Accommodation

A Novel
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Essay

When Alice Munro's The View from Castle Rock came out in 2007, I gravitated to it immediately. A great fan of Lives of Girls and Women, I was hungry for the insights Munro might share about the immigration of her ancestors from Scotland to Canada. I should have taken my cue from Lives of Girls and Women, where Munro's characters, although apparently revealing all, keep their secrets, their motives remain obscure and their actions unpredictable. In The View from Castle Rock, all Munro feels able to give readers is a chronological overview of her ancestors. The thoughts and feelings of her people remain unknown making her relatives a mystery in everything but name and physical appearance. Wisely, perhaps, Munro allows her readers to furnish the story with their own subtexts.

As a writer's writer, however, Munro always delivers, and although initially frustrated that she would not hazard anything about the inner workings of her long- dead ancestors, I was taken by the prime psychological nugget buried in her title. This is delivered by her matriarchal great great grandfather James Laidlaw who, one wet night, forces his son, Andrew, to accompany him to the top of Edinburgh castle. Having climbed a thousand steps, James has both the breath and vision to insist that it was possible to see America from Castle Rock.

As a central conceit, seeing America from Edinburgh Castle is both compelling and illuminating. Perhaps Munro's premise is that if people think in metaphors they have the ability to manufacture and drive their dreams. It is certainly James's dizzying vision from the top of Edinburgh's Castle Rock that launches a generation of Munro's ancestors in the direction of North America.

My 'view from Castle Rock' is also a dizzying one and began in early childhood. It started perhaps from the fact that I didn't live with my biological parents and can still remember scrutinizing other people's parents who, for such fabled people, looked far too ordinary to satisfy my needs. My own absent but imagined parents seemed made from altogether different clay.

Throughout adolescence and early adulthood I continued to fantasize about my parents but did nothing about finding the actual people. The impetus, when it came, was like a tidal wave, and originated from seeing inexplicable expressions ghosting in the faces of my own children. Of course, by then, my search was thirty years too late. Both parents were dead. It was like walking into a wall.

Perversely, the blocking effect only intensified the desire to locate my parents, if not physically at least emotionally. I began collating relevant information and photographs and reading history books in order better to understand the age they lived in. On the face of it, the obvious solution seemed to be to turn this emotional scrap- booking into a novel.

I opted for the idea of a novel because my collection of memorabilia seemed like just so many artifacts, valuable in a particular sense but without context; and it was the static aspect of them as objects that left me feeling dissatisfied. Perhaps my dissatisfaction with object-as-artifact had its origin in my early twenties when I completed a Fine Arts Degree. My major was painting and though I enjoyed the absorbing nature of the process, I often found the finished object disappointing. This was because it didn't properly show its own process, stopping without explanation at an apparently arbitrary point in time; and it was at this point that it seemed to become a static and inflexible object, confined to one place in time. A novel, on the other hand, although as synthetic as a painting, is more of a roving brief in that it enables the writer to range backwards and forwards in time and use process as its métier. This travel is achieved chronologically, because things like war and death actually happen at specific places and times but flexibility of time and space occur around how external events live in the mind. As Hamlet says, "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so," which indicates that, rather than being collective, 'reality' per se, is the interpretation of an event in the mind of an individual and, therefore, coloured accordingly. By definition, anything this subjective is self-interested, but this sort of willfulness also lends its self to creativity, which, when defined as art, operates outside the realm of necessity.

The artistry of the mind, therefore, is the license to be both visionary and re-visionary. In, some respects, consciousness acts like film, in that single-shot images are segued into sequences and by definition sequence indicates time and space. In this way, sequencing intimates the ordering which things occur and can be used to mimic the flow of physical time; and, let's face it, there is no denying the quantitative nature of physical time. People are born and people die. Life is that speculative thing that slips in between beginning and end.

In physical time, days follow in numerical sequence and, in order to count, calculate and communicate in consistent ways, people have set up logical modes of sequencing. We see evidence of this function operating in mathematics and in the way sentences are structured. Within such frameworks non sequiturs declare themselves by upsetting our sense of equilibrium and by disrupting the whole. However, the principle of certainty displayed in these formal operations is so often contradicted by evidence of what is random, contingent and fugitive, and this models unpredictability.

In response to this, other models of expression have evolved to illustrate, if not explain, the mutable elements of existence. Common wisdom has it that if you can see it, you can control it, and that certainly stands for the logical intellectual systems described above. However, these systems cannot provide security in the situations which they cannot quantify. For instance, Jack, one of the main protagonists in Accommodation, feels better knowing how to calculate angles and measure distance when he looks down the sights of his machine gun

because he believes he has some measure of control over the odds of his survival. He is not, however, blinded to the fact that his calculations only give him a measure of control and are not ironclad guarantees of survival, because someone else may have first-mover advantage, while the passage of flying ordinance is so random it cannot be anticipated or avoided.

I have used the image of flying ordinance to illustrate how intelligence and virtue are not sufficient armour against the unanticipated. By definition, chance equals lack of control over circumstance. Naturally, the concept of this sort of uncertainty provokes the strongest emotional responses in people and is the theatre where extreme and creative behaviours are most likely to occur. So, if continuity, consistency and predictability are crucial to systems such as mathematics and operational language, the functional aesthetic of art is to externalize and make visible forms that stand as metaphors for what is fugitive and transitory.

The fact that canons of consistency operate alongside the apparent lawlessness of randomness and chaos only serves to model the binary opposites we are so familiar with certainty and uncertainty, love and hate, peace and war. It seems the one defines the other and it is this constant interplay of opposites that Michael Ondaatje describes in his book Living in the Family as 'the congested vitality inherent in the moment'.

In Anil's Ghost, Ondaatje develops the paradox of binary opposites even further. He sets Anil's Ghost in Sri Lanka, where civil war tests human tenderness and ethical principles in a context of state-sanctioned violence. Time and again, he shows that in precarious times, people exact value from what is incidental and ephemeral and that in some perverse, mysterious way, experiencing loss and feeling pain act as the best sort of intensifiers for pleasure. An example of this is when Ondaatje has Ananda transcend the factual brutality of his wife's murder by finding an analogy for her passing in the way birds use air currents. All of which goes to demonstrate the pliable pathways available to a novelist when manufacturing metaphors for human character.

However, in starting this writing project I could hardly claim to have much understanding of the scope and dimension required to simulate something that had an emotional likeness to human experience. My original intention was schematic in that I preconceived that I would convert a collection of vignettes about my parents into a series of interconnecting events intended to progress the story of their lives through chronological time. This made logical sense in theory but, in practice, the dish very quickly ran away with the spoon. The characters refused to stay aligned to any preconceived idea and, as for plot, there was none, because the characters ran backwards and forwards in disorderly ways defying any attempt to capture them. It was worse than playing croquet with the Red Queen. From the position of hindsight, however, I can probably say this willfulness on my characters' part has probably served to develop my best argument for process over product/object to date.

Initially, however, my failure to preconceive what my characters would do next had me reading all I could lay my hands on that either suggested ways of rectifying this or reinforced the efficacy of this model. I told myself I was not writing a crime novel where murder is the underpinning idea, and where motive must be unpacked in ways that keep the reader following a hypothesis and therefore turning the pages for proof of their assumption. The novel I was writing didn't seem to have such a clearly signposted agenda. However, having simplified the entire crime genre for the sake of my argument, I took heart from one of crime and horror's foremost practitioners, Stephen King.

In King's book On Writing : A Memoir, the writer states that 'plot [in novels] is suspect as [peoples'] lives are plotless,' and even goes as far as calling plot 'shifty'. I found his book invaluable because, although ostensibly it is an autobiography, he treats the process of writing as innate to his identity. In this context he generously shares tips and tricks. He suggests that the programme of writing is tripartite. He maintains that, firstly, narration drives the story from A to Z, and, secondly, description creates sensory reality. He makes the assertion that description is not about setting but always about story, stating that "description begins in the writer's mind, but should finish in the reader's." Lastly, King stresses the importance of dialogue because, he says, it shows rather than tells and, perhaps, more importantly, stimulates the auditory sense, in that the reader starts to "hear" the characters speaking. King states that "Talk whether beautiful or ugly is the index of character."

Perhaps King's pronouncements are obvious when you think about them, but it was reading On Writing: A Memoir that caused me better to understand that writing depends on the same abstract values that give painting and music their essential vitality. This enabled me to recognize that the education I'd received at art school about constructing non-figurative compositions had a new application, as I could now more clearly see that I was working with elements that stood as equivalents for actuality, and could therefore more consciously articulate them to animate the text. In many ways, assimilating King's information on the form and function of writing was a 'Damascine' moment, because it gave a name to a process that was already in train and enabled me to be more witting around the management of the elements that I was using to establish the actuality of the characters.

As I became aware of the way dialogue simulated sound, I began to see that, as in music, it would be possible to use binaries as intensifiers. I could pitch pause against rapid speech, use words that were onomatopoeic, words that were exclamatory, words that came out like mumbling and, best of all, create speech patterns and idioms that expressed differences in culture and experience. Dialogue, therefore, came to represent story as much as did narrative of place and time. To exemplify this, I could ground Jack's metaphors in his experience of growing up on a farm in rural New Zealand, while Sybil's metaphors were filtered through

her middle-class Edwardian education and therefore a degree further away from the actual. On this basis, the characters virtually spoke themselves into existence.

Further to this, I processed King's suggestion that visual description be interpreted as a form of characterization rather than being a literal description. To exemplify this I have included an abbreviated passage from Accommodation. This passage comes from Chapter Three and describes the physical action of sixteen-year-old Sybil as she swings in a honey suckle arch on a summer's afternoon in 1917:

> Sitting on the swing under the honey suckle arch, Sybil heard the drone of bees. 'And live alone in the bee loud glade…' Her father said Irish poets were always the only ones worth listening to. She rocked back and forth. Else had called their house a sinking ship and yet everything looked as it always had. She pushed her feet into the ground and forced the seat back in an abrupt arc. Else had said she would go to the ends of the earth to get away. "Think Australia," she had said. Sybil's feet came down with a thump. Then she launched herself again.
>
> Australia! On the map Australia had a sullen, lumpen look like a piece of dough thumped down by an impatient cook. Yet Else had called England a sinking ship and told her even Guinie was planning to escape. Sybil saw Guinie and Else putting out to sea in life-boats, sliding away into the dark night to start lives in unimaginable places. Her feet thumped the ground again. They would be living amongst strangers. She leapt off the swing. All that swaying in the flickering light seemed to have caused her to feel quite dizzy.

In this instance, Sybil's physical action, swinging, creates a motion which equates with her uncertain feelings about the changes going on in her family.

According to physicists, we live in an electro-magnetic world which pre-disposes people to be sensitive to sudden movement and changes in light. No doubt such sensitivities assisted peoples' survival in the hostile environment of the savannah, as sudden changes in light must have taught people to predict weather and sudden movements must have served as advance warning of both predators and prey. Such cues about contrast seem innate to the subconscious and are demonstrated by the fact that people listening to music hear what is already in their heads and seldom have translation problems when it comes to converting abstractions about contrast into personal imagery. Such things as tonal weight and the sequencing of individual note values are reliably converted into visual shapes and colours, and can also be transposed into a range of emotions or become catalysts for retrieving memories from the past. Writers and painters, too, build emotional constructs out of peoples' latent sensitivities to light and movement.

In Sybil's swing scene, I have deliberately used conflicting sensory cues to heighten the confusion she is feeling. There is the sickly sweet smell of the honeysuckle, the drone of bees, the internalized memory and the cadence of a line from Yeats's poem, The Lake Isle of Innisfree, all of which should cause Sybil pleasure. However, if anything, they cause Sybil discomfort because they fail to allay her sense of unease about the changes occurring in the

family. The jarring sound of her feet hitting the ground and the uncertain flickering light in the thatch of leaves in the arch above her head seem to speak her emotions better and she leaves the honey-suckle arch dizzied with the motion of the swing and/or the motion of her feelings.

To further illustrate how kinesthetic triggers operate in Accommodation, I have selected a passage from Chapter Twelve which describes how Jack identifies the girl he will subsequently marry. The incident occurs when he stops at a country store for a cup of tea and encounters Violet. The catalyst for his interest in Violet is not so much that she is a pretty girl but that an incidental movement she makes reminds him of a woman he once glimpsed in a vineyard in Palestine. This excerpt starts with Jack entering the tea rooms and concludes days later when he is able to source the origin of the impulse that has driven him to become obsessed with Violet:

> Like Fanshawe's place they had one of those tinkley door bells. I knew why Fanshawe had a bell rigged up. It was to prevent kids from sneaking in and pilfering his sweets… Perhaps the owners of this shop had similar fears. Anyway I felt a twinge of irritation as soon as the tinkling started.
>
> I looked towards the counter and saw they had a new girl on the job. I gave my order and sat down at one of the tables but glanced back just as that girl was turning away. She had pretty dark hair tied up in a scarf but it was the turning of her neck that struck me. I'd seen that turning head before and it stopped me in my tracks as surely as a slipped cog stops an engine turning over.I tapped my fingers on the wood of the table. There was no one in the shop and when I looked out the window, no one out in the street either, and, it occurred to me, I was spinning myself some sort of a yarn. A good gunner never did that. Everything was referenced to something else, even though it was just a smudge of desert dust parallel to the horizon or the angle of a branch to the trunk of a tree …
>
> At work the next day I bloody nearly chopped off a finger just thinking about that girl. I couldn't place that turning head at all, but, a day or two later, cutting back one of Mum's climbing roses, I saw the grape-picking girl at Richon le Zion. I'd seen that girl a day or so after one of the more savage stoushes we'd had in Palestine. She'd been half hidden under the stoop of a grape vine and I was right on her before she or I knew it. She had a wicker basket into which she'd been cutting grapes and, when she saw me, she simply turned her head, hefted the basket onto her shoulder, and walked away. She didn't hurry. She moved as if nothing difficult was happening and it was the very ordinariness of this that started me thinking that one day the war would end…

This incident pivots on the fact that the work the girl is doing and her unhurried retreat set up an image for Jack that is reassuring. He sees that, outside war, there are people peacefully farming as they have always done. It is an insight that is invaluable to Jack given the post-battle fatigue he is experiencing at the time. Jack's sense of the continuance of things outside the theatre of war is further substantiated when the parson later claims that the young Jewish women working in the fields remind him of the way things must have looked in the time of Christ. It is not surprising, therefore, that Jack's image of the Jewish girl in a vineyard is

associated with the benign nature of continuance, and that it is this that subconsciously predisposes him to see Violet as a potential life partner.

As work on Accommodation progressed I saw more and more how kinetic everything was turning out to be and how very small actions like the turning of a head could be used to progress not only the forward motion of the novel but, more importantly, become an emotional signifier. For instance, I found Jack's constant rolling of cigarettes a useful descriptor but also discovered this small, apparently innocuous motor action could be used as a device to give necessary suspensive pause to a larger action or suggest feelings such as uncertainty or boredom. Here, I have included an abbreviated excerpt which uses cigarette smoking to punctuate the action and imply unspoken emotion. In this incident, Jack is not doing the smoking but is recalling the last time he saw his wartime mate, Mick Crossen:

> I tried to see Mick in my mind's eye but couldn't get a solid look at him. It was as if he was constantly moving to one side… Then I got a bit of a box brownie sort of look at him from the day I went aboard The Malta. We'd been sitting in the shade of one of those prickly desert bushes, having a last smoke together. By then, Mick's skin was as black as any native's. He'd been rolling his cigarette round and round in his big fingers and I thought perhaps he was mad with me for getting a passage home ahead of him. He told me, no. "Look Jack," he said, " I don't give a flying toss, who gets the nod ahead of me. The truth is there's nothing I fancy anymore. Nobody, nowhere, nothing." He flicked his cigarette so it skimmed away across the sand and stood up. "Nah," he said. "You go hurrying home if yer want. Yer can have my place any old day of the week."
>
> But next minute, I had reason to doubt all that hard-nosed stuff about not caring for nothing cause he bent over and began fiddling in his kit and dragged a whacking great bag of blue beads out and asked me to give them to his sister, Mary…

The interest I was developing here around small gestures such as the rolling of cigarettes or the way a butt was flicked was further reinforced by hearing a radio interview with a choreographer. The choreographer explained how he'd become obsessed with incidental movement so that every time he went out on the street he couldn't help seeing the interval, shape and alignment of people in relation to one another. He said he often fashioned dance sequences out of observing the passage of an individual in a crowd or picking up incidental gestural sequences from people in check-out queues or at bus stops.

In dance, of course, the absence of spoken language means that cues of alignment and orientation become crucial to the communication of story. In this respect, dance is like music, but lack of words does nothing to challenge the effectiveness of these forms of expression. In fact, if anything, they stand as the perfect analogy for mutability as they are capable of both integrating and disintegrating in the space of a moment, and, as Heraclites suggests, we are multiple selves, unable to step into the same river twice, forever negotiating difficulty moment by moment.

On the basis of this premise, it is not surprising people are consoled by images that can be held still either in the form of fixed objects or in images that can be retained in some relatively consistent form. It is my opinion, therefore, that what is recognizable and therefore familiar is what causes people to consider a particular location to be "home". Cues about home are not always literally about place, however, but can be connected to subliminal associations about states of being, as Jack demonstrates when he takes comfort from the scene in the vineyard and carries it forward in his predisposition to see benignity in the turn of another woman's head. In this way it can be seen that "home" is constantly being renegotiated and, as such, is one of the major themes I wanted to explore in the course of Accommodation.

In On Writing: A Memoir, King describes narrative as an A to Z sequence. The logic of this analogy makes sense if things start at one point and stop at another, and it is true that a novel is physically contained between the covers of a book; but, to my mind, the travel of story is less certain as echoes of it gain other contexts in the minds of readers. So if story is taken as being less linear and more negotiable, then the 'finding home' theme is something that is constantly fluctuating between what has been carried forward from the past and that what is currently being re-negotiated to fit present circumstances. To demonstrate the mobility of the "finding home" narrative, I have included an excerpt from Chapter Eleven which is constructed around the effect Benny Cooper's garden has in modifying Sybil's primary 'garden' motif :

> She took her kimono from the back of the chair and slipped her arms into the capacious sleeves, wrapped the sash around her waist, and stretched. Benny Cooper seemed to have the power to change the way she felt about things. She'd stood in the shelter of his garden hedge, seeing water arcing from a distant hose and raspberry canes cased in gauzy netting… She'd always liked colour and shape. They said children licked things if the colour appealed. Mostly though, she thought of beauty as a distancing thing. It separated you from what you saw. Gave you a measure of control. But somehow, this afternoon, Benny had shortened the distance, had brought beauty and happiness embarrassingly close together.
>
> "It's so peaceful here, "she'd said quickly, keen to cover over the pulse of excitement she'd felt thinking this. Then she'd waited, expecting Benny to say something perfect and profound but he said nothing. Then she remembered he belonged to some quietist religion.
>
> "Quakers," her father had once said, "do more listening than speaking. It's unusual," he'd continued, "as most religious people like to tell you they know something you don't. Quakers let you come to that conclusion all by yourself…"
>
> Later, she watched Benny turn towards the gate. He'd been indicating it was time for her to go and this made Sybil feel oddly dissatisfied. She wasn't ready to leave. She wanted to stay in the warmth of the sheltering hedge. She wanted Benny to explain why he wasn't angry about the war like Fanshawe…
>
> Benny's garden brought back that subliminal forever-view she had of the bole of the elm in their Salisbury garden. Terry and his friends had drunk lemonade leaning their

> backs against that tree… Ah, that garden… Some things held their shape irrespective of time! She could even remember the feel of the edge of the fish pond on her diaphragm as she hung over looking into the oily water at the red fish swimming.
> Benny's equanimity compelled her to keep looking. Mrs Atkins said he'd been a stretcher bearer. He must have daily heard the cries of people whose pain could not be comforted. But standing in the sunlight, he'd offered a fresh carrot, a pleasure to be shared without need for any qualifying.
> Perhaps she was reading stuff into all of this but it did seem to her that Benny was suggesting that life needn't be about separation. It needn't be fragmented by loss or over analyzed in the head. It was 'the cup that runneth over'. She went to the hedge with him then, willing to be released. This vision of wholeness was too contrary to what she believed. She didn't want to let go of sorrow. She wanted the privacy of the bathroom so she could cry her eyes out. She wanted to hold onto the sight of her dead father's nose rising above the pillow like the prow of some ship…

In this excerpt, Sybil's psychological 'home' is her attachment to loss. She grieves over her dead parents and brother and the loss of remembered places in her country of origin. Melancholy is her familiar and reinforces her sense of self in the aesthetic of sadness to which she is addicted.

In this excerpt, two of Sybil's crucial foundation images are alluded to. The first is an image of physical location, the garden of her childhood, which, in her imagination, is her last known safe place. This because it was the place she played free of the knowledge of Wilfred and it was the last place she saw her brother alive. On the other hand, her emotional security is still lodged in the person of her father and the sadness she feels when she remembers his death enables her to still hold onto him and not let go. In addition Benny's garden is full of the vitality, of well-nourished things growing and this has an effect on Sybil's sensibilities so that past and present imagery happens contiguously, and the resulting collision starts Sybil thinking that 'Benny had brought beauty and happiness closer together' and that " she would come back [to Benny's garden] more prepared next time. She might let herself be simple for longer. She might ask Benny about the war'.

All of which indicate that her old 'home' location is in the process of being modified and that she is beginning to recognize that her garden can be in the here and now. Alongside this, she recognizes that although Benny has been horribly damaged by war, he has not only survived all the grief, stress and loss, but has put the past behind him and is perfectly at home in his current circumstances.

I started this project thinking that the narrative agenda would be a history of times and places, but hadn't bargained for the way the characters would divert the plot away from linear progression. This was because the characters' interpretation of time and space became both subjective and digressive. Subsequently, much of the story came to be told through the self-referencing, revisionist thought-patterns of Jack and Sybil.

I also came to recognize that the real story was not about external events but kept on occurring at the interface where the characters' internally-structured world collided with what was happening in the external world. It was clear then that the story was not a chronological history but about how Jack and Sybil responded to and coped with their change in circumstance. Then and there, I settled for the name, Accommodation.

At about much the same time, I was coming to realize that the scope of the story was outgrowing the size of an acceptable MFA project, and, after some discussion, it was decided that it was best to submit an edited portion of the whole and to include a synopsis of chapters still in draft in the accompanying craft essay. I believe this course of action allows me to deliver a body of writing that will enable a reader to fully understand the philosophy and intention of the Accommodation thesis.

Throughout this essay I have explored the issue of sequencing, probably because I have identified this as one of the biggest challenges I've faced in writing this novel. I believe the problem stems from needing to synthesize logical 'A to Z' driving with the more idiosyncratic, attitudinal narratives of the characters.

To facilitate forward driving I have chosen to grow Jack and Sybil in isolation and only allow a "crossover point" to occur towards the end of the novel. The obvious reason for this is that Jack and Sybil's stories begin in different countries and their formative impressions of "reality" are developed in different cultural circumstances. A further reason for growing the characters in isolation is that the reader is enabled to understand the underpinning psychology of each character and so empathize with the problems they will subsequently encounter in accommodating each other.

There is yet another sequencing strategy in place, and this one is designed to illustrate the characters' travel from childhood, through experience, to a place of relative maturity. In this respect, I have aligned the chapters in groups. The first group is designed to locate the protagonists in their families of origin. Consequently, these chapters illustrate the characters' first premises and the rest of the story demonstrates how these source impressions continue to inform the protagonists actions. The second grouping of chapters concentrate on experiences which critically modify the characters''first premises', while the final chapters track the way the protagonists begin to reconstruct their 'realities' to fit the actuality of their circumstances.

However, I would have to say that although the story is managed in chronological chapter groupings, these parts are in no way discrete. This is because the emotional narratives of the characters override all or most of these structural boundaries.

As indicated above, I intend to use this craft essay to deliver a synopsis of that part of Accommodation still in draft, and though I initially thought to introduce the characters in a

separate section, I feel it is more contextual if they evolve out of the synopsis itself. As the first six to eight chapters will be submitted in edited form, I propose to touch fairly lightly on the motifs within them, in order to concentrate more fully on the chapters that are not yet available to read. Wherever appropriate, my intention is to use a cross-referencing technique in order to link foundation chapters with those about experience and accommodation and this is designed to illustrate the consistency of characterization and how it is this which becomes the real narrative of Accommodation.

Excerpt

Chapter 1

The picnic party moved slowly up the hill. The day had become hot and they were glad of the shadows that criss-crossed the path. Sybil noticed pale flowers growing in the deepest shade.

"It will be worth it when we see the view," she said, noticing that Addie was dawdling. She knew that soon there would be tears, and ran across and picked a cool white flower and slid it quickly under the velvet ribbon on Addie's hat.

"Now you look such a pretty one," she said, smiling into Addie's grumpy face.

The path rose steeply. The young men were in army uniforms and perspired freely. Albert had turned the colour of a lobster.

No one said anything. It was too hot and there were too many heavy baskets to carry. Only Guinie looked as if she were enjoying herself. Sybil could see Guinie's smile, a practised, full-lipped, provocative smile. Else called it her 'prospecting smile,' as it only appeared in the company of impressionable young men. Although this was not strictly true, as Mother, Father and almost all other family friends were captive to Guinie's charms.

"Such talent," Aunt Emma had declared on being shown Guinie's botanical drawings. Guinie had tossed her head and smiled. Aunt Emma, notorious for her parsimony, had paid for her to go to a private Art School in London. Sybil thought May's drawings were better, but when Emma asked to see May's sketch book she would not open it and hung her head. Aunt Emma passed on into the supper-room without further enquiry.

At the end of Guinie's first year in London she'd come home for the family Christmas wearing earrings and a vivid scarf. Addie had been enthusiastic. "Gypsy, gypsy" she'd shouted, but Aunt Emma had been unamused, and even less happy when Guinie declared herself a socialist. Since then no one had been spared what their father referred to as the third degree although, when he said this, Willis's moustache had wriggled painfully like a small animal caught in a trap and Sybil thought he was probably laughing.

Today it was Edward's turn for the third degree. Guinie's voice sounded loud in the confine of the lane and Sybil looked away. She'd heard the argument before, and besides, everyone knew Edward's father was a bicycle manufacturer. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Guinie's teasing smile and Edward bent forward at the waist as if he were a batsman parrying an awkward ball. Seeing Edward next to Guinie made her feel strange. She studied the thin serious face under the officer's cap. He would probably be one of Guinie's conquests before the afternoon was over. Else called Guinie's admirers the walking wounded because there were so many of them and all were disabled.

Sybil looked up to the crest of the hill. Where they were standing was open to the full strength of the sun but where the lane narrowed, close to the summit, the trees seemed to stitch over and become a dark cavern of leaves. She looked at her feet and the chalk ground of the lane glared up between them. Guinie was turning. She could see that a space was opening between her and Edward. Guinie's sudden movement fragmented the colours in her scarf, which scattered momentarily, like bright butterflies in the shadow of the woods. Edward remained where he was, his slightly stooped figure cut out against the white chalk lane. Sybil noticed his hand. She didn't usually look at peoples' hands, hands passed things, tied things, did things. Edward's hand was a brownish colour, but he did not seem to be the sort of person who worked out of doors. She looked at her own hand holding Addie's. It was slightly freckled and Addie's hand was plump and pale. She glanced over at Edward again, keen to see what his face looked like, but the peak of his cap shadowed his features and she was afraid he'd notice her if she stared too hard.

Addie was working a stone loose with the tip of her buttoned boot, but, when she saw Guinie going on ahead, she tugged at Sybil's hand.

"I want to go too," she said pointing at the rolled canvas bag anchored snugly within the curve of Guinie's arm.

"Guinie will choose the picnic place by herself if I don't go. She's got the rug." It was family tradition that whoever carried the picnic blanket chose the picnic spot. Normally Nettie or Willis carried the blanket but today neither parent was present. Sybil looked at the blanket in the crook of Guinie's arm. Clever Guinie. She'd never even thought of it till now. Addie was pulling at her arm, and Sybil let go of her hand and watched her short legs pumping as she ran to catch up with Guinie. Without breaking stride, Guinie half turned and stretched out a hand, a trim, slim, graceful favour, gone almost before it was perceived. Guinie's kick pleat flashed momentarily too as she turned back into the contour of the hill. Then the material of Guinie's skirt slid almost imperceptibly across her bottom and settled in the divide of her buttocks. Sybil felt tingly and sick. Everyone knew bottoms were rude. She peeped out from under the brim of her hat to see if anyone else had seen Guinie's bottom. They were all paused in the shadow of the trees but no one seemed to be looking at Guinie. Albert was crouched, head bent, adjusting the strap of a wicker hamper. From below shouts of triumph came through the trees. Terry and Pierce were throwing stones at something. She looked sternly at Edward but he was not looking at Guinie.

"They're got a mark in that tree," he said, pointing to the boys. "It sounds as if they're having fun."

"I don't know where they get the energy from?" said Albert, mopping his brow, as he prepared to lift the hamper onto his shoulder. Sybil looked back up the hill. Guinie and

Addie had reached the tunnel of leaves and seemed to be idling together like pallid fishes in the aqua shallows of the thicket.

At the top of the hill Guinie let go of Addie and rested her hands on her hips. They'd come out of the woods onto a grassy plateau. She drew a deep breath. The view was even better than she'd remembered. She gazed out at low hills which rolled in lines like the waves. Despite the brightness of the sun, the air was massed in ways that made the distance indistinct and mysterious.

"Atmospherics," she said to Addie, "Later on there might be thunder. Did you know that Constable tried to catch the motion of each moment, when he painted skies." She sighed. "But really painting moving things is too difficult." Addie shook her head and darted away. Guinie watched her run into the shade of a giant copper beech. Addie's boots flashed as she ran. Now, how could you paint that? It was impossible to see what was happening. Besides, paint immobilised things. She thought of the thin strand of milk pouring from Vermeer's jug. Vermeer had made moving liquid into a still strand of stuff. She'd never thought to look at liquid as it was being poured. She supposed that was because pouring was an action not an object.

Addie arrived back panting. "The perfect place," she cried. "I've found the perfect place." She tugged Guinie's hand. "Come on, let's put the rug down under the tree, then everyone will know that's where we're going to be sitting."

"It'll be obvious then, will it?" said Guinie. "Really, Addie." But when they reached the shade of the tree, coolness settled like a cold mantle on her shoulders and she shivered with the pleasure of it. There was no point in persecuting Addie. She never got the point.

Addie was crouched by a large tree root, patting the earth with chubby fingers. "Ooh, it's wet under this tree." She looked up anxiously. "Mummy never...."

"Never mind Mummy," said Guinie. "A little dew won't hurt anyone, so are you going to help me put this rug down in the shade or aren't you?"

Addie stood up immediately and took a corner of the blanket, and together they floated it out and watched it settle on the ground. Then without any further comment they plumped down and lay spread-eagled where they fell. Guinie felt Addie's slightly sticky fingers touching the inside of her arm. For a moment she let Addie's fingers crawl across her skin.

"Incy wincy spider", Addie said, teasingly. Guinie frowned. Addie could be a pest. She touched everyone. She even held hands with the baker's boy.

"Ouch," said Guinie, shaking off Addie's hand and sitting up abruptly. "There's lots of those sharp little beech nuts under the blanket. They're everywhere." Addie sat up beside

her, eyes round, glistening, stricken. Then, after a moment's hesitation, she flopped on her tummy and began scrabbling under the rug.

“I’ll get them,” she said. “I’ll get them all, Guinie.” When she’d scooped out all the sharp-edged shells she could find, she sat back on her heels and arranged the shells around the edge of the blanket.

Guinie stood up. “What’s the point of taking those nutshells out from under the rug if you’re going to put them into places where peoples’ hands and legs will be?’ Addie knelt up and Guinie glared at her. People were nice to Addie because she’d been born a bit simple but Guinie didn't think it was a kindness. Addie would never learn if people didn’t tell her when she was being stupid.

“You’re twelve years old, Addie, and you’re arranging nutshells as if you were two,” Guinie said firmly. “Now what you must to do is to pick them all up, take them well away from here and then throw them away. Come on, like this,” and Guinie pulled up Addie’s frilly pinafore and showed her how to drop the nuts into the pouch made by the doubled-over material. Addie was obliging, she held out her pinafore and Guinie filled it with nutshells and then, smiling self- importantly, hobbled away holding her bunched-up skirt out in front of her.

Guinie sat back against the trunk of the tree. There was no way back. Not to milk jugs, motion or painting. Such thoughts no longer had momentum. They’d been overlaid by light stippling the picnic rug, and beechnuts, and Addie being simple-minded, and now the faces of people coming out of the tunnel of leaves into sunlight.

Pierce looked at May with dislike. She’d invited him on this picnic but when he’d tried to take her arm, she’d pulled away and one of the older sisters had grinned as if were the funniest thing she’d seen in weeks. The day looked like it was going to be one bloody great embarrassment. What’s more he’d turned down a perfectly good game of snooker to come on this picnic.

The sister with the red scarf was a bit of a stunner. She had a bloody cheek, though, talking about working men’s rights. He’d bet she’d never done a tap of work in her life, but she’d kept that officer gent baled up in the lane for ages and got plenty of mileage as the bloke kept saying, "I can see your point Guinevere, I can see your point,” when clearly everything about him suggested that her view wasn’t a point of view he liked.

Pierce looked across at May. He didn’t think he could take much more of the strained-face stuff but then maybe dislike had been a bit strong. That frowning probably meant May didn’t think too much of herself, was shy not bossy or snobby like the older sisters. He looked around. There was only one boy in this family. He too had a frowning face. You couldn’t

blame him. He picked the boy to be about fourteen and could remember how, at that age or thereabouts, sisters always seemed to be snitching.

He grinned across at the boy, who straightened up and looked back at Pierce.

"Bet I can shoot that catapult better than you," Pierce said.

"How'd you know?" the boy demanded.

"Clear as day. You can see the outline at twenty paces. That Y under your braces just shouts catapult. I'm surprised that one of them girls didn't take it off you."

The boy looked down at the front of his shirt. "Oh yes, right," he said, sheepishly. "They won't have seen it because they're too busy worrying about how they look to notice me."

He came across the lane, extending his hand in a curiously formal manner.

"I'm Terry," he said. "What's your name and where do you come from? I can tell it's from somewhere foreign because you don't speak like us."

"Foreign, eh? I'm no more foreign than you are. I come from a great little country called New Zealand and we've come a flippin' long way to win this bloody war for you."

Terry squinted at Pierce. "I know New Zealand's in the war. I've got a book of flags and I've seen the New Zealand standard up at the camp."

"How come you don't know where New Zealand is then? Haven't you ever looked at a map of the world?"

Terry looked uncomfortable. "I don't do geography, only algebra and maths." Then he brightened. "Hang on. Now I think I know, isn't New Zealand near America. I've read a lot about American Indians. Do you have Indians in New Zealand?"

Pierce grinned. "Injuns ," he teased. "We do a sight better than Injuns in New Zealand. We have Maoris and they eat yer soon as look at yer." He clacked his teeth menacingly.

Terry glowered. "They do not," he said, pummelling Pierce's arm. "They do not."

"They do too." Pierce swung Terry off the ground and snapped his teeth next to Terry's ear. "Yer just lucky I ain't no Maori or you'd be meat." Terry wriggled and grunted trying to get free. "Go on, tell yer sisters."

Terry kicked hard at Pierce's shins. Then they tumbled to the ground and Pierce made a grab at the catapult.

"I can tell yer right now I can get a bull's eye right off with this." He held the catapult out of Terry's reach. "But I'll give you a fair competition. Best of three, eh?" He pointed at a knot-hole in a big oak. "That can be the target. Bet I can land a stone right on that hole, first go."

"Bet you can't," said Terry, and the next minute they were standing shoulder to shoulder eying the knot- hole with fierce concentration.

Else stopped in the lane behind them and opened her parasol. She clicked the catch that held it open and Pierce turned at the sound.

"Don't let me detain you," Else said, shaking the parasol out to its full extent. "I dare say a bit of extra target practice is never wasted on boys like you."

"What the heck's got into her," Pierce muttered, his face stiffening. Terry patted his arm. "Take no notice," he said. "She's always sarcastic. Mother says it's nursing up at the camp hospital that's upset her but really Else has always been mean. She has a field day with May and Sybil. Every second day or so she has one or other of them crying."

Pierce's shoulders dropped. "Yeah. I sort of guessed May was a bit of a softie," he said, and turned back towards the tree, holding up the catapult.

As she had no invited guest, Sybil knew she'd be expected to look after the younger ones. Addie was easy. You could always kid Addie along, but Terry, well, she'd seen the outline of the catapult beneath his shirt and knew this meant that unexpected things would get broken and she'd get the blame.

However, everything had gone off all right so far and now Addie had gone off with Guinie, and Pierce was entertaining Terry in some sort of fairly organised stone-shooting competition.

She stood in the lane and gazed into the dense mesh of leaves. A flock of small birds plummeted through the leaf screen like a scatter of stones. They flew darting courses, negotiating the particularity of each tree. She thought of the beech tree she'd climbed this time last year. It had its own pathways. She'd scrambled against the bole for some time at the start. The problem had been to swing her legs high enough to get the weight of her body onto that first branch. At first, when her feet left the ground, her arms had strained to take her full weight. It had hurt too much and she'd dropped to the ground. The second time, she'd run her feet against the trunk and this had taken the weight off her arms and braced her, but then her head had dropped too low and ground and sky had fused together in a blurry swathe of congealed colour. Determined not to fail this time, she'd arched her back and made her feet walk. Like an inch-worm, arch and walk, arch and walk, she levered herself up the trunk until her legs were high enough to straddle the branch. Then, able to pull herself into a sitting position, she sat upright and balanced, gazing pityingly down through the leaves as the straw hats of her sisters eddied about on the tide of some activity she no longer needed to count important. Inside the tree, she was Jonah in his whale. But of course that was last year. She wouldn't be able to hitch her skirt and climb the tree today. Alice said all men wanted to do was to look up womans' skirts.

Sybil looked across at Albert as he hoisted the hamper onto his shoulder and turned into the heat of the lane. With his fleshy neck and massive shoulders, Albert didn't look like the sort of person to bother himself about what was under womans' skirts. Then again she

supposed Albert was setting out with his heavy load because Else, her step nurse-quick, her parasol pointed, had just passed him in the lane. Why Else had invited him was a mystery as she didn't seem to want to be anywhere near him. Sybil turned her head to avoid seeing the dogged way Albert climbed the hill.

She glanced across at Edward. He was still watching Terry and Pierce. She supposed they did look funny, capering around like children, especially Pierce in his soldier's uniform and great army boots. Noticing that she was looking at him, Edward came across the lane towards her.

"Perfect day for a picnic." he said.

Sybil nodded and looked down, not knowing what to say next. Mother said making conversation was like hitting a tennis ball back and forth across a net, but the harder Sybil tried to think about what she might say, the more the darkness behind her eyes filled with dancing electric squiggles. The silence between her and Edward seemed to swell out of all control. She peered from beneath her hat at him but Edward did not seem to be the least affected by the fact she wasn't talking to him. He was gazing into the tree above her head.

"It would be good to have binoculars," he said. "It's amazing what a piece of convex glass can do."

"Yes," she said, and was rewarded by the curve of his lips. Narrow lips and crooked teeth and she saw too the coarse pored skin around his chin and throat. It made her stomach feel unsettled, as it did when she had to jump into a swimming pool or sit a test.

Edward was moving away. At a distance, he looked different. He was a person thinking his own thoughts. She saw the flowers Tilly had forgotten to throw away, collapsed into colourless petals on the table. Of course he was not thinking of her. She was only Guinie's schoolgirl sister and he was going because he wanted to talk to more interesting people. She sensed the rise and fall of voices, the swing of hair, the outline of noses but when she looked up the hill, the trees hung silent in the heat and the white scoop of the lane contained only herself and Edward.

She moved forward. She'd learnt Edward's face the moment he'd smiled. She saw the lift of his shoulders as he moved against the tilt of the lane and dared herself to get another smile before he reached the top of the hill. She began running to catch up with him.

"I was just wondering - " she said, falling into step at Edward's side. "Just wondering," she said again, because he'd stopped walking and the smile was back. She felt almost cheated because he'd smiled too easily.

"Just wondering?" he asked, his smile widening.

"Yes, just wondering whether you were frightened about going to war?"

As soon as she'd said it, she knew it was wrong. It was as damaging as throwing a stone. Why had she said frightened?

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to ask that. I shouldn't have, should I?"

"It certainly is the question most people do their best to avoid," he said. But, although the smile had gone, he did not walk away. "I'll have to think about it. You see, you might think there should be a straight yes or no answer because either you're frightened or you're not frightened, but, for me, it's not that simple."

"I didn't mean to say frightened," she said.

"But you did and the punishment is that now you'll have to hear the answer."

"You see, what makes it difficult is that although I've read the lists of those killed and know the odds aren't good, I can't quite believe that's true for me. Right now, for instance, it's impossible. I'm here, standing on Box Hill with you. The sun is shining, I feel remarkably well and, on the basis of this, it's hard to imagine ever feeling frightened about anything."

They were now moving slowly up the lane and entering the shadow of the copse. Gingery flecks of light darted across Edward's chin. An unseen bird tweeted suddenly and, for no reason at all, Sybil felt immensely happy. There was nothing she would change. Everything looked exactly right.

"God's in his heaven, all's right with the world," she said. It was what her father sometimes said when he was out of doors and happy.

Edward looked surprised. "Yes," he said, gazing around the thicket, "that's right. Everything here seems in perfect alignment."

Then they were both silent, standing still within the intricate weavings of the thicket. She could see by his frown he was thinking.

"Back to your question about being frightened," he said. "It's true that I'm not feeling frightened right now, but, I have to say, I often think about what it might feel like to be frightened. I worry I won't have the right instincts for war." He touched his officer's cap awkwardly. "And, if I don't have the right instincts, how can I trust myself to take responsibility for other people? At the training camp they're always talking about the necessity of shooting cowards so you can see doubting one's ability to fight is not much of an option."

He reached out and took Sybil's hand and squeezed it absent-mindedly.

"But having said all of that, I do want to go to this war. I suppose it's rather a quixotic form of curiosity, really, because I want to find out what I'll be like. But really it's not as if I have a choice. It's not so much what other people would think of me if I failed to get to this war, but what I'd think of myself."

He was staring down at her, his eyes wide open. “For some reason, I’ve told you things I’ve never told anyone else. I suppose it was that piece about God being in his heaven that made me feel I could talk to you about this.”

He let go of her hand and leant forward and kissed her lightly on the lips. His lips were feathery dry, like the opened wings of a moth brushing the white-hot glass of a lamp. Then quickly he turned her face away and kissed first one cheek and then the other.

“A salute,” he said. “It’s how the French salute very good friends.”

Sybil stepped back. The thicket swam with currents of light. Three bright spots stood on her face. Tears sprang into her eyes. “I’m going to climb that tree,” she said, starting to run. “I did it last year and I’m doing it again, now.”

At the top of the hill she ran out into sunlight. The grassy plateau, another country, blazing with yellow tansy. Her tree, a tent of deep umber, tethered to the ground by dark shadows. Already people had assembled beneath it. Addie was sitting on the picnic rug with her legs spread. Guinie was kneeling down and taking lemonade out of Albert’s hamper, and Else was at a distance perching on the handle of her parasol as if it were a shooting stick.

Sybil wished them all gone. Tears rolled down her cheeks. If anyone asked her what the matter was she’d hit them. Fortunately, the people round the tree were her sisters and they wouldn’t notice her. Guinie, because anyone sixteen or under didn’t interest her. Else, because she didn’t tolerate any sort of misery from people whom she maintained were living perfectly good lives. Addie because she was Addie and lived in a world of her own. Albert was there too, but his back was turned because he was bent helping Guinie unload the lemonade.

Sybil hiked her skirt and jumped for the first branch, swung expertly and then treadled her feet up the trunk. She heard Addie calling, “Look at Sybil. She’s climbing the tree.” Then Guinie’s voice came up to her. “For goodness sake. She’s far too old for that sort of caper.” She wanted to call down, “I don’t care what any of you think,” but thought any response would only encourage Terry to come up after her.

The activity of levering herself up through the branches felt purposeful, and stopped her tears. She peered at the downs below. She hadn’t got as high as this last year. There was blueish air above her head, and she giggled a little thinking of the angel on the top of the Christmas tree with its frilly skirt and raffia hair. It was a silly doll, really, but when the candles were lit and you could only dimly see her through the drift of piney branches you could believe she was everything she pretended.

Sybil wondered why Edward had kissed her. It was unfair. Less than two hours earlier she hadn’t known he existed but now the idea of him had grown large and unmanageable.

She could hear the picnic party below. The hum of their conversation sounded contented. She swung her legs. They'd be sipping lemonade and eating strawberries. They'd be doing what Edward said he was doing, being on Box Hill in the sunshine. She touched her lip and kicked her foot against the trunk of the tree. Edward's lips had passed so quickly. The memory gone before she knew what he was doing. "Very good friends," she murmured.

A bird entered the canopy and the quick blur of its wings distracted her for a moment. Her older sisters would be finding places to sit out of the sun, straightening their skirts and touching their hair, but she was up here and completely out of sight, so if Terry did some damage or Addie wet her pants they could blame themselves.

She looked at the network of branches below. Most people drew trees with branches coming straight out to the left and right of the trunk but that wasn't what trees were really like. The branches in her tree sprang out from the trunk at all angles. She couldn't believe that last year, she'd actually thought the inside of the tree was like a giant skeleton because now she could see that the tree wasn't closed like a skeleton but open to the wind's various pathways.

Guinie stared sceptically at the honey pot.

"Have I missed something?" she asked. "Do tell. What's honey got to do with cuts and scratches, Edward? I'm intrigued."

Heads turned in Edward's direction. Either he hadn't heard the edge in Guinie's voice or didn't see it as a challenge.

"First hand experience is what tells me, Guinevere," he said. "My grandmother kept bees."

"Kept bees?" said Guinie, sotto voice. "How rustic."

"She lived in the country, "continued Edward. "And it interested her to keep bees. She always maintained that if you sluiced out wounds in some kinds of honey, diluted in hot water, it kept those wounds from becoming infected. She said it was what the people in the village had known to do for generations."

"So," said Guinie, "you'll be carrying a little pot of granny's honey in your rations pack when you go to France."

Else stood up. "You're not being funny, Guinie," she said.

Guinie ignored her and Edward continued talking. "As I said before, it seems to be a known remedy among many country people and, there must be something in it, because I've always found honey great for soothing sore throats, and my grandfather swears by it as a remedy for indigestion."

"Quite the panacea" said Guinie, "but it's not science."

Else scowled. “You debunk everything, Guinevere. Not science? Who says it’s not science? If not just numbers but generations of people have found honey has helped them to get better, what more proof do you want?”

“But people believe things that are not true. Think of the Black Death. People went round with pot pourri held in front of their noses because they believed it would keep them safe from the plague.”

“But the difference is,” said Else, “that people weren’t helped by pot pourri but, according to Edward, honey has helped people.”

“Ah", said Guinie, her eyes glittering with triumph. “But there’s no proof it was the honey, it could have been all sorts of other things that caused them to get better and they just believed it was the honey, just as well people thought they hadn’t got the plague because of the pot pourri.”

“That argument works the other way as well,” said Else. “As you’ve just said, believing things are true or not true often has no bearing on the facts. So I would say that just because you’ve only thought of honey as sweet stuff you put on bread doesn’t mean that it doesn’t have healing properties, it only means you don’t believe it has healing properties.”

Edward watched and listened. The sisters fought like professionals and although they affected different styles, there was no doubting that their ability came from long practice. Guinie’s style was one of studied indifference. She leaned casually against the bole of the tree, half sitting, half lying, one arm crooked behind her head. They said she’d spent a year in London at some art school. Edward wondered if the pose were orchestrated. Guinie’s nakedness seemed only a paint layer away. He bit his lip and looked across at Else. She’d argued that irrespective of whether it was right or wrong, people only believed what suited them to believe.

Edward’s gaze moved to Albert. Case in point. Albert must have been dreaming to entertain thoughts of Else. Right from the start he must have known that centuries of class distinction stood between him and Else. This picnic was another case in point. It had been ordained. Edward had met the mother. Efficient, dispassionate, patrician, she would have organized this outing under the banner of helping our brave boys, in much the same manner that she sent flowers to the church.

It was late afternoon when the picnic party came down the hill. If anything it was hotter than before. The leaves hung limply from the trees and no birds sang.

Addie wrapped her arms round Sybil's neck and tried to pounce on her back. "Carry me , carry me," she begged.

Else, stopped beside them and gave Addie a stern look. "What's all this about?" she asked.

"I'm too tired to walk," Addie wailed.

"Stuff and nonsense," Else said. "Get a move on or you'll be left alone in the woods, tonight."

Addie started wailing immediately." You're mean, Else," she cried, and turned her dark-lashed eyes on Sybil. "Sybil wouldn't leave me alone in the woods, would you?" she said smugly, and twined her arm possessively through Sybil's.

"Well," said Else grinning, "if that's the case, I'll leave you two to sort it out," and, waving her parasol dismissively, she walked briskly on.

Sybil straightened Addie's hat and took the picnic blanket out of her arms. "Now," she said, "you don't have anything to carry, so off you go." Fortunately, lightening Addie's load seemed to be enough to persuade her that she could cope, and she started off down the hill at a fast trot. Sybil watched her go and couldn't help smiling at the erratic way her sister tracked from shadow to shadow.

Alone again, Sybil stood unmoving. The lane stood out like a crooked parting in a dark head of hair and the sky flowed like liquid over and round the margins of the hill. Everything was so beautiful that, for a moment, it seemed quite dangerous to be alone. If she'd had Addie with her she wouldn't have been looking at the sky like this and it was not as if all this cloudy beauty was making her feel happy. She, in fact, felt quite tense and tearful, a bit like people sometimes felt ahead of an electrical storm. She picked up a pebble and threw it up and heard it ping against the trunk of nearby tree, and smiled a little at herself. The boys had been throwing stones all day and she'd thought them stupid. Still, no doubt, there'd be no time to moon about, when she got home. Tilly would be too busy with tea to give Addie her bath and it would fall to Sybil to persuade her sister into the soapy waters, but the thought of Addie's squirming body didn't irritate her, today The only thought she seemed to carry in her head was that Edward had kissed her. She touched her lips tentatively, and saw Edward's dark pupils holding her steady in the unsteady light of the leaf tunnel.

From down below Terry's shouts came up and she could see that the picnic party had emerged from the trees and were grouped on the common at the foot of the hill. Terry and Pierce were tussling over the catapult and she thought how silly they looked. Then she saw the sun reflect off the plane of Edward's cap and a squirmy feeling started up in the pit of her stomach. Edward said he'd told her things he'd never told anyone else. He'd been serious, he'd kissed her. It had to mean he loved her. She saw Guinie's red gypsy scarf bob up next to Edward's cap and Sybil folded her arms Guinie could wear brass ear-rings and wiggle her bottom as much as she liked but all of that stuff signified nothing. Edward had kissed her, not Guinie. She wrapped her arms more tightly round herself. There was a problem though.

Since Edward had kissed her she sensed she owed him something in return but she couldn't think of anything she had that he might want.

Chapter 2

The snow- melt had been four months ago but even so two lives had been lost to the river this summer and although the Rangitata ran many courses everyone knew there were hidden holes and dangerous currents that could take a horse's feet out from under it.

Amy Hunt struggled down the bank. She moved with difficulty because she carried a baby bundled against her chest and a heavily laden basket in her free hand. She was making for a shelf of sand that curved like a crooked arm above a pool of still water. Her husband, George, was already crouched at the water's edge. He was using the back of a tomahawk to smash down a litter of fine branches for firewood.

Amy wedged her basket in a nest of willow roots and settled her baby in a scoop in the sand.

"I didn't fancy that slope, not having a free hand to save myself an' all but we're here now." She looked up and spoke as if she were addressing the sky, the heat-hung trees or the distant hills. She did not look at her husband.

The tall figure of Grandmother Kennedy came over the lip of the sandbank. She came striding like a man, carrying two baskets with an easy swing. She had made no concession to the heat for she wore her usual long black dress. George stopped chopping and watched her through narrowed eyes.

"Bog," he said under his breath." The word bog satisfied because it sounded both foul and deprived. "Bog Irish," he muttered.

Grandma Kennedy's voice rang out loudly. "This works out very nicely, me darlin'. You chose a right good spot. Out of the easterly and jist look at that pool. You'd have to look long and hard on this river ter find one as quietly behaved as this 'un. Jist the place if one of them little lads wants a dip." Then she settled herself and her baskets down in the sand next to Amy.

George scowled. Finding this place was nothing to do with Amy. She never stuck her nose out of doors so how would she know where to find the only safe hole on the Rangitata. He heaped up a pile of small branches and thumped down his axe. The old woman played favourites. It was Amy this or Amy that and when it wasn't Amy, it was Pierce. She claimed Pierce was the spit of her dadda whatever that meant. Pierce wouldn't be the one he'd claim as the spit of anyone in his family. Pierce made faces all the time as if he were in some dumb show, but that only seemed to recommend him to Grandma Kennedy. She said he was fey, dropping her voice respectfully as if being fey were God's bloody gift.

He saw Ellen emerge out of the shade of the aspens. She was holding hands with the little 'uns. Everyone called them the little' uns because there was only ten months between them so

they seemed to have come as a pair. Ellen walked the toddlers to the edge of the sandbank but as soon as the little 'uns saw the steepness of the slope they turned their fluffy heads into Ellen's skirt and squeaked like kittens. Amy's head came round as if she were attached to the little 'uns by invisible strings.

At that moment Jack came flying up to the rim of the sandbank, paused momentarily on the incline and then, snatching the hand of the nearest little' un, he leaned forward and swooped down the slope. It all happened so fast the little girl didn't have time to protest, but neither did she fall. She travelled in Jack's wake, her stout legs ploughing a separate furrow in the sand.

At the end of her run she toppled into Amy's lap and lay there thrilled and triumphant. Jack touched the top of his mother's head. It was the merest pat but it made George growl. Jack always knew which side his bread was buttered. In one move he'd put himself in his mother's good books, got himself placed right next to the food and hidden himself directly behind old Kennedy. But if Jack thought he was going to skive out of chopping the wood because he'd put his Grandma between them, he had another think coming.

Amy looked up at Jack. He was her firstborn. There'd been five since, but there was something unforgettable about first times. It didn't matter whether it was a first kiss or a first toothache. She gave Jack's arm a firm little punch.

"Hi ho," she said. "Don't you go getting too big for your boots, so what if you brought wee Alice down safely, you've also brought a dirty great pile of sand with you as well."

Jack half turned to his grandmother; she'd undoubtedly have something of her own to say. But her head was turned towards the baby and she was making a low keening sound like a cat just sighting a bird.

"I jist can't keep me hands to meself," she moaned, as she swept the baby up into her arms and pressed it fiercely against her bony chest.

A moment later Pierce came over the top of the bank, out of control and tumbling. An avalanche of sand descended on the picnic.

Amy let out a yell.

"All of me hard work ruined," she shouted.

Fortunately, most of the food was protected by teatowels, but the fruit-cake, with its glistening syrupy surface, was coated in an instant.

"Ah," said Grandma Kennedy, picking up the cake and turning it round. "Would yer look at that now? It looks like something that's jist been swept out of the grate with the ashes."

Amy was bent over the baskets salvaging what she could.

"It ain't no joke, Mother. All them currants. They're not cheap. My goodness, Pierce, whatever did yer think yer were up to?"

But when Amy saw Pierce's stricken face, she quietened and glanced guiltily across at her husband. It was too late. George was already coming across the sand at a run. Pierce stood rigid. He frowned. He grimaced. He popped his eyes.

"None of those idiot faces," yelled George, taking Pierce by the ear and shaking him like a terrier would a rat. "What the hell do you think you're playing at?"

Still cradling the baby, Grandma Kennedy rose out of the sand like a pillar of black granite. She was a head taller than George and although not a thing was said, George found his hand slipping from Pierce's ear and coming to land on Pierce's collar, instead. He looked at Grandma Kennedy with dislike. Legend had it that she'd laid out a man up at the pub, but that would just have to be talk 'cos no women were allowed in the public house. Mind you, that wouldn't stop old Kennedy. She was a law unto herself. He swung Pierce away from the women and said what he'd come to say.

"You heard your mother tell Jack just the minute before that she didn't want no sand in her picnic. And what did yer just go and do? Put sand in her bloody picnic. Well, one thing's damn certain, you can stay away from the food. In fact, you can bloody go without food."

Jack looked away from Pierce and his father. It was more than your life was worth to catch George's eye. George would bring a fight to anyone who drew his attention. Out of the corner of his eye, Jack saw his family spread out across the sand embankment, each caught mid-action in some task.

Now Pierce was out there alone, locked into the hot arena of his father's anger, and no one stirred to help him. They all dreaded any mention of the word work because George could talk at considerable length on the subject of work but they all knew that if George's argument was allowed to run its course it would be sooner done.

"Have I got a job for you. You can chop bloody wood. It'll build yer some muscle."

He peeled back Pierce's shirt sleeve and raised Pierce's scrawny arm in the air for all to see.

"Look at this. Skinny as a piece of string. Puny as a girl. And do you know what it proves?" Here he glanced triumphantly at his scattered family," It proves that this boy's never done a tap of work in his life. Well it's high time yer got started," he said, giving Pierce a shove in the direction of the fire.

Amy leant out and touched George's sleeve.

"No point in saying anything," said George, glaring at his wife. "Nothing you could say 'ud change my mind. Boy plays on your feelings enough as it is, Amy. Just listen to him snivelling. If you and Mrs Kennedy weren't so soft on him, I wouldn't have all the trouble I do."

Then, head bent bad-temperedly, George waded away through the sand towards the fire pit. Pierce scampered down to the margin of the river and began leaping and swinging on the lower branches of the willows to bring down the debris lodged there from last winter's storms.

For a moment or two everyone was quiet. Amy busied herself with her rescued baskets, shaking out the sand with delicate, circumspect movements. Next to her, Grandmother Kennedy had settled back into the sand. She rocked the baby in the cradle of her arm and crooned something which vibrated eerily as if she were drawing a whetstone across the blade of a scythe. The baby squinted up at her through his old man's eyes and Grandmother Kennedy chuckled.

"Just look at him now, will yer darlin'," she called to Amy. "This one know's a thing or two. Looks like he's been here before."

"Oh mother," said Amy. "You know that jist means the little beggar's disgraced hisself." But the little' uns crowded round their Grandmother and squeezed and pushed one another to get the best view of their baby's telling face.

As heat locked down the afternoon, the people on the river's sandy beach grew drowsy. Jack pulled his cap down. He heard his mother and grandmother talking about the best way to keep sandwiches fresh. Although they were sitting right next to him, their voices sounding as if they were miles off. Ripe lupin pods popped on the bank above.

It was comfortable in the heat, but, looking through the narrow line of sight allowed under the fall of his cap, Jack could not sleep. He felt watchful and pretended to be a soldier in a sentry box. His angle of view only allowed him to see a section of the river and a bit of the far bank where young poplars plunged in the wind. There was nothing doing there, but when he altered his position he could see Pierce slinking down the slope with the tomahawk and his father hunkered down beyond the fire. The hot air above the fire was bending the air and this made his father seem to be both crouching and jumping. Jack thought he looked like the scratchy little devils dancing around the edge of a piece of old sewing Grandma Kennedy's mother had brought out with her from Ireland.

Grandma Kennedy said, "I'm half ashamed ter have sich a thing in the house. It might frighten the little girls." But looking up at the jagged stitches on what looked like a piece of frayed sack, Jack thought that it was unlikely to frighten anyone, even the little 'uns. He'd looked to see whether his grandmother was teasing but her face looked gloomy. It seemed amazing that a grown-up could take a silly old piece of cloth so seriously, and yet now as he looked across at his father and recognised the crouching dancing shapes from the sampler, he felt uneasy. That sort of dancing looked both pleased and cruel.

Jack looked away. “Pleased to be cruel,” he said to himself. Sometimes, George hit and hit him with his leather belt and he wanted to fight back, to kill his father’s face, because when his father hit him he always had on him that look of a job well done, just like when he gelded a heifer or cut the throat of a ewe.

Above him ripe lupin seeds popped like shotgun pellets. He thought about the rifle hanging behind the door in the cow shed. He’d taken it down once or twice and sighted along the barrel. Had seen George use it to shoot the old dog. Seen the dog leap in the air and the look of surprise on its face. He looked at his father and, even through the smoke, could see the mean blueness of his eyes. Fancy lining up the rifle and seeing the old man through the sights like the old dog. His father would look surprised but more than that there would be a look of outrage when it dawned on him who was killing him.

Jack felt suddenly sick. He’d never kill the old man. Never do that. He looked around at his family. What would they think if they suspected he’d been dreaming of killing George. He knew that Grandma Kennedy would take him straight down to Sergeant Higgins at the police station. She’d done that before when she’d caught him taking old man Bilton’s apples. Sergeant Higgins had paddled him with a fence paling but it hadn’t hurt; not like George could hurt. The sergeant told him he could take a few more batons from round the back of the station and fix the hole in old Bilton’s fence. You could tell he wasn’t really mad and when Jack came back in with the palings, he found the Sergeant and Grandma Kennedy laughing fit to bust, but when Grandma Kennedy saw that he’d seen them laughing, she pointed to the iron cage at the back of the station and said, “That’s fer next time.” The cage had thick bars and there was hardly enough room to slide a hand through the gaps, and just thinking about being shut inside that cage started a bursting feeling in Jack. He could see why people might grab onto the bars and try to shake a cage apart.

He thought about the dog again. There’d been just one small circle of deep red blood left behind on the ground.

“No mess,” said George with satisfaction, as he’d picked up the dog’s body. Then, he’d passed a shovel to Jack. “He’ll be more use planted somewhere near your mother’s currant bushes. Cost me too much in dog tucker.”

Jack looked across at his mother. She and Ellen were folding teatowels and repacking the picnic baskets. “George will want his supper at six,” Amy said unhappily. “This afternoon has gone so quickly.”

Supper at six. They got up at six. They had Sunday dinner at twelve. George was like God. He ordered up everything. Nothing would happen if their father were not there to demand that it should. He looked towards his father but the hot bend of air beyond the fire contained only the trembling poplars across the river. For a second Jack panicked. He’d wanted George

dead, hadn't he? It could be like one of the fairy stories Grandma Kennedy told about wishes and jars. You only had to wish something and it came true whether it was good or bad. Then he heard his father's voice and saw that George had moved clear of the fire and was standing with his arms upraised in welcome, and that Uncle John and cousin Richard were coming down the slope to join them.

Uncle John was calling out cheerful greetings to Amy and Grandma Kennedy as he came down the slope but Richard hung back, scuffing with his feet. No one told him not to put sand in the picnic.

Uncle John said, "I heard you had a good spot lined up for today, George, so when I finished up for the day, I thought I'd bring young Richard down for a swim. He tells me he's a bit of a swimmer, don't you mate?" Richard gave his father a non-committal shrug, and came dragging down the slope as if his father's suggestion of swimming had just reminded him of some long forgotten slight. Then John and George sat down next to the fire and George poured out billy tea and Richard went over to the edge of the pool and sat with his back turned to everyone and flicked stones into the water.

After drinking the smoky-tasting tea, the adults lay in the hot envelope of air trapped above the sand and silence descended on the river bank. Smoke shimmied to the height of the poplars and Amy and the little'uns stretched out on their backs and slept. Jack could hear one of the little'uns snoring and this made it impossible for him not to listen for each new snore to occur. He glanced across to the pool. Richard was still there. Jack thought that all the shrugging and kicking sand came from the fact that Richard knew he couldn't swim. Jack thought swimming couldn't be difficult because if you moved your arms and legs something had to happen.

Shadows were moving over the pool, stretching and shrinking as wind moved the surface of the water. It must be late afternoon. Probably it was time for milking. He looked across at George. The top of George's hat moved rhythmically in time to his breathing. His father's legs were stuck straight out in front of him. Jack walked over, hot sand trickling from each step, and stood above George, looking down. George always said he never got a day off but it was a lie. Here it was, mid-afternoon and George was fast asleep. Jack pictured the cows standing on the river terrace next to the house, udders as big as footballs. If cows waited too long to be milked, they got infections and died on you, and George would be the first to blame anyone who put his cows at risk. On the other hand, George was likely to give the person who woke him a boot up the backside.

Jack could see that his father's ankles protruded far beyond the cuff of his trousers. Amy patched and altered and remade their clothes. None of them had clothes that fitted. Jack looked at the ginger hairs springing in dusty tufts out of George's legs. Who could be scared

of a man who had legs covered in ginger hair and whose trousers were six inches too short for him. Jack leant over and jabbed his father's arm.

"What about the cows?" he asked. As soon as Jack's finger touched his father's sleeve, George arched his back and jerked like a freshly hooked fish. Then he sat bolt upright. "Don't yer bloody wake me up yer miserable little beggar. If yer so bloody concerned go home and milk the bloody cows yerself."

Jack reddened. George's outburst had woken everyone. Pierce's head popped up from behind a log. There was a rabbity smirk on his face. But, in that same instant, attention was diverted away from Jack, for there was a loud splash, and everyone looked towards the pool. Richard was in the water, his arms and legs flailing wildly. But despite his awkward style, a great crinkling bow wave was opening up and Richard's body showed like the pale underbelly of an eel as he slid through the mud-brown water under the willows. Jack saw Grandma Kennedy's mannish face break into a huge grin. "Ach," she said. "I admire the spirit of the boy."

Beaching on the far side, Richard crawled on all fours up the bank. A slick of green weed was stuck to his shining back. He turned and took a quick look at the people grouped on the bank he'd left behind him. Then he stood up and made a stiff little bow. The water had divided the hair on his scalp into perfect halves and Jack thought Richard's wet hair looked as oiled as a door-to-door salesman's. Grandma Kennedy had stood up.

"Bravo, bravo," she called, "It's a standing ovation, me darlins," and she waved her hands upwards to encourage everyone into giving Richard the kind of applause she thought he deserved. She turned to Uncle John. "Ah John," she said, "Sich a proud moment fer yer."

Uncle John, who had a slightly bemused look on his face, nodded. "That boy of mine swimming," he said. "Never thought I'd see the day."

Jack watched from the top of the sandbank. Richard had a sort of caved-in chest and although he was a year older, he was much smaller than Jack. There'd been talk at one stage that Richard might have consumption but nothing had been said about it lately.

"Well, George," said Uncle John, turning to Jack's father and rubbing his hands together. "That boy of mine's swimming. How about your Jack having a go? He's a well-set-up sort of a lad. I bet he'd be a grand little swimmer."

George tipped his hat back and scratched his head. "There's cows to milk. Boy ain't got time."

Jack heard his uncle say, "Aren't you being a bit hard on your lad? Cows 'll hang on for another hour," and his father replying, "Nah. Jack's got work ter do. Responsibility never harmed anyone. It never harmed me when I were a kid and going without a play in the river won't harm Jack none neither."

Jack moved into the cover of the lupins. He hid there for a moment, listening, waiting to hear what Uncle John would say next, but Uncle John had fallen silent. No-one, other than Grandma Kennedy, ever challenged George's opinion on anything. And, besides, how could anyone challenge that stuff about responsibility. Responsibility never harmed anyone sounded so bloody reasonable. Jack kicked loose stones as he walked up through the aspens. Through the shuffling of the blown leaves he could hear the herd stamping in the home paddock.

That night, Jack lay awake. Every time he closed his eyes he saw the stretching and shrinking shapes of water and Richard on the far bank of the pool, a smug look pinned on his face, being applauded by Grandma Kennedy. Ellen told him nothing had happened at the river after he'd left, but still Jack could not sleep. Uncle John had been right to bet he'd be a good swimmer. Of course, he'd be a good swimmer. Nothing was surer.

In the morning, Jack knew he'd go back to the river. He even knew the day. George would be at the stock sale on Monday, so Monday was the day he would go back to the river and swim.

The day of the stock sale he was up early. He could hear his parents in the next room. He could hear the scrape of his father's chair and the low murmur of his mother's voice. Through the thick imperfect glass of his bedroom window, he could see mist sitting near the ground in the home paddock. There was no sight of the mountain, but above the macrocarpa hedge there was one small patch of blue. The sun would soon burn off the mist. It was going to be a fine day.

Jack rarely went to school now because most days George needed his labour around their ten-acre block, but today, because his father had already ridden off to the sale, he told his mother he'd go to school.

"Yes," Amy said. She looked vaguely unhappy. "I was going to ask you ter shift the meat safe over to the walnut tree. It's getting too hot for it against the house at this time of year. But then again, your Grandma always thought it wrong yer stopped school early. She's always saying you're the one that has it in yer ter go the distance."

"Be seeing yer," Jack said, scooting off towards the gate. Any time now Amy might change her mind and keep him home to dig the garden. He loped out into the road and, looking back, saw his mother's pale print dress framed in the dark passageway of the house. She would be in there all day now, turning collars, mending socks, baking bread. He thought of being sat at the kitchen table in the narrow scullery under the slope of the back eave and shivered.

Outside, the mountain had come through the mist. He threw a stone idly into the air. He would walk to the end of Terrace Road, go down the side of the bridge and turn back into the

river bed, then he'd be able to follow the bank until he reached the swimming pool. He thought of his cousin's rounded arms digging up the surface of the pool and rolled up his sleeves and drove his own arms into the air once or twice but, to his disgust, he saw that the insides of his arms were as smooth as a girl's. What was worse was when he touched the skin of his inner arm it felt kind of silky. "Yuck," he said out loud, because the feel of his arms brought back the slithery feeling he'd got when he'd touched his grandmother's evening purse. That must have been ages ago. He wouldn't touch a thing like that now. He must have been about the age of one of them little 'uns then, because his memory of Grandma Kennedy on that day was of someone with a head that seemed near to touching the scullery ceiling. It must have been dinnertime because his feeling for the moment was that it was hot and steamy as if pots of potatoes were boiling on the coal range. But that moment belonged entirely to Grandma Kennedy. Dressed from head to foot in a brown fur coat she swayed above Amy like a huge brown bear, and from her throat, which wobbled dangerously above her high fur collar, came peculiar shrieks and gobbles. George had just entered the kitchen for his dinner and was looking at her with unveiled dislike.

"To hear some of them old songs again. It'll make me cry, " Grandma Kennedy had said, ignoring George. "Now isn't that something, Amy. Off to Timaru, to hear the opera. Singer's come all the way from Melbourne. A household name they say. The best in the world. Makes yer feel that yer aren't cast up on one of the world's most uncivilised rocks, eh George."

"Strike a light," said George, disgustedly, and banged out of the room and Grandma Kennedy shrugged inside her huge old coat. "What that man lacks is soul," she said. "Now you kids can hold me purse while I fix me hair."

Ellen had taken the purse first. She'd turned it over and over in her hands and stroked its sheeny surface with her small white hands. Spectrum colours rippled out from under her fingers in shiny riverlets. Jack had never seen such a thing and took it from Ellen for himself. It was then he'd felt the slithery feeling. At the time it hadn't struck him as anything strange, just the way you'd expect rainbow colours to feel.

When Grandma Kennedy came back into the scullery, she took the bag from Jack and gave it back to Ellen, who clutched it to the threadbare front of her pinafore. "I'm having one of them when I'm growed up," she said. But it seemed Grandma Kennedy was not pleased, because she took the purse away from Ellen and said, "Don't you go getting' ideas about that old thing, sweetheart. It ain't havin' a glittery purse that counts fer anything in this world."

Jack put his hand up against the bridge support. He was ready to descend into the river bed. It seemed strange to be thinking about something so long ago and especially about some maggoty old purse that his sister had wanted. He paused, looking out from the shade of the willows. The river's various courses were brightly scored into the shingle of the river bed.

Perhaps it was the sight of water that kept a shivery picture of the purse in his mind; for, there was no doubt about it, he could still see the purse standing out as clear and separate from his view of the river as a stamp stood out from the envelope of a letter. The strange thing was that he knew it wasn't actually the purse that mattered, it was that thing Grandma Kennedy had said about not being able to have the things you wanted.

He came down the bank in a rush, hearing the crunch of twigs beneath his boots. Grandma Kennedy was wrong about not getting things you wanted, though, because here he was, going to the pool, and no one would stop him.

When he broke through the broom and climbed out onto the sandy shelf above the pool, he was disappointed. The spot wasn't sheltered today and the pool looked kind of small. It must only be about ten good paces across. He'd get across that with about six good kicks. He sat down on the edge of the water. The tops of willows rattled above his head. Richard had sat here for so long, no one believed he could swim. Jack thought of himself as different, and straight away stood up and began to wriggle out of his braces and to shed his work trousers. Then he stripped off his shirt and bent to untie the shiny knots in his bootlaces. Through the Y of his legs he saw the pond and the trees turned on their heads. For some reason it made him think of Pierce. Pierce must see things a bit like this all the time. He never seemed to get anything straight. Right now, Pierce would be sitting at one of them long benches in the schoolroom. Old Williams would most likely be making them do their times tables. Old Williams called it drill and did tables first thing in the morning, before they went to lunch and before they went home in the afternoon. Sometimes they marched and clapped in time to their chanting. Williams claimed nobody left his school before they knew some basic arithmetic and no one who'd been to that school on the hill between Andersville and Haverton had ever proved him wrong. Even little Alice, who'd only been to school once, could clap her fat little hands together and shrill out, "Two ones is two, two twos is four."

George had been sour with Alice when he caught her prancing in the hall, her wispy hair flying and her face glowing with excitement at knowing something the big ones knew. "Two ones is two, two twos is four," he said gloomily, "You'll be down at the bingo parlour next week."

Now Jack was undressed he felt the keenness of the wind. He turned to face the water and squared his shoulders. He would jump now even though there was no one to watch him swim or to clap as they'd clapped Richard. The rattle of the river's main stream sounded close by. You'd be mad to try and swim in that part of the river. People always said it only took two minutes to drown. That you must never swim alone. But this pond would be all right. It was only six kicks across and there was no flowing water in it. So it couldn't take yer anywhere yer didn't want ter go. The water smelt old as if it had sat for days in the bottom of

a tea-cup. Strands of green weed wriggled just below the surface. What the heck if people said never to swim alone. He could walk across this pool if necessary. He looked down at the wriggling weed. The pool wasn't as he remembered it. It was not covered in bright light and the sand under the soles of his bare feet wasn't hot but oozed stickily between his toes. He stood his ground. Not swimming was out of the question. Pierce was the one that got spooked all the time. Jack trusted himself to be better than Pierce, just like he trusted himself not to yell when his father hit him. Jack hated Pierce's bawling. The noises Pierce made sounded as shameful to Jack as if he'd made them himself.

Now he stood on the edge of the pool and still he hadn't jumped. He was glad there was no one to see him. How scornful his father would be. He could see George's sunburned face as if George were actually here at his side accusing him of cowardice. He glanced at the row of aspens at the head of the ridge. Perhaps his father already knew where he was and would come crashing through the branches any moment now, galloping Sultan full tilt down the bank, making the water fly, bent on dragging Jack home and shaming him.

Jack turned back to the pool. If he drowned, there would be no more beatings. He would not have to dig the lavatory pit ever again. He leapt forward and, as he fell through the water, he saw shafts of brilliant light shifting across the sand at the bottom of the pool. If he drowned there'd be nothing his father could do. He could ride bloody Sultan round and round and kick the sand bank ter pieces but he wouldn't ever get his bloody slavey back. He remembered how Bessie Johnson had cried when Mr Williams read The Water Babies and Old Williams had snapped the book shut and looked at Bessie over the top of his glasses. Then Williams had asked Bessie whether she would like to clean chimneys and when she shook her head he'd asked her whether she might like to consider the possibility that Tom would be happy now that he never had to sweep chimneys again.

At that moment Jack's feet grazed the bottom of the pool. When he looked up, it was difficult to guess just how far away the surface was. There was a roaring noise in his ears. Air bubbles were rushing out from his nose. Instinctively he drove his feet against the bottom of the pool and, a moment later, his head broke clear of the water and he was gobbling down air. But there was nothing to hold on to and he sank straight down again. As he slid downwards he thought about how living with George was like being shut in that cage down at the police station. Air bubbles popped on the surface above him. He'd get away. He'd get a job at one of them big sheep stations. He began rising. His head came out of the water, rivulets streamed from his shoulders. He worked his legs like scissors cutting a jagged path in the water. He'd be a rouseabout. He'd make money. The water moved jerkily past, then his feet struck the side of the pool. Crawling, and scrabbling he pulled himself clear of the water and dragged himself onto the bank. He lay face-down in claggy sand and shut his eyes.

Coldness filled him to the core. His body felt like a dead weight. Perhaps he had died like Tom in The Water Babies. But dead things looked as if there was nothing inside them and the fact he was thinking about old Williams's darned book probably meant he wasn't dead. He could see his legs dragged out behind him in the sand and remembered how they had looked underwater, pale and yellow and sort of stepping along. He must have been doing some sort of swimming. When he'd first gone into the water his body had acted as if it were a dumb thing but the moment he'd thought about leaving home his legs had started working as if they were already walking him away. And yet if he worked for some homesteader there would be nothing ter show fer it. Only two nights ago George had told him that their place on River Terrace Road would be just another piece of old river bed if it hadn't been for his work. It weren't no lie either. Without George there would be no house, no garden, no cows.

The night his father had talked to him about the farm was the night before the picnic. Perhaps he'd worked out they could afford another cow or something for he seemed to be in a good mood. Even so, Jack had been wary. A good mood guaranteed nothing with his father.

They'd stood together under the young walnut tree while George tamped his pipe.

"Let's look around a bit," his father had said, leading the way to a point in the yard where the house and the river flat could be seen together.

"Nothing when I came," George said. "I've made everything I can see round here."

Jack said nothing. His father wasn't God. They'd all worked hard, even little Alice, who'd stumbled out over the frosty ground her shivering hands holding as many stones as she could carry in the front of her pinny.

George paced the length of the macrocarpa hedge, talking quietly. "Me brother John and me father came over from Haverton and we built them sheds and the house tergether. We did it all in the summer of '91. We did it evenings after we'd all put in a full day's work. I were a shepherd over at Alton station in them days. Even so, yer mother were in such a hurry she had yer in a tent before we could get the house framed up"

George moved back and forth in the shadow of the hedge and Jack trudged behind feeling foolish for having to follow in his father's wake. Finally, George stopped by the kitchen garden and waved a hand towards the neat rows of staked beans. "If yer know how and when, a garden ain't chance. Yer get back yer work in even measure. I'd say a man'd be a total fool ter depend on chance." Then he swept his arm in wide arc, taking in the house, garden and cow paddocks.

"I'm leaving nothing ter chance. Might have been a stony bit a ground when I first got started here but, by the time I finish up, it'll be fit enough for generations of Hunts ter make a living from. I had nothing but me name when I started out but, if I have me way, it's going ter be a helluva lot different fer yous kids."

Now, lying on the riverbank with a pelt of sand attached to his wet back, Jack felt tears starting and brushed them away angrily. He never cried if he could help it. He was not the self pitying type. He'd only ever lived at River Terrace Road. It was the only place he knew, and yet something had changed. It was as if he were looking at the house with its familiar central door and two front windows and could see that it might not be his home forever.

Chapter 3

"I can understand why you might want to deny it," Else had said. "It's not nice having a drunk for a father."

Sybil couldn't trust Else's way of seeing things. Having a drink in his hand in the evenings was just Daddy being Daddy. He'd done that for as long as she could remember.

Sitting on the swing seat under the honeysuckle arch, Sybil heard the drone of bees. There was an insidious sweetness in the air.

"And live alone in the bee loud glade." Her father said Yeats was the new man, and that, as far as he was concerned, Irish poets always were the ones to listen to. Sybil rocked back and forth and stared at the solid brick house and the pencil-point of the cathedral spire which rose behind it.

Else had called their house a sinking ship. And yet everything looked as it always had. The honeysuckle smelt sweet, and hot afternoon light coated everything in a sticky golden glaze. Who wanted to believe the world was a terrible place when everything looked so beautiful? She pushed her feet into the ground and forced the seat back in an abrupt arc, and her feet speckled over as she went flying up into the leafy arch.

Else had said she would go to the ends of the earth to get away.

"From England, from us all?" Sybil had asked.

"Think Australia," Else had said.

Sybil's feet came back down with a thump and then she launched herself again. Australia! On the map Australia had a sullen, lumpen look like a piece of dough thumped down by an impatient cook. Photographs of the place were no more heartening. They showed featureless empty spaces. Yet Else had called England a sinking ship and told her that even Guinie was planning to escape. Sybil saw Guinie and Else putting out to sea in life-boats, sliding away into the dark night to continue lives in unimaginable places. Her feet thumped the ground again. They would be living amongst strangers. She leapt off the swing. All that swaying in the flickering light seemed to have made her dizzy.

Sybil moved down the garden into the shadow of the hedge, where it was cooler. When she'd been much younger, she and May had played inside this hedge. They'd set up house in its shadowy rooms, brought the dolls' tea-set down and put the miniature cups and saucers out on a soap box and served dandelion tea. The tea had tasted like medicine and had a dirty colour, but they'd drunk it all the same because being inside the hedge was new and strange and perhaps, just perhaps, they might never go home. Tilly would call and call and her mother would cry. Tears of sympathy had sprung into Sybil's eyes and she'd felt cold all over and a bit shivery. Her mother would be so lonely. She'd looked across at May crouched

down on the other side of the soap box. In the green light of the hedge, May's eyes had gleamed whitely. They'd stared at one another. Perhaps they were hiding? Perhaps they were dreaming? They sat motionless inside the hedge for what seemed like a long time. Then Tilly struck the tea-gong and both burst out of their hiding place and raced up the lawn. They washed their hands without being asked, and, seated at the table, watched covetously as Tilly placed buttered bread and a sweet cake on each of their plates.

A month ago she'd discovered Wilfred living in this same hedge and Nettie had called the military police. It was the neighbour's dog that discovered Wilfred and she wondered what she might have done if Nettie hadn't been there. Would she have brought Wilfred food, helped him to hide out from the army?

She hadn't liked seeing the military police herding him out of the garden, their batons drawn. Her mother hadn't liked it either and, even though she wanted Wilfred gone, she'd shouted at the police. Nettie's voice had sounded as thin and plaintive as a curlew's and had about as much effect, for the policemen rounded on Wilfred when he'd tried to elude their grasp in the opening of the gate. Poor Wilfred. He was smaller than she was and those heavy-set men had used their night-sticks on his shrinking back.

That evening Sybil had lain awake. In the shadowy darkness of her room, she thought the white sheet round her body looked like a shroud. She lay still, hardly breathing, her arms at her sides, her legs pressed together. Only her feet pointed skywards. He couldn't have stayed in the hedge over the winter. If he went to prison at least he'd be indoors. It had to be better than being outside.

Shadows from the tree outside her window rippled backwards and forwards across the ceiling. It was as if she were lying at the bottom of a tank filled with water. Wilfred was strange and sick. People didn't choose to live in hedges. Sybil remembered how the hedge had looked from the inside. She could see the dolls' teaset. Little white ellipses in the shadow-land of the hedge, the hedge above as closely woven as a bird's nest. According to Terry, who'd explored Wilfred's hiding-place after he'd been arrested, Wilfred had left a mountain of cigarette butts and even some poo.

"Fancy pooing in our hedge," Terry had said, wrinkling his nose.

"Well,"]Else said, jabbing him with a pointed finger as she passed, "you wouldn't have liked it any better if he'd used our water closet."

The police had driven Wilfred out of the garden, belabouring him with sticks, as if he were a beast. The action of those batons on Wilfred's shoulders made her want to hide under the bedclothes as if she was trying to avoid being hurt herself. The white flurry of those furious batons had not come down on her shoulders but she closed her eyes tightly anyway and tried to imagine would it might feel like to be dead.

“Dead.” She said the word out loud and it sounded as resonant as an empty well. What would being dead feel like? Would it feel like something or nothing at all?

She opened her eyes and the window square above her bed remained dark and unresolved, and she felt suddenly fearful. Could wishing make it so? She sat up then and threw off the white sheet and the edge of the table came into focus and tree branches began filling the window square again. She sighed with relief and took the glass from her bedside table and drank water down in quick grateful gulps.

A moment or two later, she lay down again and as her skin warmed under the blankets. Absent-mindedly, she began to stroke the insides of her legs. It used to be something she liked to do because the skin there was silky and the tickling feeling she experienced when she did this relaxed and pleased her. But now, as the familiar buzz of sensation started up, she was seized by a feeling of panic and pinched her legs together as closely as she could. Wilfred had hurt her. She looked at the thick boughs of the elm. The knotted branches seemed pressed against the window-glass.

Perhaps Wilfred hadn’t meant to hurt her. She didn’t think of Wilfred as a nasty person. But he’d knelt on her thighs and grunted. She saw the flurry of sticks raining down on his back and somehow all this hurting seemed inevitable.

When she'd first been introduced to Wilfred he seemed pale and innocuous. Sybil suspected he'd been invited because he was a clergyman’s son. Nettie had mentioned that his family was friends of some relative who lived in Northampton. When she first met him, he'd just turned eighteen and was going into training at Codford Camp at the end of the week. He was about to become one of what Nettie called, “Our brave boys." Else hated this saying of her mother's. "Going to war isn't a religious calling, mother," she said tersely.

When Wilfred appeared in the drawing room at their Salisbury house, Nettie singled Sybil out.

“Look after Wilfred nicely, dear,” she told her, and Sybil had been pleased. Normally the task of hosting the succession of brave boys who came through their house was allotted to her older sisters. Perhaps her mother had entrusted her with this job because she'd recently turned sixteen. Besides, entertaining Wilfred was no bother. He'd been content to do whatever she suggested. They gone into the garden and played badminton on the back lawn, but mostly they'd flopped about in the shade drinking lemonade and swapping stories about the awfulness of school.

When Wilfred went into training, Sybil didn't think of him again, but, just before his regiment was due to go to France, he’d come to the house. Sybil had been amused by the way he paraded around the house. She noted his polished boots and pulled-in belt and she didn't miss the way he hovered in front of the hall mirror and altered the angle of his hat.

"Come on, Adonis," she said, laughing."Let's go out into the garden. It's too good a day to waste inside." He'd looked at her dubiously, and accepted her mother's offer of tea in the drawing room instead. In the drawing room he sat stiffly in a Chippendale chair and took tiny sips from a porcelain cup. If she'd been younger, Sybil would have run outside and left him to it, but she knew that, because he was a guest, she must consider his wishes more important than her own.

When he'd finished his tea, she suggested going outside again, and he rose grudgingly and followed her into the garden. Once outside, she led him past the shed where the badminton rackets were kept but he did not ask to play. They walked the length of the garden and nothing was said. When they reached the end of the lawn, Sybil couldn't resist giving him a push. He stumbled and half fell against the garden hedge, but as he did not push back, she parted the branches and pretended her intention all along had been to show him the place where she and May had once played house. It had been pointless, of course. Wilfred wasn't the least bit interested, and, when she told him about the dolls' tea-sets, he simply walked away. Sybil stayed where she was, smelling the peppery fragrance of the bruised leaves and remembering May's eyes big with believing they'd really left home forever.

When she turned back towards the house, Wilfred was paused by the honeysuckle arch.

"Let's sit here," he said, pointing to the seat as Sybil drew level. They sat on the slatted seat and Wilfred's leg pressed against hers. If he had been Terry she would have bumped him off the seat with her hip but because he was a guest she pretended not to notice. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him staring ahead at a fixed point just as if he were looking through a telescope. He really was absurd. She stood up and Wilfred stood up too. It was an ill-timed move and the kiss he'd been intending to place on her lips grazed her chin. "Don't," she'd said, stepping out of his clumsy embrace.

"I told the chaps you were my girl," he said, his face scarlet.

For a moment they stared at each another. She thought he looked a bit like Addie. People were always telling Addie not to touch them, yet everyone knew she meant no harm. Sybil reached out and took Wilfred's hand. She could feel the smooth ovals of his fingernails.

"I'll be your girl, if you like," she said.

It seemed she'd said that years ago, but really It must have been just a few months back. I'll be your girl. What a thing to say! She supposed she'd been trying to be polite or kind or smoothing out an embarrassing moment , but whatever the reason, it hadn't been true. Could never be true. In uniform Wilfred had behaved like a fool.

Now, lying under her sheet, Sybil watched the ebb and flow of shadows on the ceiling. She'd behaved like a fool, too. It had been wrong of her to say she'd be Wilfred's girl. It had put ideas in his head because, the next time he came to their house, he'd asked her to marry him. He'd been insistent and peculiar. She wriggled uncomfortably under the sheet and dragged the tartan blanket up to her chin. Even lying here in the safety of her bed she'd couldn't escape the discomfort she felt, could even hear the high pitch in her voice as she replied , "We don't even know each other!"

After the military police took Wilfred away Else had tackled Nettie.

"You should have called the authorities the moment that boy turned up at the door. Anyone with half a brain could have seen the boy was sick. It would have saved everyone a lot of trouble, if you had."

Nettie had bristled. "It's all very well being wise after the fact, my girl," she said tartly, "but I'm not a trained nurse so how was I to know?"

Else had made a hissing noise with her mouth but let her mother alone. She shrugged her shoulders at Sybil and mouthed the word incorrigible at her, then, unaccountably, insisted Sybil watch Tilly cutting up rabbit for their tea. It seemed incidental at the time but, subsequently, Sybil had occasion to believe Else did it on purpose to teach her some sort of lesson.

"You should see this," Else said, as they went past the kitchen door and Tilly swung into view carrying a freshly killed rabbit. "Tilly is such an expert with a knife , she can turn rabbit into pie in the time it takes wink an eye."

"Poor thing," Sybil said. " I don't want to see that. Just think a few hours ago it was running happily around out in the fields eating grass."

"For goodness sake," Else said, chivvying her through the door, "don't be such a ninny. In an hour or two, you'll be the one telling Tilly what a delicious pie she's made."

When the girls entered the kitchen, Tilly was standing at the sink and the rabbit was lying across her wooden chopping block. Tilly half-turned and her good-natured face flushed when she saw the girls.

"Why don't you two come back in half an hour or so, I'll have some nice hot scones on the go by then."

Else shook her head. "Oh, no, we've come to see you turn rabbit into pie."

Tilly continued to look uncomfortable but, after a moment's hesitation, she bent forward and inserted the knife under the rabbit's skin. The skin shook as it stretched above the knife's travel. Then there was a tearing noise and the pelt slipped cleanly off the rabbit's body as if Tilly had simply undressed it. She dropped the shucked skin into a pail and the carcass now lay exposed, the flesh held compactly in a glaucous sac. Tilly turned the rabbit onto its back.

Its head had not yet been severed and its ears flopped out onto the bench with a small thud. Sybil put out her hand and touched the fur of the head and the stiffness she felt under her fingers made her shudder.

Else noticed and smirked at her. "You stand accused," she said. "Perhaps you should consider not eating meat in future, little sister."

The next moment the contents of the rabbit's stomach dropped into the bucket. Ropes of intestine and black clotted matter flowed over and round the flaccid bulk of the skin. Sybil steadied herself against the edge of the bench. "Just shapes," she told herself. Shapes that coiled around and in on themselves. Colours that blossomed brighter than anything she'd seen before. Then she was blundering against things in the kitchen, rushing to the door, banging ineffectually up against it. Else came up behind her and released the catch. Tilly's concerned face appeared beyond Else's shoulder.

"She'll be all right," said Else, pushing Sybil out into the garden and closing the kitchen door behind her.

Else hooked her arm round her sister's waist. "Take it easy. It's only bile. It's strong, I know, but it's just nature when all is said and done."

"I can taste it," Sybil said, dabbing at her watering eyes.

"You're not crying, are you? Come on now, you'll feel better in a moment or two."

Sybil ran her fingers across the dark squares of the tartan blanket. That day, Else had been uncharacteristically kind, had put her arms round Sybil and wiped away her tears with a pocket handkerchief. Although later when Sybil asked why Else had insisted they watch Tilly disemboweling the rabbit, Else had looked morose.

"Go on, ask yourself ?" she said brusquely.

Sybil had frowned. "You must have known the smell of that bile would make me sick," she'd complained. "You're always so cruel, Else."

Else had shrugged. "Cruel am I?" she said, and walked away.

Sybil hunched further down under the bedclothes. Else could say what she liked, but it had been cruel of her to set that thing up with the rabbit. The memory of that bucket of innards still made her feel queasy and sometimes she caught a whiff of something foul in the air as if the smell of all those people who'd died in France was being wafted across the channel on a prevailing breeze. She'd wondered if she'd ever forget the stench of the rabbit's innards. She pulled the rug up to her chin, but it afforded no comfort and after a moment or two she threw it aside. Once Else had taken her outside, she'd had made Sybil walk up and down the garden. After they'd tramped about a bit, Else spoke about Wilfred. She said he was in no fit state to be running round the countryside, that he should be in hospital.

Sybil stretched her toes under the bed-clothes. Her toes felt icy. No fit state, Else said. In no fit state, he'd asked her to marry him. In no fit state he'd trampled her too. Walked on her legs like a horse.

The day she'd gone out into the field with Wilfred had been so bright that even in this night-time room the memory of it was like a yellow window in her mind. Only a few weeks had passed since that afternoon but already leaves lay in the ditches and haws showed red in the hedges. Soon frost would rime the verge of the lane. She scrunched her toes up. The sheets had warmed a bit and she no longer felt so cold. Perhaps she would soon sleep. She ran her fingers along the smooth skin of her thighs. She regretted her height. She was too tall. Her sisters, and Else in particular, were what her mother called petite. She rested her hand on her stomach. Inside, under this satiny skin were all those ropes of intestine. Somebody, perhaps Terry, had said there were miles and miles of them. She smoothed the skin of her stomach. People never really thought much about what was inside them because they couldn't see any of it. She turned in the bed. Wilfred had come right inside her. She didn't know quite how because she had tried not to look. She remembered watching clouds in the sky above her head.

Sybil shrugged the blankets from her shoulders and reached for the water. Everybody wanted to be married. She'd wondered about what it would be like to be asked since she'd been about eleven. The scene had always been vague. A Rossetti sort of occasion with gold stars and sheaths of white lilies but really not even this. More a pale wash, the colour of icing on cakes. When Wilfred proposed, his mouth was framed in a filthy stubble, there'd been spittle on his lips, and the next moment he'd fallen down.

On the ground, Wilfred had looked small in the open space of the field. They said the war in France was being fought for in fields. She squinted down the hillside and the grass rippled like water.

It had been Tilly who'd let Wilfred into the house. Nettie hadn't been pleased.

"I have concerns," she said, shepherding Sybil towards the drawing-room. "That boy looks no better than a vagrant."

Wilfred was standing by the window when Sybil entered the drawing room. She could see no vestige of the boy she'd played badminton with. This man had hair spiked with perspiration and boots caked with mud. He'd brought flowers, but they'd been pulled out by the roots and were from their own garden.

When Wilfred fell down, it completely surprised her. One moment he was standing, the next lying flat on the ground. Once a girl at school had fainted but she didn't think Wilfred had fainted. She knelt beside him and the wetness of the earth came up through her skirt.

“It’s no good you doing that, Wilfred," she said. She looked down at his face and his eyes were closed and his breath was coming out of his open mouth in small pants.

“Come on," she said, tugging at his arm. “I can’t help you if you won’t help yourself." Her voice sounded peremptory and was the way Else would have spoken. Guinie called Else “The sister” because nursing sisters were known to be such dragons.

Sybil could see the curve of Wilfred’s teeth set into the pink flesh of his jaws. There was foam round the edges of his mouth. The way his lips were drawn back made him look like a dog.

“Silly," she said, shaking him. “You’re being silly.” Then she reached out determinedly and hauled him up by the arms.

“Help me,” she’d said, “I’m not going to let you just lie there. The ground's soaking wet."

She managed to wrestle him up into a sitting position, then he slumped and fell half way across her lap. She scanned the field. There was no one but herself to help him. She straightened her back to support his weight and noticed how the folds in her sleeves fell in strong, beautiful curves like the drapery on the Mary in Miss Brook’s photograph of The Pieta. Miss Brook had put photographs of Trajan’s column, the Coliseum and The Pieta on the back wall of the Art History room. The Pieta had not been a success. Some of the girls had giggled uncontrollably. They said the Christ was a “nudie” and the image was gone the next day.

It surprised Sybil that she’d remembered the photograph. She'd seen it the moment Wilfred slumped in her arms. She could even see Miss Brook’s pointer moving along the lines of the drapery and hear her telling them that lines always told their own story, and that these lines told the story of human suffering.

Suffering. Sybil wrenched the bed-clothes around herself again. Else talked nonstop about suffering. She said that every day flesh and blood people were being sent out against bombs and bullets. She said the people at home shouldn't hide from the truth but should come down to the hospital and see what was happening with their own eyes.

Else’s harangues always made Nettie restless.

“Don’t talk like that around Addie,” she said, moving forward to swat a fly. “She’s only a child.” But everyone knew Addie was actually fourteen and had boobies like all the rest of them.

In a way, though, Mummy was right to try and keep Addie safe. Once you started thinking about suffering, you saw it everywhere. One evening, Sybil even found her father crying. He'd been sitting in the hall-way and she wouldn’t have seen him, if she hadn’t come downstairs to get a glass of water before bed. It had been dark in the hallway but her eye had been attracted by something shaking in the hall mirror. The shaking frightened her because

the shape she saw was pale and ghost-like. But when she saw it was her father she was even more frightened. What could be so wrong that a grown-up like Daddy could be shivering like that? She'd gone immediately to him. He looked terrible. His hair disheveled, his tie thrown back over his jacket, as if he'd been tearing at his throat. Wilfred had scrabbled at his throat in the field and she hadn't known what to do. With her father it was different. She took hold of both his hands and chafed them to bring back some warmth.

"What's wrong? "she asked, and the sympathy she felt brought tears into her eyes. His mouth opened several times but no sound came out.

"I'll get a blanket and some water," she said, and hurried away. But when she got back, carrying the rug from the sun-porch and balancing a full glass of water, her father had gone. She heard the squeak of floor-boards on the landing and thought that he must be going to his bed. She put the water down on the sideboard and wrapped the rug round her own shoulders, then sat herself on the chair her father had just vacated. The night sky glowed faintly in the porthole window of the door. Was he ill or sad? Today had been Terry's seventeenth birthday. Everyone had sung and eaten lucky slices of birthday cake and then Willis had presented Terry with a watch. He'd been jovial and happy as he buckled the watch onto Terry's wrist.

Sybil ran her fingers along the satin edge of the blanket. Everyone knew boys of seventeen were putting up their ages so they could fight in the war. Daddy had given Terry a watch for his birthday. Perhaps he was regretting having said, "Time waits for no man," as he strapped on that watch. Terry was his only son.

The next day Sybil took Else aside. "I'm worried about Daddy," she said. "I think he's scared that Terry will think he's old enough to enlist."

"Oh," said Else, "Did he tell you that?"

"No," said Sybil. "But I guessed that was why he was crying in the hallway last night."

Else gave her narrow-eyed look. "I wouldn't bet on that," she said nastily, and turned on her heel and left the room. Guinie, who'd been lying in the sun on the window seat, uncurled herself and yawned.

"I don't think I'd like to be down at the hospital when the sister's on the war path," she said. "You'd get precious little sympathy." She was balancing herself on the edge of the window-seat and sliding her feet into a pair of pretty strapped shoes. Her head was tilted and her silky hair fell forward and masked her face. Outside, the garden gate creaked and her head came up expectantly. Sybil gazed out of the window and saw Terry coming through the shrubbery. He looked sulky.

Rhododendron leaves moved blurrily green against the pane. She'd not seen the clubs the police used on Wilfred, only their movement, and it had been the rhythm of her father's

shaking that had allowed her to find him in the hall. The trouble with her was that she never seemed to see the thing itself, only the movement at its edges. She turned to Guinie, who was looking peeved and saying something about getting a handyman to oil the gate.

“Do you think it was Else who called the authorities when we discovered Wilfred in the hedge?” Sybil asked. “Else did say he turned up at the hospital the next day and she was always saying hospital was where he should be.”

“Well,” said Guinie, “If that was Else’s intention, it went badly wrong. Rumour has it they sent Wilfred back to the front. From what I heard the general opinion was that he ought to have been shot. But if you want to know who called the authorities, my bet's on Mummy. You can’t have a madman living in your garden hedge when you’ve got five daughters to protect. It would be like keeping a fox in your chicken house."

Sybil shook her head. “I don't know what to think," she said.

"Why worry about it?" Guinie said, tossing her head. "It's all water under the bridge now." Then she laughed. "But of course, knowing you, you'll go on needlessly fretting about the rights and wrongs of it for weeks."

Sybil shook her head, "No, I won't ," she said, but of course Guinie was right. She wanted to hunt Else down and ask her directly whether she'd told on Wilfred. She wanted to ask Else about Daddy and Wilfred, too. They’d both been shaking and, being a nurse, Else could probably tell her why. She looked at her watch and sighed. Else would be half way to the hospital by now. She could just picture her, striding, head down, small against the sweep of the downs. And what if she did ask Else? Else would only tell her the things she most feared were true.

Sybil went out of the house and into the garden. They used to have a gardener but he’d gone to fight in the war and now years had passed since anyone had done anything constructive. The garden had lost its shape and grown big and blurry. Sybil liked it this way. She liked the way leaves and flowers were taking over the swing seat. One of these days the arch itself would topple under the weight of the honeysuckle vine. Each year the frame settled lower into the ground. She and Wilfred had sat under this arch the best part of a year ago and she’d received his unwanted kiss. She touched her face. His teeth had jarred against the bone of her chin. Silly Wilfred. He messed up everything. She didn’t feel sorry that he’d been sent to the front.

"Sent to the front" had an ominous sound, though. There'd been many telegrams. If you had a map of England little dots signifying telegrams would be pinned in everywhere. Yet, although most soldiers were drafted now, there were still those who rushed to enlist. Wilfred had come back to England on leave and it was clear that he would not, could not, should not go back. He’d lain in the field and shivered and foamed at the mouth, then he’d gone to

ground in their hedge. People said Wilfred had been too frightened to fight. No doubt any number of people would have been proud to give him a white feather.

She looked at the seat hanging slack in the deep shade of the arch-way. Back then, she'd been infuriated because Wilfred had left her too little room. She stared at the slats of the seat. The light behind the swag of honeysuckle glowed like a corona. She saw now that they'd sent Wilfred back to France because they wanted him shot. They'd calculated his death a certainty and that meant that everyone out there was in harm's way. Else was right, they really were sending human flesh out against bombs. It didn't sound like the sort of thing reasonable people would do. Somebody had once said that incoming bullets made a peculiar whine but that if you heard the whine you knew you were safe.

She saw Wilfred out in the field. It made her feel sick. She never set out to think about Wilfred but he always seemed to come into her thoughts whether she wanted him there or not. Perhaps he came ghosting back all the time because he thought she was the one who'd called the military police. The one who wanted him killed.

As children they'd played ghosts all the time. They'd hauled sheets off the beds, hidden in wardrobes and behind doors and leapt out on one another in the dark of the night. They'd screamed the house down or so their mother claimed. Sybil could still remember running down the passage as if her life depended on it. The terror had been electrifying. Once she'd actually peed on her nightgown. The funny thing was that even though you knew that it was really only Terry or May wrapped in a bed-sheet, you were terrified just the same and, as soon as one of those white shapes appeared, your mouth went dry and you couldn't stop screaming. She didn't believe Wilfred was a ghost, but it felt as if he'd never actually left their garden, because he was so often unaccountably there.

Every night she woke to shapes moving in the room. Then she'd have to lie still until she'd reassured herself nobody was there. After this, she drank water because her mouth was so dry. Terry reckoned you only got a dry mouth if you'd been snoring. She disagreed with Terry on most things. Terry said rubbishy things for effect. Besides, she didn't want to think she ever snored. Snoring was absolutely repulsive. Aunt Emma snored during her afternoon nap and it sounded both horrible and ridiculous. She'd seen the quiver of Aunt Emma's dewlaps and this had cemented the idea in her mind that snoring went with wrinkled skins and thinning hair. Instead, she blamed her dry mouth on the frightening feelings that seemed to rise up out of her dreams; feelings that reminded her of the terror she'd felt in those old ghost games.

She told herself her wakefulness was caused by the full moon, which, at a certain hour, flooded her room with light and caused the shapes of branches to shiver across the ceiling. She believed she would sleep better once the moon was on the wane. Then she thought

perhaps it was thirst that woke her because every time she shuddered into consciousness her throat felt parched and sore. The feeling reminded her of the cracked platelets of mud at the bottom of the garden pond in summer months. The pond must have sprung a leak and, even when winter rains filled it, nothing grew or swam in it.

Nettie had been cross when Wilfred had taken her from the drawing-room. She'd protested loudly but Wilfred had ignored her completely. It had been quite funny really, seeing the obsequious clergyman's son turned bully. He'd marched her so determinedly into the neighbouring field. She'd been amused at first. Did he really think he was taking her prisoner? At a certain point in the field, she'd looked back at the house. It didn't concern her that no one had come out to rescue her.

The strange thing was that even when Wilfred started hurting her, she couldn't think that anyone might have made him stop. In fact, throughout that whole business, it was as if she wasn't even really there. It was like looking down a microscope at something completely separate from herself.

That last year at school, they'd studied cells and the teacher had helped Sybil focus the lens of her microscope so she could see the specimen inside the glass slide. The cell had a strong outline, and inside this frame were stipples of colour as you might expect to find on the skin of a salmon. But no matter how hard she tried to see it as a skin cell, she could not apply that pink stained thing to herself.

She looked down at her lightly freckled arms, even more definitively patterned by the striated light in the archway. She'd never have delicate arms like Guinie. Never be able to wear hats with the casual aplomb of Else. Unlike Guinie, Else didn't care what people thought and that's what made it so unfair that she could tilt and tie a hat in ways that made everyone look at her. That gorgeous Miss Courage. Even Guinie grumbled about Else's knack with hats. Perhaps it was Else's red hair. People commented on the way it dazzled in the light. Apparently, Aunt Emma had had similar colouring, but that was hard to credit now given the wispy nature of her scant white bun.

There'd been a bright, hard-on-the-eyes dazzle in the field, too. The sort of light that sent you indoors for a hat. She could hear herself murmuring, telling Wilfred everything would be alright. She'd been thinking about her mother at the time. Thinking about how Nettie's afternoon tea plans had gone awry and her fingers were straying into Wilfred's hair. How prickly it felt. Not drawing room hair. There'd been truth in Nettie's vagrant comment. He was a nuisance really. The weight of him lying across her was giving her pins and needles and her stockings were getting covered in grass stains. Nettie would have lots to say about that. She must get him up and moving. She rocked the cradle of her hips to dislodge him but his weight settled even more heavily down upon her.

“Stop it,” she said, trying to shift him, but he only held her tighter and started crawling right over the top of her. She rained blows on his arms and shoulders. What an idiot he was.

"Stupid, stupid,” she hissed, but she didn’t hit Wilfred hard. It wouldn’t be kind to hurt him.

Else said she didn’t mind if she never saw some people again. She said Aunt Emma had already paid her fare to Australia and she was going as soon as the war was over. Sybil thought Emma was a bad old woman. Nettie would be beside herself if she knew what had been planned behind her back. Besides, all those pictures of Australia that Else showed were so dreary; trees that were all the same and animals with dim expressions on their faces. Then there were poisonous snakes and terrible insects. The teacher who’d shown them the skin cells had made them study insects. Sybil, who had spent most of her life avoiding creepy-crawlies, expected to only like the bit about the metamorphosis of butterflies. It was not something new, however, as their governess had shown them a hatching chrysalis and she’d seen the wings of a red admiral unpack in a warm corner of the nursery. Quite against the odds, she’d come to quite like insects. Their tripartite bodies were easy to draw and colouring in their varnished shells was almost as pleasing as illustrating the decorative wings of butterflies. She’d been surprised at how well armed some of the insects were. They not only had protective armour but a fearsome set of tools with which to inflict damage. There were probosces for drilling and sucking. There were mandibles that imprisoned and crushed and pincers for trapping and skewering. She’d felt sorry for all those soft- bellied caterpillars and worms.

She and Wilfred had talked about the cross-grained nature of teachers when Wilfred first came to their house. Sybil had told Wilfred about the biology teacher and how she had made them study disgusting things like skin cells and tarantulas and how they’d nicknamed her ‘hirsute’ because she had a hairy face like a man. Although what she and Wilfred had mainly done was laze about, play a little desultory tennis and pull blotchy elm seeds out of their lemonade. In the field, it was as if none of this had ever happened. Wilfred had lain on top of her and the brown of his uniformed back had shone in the sun and he’d held her in his pinching grip. She was glad there was long grass. She would have been ashamed if anyone had seen what he was doing.

Nettie especially hated being reminded that things around the house were not quite right anymore. The overflowing bucket at the corner of the house always got her going and the moment Nettie said "rack and ruin", people knew it was time to make their excuses and melt away. Earlier that day, Sybil had been trapped by the water bucket because she was holding

her mother's gardening basket and could not easily get away. But fortunately, just as Nettie was saying, "That guttering's been like that for months, and of course, nowadays there's no one to fix it," next door's dog came sidling up and put its muzzle into the bucket. The noise of its drinking made Nettie laugh.

"Slaking its thirst," she said, giggling, and forgot the house. She took back her gardening basket and pulled out the rose cutters, and sauntered happily away, intent on picking a few last blooms for the drawing room vases. And Sybil had stood a moment longer looking at the dog's sleek head bobbing greedily above the bucket. According to Nettie it was slaking its thirst. What a word. "Slaking" coursed over the tongue like water sliding along the channel of a narrow stream.

Later, Sybil sat on the swing and smiled about the word that sounded like water coursing over the tongue. No one came to sit on this swing seat anymore. No one smelt the honeysuckle or heard the hum of the bees. No one seemed to love these "sounds and sweet sweet airs" as she did. Her feet dragged back and forth, back and forth. Else was going to Australia and Daddy was a drunk night after night and, night after night, she woke up and it wasn't the moon. Wilfred had drilled into her, and since that time, she'd felt that somewhere far inside herself she'd become as dry as desert sand.

Chapter 4

As kids we had wars. We waded through ditches, forced ourselves through gorse hedges, staked territories with willow sticks, stole pieces of shirt and teatowel from the mending basket, scored these with crosses and stars. Territories were won and lost in an afternoon.

Once, the Cooper's pony got stuck in the rump with an arrow. It screamed and plunged about and tossed Benny Cooper onto the road. Enemy fire came pelting down on us from the high ground of Eason's paddock. Things were bouncing about in the willow branches above our heads. I dragged Benny as if he were a body, and forced him head first into the nearest ditch. He was wriggling like an eel.

"I'm not dead yet," he gurgled, as his face sank into the water.

"You will be," I said, "If you don't shut up. Those Crossens'll murder you if you let them catch a sight of you."

We lay doggo until the hail of arrows and clods stopped whistling in the branches. We could hear the Crossens laughing as they chased Benny's pony down the road. I caught a glimpse of its swaying back and of the arrow hanging out and bobbling as it ran.

After they'd gone. I hauled Benny up and we looked each other over. I had a split lip and Benny had a bump the size of a hen's egg on his head.

Next Sunday Benny and I got busy. We scraped cow dung out from under our cow shed with one of Mum's soup-spoons.

"Better than mud, " I said, as we laid turd patties out in rows to bake in the sun.

I showed Benny the stuff I'd made a few days earlier.

"Beaut," I said with satisfaction, as I rolled those dung balls between finger and thumb and showed Benny that there was no shit stuck to my fingers.

Then I fished my shanghai out from under my shirt and brandished it.

"This is where it starts to get good," I said, as I snuggled a wad of cowshit up against the elastic and let fly. That dung hit the nearest fence post a real whack. Then thwack, thwack went the next two shots.

"Howzat," I yelled, and looked at Benny to see that he was appreciating the way those balls opened up and spewed custardy stuff in the place where they landed.

"Gosh," said Benny, a slow smile spreading over his face. "It's better than rotten eggs."

"And there's no shortage," I said, smirking at the dark hole we'd mined under the cow shed.

"Those bombs should be cooked in a day or two and then we'll bloody get those Crossens."

We went down to the river and I dipped that soup spoon into the water until it looked good and shiny. I'd slip it back into the spoon box before tea and no one would be any the wiser. Then, we lay down on the sand-bank under the aspens and laughed ourselves silly. We planned the attack for Wednesday and I told Benny he'd need to be early that morning so we could get our ammunition stowed and he nodded. But when I told him to bring his dad's saddle bags, he looked a bit doubtful.

"Dad keeps special stuff in those bags," he said.

"So," I said, "Tell him you need to do a job for Williams or something."

The morning of the raid, I got out to our gate real early. I hopped from foot to foot. I could just see those Crossens' faces. By the end of the day those Crossens would be real sorry for themselves.

I waited and waited but Benny didn't show. Then, just as I was about to give up on him, he came galloping round the corner. He was all in a lather and gave me a shame-faced look.

"I tried," he said. "But as I said, Dad keeps special stuff in those bags." He leaned towards me and handed down his school bag.

I didn't give him a hard time but got to work loading those turds into the bag as fast as I could.

By the time we got to school, we weren't that much ahead of the bell, but Benny insisted on taking his pony across to the drinking trough. He'd just dismounted and leaned his schoolbag against the trough when Micky Crossen came across the paddock. I hoped Micky wouldn't notice Benny. Benny wasn't that interesting but I'd just stepped out into the road and Benny was on his own and the Crossens loved getting people on their own. Benny's family belonged to some odd shaking religion and as soon as Micky saw Benny, he started shivering like he had the palsy and I knew right away it wasn't going to be good.

"Shaker, shaker, shaker," Micky shouted. To do Benny credit he put himself in front of his school bag right away but that only roused Micky's suspicions. "What yer got in there?" he said, shoving Benny aside. Taking the bag off Benny was easy for a big fellow like Micky Crossen. He lofted the bag above Benny's head and I could see the look of surprise on Micky's face as he felt the weight of it.

"Hey, you got shaking stuff in there or something?" he said, and, in one furious swing, he lobbed that bag straight into the horse trough. A great wave of gungy water rose up and splashed onto Benny's back and Micky, who'd stepped smartly back, looked at Benny's dripping jersey and smirked.

"Serves yer right Cooper. No one wants your sort of religious tripe round here, we're all Christians." Then, without a backward glance, he sauntered away across the field towards the school- house where old Williams already had someone swinging on the bell. I could see

the bellringer's red jersey moving back and forth through the gaps in the hedge. Ding dong, ding dong, ding bloody dong.

Crossen forced his way through the hedge and turned to give Benny one last shimmy.

"School time Benny," he yelled. "Teacher won't like yer being late."

We rescued the bag after school. I'd been curious to see what the stuff inside looked like.

"Still a chance," I told Benny, as I hauled his dripping bag out of the trough.

I laid it on the ground as carefully as if it were a corpse, and undid the straps. The stuff inside rushed out. It was so bad Benny threw up and I had to walk home that night because I couldn't stop laughing. Benny thought I was laughing at him being ill, but really it was just the way that stuff came out of the bag.

Fortunately, Benny never held a grudge and was waiting up in the willows for me the next day as if nothing bad had happened between us.

Not long after, we beat the Crossens hands down. Our shit stuck to them like treacle, and seeing Micky trying to get cow dung out of his hair was the funniest thing. His face was a picture.

After that, shit balls caught on and everyone was throwing them. Then the mothers got into the act and the shit ball wars were stopped. Fortunately there was no shortage of things to throw, so wars went on just the same. We whacked one another with willow branches, used hard little acorns in our slingshots. My knuckles were raw from punching and my shins yellowed over with bruises. Mum grumbled about never getting on top of the mending and the patent medicine man did a roaring trade in salves and liniments.

One afternoon Grandma Kennedy came stamping in. Mum was daubing ointment on my back and showed Kennedy all the welts on my arms.

Kennedy remained unruffled.

"Boys will be boys," she said, and put a hand lightly on my shoulder.

"You're just being our stout little soldier, aren't you, Jack?

A few years later, I found out I could join the Volunteers. They were giving training on how to become a mounted soldier. It sounded just the ticket. I told Dad that I was thinking of joining. He squinted at me through the smoke of his pipe.

"War preparedness training, eh? Well, you joining the Volunteers is no bad thing I'd say. It won't be kid's stakes, though."

The moment Dad said kid's stakes, Benny Cooper sprang to mind. It had been bloody ages since I'd seen him, but he and I had fought side by side through all those clod wars. It seemed only right to ask him to join the Volunteers with me.

I rode down to Benny's after tea. The Cooper place seemed ordinary enough from the road, a house behind a gorse hedge just like ours. But when I got in behind that hedge I saw Benny's place was different. Behind the original house the Coopers had built more houses. I counted at least ten.

"What's with them houses?" I asked, when Benny opened the door.

Benny smiled. "We're building a community," he said. I looked over my shoulder at all those houses. Dad always said our ten-acre block wasn't big enough to feed one family, and here were the Coopers expecting to feed twenty or thirty people.

Benny must have read my mind because he spread his arms wide as if feeding lots of people was common place.

"It's God's will," he said,

Then I told him about the Volunteers.

"No, I don't think I could do that," Benny said.

I gave him a shove. "Aw, come on. Everyone worth his salt will be joining the volunteers."

Benny screwed his eyes up as if he had some pain that was hurting him. Then he opened his eyes.

"All right," he said. "I'll go see if Mum can spare me."

I watched him go back inside. It was years since I'd taken orders from my mother. I tried to think what Benny's mum might want him to do that was more important than joining the volunteers.

Presently he came back.

"I can come for a while," he said. Then I helped him saddle up and we high tailed it down to Andersville and arrived outside the Oddfellows Lodge just as the uniforms were being divvied out.

When I handed a khaki tunic to Benny, he gave it back.

"I don't think I can wear this," he said.

"We're not asking you to put on fancy dress, boy," a voice behind us said.

"What do you think, Baldwin? Send him packing? We don't need blokes who get squeamish at the thought of wearing battle dress."

Benny and I turned. We hadn't expected to see Stannard standing there. We'd known Stannard forever. As kids, we'd hung round Ander's pub just waiting for him and Baldwin and Nobby Clarke to show up. Boer War soldiers were our heroes then. We copied the way they walked and the casual way they sat, legs apart, leaning back. We even imitated the way Nobby ate hunks of meat off the end of his knife.

"It's the way all scouts do," said Nobby and we watched as the shiny blade of his knife skirted past his big pink tongue.

Before now, I'd never really thought of Stannard as a person. He'd been a hat and a moustache and a way of sitting. It had been Nobby who'd done all the talking. Now Stannard was so close I could see the hair-oil stains on his hat band.

"Well look who's turned up," he was saying. "Remember those kids from outside Ander's pub, Baldwin? That little lily-livered one's turned up to do some volunteering. " He glared at Benny. "Wonders'll never cease."

I saw Baldwin a few yards away talking to Mick and Nig Crossen. He glanced across briefly at Benny. I could see Baldwin didn't give a damn about Benny.

I braced myself and stared back at Stannard.

"Nobby made up those stories just to get a rise out of us kids," I said. I was bigger than Stannard and when he swung round to look at me, I thought perhaps he'd taken that on board.

"Tell Baldwin what you just told me and see where it gets you," he said, and walked away.

I grinned at Benny. "You see, Stannard didn't argue with me. Those stories Nobby told were bullshit."

Benny smiled. He looked as if he were miles away.

"They used to give me terrible nightmares," he said. "You'd have to admit that story about the headless horseman was scary."

"First time, Benny," I said. "But not over and over. I could never understand why he always got you with that one."

"It didn't get less scary for me," said Benny." Do you remember how that story always began with Nobby and Baldwin hiding behind a rock and you'd say, "Yeah, yeah, We've heard that one, " and Nobby would say, "Don't put yourself in the way of a good story, boy. Benny wants to hear, don't you Benny?"

"Yeah," I said. "Nobby always used to hold onto your collar so you couldn't get away when he told you the bit about the blood squirting."

"And he used to roll up his trousers and make me feel where his leg was amputated. It was creepy because it was sort of bald and smooth and wrinkly and withered too."

"Your freckles used to stand out," I said.

"Well," said Benny, "Nobby always made me feel the end of his leg just when he said the headless horseman's neck was gristly."

Benny's eyes were shining. "The bit that gave me bad dreams, though, was where that horseman got set on the horse's back and they had to break his legs to get him off."

"Yeah," I groaned, "And the flies and the maggots and the way the gas blew out his innards."

We looked at each other and grinned.

"Nobby was evil," I said. Then I passed Benny a tunic and he pulled it over his head and I helped him fasten the belt. Then I put one on myself and we looked one another over.

"Good, eh?" I said.

After we'd been kitted out, Stannard had us do some riding. He set a mean course and it wasn't long before a few people had come off their horses. One bloke broke a collar bone and somebody else got yanked off his horse when we went under a whole lot of low-slung branches. Benny and I were alright. We'd ridden over this country before and we knew our horses and they knew us.

When we got back to Andersville it was quite dark and Stannard barked out something about having our uniforms up to scratch for the next time.

Benny and I rode back to River Road in silence. Benny seemed anxious. He dismounted as soon we got to our old hidey-hole in the willows. He pulled off his uniform.

"I can't go home in these," he said, handing me his boots, jodhpurs and tunic. Then he remounted his horse and galloped away down River Road. I sat on for a moment or two, watching him go. His mother must have wielded one hell of a stick if Benny had to hide his uniform from her. I looked at his tunic. It was creased and muddied from our ride through all those ditches around Andersville. That bastard Stannard had threatened to personally shoot anyone who turned up in an untidy uniform but I'd get round all that by getting Mum to give Benny's uniform the once over when she ironed mine.

When we'd been school kids, we'd thought those Boer War soldiers were old, but when Stannard and Baldwin turned up to teach us volunteers how to ride in the rough, we weren't so sure. They rode like they were nineteen. We'd see them coming full tilt across the river flat wheeling and feinting in complete unison. You could love them for that sort of stuff. We admired the way they wore big slouch hats which they raked up at casual angles. We weren't allowed to copy them, though, and Stannard gave Crossen a cut across the hand with his crop when he caught Mick with his hat brim flicked up like theirs.

"Earn your spurs," he said, watching with some satisfaction as blood welled out of the cut on Mick's hand. To do Mick credit, he resisted the temptation to look at his hand and kept his face blank.

I suppose we were Volunteers for a good few months before Baldwin left. After Baldwin left, Stannard kept it going for a while. But things just weren't well organised any more and eventually people stopped coming and it all just sort of petered out.

One of the older men said, "Stannard's only a sergeant. All he knows is spit and polish. Baldwin was the brains behind this outfit."

It was a revelation to us. Baldwin never wore anything but ordinary clobber, always stayed in the background, always let Stannard drive the orders.

"That's what sergeants do," the older bloke said, "Or are you blokes too ignorant to know?"

When we first joined, being in the Volunteers was great. Stannard and Baldwin taught us a fair few tricks we wouldn't have had reason to think out for ourselves. We might have swum our horses through flooded rivers for the hell of it but would never have stood them completely still in the cover of he bush for what seemed hours.

"No jingle or you're dead," said Baldwin, waving his pistol near our heads to make the point. Baldwin's patience with us came to an end quite soon after this. One day somewhere in those foothills he ambushed us. Came out of the scrub firing real bullets.

"You're all dead," he screamed, and pointed his rifle towards us execution-style. His mouth and eyes were all over the place. Then he pulled his horse up alongside ours. He was deadly calm now. In fact, he spoke so quietly, we had to strain to hear him. It was like he was telling us a secret.

"You're all dead. You pack of silly shits. Every blinking one of you. I'd have had you all from the cover of that thicket." Then he rode off.

After that, Stannard came out of the ti tree scrub. He picked up on one or two small lacks in us. Got us moving. Told us it was business as usual.

Later that year, Dad and I had a major bust-up. It was in that bloody cow-shed, of course.

Mum said it was just old dog, young dog sort of stuff and not to worry about it but I knew there was no way back. I'd knocked Dad to the ground, bloodied his nose. He could not forgive me that. I moved out the next day. Went to Christchurch. Found a job the day after.

A few months later I'd moved on. The jobs I took made me see why Dad worked for himself. Working for someone else was a mug's game. Essentially all you got for your labour was your keep.

About New Year 1910, I rode up to Cheviot to take up a job as a shepherd. I was told the pay was better because it was "out back of beyond."

I left town about day-break. Folks hadn't been getting a lot of sleep over the last few nights because there'd been strange goings on in the sky. Away from town I had plenty of opportunity to watch the sky. There wasn't much else to look at. The day came up hot and even though it was broad daylight and there wasn't a cloud, there was something bright up there that wasn't the sun. It wasn't anything that could be explained and it left you feeling uneasy. But as I rode along people were out doing their usual stuff. I figured most people thought that if it was the end of the world there wasn't a hell of a lot they could do about it,

whereas the cow needed milking and the washing needed washing, and probably tomorrow would come round the way it always had.

When I got to the farm, it was just getting dark. The boss was standing on the verandah when I rode up. He had a telescope set up on the balustrade.

"You can come and have a look at that thing if you like," he said.

That thing as he called it had taken over most of the sky. It was impossible to look at anything else, really, and it seemed strange to narrow your view to a pin-hole. The boss swung the telescope in my direction and I half squatted in order to line my eye up with the eye-piece. What I saw made very little sense. All I could see was a solid white blur as if someone had put a blob of paint on the lens. Then the boss showed me how to focus and I saw something lumpy and grainy like badly mixed porridge. It was not what I expected, the sort of surprise that took your breath away..

"Looks close, eh," the Boss said. "You wouldn't credit it was so many millions of miles away."

I grinned. "Well that puts it in a different light. Lots of folks seem to think its going to collide with the earth and wipe us all out."

"Not a chance." The Boss folded up the telescope and put the cap back over the lens with a sharp click.

"The whare's over there," he said, gesturing towards a big low building a few paddocks down the hill from the house. I went down the steps feeling as if I'd said something stupid. Initially the boss had seemed keen enough to show me the comet through his telescope, but took me for an ignorant shit as soon as I said that bit about the world being wiped out.

When I got to the whare there were people draped all over the verandah rail.

Someone was saying, "A few days back that thing was about the size of a sty in your eye. Now it's like the sky was a piece of toast bread and that thing smeared onto it like melted butter."

Out in front of the whare was an old bloke. He was kneeling on the grass sort of folded over on himself.

"What's wrong with him? " I asked.

"Nothing's bloody wrong mate. That's Old Ned Jones. He'll give you a rendition in a moment. A few nights back when he first saw that thing, his chest started moving in and out so fast we thought he was having a seizure. Look, there he goes now. Working himself up."

I looked over to where the old man was. He'd straightened up now, and was holding his hands up to the sky. I could see what the bloke next to me meant. Ned's chest was going like a pair of bellows. I could see how they could have thought the old bloke was dying.

"You wouldn't think an old fellow like that would have any more rasp in him than a grasshopper," the bloke on the other side of me said. "But the sound that old man puts out has to be heard to believed. This comet takes folks all ways. If you went inside, you'd find Jimmie Burns all wrapped up in a sheet. He hasn't stirred from his bed in two days. Claims that if he has to die, it'll be in his bed."

Just then Ned's voice broke through.

"Welsh chapel stuff," the bloke next to me said.

I looked across to the Cheviot Hills. Their rounded shapes seemed to be all that stood between us and that comet. Ned's voice was rising through the air.

"Jesu joy of man's desiring," he sang, "Holy wisdom, love most bright, drawn by Thee, our souls aspiring, soar to uncreated light …"

I stood out on that verandah for quite a while after Ned had stopped singing. A few other blokes were out there. Smoking. Not talking. I kept needing to look at the sky. Millions of miles away the boss said. It sure didn't look millions of miles off. The head of that comet looked close. Made you think that if you took your eye off it you might miss the hallelujah moment when it struck the Cheviot hills. I could understand Jimmie Burns lying inside with the covers over his head. The sight of that comet brought your thoughts to a dead stop.

I think when I first heard we were at war with Germany, I felt the same as when I'd first seen that comet. Not hit between the eyes exactly, but every time the word war came into my head it seemed like a new idea. And, like the comet, it looked like something you could see but couldn't actually recognise for what is was.

The night we heard the news, we were all sitting out on the verandah having a beer. We knew something was up as soon as we saw that lantern coming down the hill towards the whare. It had to be something that had come by telegraph. A death. A birth. The boss never came down to see us without a reason.

He stepped up onto the verandah, holding the lantern high above his head, so he could look us over.

"Is everybody here?" he asked. We all sat up straight then. We knew he had news worth hearing. Then he dropped his bombshell.

"Bloody Germans have started a war."

Baxter stood up, straight away.

"Well if that's the case, Boss, don't count on me staying around looking after your bloody sheep." He seized his rifle, walked down the verandah steps and put a volley of shots up into the air. One of the bullets fell back onto the roof of the whare and rattled down the tin before sliding into the guttering.

The boss held the lantern higher and looked us over again. It wasn't too hard to see that Baxter had started something.

"All right," he said. "Go on, fire a few shots, but take yourself well away from the whare or someone will get hurt." Then he said. "One thing to remember boys, the army will take you places where lots of people will be trying to shoot the arse out of your pants."

Baxter gave him a hard-boiled look.

Then a lot of blokes started ranging around and cussing the Germans and shooting off their rifles. Soon all that could heard was the crack of rifle fire.

"Save time and trouble to have the bloody war right here," Ned said, jerking a shoulder in the direction of the shooting. "Anyway I'm turning in."

I followed him into the whare and sat down at the table. Ned was putting the kettle onto the range.

"Want a cuppa?" he asked.

I shook my head. In truth I was feeling a bit crook. My head felt like some fellow was hitting me repeatedly with a mallet. I couldn't stop thinking that until now, I'd only played at things. The clod wars, the volunteers. Now a real war was on, it seemed madness to be sitting here in the middle of nowhere, doing nothing about it. I'd walk to the train station. I stood up and nearly tripped over Willi Smidt who was crouched by the door jamb rolling up his kit.

"Sorry mate, "I said. "Are you off to the train too?"

He looked up at me and shrugged. Willi never was communicative. He came from some foreign place. I stepped over his kit and out onto the verandah. Most of the boys had stopped shooting and were buzzing round the beer keg like bees round a honey pot. I could see someone lying on his back trying to squirt beer straight from the tap into his mouth. A forest of rifles was stacked along the edge of the verandah. Baxter's voice rose above the rest.

"Bloody sheep," he was saying. " Boss or no boss, I'm not wasting my bloody life droving sodding sheep."

I went off down the hill, my feet going faster as the slope got steeper. At the bottom I stopped to roll a smoke. Then I begun to think about the pay I'd be leaving behind. I looked back towards the whare. One more night wouldn't kill me. I could fix up what the boss owed me in the morning. The whare was ablaze with light. A few lanterns hung along the verandah railing and this was enough to make the place look as if it was on fire. But then the whare was right on the ridge-line and it was a dark sort of night. I could hear the dull roar of voices. The blokes were getting properly shickered.

At the point I was standing, the track wound through a small stand of oak trees and in amongst the trees a cigarette glowed. It must belong to someone about my own height. I went

forward and saw Willi Smidt. He gave me an unfriendly look and I wondered whether he'd been drinking.

"Off to catch the train?" I asked.

The end of his cigarette glowed fiercely.

"Yah."

We were a few yards apart, and, without even looking, I could feel his fury.

"What's up with you?" I asked.

Above us a volley of shots rang out, and Willi turned his face towards me and grinned savagely.

"That's what's up, mate," he said. "You Britishers off to fight the German." Then he shouldered his swag and walked away. I watched him wend his way through the trees.

The sound of more shots came down from up near the whare. I could see blokes wobbling about on the skyline, hunting one another down. It had never before occurred to me that Willi was German.

I caught a train next morning. It stopped at every siding. Mail-bags were hefted in the window. The rate it was going told me I wouldn't be in the Rangitata before tomorrow.

"It'll be the war," some woman said. "Everybody's writing to tell that special somebody the things they ought to know."

The talk about writing letters made me think I hadn't written to mum for the best part of a year. At least I was going home now and would tell her my news face to face.

I stood at the window and watched folks at the various sidings. When people looked at me, I figured they'd be thinking I was off to fight the Germans and I smiled, and often enough they waved back. Grandma Kennedy always used to say, "Everybody loves a soldier."

But as the day wore on I got bored boxed up in a railway carriage. Of course I could shorten the trip by getting off in Christchurch and joining the army there, but knew I'd be going back to the Rangitata to go into the army with people I knew. Besides, I owed Mum this visit. Couldn't just up and off without telling her what I was doing. I couldn't begin to guess how Dad might behave. He'd probably think me going into the army was good riddance.

I couldn't seem to sit still for more than a minute. I talked to people in other carriages, couldn't shut my mouth. Told everyone I was going to the war. Eventually I ran out of listeners and went back and sat in my original seat. I figured time might go faster if I could sleep. It was hot in the carriage and a lone blowfly blundered against the window. I struck at it. Stopped its blithering, sat down, closed my eyes.

If you'd told me I'd be going overseas a week or so back, I'd have thought you were pulling my leg. Until now, overseas had been the somewhere else Grandma Kennedy called Ireland. Ireland, so she told us, was her home. We'd never taken her seriously, though. She lived in Andersville just as we did. Ireland was just one of her stories.

Now I'd be going overseas myself, I began to think about her stories again.

Generally, our grandmother told stories round the fire. All that flickery light seemed to suit her best.

She'd put her hands out to the flames and say, "I swear to God Ireland is as close as this to me." Then she'd stretch out her fingers as if she were actually drawing something out of the fire itself and we'd sit as close as we could to her, listening to the wheedle in her voice and expecting some unimaginable thing to rise up out of the grate.

As we grew bigger we realised Kennedy didn't actually remember much about Ireland. What she did remember was coming to New Zealand in a sailing ship. She told stories about rats and hard biscuits but it was the size of the waves that really got us excited.

"So big," she said, widening her eyes at us. "High as mountains. You just look out at Mount Anders there. Just you kids put Mount Anders in your minds 'cos that was the size of those waves. Think of Mount Anders coming rolling across that river flat towards this house. There'd not be much light coming in your windows, now would there? And next minute, bang, that mountain would be all over the top of you. Running down the side of the house, coming in the every crack and cranny at you."

We'd crouch next to the grate and listen out for the sound of Mount Anders moving against the house. We believed the black soil from that mountain would come down on top of us and smother us to death.

My sister Esther said, "That's not true. Mountains don't move around."

And Grandma had shrugged and said, "Did I ever say they did, child? I said that was what it felt like looking at those waves." Then she'd say that after the waves had gone, salt coated the rigging so thickly it looked like ice and shone like fire in the sunshine.

Andersville was inland and none of us had seen an actual wave. It made us glad we hadn't.

Of course, since that time, I'd seen the sea a fair few times and never once did I think waves looked like mountains. In fact, until now, I'd had no reason to think about Grandma Kennedy's sea stories at all. But since I'd come to believe I'd be going overseas myself, I remembered Kennedy said there were fish that flew like birds and that she'd seen another sort of fish. One with eight arms that had slid back and forth in the swill of the deck.

Dad used to say if someone paid him a farthing for every fib Grandma Kennedy told, he'd be a made man. And, like Dad, I used to think she stories were a load of old bull, but now, I

wasn't so sure. I liked the idea of flying fishes and fishes with eight arms and waves as big as Mount Anders and wanted to see them for myself.

I knew it'd be likely I'd go to France because that was where all the fighting was. But when it came to picturing France, my mind drew a blank. France had never even been a school subject. France might as well be the moon as far as the kids in Andersville were concerned. Then I remembered I'd had a fight with some girl in a pink hair bow. I think it had been the bow that did it. I'd taken the book she was reading and held it up so she couldn't get at it. Williams, who had a nose for this sort of trouble, was there in a flash.

"So you both want the same book?" he said, and gave me a level look.

"French Chateaux, eh Jack?"

Then he opened the book and showed me a picture of some fancy castle and said that, seeing I was so keen, I should copy some stuff out about it over my lunch break. It wouldn't have been so bad if that castle had been halfway decent. I wouldn't have minded if it had battlements and windows to shoot arrows from, but the castle Williams chose for me was for girls. It was all prettied up with flower gardens and the people outside it were dressed up in wigs, even the blokes.

But now, I was going to France, I remembered that castle had been built as a bridge across a river and that made defensive sense when you thought about it.

I struggled upright, hadn't slept the night before, but my mind wouldn't let go, was buzzing and spinning like that damn fly.

I looked from the window. Outside I could see some cunning gullies for hiding out in. Stannard would have shown us how to use such country to our advantage.

I liked the speed and movement of the train and the way it seemed to split open the landscape like a knife passing through an apple. Then split the sections of view again and again and opened more shapes and angles up, and how nothing was the same from moment to moment. It reminded me of the first time I got onto Benny's pony and it galloped. The speed of its movement changed the way everything felt and looked. It was as if things had come unstuck and were jouncing about. Of course I knew it was me and not trees and hills that were moving but, to someone who'd always walked places, it was something else again. In a flash, I saw that if we could ride Benny's pony, we could take war to Eason's paddock, attack and retreat before the Easons even got their stones together in one place. Speed and surprise. It was everything in a fight.

As the day wore on, I got increasingly impatient. The train stopped at every tinpot shed and siding, standing motionless for what seemed hours while wagons jarred together and chains clanged and graunched.

The people in such places moved slowly. Nothing was worth the hurry. Things were methodically stamped, the tops of mail-bags were tied and retied and these same people put what seemed years of silence between their words.

I didn't have time for it. I stamped up and down the track waiting for the train to start again.

One old fellow dressed in railway overalls was sitting on a bench behind a goods shed and blinked as I went past. Ten minutes later when I returned, he was still there. What's more, he spat a gobbit right next to my foot.

"What's yer rush, son?" he said, when I glared at him. "Yer can't hurry things along, or didn't yer know? Things take whatever time they take, mate."

What he said sounded like balderdash to me. He'd probably lost his marbles, but I told him about my war all the same.

"I'm going to fight the Germans," I said. He gave me a blank look so, thinking him deaf, I moved within an inch of his face.

"W.A.R, "I repeated, "I'm going to fight the G E R M A N S.

He blinked. " Germans? War?" he asked. "I wouldn't be in a hurry."

Turning on my heel, I walked back to the train and swung aboard. Fancy some old death's head telling me not to hurry. I had to be in a hurry. The war might be over before I could get anywhere near it.

By nightfall the train stopped in Timaru and I stepped down onto the platform. I could smell salt in the air and hear the niggle of seabirds. It would have been sensible to have stayed the night in town, but after being shut up in a carriage for the best part of a day, I needed action.

I hired a horse and started straight out for Andersville. There was no moon and a wind with a cold edge was blowing, but it felt much better being out of doors. I leaned back in the saddle and, although this would be my second night without sleep, I felt comfortable being out at night in this countryside.

Soon I began to recognise certain stands of trees and realised I knew my way round here by heart. Once I heard moreporks calling and wondered what sorts of birds there'd be in France. And, as I moved steadily on through the night, I could hear cattle stamping in the fields and an occasional shingly rattle from the river below.

Just before dawn I found myself in River Road, and walked my horse through the gate and into our home paddock. I knew it would be a while before the family woke and backed that horse up against the macrocarpa hedge so I couldn't be seen from the house. After all, I wasn't sure whether Dad would order me off his land or offer me a cup of tea.

Although it was still not light, my eyes were accustomed to darkness. I could see the river flats quite plainly. I knew every square inch of those flats.

George used to say, "Ten acres is only four if you can't put a harrow through it because most of it's stones."

He'd been a real slave driver. Had us children out rain or shine picking up river stones. I dismounted and kicked a stone or two with my boot. Looked like the job still wasn't done. It wasn't my worry, though. Nor was that patch of nodding thistles rattling in the early morning breeze.

Further off, towards the river, strong wind bent the tops of the aspens. Dad had planted those trees on the edge of the river terrace. According to Mum, they'd been planted about the time I was born, so those trees and I were of an age. Dad said he'd planted the trees to hold the terrace together in times of flood and to shelter stock from the wind. I could see he'd succeeded because, although the trees were stirring busily, it was less windy here in the home paddock. It made me feel that what Dad knew, I knew.

From my vantage point, I could see Mum's kitchen garden. Some light was coming into the sky and everything looked bigger and bushier than I remembered it. Hardly surprising, given that it had been nearly five years since I was last here. Mum must have built it up with compost. Perhaps Pierce had helped. Certainly a lot of work had gone into it. There were cinder paths leading between the rows. A frame had been built for cucumbers and a railing strung for beans to climb. Further over, I could see the leafy mass of currant and gooseberry bushes. I strained to see if berries were already forming, but figured that it was probably a bit early in the season for that.

As kids, Pierce and I had been terrible berry thieves. We'd burrow under the spread of the leaves and scoff fruit. Once Mum caught Pierce and Dad gave him one hell of a biffing, then we were all called into the parlour. As the parlour was for special occasions we kids muscled about in the hall. The little 'uns trod ruthlessly on other people's toes in order to be first in line and Mum cuffed them and told them to settle down. Mum's eyes were puffy and reddened and we thought that she was being mean to us because she had one of her headaches.

"Don't think you're here to loll around," she said, driving Esther and I off the horsehair sofa which we'd bagged as soon as we'd got into the parlour.

"I want you on your feet, paying attention."

We stood in a raggedy line and waited. Neither Dad nor Pierce had arrived yet and I began to have a bad feeling about why we'd been called to the parlour. I looked over at Mum for clues as to what this was all about. Normally I never really looked at Mum. She was just the one who didn't bitch and moan unless she caught you at something red-handed, and she

was the one who passed out an extra buttered scone if she had one to spare. Now all I saw was the ugly way her apron was hitched over the football of her stomach and the sour set of her mouth. There was a nasty taste on my tongue as if I'd just licked a postage stamp or something. This cross, fat, ugly woman was my mother. Mum had turned a bit further from me but the way her stomach bulged looked even worse than before. I didn't like seeing how ugly she'd become.

But my eyes soon went from Mum to Dad. We heard his racket even before he came through the door. There was bumping and banging noises as if something heavy was bouncing off the walls in the hall. We figured he must be dragging Pierce along the floor. Then he barged through the parlour door pulling Pierce behind him. Pierce's head drooped like his neck was broken. I couldn't help thinking of the hanged man in Grandma Kennedy's card pack. Mum had started sniffing and I saw a big snot settle on her upper lip.

Dad's brows were like saw cuts. He thundered at us.

"If I didn't sweat my damn guts out for you lot, you'd all starve."

I thought of Mum banging bread dough out every morning in her dark scullery. Later she put hot crumbly bread in our hands and ladled porridge from the big black pot at the back of the stove. After school, we ate what was left in the black pot and it glued up our hunger as good as any rice pudding.

Pierce was making choking noises. I couldn't see his fuss. It wasn't like Dad was belting him or anything.

We kept our eyes off Dad. It didn't pay to look directly at him when he was steamed up. Perhaps Mum had looked at Dad or he was just cross with he because he turned to us kids and swept his arm in Mum's direction and spoke in a voice heavy with sarcasm.

"Of course your Mother's got herself in the family way again. It's all I need, things being the way they are."

"As for you little flosses," he said, turning his guns suddenly on the little 'uns. "You needn't think you can get away with stuff because you're a couple of useless females."

The little 'uns stood their ground, hooves planted like little heifers, their sandy-coloured heads close together.

Shoot one and frighten ten thousand was George's motto, but if this was his intention it never worked with Annie and Alice. Breaking Pierce, on the other hand, was a moment's work.

But George's real talent lay in surprise. He could switch his attack as deftly as any football star.

"You two, workshy," he bellowed, abandoning his assault on the little 'uns and focusing on me and Esther. "It's cheating, you know. Short-changing the family." Then back he went

to Pierce worrying at him like a terrier with a rat. "But this one," he said, "Takes the biscuit. This one is a thief!"

To us children, it was as if Dad and Pierce were performing some sort of dumbshow. The more George shook him, the more Pierce did odd things with his face. Frowning, blinking, twisting his mouth like someone had run a thread through just under his skin and was jerking the end.

"I didn't do it on purpose," Pierce stammered.

"You did," George said. "You did do it on purpose. Nobody told you to steal those currants. You took them because you chose to. "

I could see Pierces eyes swivel in my direction and I looked quickly away. There was no way I was going to let Pierce include me in what was happening. Pierce only had himself to blame.

"It was only currants," Mum said. "There's plenty more on the bush."

"Not the point. It's stealing from the family that's the point. If Pierce got caught stealing provisions onboard ship, he'd be bloody well keel hauled."

Seeing those same bushes, I could see how small Pierce and I had been at the time we stole those berries. Thinking of us crouched there together brought back the tart flavour of the fruit. I could see Pierce's face in the shadow of the leaves, his mouth stained with juice.

Watching Dad being cruel to him I felt neither pity nor guilt for the part I'd played. I thought the difference between us was that I'd known to wipe my mouth at the tap before going inside.

My horse had wandered during the time I'd been thinking of the currant incident. I grabbed its reins and pulled it back into the shelter of the hedge. I looked across to the lean-to milking shed and could see the pale shapes of cows beyond, moving against the dark bulk of the far hedge. I felt sure I'd be able to build a herd like this one. Make a farm out of river-flat too, if it came to it.

Then I heard the cows starting to stamp and moo, and knew that pretty soon someone would come out from the house. A good cow can always communicate the time it needs to be milked.

I mounted my horse. I'd be caught out if I didn't hurry. There was a raggedy gap where once there must have been a fire in the hedge and I sidled my horse back in amongst the blackened branches. We didn't stand out beyond the line of the hedge now and shouldn't be too obvious. Also there was a nice little peep- hole through the tops of these branches and this allowed me to keep an eye on the back door so I could see when someone came out. I concentrated on that door. For some unknown reason Dad had painted it sky blue. I could only think he'd been given a free tin of paint.

I leaned forward, keyed up, wanting to see Dad but not sure whether I could bear the sight of him, when I did. Sometimes, his orange hair and strutting walk was enough to make me want to kill him.

Then the back door opened and a smallish boy slipped out into the garden. It was my youngest brother, James. I knew to the letter what he would do and watched as he went running across the home paddock, small against the open side of the shed, and the cows came swaying out to meet him, tails flicking, forming up in the order they were to be milked. James had not seen me tucked into the recessed part of that hedge. His head had been down. No doubt he was thinking about what he had to do to stay out of trouble. Dad was bloody hard on mistakes. A mistake was a fault that had to be corrected. He was nicer to horses.

I sat steady and looked back through the branches. The old devil himself hadn't showed yet. It was unlike him to be taking it easy. What a hard bastard, always narrowing his eyes when he looked at me as if he just couldn't believe there could be so much to dislike in one person.

It must have been only a minute or two that I waited for him to show but, in that time, I convinced myself the old bugger had died and nobody had told me.

"You stupid, stupid, berk," I said.

It made me want to march straight down to the house and wrench open that silly-coloured door and demand he be there. To lay my hands on his throat a second time and shake the teeth out of him.

Then the door opened a crack and the old bastard stuck his nose out. I heard the sound of boots being kicked about on the back step. Then I heard George come grousing past as he stumped off down to the cow shed. Good job the folks round here had the sort of temper that kept their heads down. I'd escaped the notice of first James and now George. I grinned. Time hadn't sweetened Dad one iota. I watched him go into the cowshed, arms swinging. Then there was the sound of an upset bucket. Clumsy old git had knocked something over. But to his way of thinking it would be Jim's fault. I heard George's raised voice. It was ancient history, had been my history, Pierce's history and now it was Jim's.

I had not thought to understand my father. But hearing him abuse Jim made me realize Dad's cussing wasn't even very personal. He saw us as rods for his back, and besides, he didn't like working with cows and never hesitated to tell us so.

"Can't stand the buggers," he'd say every day on his way to the cowshed, and I felt a bit sorry for all the Daisys and Mollys we'd had over the years.

I watched until James came out of the cowshed. He stood in the light for a minute, his face turned to the sky. I felt sure he must see me now, but no, he went past me swinging his

bucket, whistling, thinking of other things. Perhaps, after all, Dad had mellowed. I doubted he'd have tolerated whistling from me.

I watched my brother go up the cinder path between the bean rows, put his boots next to the scrape and go through that blue door into the scullery. He'd be taking the full cream in to Mum so that she could start in on making the butter.

That littlest brother had changed since I'd last seen him. Not that I could remember that much about him. My strongest memory was of him as a plump baby in a pram. Mum used to put him out under the plum tree to get an airing and Pierce and I used to put beetles and slugs into the pram with him. After a while Mum shifted the position of his pram. She must've thought all those insects dropped out of the plum tree.

Looking at him now, I calculated he'd be about ten. He wasn't fair like Pierce and me, but dark like Grandma Kennedy. I heard the back door close and although I knew Dad was on his own in the cowshed, I didn't go down there to see him.

Some Maori joker once told me that places where bad things happened were tapu and that meant you didn't go there because of what had happened in the past. It seemed a bit of a fancy idea but I had to admit I was in no hurry to visit that cowshed again.

I tried to remember what had set me off the night I decked Dad. Probably the build up of a lifetime of niggle. Whatever it was, it was as if something went off in my head like the bang of a gun and suddenly I was so angry I could hardly make sense of Dad's face. Next minute my hands were round his throat like I was strangling a chicken. I could smell the frowsty scent of his scalp but all I knew was that I had to stop him being the way he was. He was hiccupping like a drunk and I thought that now, I was making him regret all the things he'd done to me and Pierce and Mum. More fool me. George knew all the tricks in the book. He trod hard on my foot with his hobnailed boot. That used to startle tears from my eyes when I was younger but I was tougher now.

"I'm not a kid," I roared. "You can't hurt me like that anymore."

Then he brought his knee up and caught me a jarring blow between the legs.

"Who said you were a kid," he said, grinning meanly as I stumbled back gathering my hands protectively. My head went down for a moment or two. There was no way I'd give George the satisfaction of seeing my face. I could hear his breathing slowing down, becoming regular and then the rattle of buckets. The old git was getting on with tidying up in the shed as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Gingerly, I straightened. Despite my best choking efforts, he was still the same mean, unsorry old bugger, he'd always been. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him throwing water on the floor, sluicing out the night's shit. He'd pulled on his old bucket hat and had it

rammed down over his ears like he always wore it and he'd turned his back on me as if he counted me for nothing.

"Alright, Mister" I said, and spun him round. It was clear that he wasn't expecting another attack from me and my sudden move caught him off balance and gave me the advantage I needed to drive my fist right into the middle of his face. I could feel mushiness under my knuckles. I knew there were broken bones.

He went down like a felled tree. His hobnails were the only thing left vertical. His blue eyes stared straight up at me. I smiled. Glad he was still awake, so he could see it was me that had hurt him.

Then I walked from the shed into the night. There was a bit of rain in the air and as I went across the home paddock in the dark, I heard all the crying we'd done over the years. That miserable bugger had beaten and bullied us all. Had thought nothing of wrapping his strop around my kidneys, bringing his hobnail boots crunching down on my barefoot toes. I even saw Pierce's crying face and the little 'uns carrying stones in their pinafores on frosty mornings.

Well it was over now. He'd never dare do any of that stuff to me again.

My hair was plastered to my face by the time I got into the scullery. Mum made big eyes at me.

"Jack, you're back early," she said. "What's the matter?"

I held up my hand and showed her my swollen knuckles.

"Out in the cowshed," I said, a moment later when she asked where Dad was.

"Old dog, young dog," she said, and touched my cheek lightly, then she put on her coat and I saw her running out across the wet grass towards the cow shed.

Half an hour later, Mum brought Dad back to the house. The two of them coming across the paddock looked like some odd hunch backed animal. But I noticed Dad's boots stomping alongside Mum's. He was doing his own walking.

As they neared the house, my parents' heads came briefly into the lantern light from the scullery window. I saw only the crown of Mum's head but Dad's face came up. He must have been working out the distance to the back step.

It was obvious Mum had tidied him up a fair bit down at the cowshed, but there was still plenty of damage. He nose and cheeks glistened and were as congealed and scrambled together as the inside of a meat pie. I hoped he was hurting. I hoped he was sorry.

I tied my horse to one of the stouter macrocarpa branches. The hedge smelt resinous. When we'd been kids we'd forced our way into the middle of this hedge so we could smoke cigarettes out of sight of our parents. On hot days, the inside of that hedge smelt like horse

linement. Dad had warned us to keep matches away from it. Perhaps he suspected us of smoking.

"Could go up like a bomb," he said.

I looked at the charred branches and grinned. Somebody hadn't been paying attention. Perhaps James had been lying up in there smoking. But then again it could be the result of a dozen other mishaps.

I patted my horse, mindful that I should take it round to the stables for a feed. The poor old nag had been going all night. But the first thing I needed was to see Mum. I turned towards the house. Up close Mum's vegetable garden looked in good nick. Fresh mint was bursting out of an old rainwater tank. I grinned. Mum had always been partial to a bit of mint with her new potatoes.

She'd been standing in this garden when I'd left home five years ago. Had sent me away with full saddlebags, asked me to write as soon as I had a settled address. I could see Mum as she'd been then. The white shape of her blouse easy to pick against the green leaves of the staked beans.

On horseback, I'd been tall enough to get a clear line of sight through to the kitchen garden and even as I rode down River Road I saw Mum hadn't moved from the spot I'd last seen her in. Her hand was up shading her eyes against the sun, straining for one last sight of me. I hurried towards that ridiculous blue door. Mum had always shown me how much she liked me. I couldn't say there'd been that many others.

As soon as I walked in, I could see the scullery was as dark as ever. The pitch of the roof came right down at the back of the house so it wasn't any wonder that so little light got through. Mum was bent, her hands working in flour.

At first, I think because she wasn't expecting me, she didn't realise I was in the room and that allowed me to take a good look at her. Five years is a long time. But it nevertheless surprised me that she was so small. Her feet in their black boots the size of a schoolkid's. I reached out and put my hands over her eyes.

"Guess who?" I said, but she must have known, for she swung round and hugged me.

"Jack, Jack," she cried. Her arms clamped tightly round my back.

"Mum," I said, trying to shake her off. "I'm not a kid now."

"Who cares what you are," she said. "You're my son and I'll hug you as much as I want to."

"You don't have to tell me what's brought you home. I can guess. Your brother went to town last week to enlist and hasn't been back. They must've taken him in straight away."

"What, Pierce?" I asked.

"Yep, who else?" she asked, dropping her arms and giving me a push.

"Well I'll be damned," I said.

"Be damned then," she said, turning suddenly to her bread dough. I watched her slap the dough with her hands and bring it banging down on the bench.

"Don't be cross," I said. "I didn't mean any disrespect."

"Didn't you? I sometimes think the only thing you can rely on round here is disrespect." Then she slammed the bread dough into a tin and pushed it towards the back of her glowing oven. When she'd closed the oven door she turned to face me, again. I noticed the way she rubbed the small of her back against the bench as if it ached in some way.

"By rights, you should be two hundred miles away, Jack ," she said. "But I kind of knew you wouldn't leave it too long before you signed up. I was kind of hoping you'd join up with the local boys. All that training you did as a volunteer. I thought to myself you must have made friends doing that, and if you went in with some of those lads, you'd be able to look out for one another. Pierce never was interested in the sort of stuff that went on round the district and I hate to think of him going overseas with complete strangers."

"Pierce and I will be all right, Mum. You and Dad brought us up being able to take care of our selves."

"Yes," Mum said. "I suppose that's right. By the way, I had a visit from that Mrs Cooper. You know, the one who lives down at that community. Generally that woman wouldn't say boo to a goose but she came round her all hot under the collar. Told me straight you were not welcome at their place, you were not to go round there putting ideas into her Benny's head. Your dad must have heard the tail end of that conversation because he came round the corner of the house just as Mrs Cooper was leaving and said, It's a free country Missus."

"Poor old Benny," I said, and rested my cheek on the top of Mum's head. Her hair and skin smelt familiar, made me put my arms round her as tightly as she had with me a few minutes before. I could feel her heart beating.

"Jack," she said, giggling and fluttering in my arms, "You're squeezing the life out of me."

Then she pushed me aside and I watched her freckled hands start taking fresh-baked scones from a rack and splitting and buttering them and arranging them on a blue-edged plate. It was true she wasn't stylish like the station manager's wife, but her bulky shape tied up in that print pinafore looked so good to me I wanted to grab her again. I dived my hand across to where her hand was, but she must've thought I was trying to pilfer her baking and gave my hand a little slap. I left her with her misunderstanding.

Then the door opened and Dad walked in.

My eyes went straight to his face. I couldn't help myself. After all, the last time I'd seen that face it had been pretty roughed up. But, in truth, he didn't look too different from how

he'd always looked. His nose was a bit skew-whiff and one cheek had a few shiny patches where hair wouldn't grow but otherwise the bugger looked right as rain.

George must have noticed me looking at him. for he tilted his chin aggressively and gave me one of his what you looking at frowns and I thought here come the marching orders.

But next minute it seemed he was prepared to let bygones be bygones. He took a scone from the plate Mum was offering and bit into it.

"You had me guessing," he grumbled, "I saw that strange horse. I might have known it'd be you coming back before enlisting. I'd have to say I'd have been first on the ship if there'd been a war offering in my young days. "

He reached for another scone and munched in silence for a while.

"A good idea to come back down south, Jack. Join up with the local Mounted brigade. The South Canterbury's will be the pride of this country. You mark my words."

I could see a hard sparkle in his blue eyes. And then to my complete surprise I felt his hard fingers kneading the muscles in the back of my neck. It was the same easy affection he had for his best horse and I grinned. He'd not touched me like that before, but I'd wager old Sultan had been spoilt like this every day of his damned life. He dropped his hand and I turned to look at him. He met my eyes, man to man.

"There's going to be some fine lads riding out of this district," he said. "The South Canterbury Mounteds will be the pick of the crop." And he looked at me again and his blue eyes sparked speculatively.

And, when I met up with some of the boys later in the day, I had occasion to feel like the pick of the crop, because I was riding Sultan. There were whistles and hoots of appreciation, for there was not a man there who did not know a good horse when they saw one.

Stannard looked shrewdly at Sultan.

"How'd you persuade your old man to part with that one?" he said, running a hand speculatively over Sultan's hock.

"Old, yes, but, by God, there's no denying the quality. You must have some hidden talents, Jack, to coax this one out of your Father."

I looked away in embarrassment. Persuading Dad to give me Sultan, hadn't been quite the triumph everyone credited me with. Sultan, as everyone round Andersville knew, was the best horse Dad had ever owned, and, over the course of the afternoon, it had became painfully obvious that Dad was regretting offering Sultan to me.

I don't know what made me suggest it in the first place. I suppose I had expected an outright refusal, or even some outrage from him at the very suggestion, but, instead he'd gone silent, had bitten his lip. Had looked at me blindly then, as if I'd backed him into a

corner. Then, without anything being said, he'd beckoned me and we both walked out to the stable.

At the stable door, Dad signalled for me to wait, and went into the stable alone. He stayed in there for what seemed like ages. I could just make him out in the half light. I could see he was standing next to Sultan, an arm resting on the horse's back.

I was mighty embarrassed by all of this, and called out to him.

"Hey, it's all right, Dad. It was wrong of me to ask. Sultan deserves to live out his life here. This is where he belongs."

But Dad poked his head out the stable door and gave me a furious look.

"I'll decide what happens to Sultan," he said, and within a short while he was leading Sultan out into the light. And, although it was true that Sultan were not in his first flush, his coming out of the stable and into full light took me breath away. Dad had him polished like a fresh conker, and he was holding his head up and high stepping. He was such a sight, I couldn't take my eyes of him. Dad was holding him on a snaffle, and his free hand was idling on Sultan's nose.

I knew then I didn't feel at all good about asking him for Sultan. I suppose it had come out of the pride I'd felt when Dad praised the South Canterbury Mounteds, and looked at me with such regard. It must have gone to my head, because I'd asked for Sultan straight after.

Still holding Sultan, he'd looked at me squarely and said, "You know the story of this horse?"

Of course I did. Everyone did. But I let Dad tell me Sultan's story again. It was the very least I could do.

Dad cleared his throat. "This horse was a bargain," he said. "The cheapest horse I ever bought. I got him down the racing stables. They reckoned he was a bit of a bastard, they were prepared to let him go for the price of dog tucker. They had plenty of reason to regret it when they saw what he'd developed into as a yearling. After that, I had plenty of offers for him from people with more money than sense, but I wouldn't sell. I felt it showed that though I might only be a man who had been balloted a ten acre block, I could keep quality horseflesh with the best of them. I can't say it didn't give me pleasure to see the looks on their faces when they saw I wasn't going to take their money."

"Put Sultan in the Agricultural show a couple of times, just to see what those judges from Christchurch made of him. They liked the cut of him more than all the rest they saw that day, and, I might say, some of them station owners had some damn fine horseflesh. That crystal vase in your mother's parlour was one of Sultan's winnings. I bet when they got that trophy made up and engraved at some flash jewellers they never imagined it would end up on the mantlepiece of a working man."

When I got up on Sultan's back, I watched Dad's eyes narrow, and knew he was struggling with the idea of seeing me on Sultan. He'd trusted me with so little in the past.

I felt the warmth of the sun on me shoulders, and played with the coarse hairs of Sultan's mane as I waited for Dad to make up his mind.

At last he gave me a curt nod, "Do good, Jack," he said, and went inside so he needn't see me ride Sultan away. I should have felt pride then, because Dad had given me the best thing he'd ever owned, but, perversely, I couldn't take any pleasure in it. I rapped Sultan's neck with my crop, and we were away, going fast, the ground spinning under Sultan's flying hooves.

The day we left Everton to go into training camp, twenty or so of us South Canterbury boys gathered in the main street. Everton was on the cross roads from Andersville in the north and Monkstown in the south. It had a couple of general stores, two pubs and a racecourse and was affectionately known as town.

A lot of people from the surrounding district had come to see us off. I suppose it was a kind of farewell parade. I looked around for people I knew. They weren't hard to find. I'd never imagined that some of these people would've turned out for me. I suppose they never would have shown that regard in the usual run of things. But now I felt me and Sultan were being given the once-over and people liked what they saw. It made me sit up a bit straighter. Men raised their hats. It were clear that in their eyes we were just the sort of lads to shake them bloody Germans off their perch. What's more, I was getting some special looks from a few of the women. I grinned and pulled Sultan up short so he did a few fancy steps for them. Then I gave the brim of my hat a big twitch so it stood up like Stannard and Baldwin's used to. That bugger Stannard could do nothing to us now. I wasn't playing his cowboy stuff any more, I was off to a real stoush.

Some of those women were sure giving me the glad eye, I began to regret all the wasted opportunities I was leaving behind. But I told myself as soon as I was clear of the district I'd take the trouble to get to know a few of them.

The strangest thing was that even Mick Crossen's sister Mary was giving me the come on. Waving a bloody big green bandanna and screeching her head off.

"Good luck Jack. Yer come back safe an' sound now won't yer."

In the usual course of event the Crossen boys didn't let anyone other than Catholics come near their women. But today the Crossens weren't complaining 'cos Mickey was going to enlist as a Mounted just like me and suddenly religion didn't come into it any more.

I could see old Williams's straw hat bobbing about in the crowd and knew it were only a matter of time before he spoke to me. He always talked to people who'd been at his bloomin'

school and today he'd make bloody sure of it. I could hear his voice coming closer. He had different ways of pronouncing words from most people and, for some reason, the sound of it embarrassed me and I kept sort of turning old Sultan around to avoid him. Of course, Williams was a master at sneaking up, and I almost jumped out of my skin when I saw his hand reaching up to pat Sultan's neck.

"Ah," he said, and in some way I felt guilty. Not that Williams said anything about Sultan being Dad's horse. In fact he didn't talk about horses at all but that Ah was enough to make me feel I'd done something wrong.

I looked down. Williams's face was pale, and his upturned eyes gave him the look of one of those plaster saints down in the Monkstown Mickey Doolan Church. Some of those saints had their chests cut open and were showing off their bloody hearts. Williams wasn't showing me anything. I couldn't read his expression. I fidgeted, and Sultan, started side-stepping.

Williams stroked Sultan's neck, "Easy, old fellow," he said.

"I haven't seen you round Andersville for a good long while, Jack and I've been wondering how you've been getting on. I've asked your Dad about you once or twice, but he didn't seem to know where you'd got to."

Williams's hand had not left Sultan's neck. It was as if he was holding us in that place. His face was still turned up. He was still looking at me. I squirmed. What the hell was he looking at? Then he began talking again, but it was almost as if he were speaking to himself and not to me.

"I always believed you'd be one of my successes, Jack. Didn't count on a war taking all my best boys to Europe." Then he reached up his hand and took mine and shook it.

"You're smart Jack," he said. "Remember that and be sure to trust your own judgement."

When he'd finished speaking, he kept on holding my hand, and I looked at his small hand holding my large hand and wondered why I'd been so afraid of him as a kid.

After Williams left, Nobby Clarke came up. He had some other old blokes with him and it looked as if they'd put a few hours in at The Southern Cross before getting to the parade.

"Nothing like a good war to get some travel out of the army," one of the old fellows said, and that set Nobby off. He went on about France and how every woman in France had their doors wide open. He was hopping about like a sparrow after breadcrumbs, swinging his head from side to side to gauge the extent of his audience. Some of the others who'd been in the volunteers rode up with me. Everyone knew Nobby put on a good show.

"You mark me words," he was saying. "I'll be on one of them troop ships. They'll need blokes like me. We fought them Germans or close as in South Africa. Me and Baldwin put a fair few away. Never was a sharp shooter like Baldwin. With him around it was like shooting chickens in a fowl run."

"Fat chance of you making it overseas, Nobby old son," Crossen said. "You're pushing fifty and you've only got one leg."

We all laughed, and Nobby raised his stick at us.

"I'd find a way of going even if I were sixty, son, so watch out fer me stick, it'll be right up yer bum." Then he went spinning away down the street on his stick, grinning and hoicking spittle and marching up and down as if, but for the lack of a horse, he'd be right there galloping out of town with us.

The sun was full on our backs as we galloped out of Everton. By this time most people had gone about their business but a few remained hanging over the railing of the general store. Mary Crossen was there. She was still waving that bit of green stuff. It was a good job I was leaving town. There'd have been new turf wars over Mary if I'd stayed.

We started moving down the road, riding bunched like we were a posse. Some one let out a yippee. Mick Crossan was galloping right up against me trying to throw Sultan off his stride. He was using the whip on his naggerty brown, standing in the stirrups. Wanting to make a competition of it. I knew there was no match fer Sultan in the whole of the Rangitata and just grinned.

"Piss off, Crossen," I said.

I half turned in my saddle and looked back and saw that the dust kicked up by our horses had blown back as far as Everton itself. If I were Mary standing on the verandah of the store all I'd be able to see would be our dust.

Mick was still quite close to me, still looking for a chance to race. But I wasn't doing that to Sultan, or not right now. We had a fair way to hike to Timaru and I'd make sure Sultan got there in good shape.

Once Everton was out of sight the show was over anyway, and we slowed our horses to a trot and started following the course of the Rangitata. At about three o'clock we got a couple of small fires going, rigged a billy and had tea on the go in no time. We knew we had a few hours of daylight up our sleeves, and some of us let our horses have a bit of a splash in the river. A bit of a splash freshened them up faster than anything. I watched Sultan standing in the shallows. The arch of his big neck, the height of him, made him outstanding. Then I noticed one or two of the others were looking up at the ridge line.

"Somebody's in a hurry, "Crossen said, and I followed his gaze. There was a lone horseman, zigzagging down the hill above the river. Dust plumed in his wake.

"What's his bloody hurry?" I said asked. "No bloody good blowing your horse like that. He must have something pretty urgent going on."

Crossen and I stood side by side watching the horseman. It was clear he was coming our way. As horse and rider got closer, Crossen tipped his hat back and scratched his head.

"Well, bugger me days," he said. If it isn't your little mate, Benny Cooper."

Benny came down the incline and drew to a halt.

"Did we leave you behind or something?" said Crossen, and I thought I saw his shoulders begin shaking.

Chapter 5

Nettie's refrain had become it's your father's fault. Certainly, Willis looked like somebody who should be blamed for something. His moustache was awry, his cheeks alive with extravagant veins. He no longer went to work but camped, listless and evasive, in a back bedroom. A regime had grown up around this room. Once a day Nettie and Tilly marched up the passage. Tilly took clean sheets and Nettie brought back alcohol and emptied it noisily down the drain.

"That man is beyond cunning," she would complain. "He never goes out, but somehow all this alcohol comes in."

Sybil's part in the regime was to take in her father's lunch. In the mornings Willis slept, but by noon he would be awake. Sybil would plump up his pillows and wipe his face. He thanked her profusely and would smile his "Jimmy" smile and, in an instant, Sybil would be back on the nursery floor, tumbling and fighting and being tickled. She'd been called "Jimmy" because she had been the fourth daughter in the family and a special, sweet relationship had grown out of her father's teasing.

"Oh sir," Nurse James would say as Sybil and her father chased each other round the nursery. "You'll get her overexcited and they'll be no getting her to sleep."

Sybil's favourite game was Magillacuddy. This would start in the dark of the hallway where Sybil would ride her father piggyback, flapping up and down as her father jogged. He would clack his tongue to suggest the clip clop of hooves. Then he would throw open the door to the drawingroom and light from the big window would flood into the hall. The drawingroom was normally out of bounds to children.

"Too many breakables," Nettie said.

Willis's disregard for the rules was exciting. They'd stampede into the room and cabinet doors would glance open and polite chairs spin on their castors. But it was Magillacuddy they were there for. Magillacuddy Reeks and the Mountains of Mourne.

The Mountains and the Reeks had been painted by a maiden aunt of Willis's and had a rough, unfinished look. The oil and pigment seemed at war and the surface of the painting was scored all over with fierce marks. And, although the subject was the Reeks and the Mournes, there was a crude hut in the middle of this chaotic, tumbled landscape where, according to Willis, the ogre Magillacuddy himself lived. What's more, Magillacuddy was hungry for human flesh. Fi foe fie fum, Snuff snuff. Magillacuddy loved the smell of human blood, and was coming to get them. Although Magillacuddy was not exactly visible in the painting, he was never the less manifest, for there were grunting and puffing sounds which got louder the closer Magillacuddy came. The Willis horse was disobedient and did not

respond. It would stamp and toss its stupid head and it wasn't until the hot breath of Magillacuddy was right upon them and Jimmy screaming with frustration and fear, that it would turn and gallop ponderously off down the hall. Then the Willis horse would open the nursery door and both horse and rider would collapse gasping and laughing on the window seat. And Nurse James, determined not to give them the satisfaction of her attention, would get on with her knitting as if nothing they did would surprise her.

The man who'd played Magillacuddy and had come home with humbugs in his pocket, was now relegated to a junk room where all the broken jugs and ewers seemed to end their days. The room was darkened by a rhododendron bush that grew right up against the window. It was rancid with sickness, a room where a commode, filled with yellow, curdy urine, stood uncollected by the bed. There was often something else floating in the pan that Sybil couldn't bring herself to look at .

Sybil placed the invalid's tray on her father's lap and set its stout legs into the anchor of the bedclothes. They both looked at the neat triangles of brown buttered bread and the slew of poached egg sitting waterlogged in its pocket of albumen. Both seeing the unpalatable in this wholesome food.

"No king's horses to put it together," Willis intoned, then, shrugged his shoulders so vigorously the egg slid from its plate and disappeared into a fold in the bedclothes.

"Oh, Daddy," said Sybil, and leant forward trying to secure the slithery golden mass between two triangles of bread.

"What does it matter, my pretty?" her father said, touching the back of her head lightly. "Our own dear, stupid boy's put up his age. What does one elusive egg matter in the scheme of things? Our own dear, stupid boy's put his age up. Pray the war will be over before he can get there."

But when Terry came home on leave before going to the front., Nettie warned him against seeing his father.

"Your father's indisposed," she said bitterly. " I really can't recommend that you see him."

Terry had stood for a moment, his arm lightly encircling Nettie's waist. "What do you mean by indisposed?" he asked, a small frown marking the smooth skin of his forehead.

"It's plain enough English," said Nettie. "What I mean is that your father's in no fit state to see visitors."

Terry had brought two newfound friends home with him, and the young men stood awkwardly, uncomfortable at the turn things had taken. Terry moved away from his mother and went towards his friends.

"We'll go down to the kitchen," he said, grinning. "I'm pretty sure I can persuade Tilly to make a cake for us."

"Very well," said Nettie. "I will order tea to be served in the drawing room at three."

Terry shook his head. "No, thank you," he said. "We'll probably put up the old tennis net and just eat our tea in the garden." Nettie stiffened, but Terry turned away so he didn't have to see his mother's displeasure. He linked his arm in Sybil's. "Do you want to make a foursome?' he said. "You and I against the rest."

Sybil went down the passageway to the scullery with the boys. Tilly was rinsing dishes at the sink, but when she saw Terry, her smile grew expansive. "My goodness," she said, "who is this handsome charmer?"

Terry blushed and one of his friends gave him a bit of a shove.

"Knocks the ladies out cold," the boy said, winking at Sybil.

"Well, that comes as no surprise," said Tilly. "Now let me guess what you young folk are after?"

Terry groaned loudly and patted his stomach. "Something that's not cooked by the army. No tin plates, no ladles, no mashed potatoes and no custard."

Tilly continued to smile. She rolled up her sleeves and dried her hands on her apron. "Well, what's it to be, then? Bilberry muffins, chocolate cake or melting moments?"

"All of the above," said Terry.

"I'll see what I can do," Tilly said, making shooing motions with her hands. "I can't move with all you young people in my kitchen. Come back in a bit over an hour. Everything should be out of the oven and on the cooling racks by then."

They trooped outside and the boys took the old net out of the garden shed and strung it between two trees. Soon shuttlecocks bounced from racket to racket. Within minutes, Sybil had grown tired of fighting Terry for possession of the shuttlecock on her side of the net.

"I thought we were on the same side," she said, crossly. "But if you want to play singlehanded you can," and she threw down her racket and walked away down the garden.

"Aw, come on, sis, don't be angry." Terry said.

But Sybil resisted Terry's pleas and went towards the old swing seat. "I'll watch from here," she said.

The swing in the honeysuckle arbour had become virtually immobilized because its ropes were spliced through and through with honeysuckle vines. There was hardly even room to sit on the slatted seat and Sybil had to tear away some leaves and twigs before she could fit into the space available. Through the thatch of leaves she saw the white, feathered shapes of the shuttlecocks flitting and gliding like birds in the garden. The boys in their khaki uniforms were gamboling and swooping and calling out, and next door's dog had come through the

hedge and was leaping at the boys, snapping at any shuttlecock that floated too near to the ground.

A summer ago, she'd sat on this seat with Wilfred. They'd played quoits and badminton, and just like Terry and his friends, Wilfred had been proud of his uniform. She thought that Wilfred had probably kissed her because of it. Uniforms gave people permission to do things they wouldn't otherwise do.

Wilfred's kiss had been her first. She no longer counted Edward's, as she saw now that he was just being brotherly although Edward's kiss had felt affectionate. They'd talked quite seriously just before it, and the kiss fitted their conversation perfectly. She reflected that in a war there were lots of kisses but that none of them had brought much pleasure. Her dream of kisses had been of small, exact, lip-for-lip things, like the little bowed imprints that came off on Guinie's tissues when she tamped her lipstick dry. Most boys' kisses yawed about like fishing smacks in a high sea. Their tongues were like slabs of meat and when they were done her face was left shiny with saliva that tensioned her skin as it dried.

Guinie said some kisses tasted delicious as if that person had been eating sugar, and that some were so thrilling it made you wet your knickers. Sybil discounted such talk. It was just the sort of thing you would expect from Guinie. Boys hung round Guinie all the time and Sybil hated the way those boys looked at the tightness of Guinie's skirt and how her blouse stretched in ways that showed her nipples. Sybil cringed at the thought that some uninvited eye should see her nipples, and used binders so the front of her blouse looked as flat as a wall and invited no speculation. Besides, talking about wetting your pants around a boy was disgusting. She thought of Wilfred's back raised above her in the field and the way he had bored in between her legs and the ratchet of pain that had followed.

It seemed as if malign forces hovered in the darkened hive of the honeysuckle arch, for her thoughts seemed weighted with pain. She could feel the rough sweat-encrusted spikes of Wilfred's hair under her fingertips, hear his quick breathing as he laboured over her and his small yodel of triumph. He'd offered her a piece of chocolate afterwards. A piece that had rolled around in his greatcoat pocket for days, perhaps weeks. She'd knocked it out of his hands. Not sure now whether it was because of the paltry nature of his offering or because the mouldy congealed lump of fat had so disgusted her.

She pushed her feet hard against the ground, trying to loosen the seat so she might swing as freely as she once had, but it was locked up and the vines were unyielding. Angered, she stood up, and a low bough gouged her forehead. The unexpected blow made her cry out. She put her hand to the wound and her fingers came away spotted with blood. Feeling foolish, she looked over to where the boys were. They'd abandoned their game of shuttlecock and

were lounging on the grass. She had to squint to see them and it took a moment for the khaki of their uniforms to materialise out of the maze of greenery that was the garden.

Years ago, her father had taken her to a gallery in London. It had seemed unrelated to anything else they'd done that day. Guinie and May were there too.

"Here's an opportunity to see something completely new," their father had said. Sybil supposed he'd been speaking to Guinie, really. She was considered the artist in the family.

Sybil's first impression of the gallery was the immensity of the polished floor. It shone like water. Terry would have wanted to slide on it. Perhaps her father had thought that she might, too, because he took her hand and led her over to a wall where a group of quite small paintings were hanging.

"They're sketches really," he said, as he lifted her up so that her eye would be level with the paintings. She'd peered, surprised. The painting her father was holding her up to see was nothing but yellow strokes and a few blue speckles. She was too close. It made no sense. She wriggled in her father's arms, but he only held her more firmly.

"Look," he said, his face close to hers, "see how everything has been dissolved in light. But if you look carefully everything begins to form up. See those distant trees? The deer in the park? The terrace?

"No," said Sybil, pretending uncertainty, but really starting to see everything her father had indicated. He turned to Guinie.

"The mistake we make is, that if we've seen something before, we don't tend to ever look properly at it again. These paintings won't let you take things for granted."

Sybil could see why she'd recalled that trip to the gallery. The boys were sitting only a few yards away, yet the paleness of their skin and their khaki tunics had leached out into a kind of nothingness in the bright August light.

Just then, the back door opened and Tilly came into the garden. She stepped into sunlight holding up a tray of homemade lemonade. She came down the path, smiling, and laid the tray on the grass next to the boys. Their heads came together above the tray and the raised jug flashed as the glass caught the light.

"Come on Syb," Terry called. "There's a glass here for you." Slowly, Sybil went across the grass towards them. She felt the gash on her forehead made her look stupid. Guinie sometimes called her a lummox. She dabbed selfconsciously at her brow with a hanky.

Terry looked up, blue eyes full on her face.

"What have you done?" he asked, and Sybil raised the hanky and showed him the cut.

"Ow, that's a nasty one." He stood up and put his arm around her shoulder, but she shook him off.

"It was my own stupid fault," she said. "I forgot how overgrown the swing seat was and stood up without looking."

Terry bent down and poured out a glass of lemonade. "This'll make you feel better," he said, putting the glass in Sybil's hand. "Do you remember how Tilly always used to give us a sugar cube when any of us fell over? She was obviously working on the principle that a nice taste in the mouth takes your mind off just about anything." He flicked a pair of membranous seeds out of his glass.

"Watch out for elm seeds," he said "They're as thick round here as the dandruff in Colin's hair," and he gave his friend a quick shove.

Sybil raised her glass and examined it for elm seeds. All she saw was a cloudy syrupy liquid. "No elm seeds," she said, and raised the glass to her lips. The scent of lemon and honey filled the air. Her lips settled over the rim of her glass and the sweet-sour flavour of the cordial collected on her tongue. Then she put the glass abruptly back down on the tray. It seemed the older you got, the more quite innocent things, like drinking lemonade, got contaminated with the unhappiness of the past. All she'd done was to come out of doors to play shuttlecock with Terry and his friends and it was as if she'd been ambushed. The taste and smell of Tilly's lemonade had put Wilfred on the lawn in place of her brother. She and Wilfred had even picked elm seeds out of their drinks just as Terry and his friends were doing today. She looked at Terry. Else was saying that perhaps now Ludendorf's attack had been repulsed the war was running out of steam and, this year, maybe, it would be over by Christmas. Terry picked up her glass.

"Don't you want this?" he asked. "I'm parched, mind if I drink it?" She touched his hand, momentarily. "Of course not," she said. "Please do have it."

Then she set off towards the house. Terry's regiment was due in France in a little under a month.

There must have been some sort of advance warning that Aunt Emma was coming because, as Sybil recalled it, she, Guinie and Addie had been summoned to the hall to greet her. While they waited, Guinie took advantage of the hall mirror and tied and retied her scarf, and Nettie clicked her tongue in irritation.

"Such vanity," she muttered, flicking an imaginary grain of dust from the hall table.

Then there was the sound of carriage wheels grating against the small stones in the drive and finally the decisive crunch of Emma's boots coming across the gravel towards the house. Nettie swung the door ahead of Emma's knock.

"How kind of you to come at such short notice," she cried. "Have you travelled all the way from Homefield today? You'll be absolutely exhausted."

"Jeanetta," Emma said, giving Nettie a brief hug, "Don't be so dramatic, I'm not absolutely exhausted, as you put it, but I most certainly could do with a cup of tea."

Nettie took a step backwards. "Guinie," she said, sharply. "Get Tilly to bring refreshments to the drawing room."

Guinie looked sulky. She gave her scarf another tweak in the mirror before obeying her mother.

"Must be Fergus," giggled Addie, as Guinie went swinging away down the passage to the scullery. Nettie, gestured impatiently.

"Addie and Sybil, you have better things to be doing than loitering around in this hallway. Now run along, please. Emma and I have important business to discuss." Then she drew Emma into the drawing room and shut the door. Addie looked at Sybil.

"Wonder what the important business is? Emma generally only talks business with Daddy."

A small knot of fear built in Sybil's stomach. Addie was right. There was something unusual going on. Her aunt wouldn't come all the way from Homefieldif there wasn't a reason. She found herself moving closer to the door. It was not possible to hear individual words but there was no mistaking the tone of Emma's voice and the way Nettie's voice wove round Emma's in a descant of complaint.

Just then Tilly came down the passage carrying a laden tea tray. "Be a love and open the door, Sybil," she said.

Addie scooted away from the door so Nettie couldn't see she was still in the passageway while Sybil swung the door to admit Tilly. In the split second available to her, Sybil saw Emma standing by the fireplace looking down at Nettie, who lay half curled on the loveseat, knees drawn up as if she were in pain. Sybil slid the door closed and stepped back into the hallway.

Tilly re-appeared a moment later and Addie caught hold of her hand. It was clear Addie had seen the iced biscuits on the tray and wanted a chance to lick out the icing bowl. Sybil watched Addie and Tilly go down the passage together, Tilly's starched apron crackling as she walked.

After they'd gone, Sybil put her ear to the drawing room door again. The conversation between Emma and her mother was still going on, but she couldn't hear the exact words any better than before and stepped back into the hall, impatient at being excluded. She was overtaken by a sudden impulse to open the door and declare herself. She'd say something impressive like, "Don't decide things behind my back, behind Daddy's back, behind everyone's back. I'm nineteen and have a right to know." It sounded so perfect in her head but just as she reached for the door handle, she heard the unmistakable sound of her mother

crying. Her father said tears were Nettie's special weapon and, certainly, no one dreamt of crossing her when she cried. Sybil tried to imagine the scene on the other side of the door but couldn't see Emma softening because of Nettie's tears.

She moved back from the door and further out into the hall. It seemed odd that Willis hadn't been invited. After all, Emma was his sister and usually she had little time for Nettie. Sybil resolved to go to her father's room and tell him what was happening in the drawing room. Outside her father's door, she paused, wondering what she should say. There was no sound coming from inside her father's room and, normally, she would have accepted that Willis was asleep and have gone away but, today, she rapped firmly on the door. It was no good Willis sitting in there, oblivious to the fact that Emma and Nettie were discussing things behind closed doors. As there was no reply to her knock she pushed the door boldly open and went straight in. At first she couldn't see her father because the rhododendron outside the window dimmed the light in the room, but then she saw his white night gown through the spindle back of the bedside chair. His luncheon tray had not yet been cleared and she saw that he had a teacup in his hand from which he was taking rapid sips.

"Daddy," she said softly, and he turned slowly, peering in her general direction with unfocused eyes.

"Ah ," he said, "the changeling girl. Your mother thought she couldn't have been responsible for one like you. "Too dark ", she said. I said, you were just like that black-jack of a father of hers. Told her straight, not all those Spaniards went to the bottom with the Armada, said, the big, strong dark ones came ashore on countless western beaches and those Irish pig farmer's daughters were soon in farrow. Your mother was in tears in a moment. Willis, she said, You always say the horridest things. Pig farmers? Spaniards? And that's not the sum of it, I told her. What they're saying now is that every damn one of us came out of Africa. And do you know the very idea of us all being black sent her from the room in an instant. Your mother always has to have things her way or not at all."

"Daddy," Sybil said, "Aunt Emma's here."

"Who? " asked Willis. Then he raised his cup crookedly aloft. "Emma, did you say? We must celebrate. To what great, good fortune do we owe this visit? A breath of scandal, perhaps? The reek of opprobrium?"

"Daddy, don't be like this. It's not funny," Sybil said. "Emma and Mummy are discussing something important and I think you should be there. Let me help you to get dressed and then we can go down to the drawing room together?"

Her father seemed not to have heard her. He was bent forward dredging in the ewer with his cup. He straightened suddenly and the cup came up slopping liquid. "Celebrate," he said, waving the cup even more erratically.

"Celebrate?" asked Sybil.

"Yes, celebrate that the old sow has come from Ipswich. Come to stay has she? How I hate the stench of sanctity."

Sybil went across to her father and touched his shoulder. "Please let me help you get dressed," she said. Then she saw that his feet were covered in small, freely bleeding cuts, and crouched down to look more closely.

"What have you been doing?" she asked. "You look like a Christian martyr." But she didn't have to ask, really, because it was clear he'd been treading repeatedly on the broken lip of the ewer that lay at his feet.

"You should have your slippers on," she said.

On the carpet around the ewer was a brownish stain and Sybil could see red gold liquid in the unbroken base of the ewer. The cup aslant in Willis's hand dripped liquid, and his slack mouth glistened with a sweet, wet sheen.

"What if Emma was to come down here and see you like this?" she asked." We must get you tidied up, Daddy."

"Codfish," said Willis, slopping more liquid from his cup.

Sybil lifted up the ewer, and Willis let out a bubble of complaint.

"No, Daddy," Sybil said, evading her father's lunge. "I'm going to put it up on that high shelf so that if Mummy and Emma come down here, they won't see the broken spout or know you've got liquor inside it."

"Cruel girl," Willis said, but Sybil turned her back on him and began picking up the china chips. They were surprisingly sharp and pierced her skin in one or two places. Then she pulled a Turkey rug over from under the window so that the incriminating stain would be covered.

"Now," she said, moving towards the door, "I'll go and tell Tilly to bring something for those cuts."

"Sybil," her father called, and when she turned, she saw him beckoning to her.

"What is, it?" she asked warily, still moving towards the door. But her father beckoned more urgently and she went back to him. When she got to his side, he reached up his arms to her, but looking down into his face she was struck by his unfamiliarity. His eyes were shot through with bright veins, his lips shiny with saliva and his face unshaven, and yet she let him pull her face down until it rested on his shoulder.

"My darkling, my beloved one," he said. But soon he began shaking. Sybil straightened and saw the tears running down his cheeks.

"Daddy," she said, patting his shoulder, "don't cry. Everything will be all right. I know it will be."

Outside in the passage she stopped for a moment. Everything will be all right was the sort of thing you said to children when they cried. Her father was crying and so was her mother and she didn't know whether anything would ever be all right again. The passageway was dark, and she felt as cold and shuddery as she'd felt the day Terry put a penny on the railway track. Terry had said that when the train struck the penny it would be derailed. Sybil hadn't believed a word of it but the sound of the train coming closer had panicked her. She'd rushed forward to take the penny back but Terry had grabbed her wrist and held her steady.

"Don't be stupid," he said, "you'll be killed," and as the train came closer she'd shut her eyes. Its roaring approach made her shudder. Trains weighed tons and tons. She listened, concentrating as if all her thoughts and feelings were being fed through one tiny keyhole. But all she'd heard was the clackety-clack of train wheels going and going and then nothing but still air, and, when she opened her eyes, she could see Terry prancing on the shining track holding up his flattened penny.

"Dummy," he said. "Did you really think a single penny would tip a locomotive off the rails?" And she'd laughed and said, "Of course not." But it wasn't true because, for however long it had taken for the train to pass, she'd believed she was going to lose the sense of everything that had gone before in a single second. Now, standing outside her father's door in the semi-dark hall, she saw her father's bloodied feet and the drink in the ewer and heard Nettie crying behind that closed door of the drawing room, and it was as if a train was rushing through the confined space of the passageway.

Aunt Emma said that ten days was as long as she was prepared to stay away from Homefield.

"I can't leave Robbins in charge for too long," she said. "Things get very quickly out of hand."

She asked Sybil to help her pack. "I can't let your scullery maid near my things," she said sharply. She was sharp with Sybil too, scolding when Sybil lingered too long over the golden stitches and ice-blue silk of an oriental dressing gown.

"Fingers leave greasy marks," Emma said, taking the gown out of Sybil's hands and rolling it briskly away in tissue paper. Next, the aunt scrabbled in the dressing table drawer for her jewellery. Bending against her own bulk made her breathless.

"One forgets," she wheezed, "that one needs as much for ten days as for a month. I had to bring something for every occasion."

Sybil pondered the word 'occasion'. There were few occasions in the Courage house these days. Nettie called it an occasion when she got Tilly to put out the best china and pretended bloater paste was caviar. And since Emma had been staying, Nettie had sneaked out early in

the morning to pick different coloured gladioli from behind the water-butt, which she arranged in the Chinese vases in the hall in order to pretend fresh flowers were delivered to the house each day.

Sybil looked at Emma, who was lying half way across the bed and fishing for rings and brooches at the back of the dressing table drawer. Perhaps she'd been hoodwinked by Nettie's little ruses. Occasions didn't have to be loud with the music of drum and flute or have a cast of thousands. Her father used to make an occasion out of telling the time by blowing a dandelion clock.

Emma straightened and patted a place beside her on the big white bed. "Some of these things are worth quite a bit of money," she said, pushing one or two sparkly rings into their slotted boxes. Sybil sat perfectly still on her aunt's bed. She knew that any sign of interest might be seen as an expression of greed. Emma lifted out the drawer and sat it on the counterpane. A number of necklaces sat on the tray. Amber beads snarled with iridescent gems. Claws, hooks, clips and links locked bead for bead.

"Young fingers are better than old," said Emma, "you better undo these knots," and she passed the bead tangle to Sybil.

Unpicking the silver links was time-consuming. Sybil sat cross-legged, pulling and prising with her brittle finger-nails. When the necklaces were at last parted, Emma received them without comment. She dropped the skein of amber beads straight into a blue velvet bag, but laid out the circlet of iridescent gems on the counterpane.

"Not very valuable," she said, pointing to the pale stones bedded in their curved silver frames, "but oh so pretty. I remember begging my mother to let me wear them to my first ball."

She glanced at Sybil. "I suppose, at a pinch, they might suit you. I was a redhead and you've got a rather dark complexion. Sit up straight. So I can see how these look against your skin tone." She held the chain of iridescent stones up in front of Sybil's neck.

"That creates really quite a nice impression," she said grudgingly, but just as Sybil caught the ghost of that impression in the mirror, Emma wafted the necklace away and laid it in its snakeskin case which she closed with a definite snap.

"I'll make a note that this moonstone piece should come to you when the time comes," she said. Then she turned her two small eyes on Sybil. "I hope you are a help to your mother in all of this," she said. "Obviously, things can't go on as they are."

Nettie, Sybil and Addie stood at the gate ready to wave Emma goodbye. After what seemed to be some last-minute kerfuffle, their aunt's face appeared at the carriage window and she gave them a wintery smile. Her jowly face and her tightly-tied bonnet reminded Sybil of the late Queen Victoria.

"Now don't forget we're meeting at Homefield at the end of the month, Jeanetta," she said imperiously. "I'll expect you and the family to stay until we get everything sorted out."

"What things do we need to get sorted out?" asked Addie, but the noise of the carriage wheels drowned out her voice and allowed Nettie to turn away without answering the question.

" It's your father's fault," she said sadly. "Emma would never have spoken to me like that if Willis had been well. Still, I suppose, now that she's gone, we can drop all pretence." Then she looked at Sybil and giggled. "It's a good job Emma went today as I've just about picked every passable flower in the garden."

Strangely, however, now that Emma had gone, the house seemed suddenly nerveless. No one claimed exclusive rights to anything anymore and, in the mid-afternoon, the sunroom where Emma used to take her afternoon nap seemed like a mausoleum, the cane chairs and ottoman sealed and sweating behind glass like unbought cakes in a confectioner's window.

Sybil dressed Willis warmly in his best tweed jacket for their trip to Homefield.

"There," she said, "that looks smart, and what's more it will keep you nice and warm." But despite being well-dressed and having a rug round his knees, Willis continued to shiver. They changed trains at London and Sybil had to support her father down the train steps, and continued to hold his arm once they were on the platform. Nettie and Addie went ahead to get seats on the next train. But when Sybil eventually got Willis on board , there were no seats left in Nettie's carriage and she and Willis ended up sitting in another carriage altogether. As she settled Willis in his seat, Sybil noticed how untidy her father looked and wondered whether her mother had separated them on purpose because she was ashamed of Willis's derelict appearance. The idea that Nettie had rejected Willis caused Sybil to take her father's hand and snuggle in close beside him.

"You grew up at "Homefield", didn't you, Daddy?" she asked. "Will it feel strange to be going back, or does it still feel like going home to you?"

"It's become Emma's home now," Willis said, "and I don't think I'd be able to go there now without her permission. Although today, it seems more like a summons, don't you think?" He fell silent then, and Sybil turned to the window and watched the back of terrace houses swirl past. They'd soon be out of London at this rate, and then there'd be meadows and trees to look at.

Her father had started mumbling to himself, and when she turned to look at him, he said, "Homefield. A name like that does conjure up the promise of some kind of homecoming. A name like that would seem to suggest grazing herds, a benign homestead, everything pleasantly conceived."

Sybil smiled and touched the speckled flesh of his hand, then looked at the unmarked skin of her own. For a long time there'd been a photo of Willis on the mantelpiece at their Salisbury house, but recently this and other photos of Willis had been packed away. The photo she was thinking of showed him as a small boy. He'd been in a velvet suit, sitting on a rush stool, looking into the camera. His look was eager, a grin filled with milk teeth, a slew of fairish hair, one foot forward as if he were about to spring out of the picture and into real space. But she knew that look of spontaneity was a lie because having your photograph taken in those days was a painstaking process involving stands and clamps so you didn't move while the photographer was behind his black cloth. What had kept that eager, spellbound look on Willis's five-year-old face?

There'd been another photograph of Willis with Tom, his older brother, but no photograph of Emma. Emma was significantly older than either Tom or Willis. Perhaps they didn't even take photographs in those days. But really Sybil knew this wasn't true and that the thought came from some meanness of perception, a failure on her part to visualise the Emma who had worn the moonstones to a ball, the Emma who had young, taut skin and bright red hair.

It was as if her father read her thoughts. He said, "We've grown old, Emma, Tom, Bertie and I. Strangely, I still think of myself as quite young. Sometimes I feel the way I felt when I left Homefield at seventeen, just as if I was on the verge of discovering how wonderful the world would be."

Sybil squeezed his hand and Willis shook his head. "You're being kind, my dear. I realise you must think I'm rambling. I can see how difficult it might be for you to reconcile that optimistic young man with the wretch I've become."

"But you still tell the funniest jokes and we've having the sort of conversation I love having with you."

Willis looked at Sybil: he was starting to shake again but still he smiled. "You're only nineteen and I'm confiding in you. So rare to find someone who is prepared to listen as well as you do". He held up his shaking hand."Look at the state I'm in, I'm surprised you have patience with me but you know, despite everything , I'm still an optimist. You see we were brought up to be optimists. Our parents had us believe that our family name was enough to ensure our success."

"If you see nothing else in us," he continued, "Emma, Tom and believe in ourselves. We always have, although as children we were dreadfully competitive. Perhaps being a Courage was some sort of proving ground. I always used to see Tom as the frontrunner because he was older than I was, but, on the other hand, despite being a girl, Emma was tougher than either of us. Both Tom and Emma denied any advantage. They said the advantage was all

mine because I was our Mother's favourite. Bertie, of course, was different. He had a withered arm and took fits. Mother was always telling us we must consider him first, but we didn't. We just left him behind. I can still hear him wailing, 'Wait for me.' That just encouraged us to be even more cruel to him."

"Everybody's cruel," Sybil said. "I'm cruel to Addie. Else is cruel to me."

"Perhaps," said Willis. "But I hope you will end up liking one another eventually. One of the things I regret most is that when Mother died there was not much fellow-feeling between Tom, Emma and me. We'd been nasty to one another too often in the past for us ever to have had much trust in or liking for each other."

"What happened to Bertie?" asked Sybil. " I've never met him. Did he die?"

Willis shook his head. " No, he's still alive but when Mother died, Tom and I had families and Bertie's fits were too violent for Emma to manage so she had him put into an asylum."

They reached Homefield as it was getting dark. The last of the western light gave the house's pale Greco/Roman face a ruddy hue. Sybil noticed Willis's grin. A trap had been sent out to meet them at the station and Willis had almost fallen trying to negotiate the step. Now she stood next to him, lightly holding his elbow. It pleased her to see his grin. He seemed almost happy. For most of the journey he had been slumped in his seat. She'd found his mumbling depressing, and had thought enviously of Addie in the next carriage, free to look at the countryside and dream her own dreams. But then, both her parents were unhappy and she was certain that she wouldn't have liked being with her mother either, especially if Nettie had tried to enlist her support against her father.

Willis staggered slightly and Sybil tightened her grip. "All right, Daddy?" she asked. Willis turned towards her. The grin was still on his face.

"From a purist's point of view," he said, "Homefield is not an attractive house. Soames and Nash on the cheap. But then I can't help thinking that economical portico and those imperfect proportions are its most endearing features. They speak of a failure on the part of both the owner and the architect to reconcile differences over money."

"Shush," said Sybil, as Emma came out through the conservatory door to greet them. But Willis would not be quiet. He turned his grin on Emma. "Emma knows perfectly well, don't you, old girl? Soames and Nash on the cheap," and he gestured at the house, taking in its entire façade in a generous sweep. Emma ducked her head in Willis's direction but did not smile.

"It doesn't matter a jot, of course," Willis continued. "We always come to like what we know."

Tom was on the terrace now, standing behind Emma. Sybil noticed his well-waxed moustache and the exact parting in his oiled hair. The evening light gave his face a benign, pinkish glow. He stepped past Emma and came over to Willis. “Well, old fellow,” he said, “you must be tired after travelling that distance. Let me show you to your room.”

Willis smiled affably. “ Thank you, Tom” he said. “But I think I’ll test myself on the view from the garden terrace first,” and, leaning on Sybil’s arm, he steered them towards the balustrade.

“Ah,” he said, gazing down the length of the lawn. “I’m as susceptible as ever to that cedar against the light. I think when you’re very young you learn some kind of subtle mathematics about location. The spaces between things, that sort of thing. Sybil, you asked me whether coming back to Homefield would be like coming home, and I would say yes, I am experiencing a definite sort of recognition, aural, visual, the sort of elemental thing you might expect from a homing pigeon. Not something rote-learned, though. Something driven by emotion, something printed on the heart.”

“Printed on the heart!” Tom said, laughing. “You always were sentimental, Willis. What you’re describing is indeed homing pigeon stuff. Just some basic locating instinct based on prior knowledge about food supplies. The stuff that Darwin proposes as survival of the fittest.”

Willis gave Tom a long look. “Survival of the fittest is a pretty cool hypothesis if it operates without human sentiment.”

“Indeed,” said Tom smoothly, talking Willis’s arm. “Go inside, Sybil. You’ve looked after your father for long enough and now I’m sure you deserve some tea.”

After tea Sybil went to see Willis in his allocated room. Another back bedroom, she noted sadly. When she looked in, Willis was wrapped up in a white down coverlet. He was asleep. The coverlet pulled up to his chin was arranged as if it had been put there after he slept. She became aware of her Uncle’s Tom’s medical bag and then of Tom himself, sitting on a chair in the corner of the room.

“It’s all right, Sybil,” Tom said. “Your father’s sleeping quite peacefully now. You are aware, of course, that your father is an alcoholic and it is almost impossible for him to go for long periods without the stimulus of alcohol. His only respite from addiction is sleep. You did a remarkable job bringing him all the way from Salisbury, given he had no access to alcohol during that entire trip. But you do realize that to stand any chance of recovery your father must stop drinking altogether and to achieve that he needs care."

“I can care for him,” Sybil said.

"Twenty-four hours a day? I think not," said Tom. "Besides, you have a life of your own to live. No, I'm sure you realize that the whole purpose of this visit to Homefield is to get the family together to work out what must be done for the best."

Sybil looked at Tom. In many ways he was like her father, the same build, the same fine hair and set of the jaw. It was clear they were brothers. But looking at Tom's well-fleshed face, Sybil felt uneasy. She noticed the measuring-cup on the bedside table and the way Willis was slumped in the bed.

"Did you give Daddy some kind of sleeping draft?" she asked.

Tom nodded. "Kindest thing to do in the circumstances," he said.

Sybil went to the door. She'd come to say goodnight to her father, but there was no opportunity for that now. She stepped out into the passageway. Tom had taken her into his confidence. It was clear he'd meant to be kind, but he was exercising some sort of prerogative which seemed to allow him to have authority over her family. Perhaps the name Courage gave him all the justification he needed?

Next morning Willis wasn't at breakfast

"Where's Willis?' Aunt Emma asked sharply, looking from one to the other. "The family meeting is in half an hour."

Nettie said, "Willis never gets up in the morning."

"Everything is in hand Emma," Tom said, smoothly.

Then the door opened and Else came in. Sybil looked up, astonished. "I thought you couldn't leave the hospital," she said.

"I caught the night train and I'll go back tomorrow morning. I've applied for compassionate leave," Else replied.

"Compassionate leave?" exclaimed Sybil. "Nobody in our family has died."

Else shrugged. " I may as well claim compassionate leave. It's the only compassionate thing left to claim."

"Madam," said Robbins, at Emma's shoulder, "is anything else required?"

"No," said Emma, abruptly. "But I do want coffee brought to the drawing room at 10.00 a.m."

The green baize door closed behind Robbins and everyone but Else and Sybil rose from the table.

Sybil heard her mother's voice outside in the passageway. "Go and brush your hair and wash your face again, Adelaide. You've managed to get jam everywhere, young miss."

Sybil turned to Else. "I hate the way Mother talks to Addie. She treats Addie as if she were five."

Else was taking the last triangle of toast from the toast rack and buttering it, but she looked momentarily in Sybil's direction.

"I wouldn't take particular exception to it if I were you. Addie likes being mothered. It means she doesn't have to be responsible for anything and you know how much Mother likes to control things. So you see, the behaviour you object to is what they both like."

"That's not a very nice way of seeing things," said Sybil.

"Nice!" said Else, laying down her knife and staring directly at Sybil. "Nice seems to be your favourite word, but there's no use going round trying to put a nice template down over things. Nothing would come up through the holes."

"So," said Sybil, "I'm not trading my nice view for your nasty one, if that's what you're suggesting."

"You might have to," said Else, "after today."

"What do you mean?" asked Sybil. But Else just tossed her head and continued eating.

"You'll find out. Ten o'clock's only ten minutes away. Now shouldn't you be brushing your hair and washing your face?'

Sybil spun round, but Else held up crossed fingers. "Pax," she said, laughing. Then she looked at Sybil and the smile was gone from her face. "I didn't set out to annoy you, just then," she said, "but don't go into the drawing room unprepared for change, that's all."

Sybil went to her room. Ten minutes, she said to herself, and smiled as she found herself at the dressing table mirror, hairbrush in hand. Looking neat and tidy was such a convention, she'd gone to do exactly what her mother had told Addie to do.

As Sybil entered the drawingroom she saw everyone was already assembled there. Emma sat in a wing chair by the hearth and Uncle Tom stood behind her, tipped forward, rather in the attitude of a pointing dog. Next to them stood Else, her hair fiery against the oak-panelled wall.

The chairs in the room had been deployed in ways that reminded Sybil of a battle plan. She looked across at her mother, who was perched on a Chippendale chair like a brilliant little bird. She wore a dove grey dress which flattered her pale complexion, and had an opal pinned at her throat that blazed as if electrically charged. Her father, however, provided a cruel contrast. Isolated in the middle of the room in his bath chair, he drifted between wakefulness and sleep, his head withdrawn inside a plaid rug like some ancient turtle.

Emma started proceedings briskly by tapping a spoon on a crystal glass and all eyes became focused on her as the thrumming note from the struck crystal died away. However, after getting the attention of the meeting, Emma remained uncharacteristically silent. She looked from one to the other.

"My dears," she said, at last. "It gives me no pleasure to tell you such bad news." Tom nodded and gave Emma's hand a little pat. Then Emma inclined her head towards Nettie. "I'm sure it would come as no shock to you, Jeanetta, if I were to tell you that Willis's spending has exceeded his income."

Nettie looked up, her blue eyes sparkling. "I've never considered money as having been any concern of mine. Money is, to my way of thinking, a sordid subject."

Emma looked unhappy. "I find myself at a loss for words," she said. "Tom, you'd better explain how things are to Jeanetta."

Tom shifted from foot to foot." Very well," he said, and walked across to stand by Nettie's chair. "I hope you will appreciate how difficult all of this has been for us, but the fact of the matter is that Willis has spent all the money he ever earned and most of his inheritance as well. Unfortunately, this means we must sell the house in Salisbury and use Willis's share of the Courage estate to prevent his creditors from pressing charges."

Everyone was looking at Nettie, who blinked self consciously but gave no other sign of emotion. "I suppose I could have guessed," she said, turning and giving Willis a narrow-eyed stare. "Of course, there were necessary economies when Willis stopped working, but I was always under the impression that Willis's inheritance would keep us as we'd been accustomed."

Emma cleared her throat." I wish it were so, for your sake, my dear, but Willis's debts have outstripped all his means There is much to be sorted. However, the most pressing problem is your accommodation. You do realise that selling the house means we must get you and the girls an alternative place to live as quickly as possible?"

Nettie shook her head. "You're rushing this, Emma. I cannot give up my home at such short notice."

Tom rested his hand on the back of Nettie's chair. " Please," he said. "We are not saying these things to spite you. We are acting out of necessity and trying our best to help you."

"Perhaps if you'd taken this sort of interest a bit sooner, all of this would never have happened," Nettie said.

"That might very well be true," said Emma, "but let's not debate what might have been. Let's just focus on the two things of real importance: Willis's care and your accommodation."

Tom bobbed down by Nettie's chair so that his eyes could be level with hers. "Look," he said, "I know you and your maidservant have managed Willis for the last few months, but it must have been an uphill battle. You see, with alcoholics, you never get ahead. I know you will have thought that you'd got rid of all the alcohol in the house but alcoholics somehow always manage to get supplies from somewhere. You won't have known that Willis had

emptied his account and was paying the grocer's boy to bring alcohol to the window of his bedroom."

Nettie leaned forward and sighed. "Well, that explains a lot," she said, and her mouth tightened.

Tom shifted his position. "What I've arranged," he said, looking up at Nettie, "is for Willis to go into a private nursing home. I've organized it with a colleague who runs an institution which has a reputation for succeeding where others fail."

Nettie nodded. "You're right about the difficulty of looking after Willis. He needs locking up but I doubt whether even that asylum you sent Bertie to would have the capacity to keep Willis and alcohol apart for very long."

There was a stunned silence. Neither Tom nor Emma spoke for the best part of a minute. Sybil noticed movement in Emma's throat. "That remark was uncalled for, Jeanetta," she said, shortly. But despite her stern demeanour, Emma seemed reluctant to speak further. "Tom," she said.

Tom straightened from his crouching position and stood up. "Nettie," he said, "Emma and I have been working extremely hard to find some short-term accommodation for you. As you can appreciate, it hasn't been easy."

"Tom," Emma said, "stop beating about the bush. It's better Jeanetta knows now rather than later." Then she too came over to stand by Nettie. Looking across, Sybil thought the way the two of them were standing over Nettie looked almost bullying. She turned her head. Through the window she saw trees and even the dark slur of the cedar at the perimeter of the garden. When she turned back the opal at her mother's throat blazed suddenly between the masking shapes of Tom and Emma. Then she heard Emma's voice.

"Well, Jeanetta, we have to have you out of the house in Salisbury by the end of next week because the auction is the following Saturday and it's clear you and the girls have to have somewhere to live. The estate has a block of shops in the High street in Evesham and just last week a tenant vacated the rooms above a chemist's shop. You can live there rent-free until we can sort out something better."

"Above a shop?" said Nettie, standing up abruptly. "You can't, in all seriousness, suggest that members of your own family should live above a shop?"

"It's an interim measure," said Emma, shortly. "We've had to move very quickly to prevent damage to the family name. I'm sure you'd agree the last thing we'd want would be to have our names in the papers."

"Names in the papers?" said Nettie. "If we have to go and live above a shop, you may as well put our names in the papers and be done with it." Nettie moved out from between Tom and Emma.

"Sybil, Addie, Else," she called, "we must go somewhere private to discuss this extraordinary turn of events. Come, my girls," and she indicated the vestibule with an imperious swoop of her hand.

Sybil stared indignantly at Else, who made no move to join Nettie but stood impassively by the fireplace. Surely Else must see how humiliating all these disclosures had been? The sweep of her gaze took in Emma and Tom, who stood wide-eyed and frozen like figures in a waxworks. She hoped they understood what pain they had inflicted. Fancy Emma striking that crystal for attention and insisting on announcing her bad news as if she were conducting a public meeting. Face burning, Sybil marched towards the door. Behind her, she heard Willis groaning. He reached for Nettie's arm, but Nettie brushed her off.

"Not now," she hissed, kicking open the drawing-room door with her foot. A moment later, they were alone together in the vestibule.

What a relief to get out of there," Nettie said. "A shop, indeed! And to be told to go there by Emma. Over the years, that woman has used every opportunity to best me, but I will not let her get away with this. I will insist that the Courages do much better by us than that."

Just then the drawing-room door opened and Tom's head appeared

"Not intruding?" he asked, an affable look on his face. Sybil thought that, as a doctor, he must be used to telling people bad news in agreeable ways.

"I thought I'd made it clear that we needed to be alone," Nettie said. Tom was not discomforted and stepped into the vestibule anyway.

"Do believe me when I say that I do understand your need to be alone, but before you discuss anything, I want you to recognize that offering the accommodation above the shop is not intended as an insult—"

It seems remarkably like an insult to me, "said Nettie, cutting Tom's speech short. She waved a hand towards the lawn beyond the terrace. "Girls," she said. "I can see we must go further afield if we are to have the privacy we require."

Tom's face remained affable. "Should I bring Willis out to join you? He's asked to be with you and it would be no trouble to get the bath chair down the steps and onto the lawn."

Nettie's eyes narrowed. "I can't imagine why you would suggest such a thing. Of course I don't want Willis to join us. He's done quite enough damage as it is. It does occur to me, however, that if I'm to agree to go into exile in Evesham, then a condition of that is that Willis goes straight to your infirmary."

Sybil looked into her mother's face and waited for Nettie to say something regretful or affectionate, but her mother's resolute expression did not alter and she was already turning to unlatch the french-doors so that they could go into the garden.

Back in Salisbury, there was packing to do. Tilly helped them, her eyes red rimmed with crying.

"Oh my dears," she kept saying. "Oh my dears, I never thought I'd see the day you left this house. When I first came here you children were tiny tots and I've seen you all grow up and now by the end of the week you'll all be gone. I hardly have the heart to start again with some other family. Wherever I go I'll be constantly reminded of you all, for if I cook bilberry muffins I'll be thinking of Master Terry and if I bake butterfly cakes I'll be remembering Mistress Guinie setting out my butterfly cakes on pretty plates to tempt her young men."

For several days Nettie put off the task of tackling Willis's back bedroom.

"I should ask Tilly to do it," she said, "but for some strange reason I seem to need to do it myself. Perhaps, Sybil you'd come with me and help me get all those old ewers down from that top shelf?"

Sybil went down the passage with her mother and pulled her father's spindle back chair across so she could reach the topmost shelf, and handed down the ewers one at a time.

"Some of these are quite grand," said Nettie, turning a blue Staffordshire jug over in her hands and squinting at the maker's mark. "There must be a matching washbasin somewhere. But it's of no consequence whether things are in matching sets or not because they can all go to the church rummage sale. At least there, they will be put to better use than they were in this house."

Eventually everything was cleared from the room except the wire frame of the single bed.

"The carriers can take that," said Nettie, dusting her hands. "I'm satisfied we've done what we can." Then she bustled off down the passageway. Although there was no ostensible reason for Sybil to stay on in the emptied room, she found herself unable to leave. Unerringly, she went to the window. She knew exactly what she had come to see. She'd come to see the grocer's boy holding up his bag of bottles. She could see the possibility of it now. There was a perfect space between the rhododendron and the house where a person could stand unobserved. She pictured Willis responding to the boy's tap, saw her father stumbling from his chair, wallet gaping with notes, and putting the family's money into the waiting hands of that boy. It seemed such a heartless thing to do. And yet she'd colluded with Willis. She'd put that ewer on the top shelf so her mother and aunt wouldn't see its contents. She'd smelt the alcohol. It had stunk like pee but she'd put it up there nonetheless. It had felt like a kind thing to do at the time.

She looked down at the bedframe. The light on the wire mesh created an unpleasant confusion of light and dark shapes. As recently as last week her father had lain in this exact space. In this bed her father had said "Our dear, foolish boy has put up his age. Let's pray that the war ends before he gets there."

There was no doubt her father loved Terry, loved them all, extravagantly. It was unmistakably in his look, the way he inclined his body. They were all their father's best beloved. He claimed anything less would be a diminution of what he felt.

She remembered how her Uncle had called Willis's regard for Homefield sentimental and Willis had argued that it was sentiment that gave life its human dimension. They'd had that conversation leaning against the balustrade on the terrace looking down the garden at the dark horizontal struts of that distant cedar. Seeing the breadth of the tree countered against the length of the lawns had caused Willis to become discursive. He'd said something about it being the spaces between things that caused the heart to lurch and the mind to call up things so distinctly from the past, but as soon as Willis mentioned the word heart, Tom had chivvied them inside.

Perhaps it had been the rightness of Willis's theory or the cold air on the terrace but, whatever it was, it had made her register the look and feel of her father's hand on the sleeve of her coat. She wanted to keep that hand on her arm forever. No one had loved her more than her father had, but the awful thing was that some other part of her father had acted to destroy them. It was Willis's fault that they'd lost their home. Willis was the reason Tilly was crying in the kitchen, and why Nettie had called down the passage to say she was going upstairs because she had another headache coming on.

Sybil walked over to the bed and stretched herself out on the wire rack of the mattress frame. The springs jangled unpleasantly. Her fingers reached for the edge of the frame and she clung to it as if she was on some frail craft in a high sea. Some afternoon light filtered through the leaves of the rhododendron and created a pleasant warmth across her shoulders. She wondered idly if the word "spreadeagled" derived from the outspread span of an eagle's wings. Then she thought of prisoners stretched on a rack and tried to imagine how it might feel to have the fibres in your bones teased to snapping point. Seeing her father taken away from Homefield had been painful. She knew she hadn't been meant to see it, that Nettie had organised for them to be out of the way, picnicking in the walled garden, when the orderly came to collect their father.

"There won't be a breath of wind in there," Nettie had said gleefully. "Bring your books and your hats and we can laze the afternoon away."

They'd set out down the lawn together and Nettie had held their hands and swung their arms, and said quite merrily, "Don't we just deserve this?" And for a time it had been blissful in the enclosed garden. There were medlars espaliered against the walls and in the flower bed next to where they sat, serried rows of golden rod and sweet scented stocks.

"It's quite the most lovely afternoon," their mother said drowsily, her head nodding over her book. Meanwhile Addie ran back and forth gathering things for her sand tray garden.

She'd already blocked in the background with moss scalped from the shadier parts of the wall and now she was searching out choice little pansies to line the paths of her miniature garden. Sybil watched her. She could not concentrate on her own book and kept losing her place and reading the same lines over and over. After a while she stood up. "I'm going back to the house," she said. "Shall I bring some apples?" Neither Nettie nor Addie paid her the slightest bit of attention. Nettie was dozing and Addie had lifted all the moss out of her saucer and was starting again with a new layout.

Sybil turned out of the walled garden and made her way up the lawn and onto the terrace. She was just about to go into the side door off the terrace when she caught the glint of light on metal and stopped to stare. A motor car was drawn up outside the portico. She changed direction and stepped from the terrace into the drive. Not so many people drove cars and she'd definitely not seen this car before. Aunt Emma must have visitors. It was then she heard her father's raised voice. It sounded querulous. The front door stood open and Sybil went up the steps. She saw her father standing unsteadily in the hallway. He'd rolled up his sleeves and was presenting his fists like a gentleman boxer. It seemed quixotic given that the man he was threatening was a head taller and in his prime. Then she saw her uncle step out from behind a door, and throw some sort of white cloth round Willis's shoulders, and he and the stranger moved in concert and captured Willis's puny little fighting arms and wrapped them away out of sight.

Sybil turned and ran. Her feet carried her across the gravel carriageway and down the lawn. She'd seen her father's terrified look and the way his head flicked from side to side. They'd put him in some sort of cocoon. Air burned in her throat. She hardly knew where she was going until she bumped up against the bole of the cedar. In the distance she heard the motor car's engine start and turned in time to see the glint off the metal bodywork as the car moved through the gap between the portico and the laurel hedge that flanked the driveway. Then it was gone.

"Daddy," Sybil cried, and then realized she was lying on her father's old bed in the back room in their house in Salisbury. Being here in her father's old room was doing her no good. She stood up. No amount of wishing would bring her father back. He'd been taken away and, if her mother had anything to do with it, might never be brought back. She didn't even know where he'd been taken. At the time when she could have done something, she'd been foolish and helpless and run away like a child.

Later that afternoon, Sybil stood at the window of her bedroom, looking out at the elm tree. She'd grown up with that tree and, over the years, its branches had grown bigger and bigger and closer to the house. There was talk that the new owners were going to cut it down, that it

was too big for a suburban garden, that elms needed the sort of space provided by a common or a field. She wondered if perhaps the new owners would repair the pond and stock it with goldfish. She remembered a time when there'd been fish in that pond and she'd spent hours lying on her belly watching the scarlet ballet of the fishes, watching their quick silver pathways and pondering the secret of their fishy purpose. Through the mishmash of branches she could just make out the dark shape of the hedge. She and May had lived inside that hedge for most of one summer.

Closer to the house, there was a sudden movement. Somebody was coming up the path. She decided it must be another real estate agent staking yet another sign. They'd put signs out in the street which described their house as a desirable gentleman's residence. Whoever it was on the path was in no hurry, for the bushes moved back and forth for quite a while before anyone appeared in front of the house. Sybil thought the person might be having a cigarette or possibly even a pee. Once, that would have disturbed her, but things like that didn't seem to matter anymore.

Eventually a head bobbed into view. It was some boy from the telegraph office. She wondered idly what fresh dictate might have come from Aunt Emma. Was it not sufficient to have arranged for them to live above a shop without having to bombard them with directives? She saw the boy's coloured cap disappear into the hood of the porch and hurried downstairs to answer the door. The rata-tat-tat of the door-knocker sounded hollowly in the hall as she came down the stairs. She opened the door and took the telegram from the boy. He was staring watchfully out at her from under the office of his peaked cap. He must have been fifteen, perhaps even younger. She glanced down. The telegram was from the war ministry.

"I'm dreadful sorry, Miss," he said, and turned, slope shouldered, and walked off down the path. The telegram was addressed to Nettie but Nettie was sleeping off a headache. The War Ministry, it said. The War Ministry! Sybil held the slender paper slip in her hand, then she folded it again and again, and passed it through a gap in the front of her blouse and held it next to her skin. She went inside and shut the door.

Chapter 6

December 1914

Dear Mum,

I've got my two feet on land again. I must be a real landlubber because I got very sick of being at sea. It was close quarters all the time. Mostly, we managed to rub along but sometimes there were a few stoushes.

The horses were not happy though and it took lots of work to keep them in good nick. Some horses just didn't stand it. Crossen's horse was one of those that died. It was hard to see perfectly good horseflesh go over the side. Quite a few animals went that way. Not Sultan, of course.

I expect you are sitting down to baked mutton and a good bag pudding. I would like to sit down to such a dinner but it might be a while before I get that opportunity. We're hoping the Army will put on something a bit better than bully beef for Christmas. One good thing though, there's no shortage of oranges here. In Andersville you never see an orange from one year to the next but here they are for sale everywhere you go. Someone said dates were good eating but I don't eat them because they're always covered in flies.

You'd laugh to see us all camped out here in the desert. It looks kind of wrong, with no grass and trees.

You would know most of the boys in my tent, Mum. There is Leonard Smith, Ernest Fanshawe, Mick Crossen and Benny Cooper and a couple of blokes from Timaru and one from Waimate. We're all pretty matey. Sometimes Mick gets on Benny's case but Crossen always did make Benny's life a misery at Williams's school so no surprise there.

I will send you and Esther beads. They are only blue glass, but I'll think you'll like them anyway. They look pretty in the light.

Tell Esther not to send more socks. Four pairs arrived yesterday and another pair the day before. We are sweltering here and it's hard to think of ever needing warm clothes again. The Army does not pay any heed to the heat though and we are often drilled in the hottest part of the day. What is worse, they seem to want to make infantry of us and, more often than not, the horses stay stabled. At least the animals have shelter. They have set up stalls in open-ended sheds and we employ local urchins to do the dirty work. Unfortunately, the urchins are used to handling donkeys and the size and the temperament of our horses has them beat. One poor devil tried to ride one of the horses and got thrown off and collected the side of a shed. He hit with a real wallop and, from the din he made, there must have been quite a few broken bones.

Still nothing about when we'll be going to France. It is strange to be training in the desert if we are going into winter in Europe. Ours not to reason why or so they say.
Have the best of Christmases.
Your loving son,
Jack

I feel better for having written to Mum. It's strange how much I've thought about her since I've been away. I never thought I was that sort of bloke. I certainly didn't think of my folks much when I first left home and went mustering. Then I thought I'd left all that Andersville stuff behind me. Now you'd think I'd have more on my mind than the doings of some bloody hick down in South Canterbury. It's not as if there's much time to be thinking about any sort of stuff, really. We're always working. Drilling, riding sorties out on the horses, besides, when you're sharing a tent with seven other blokes there's not a moment to call your own.

I blame all this thinking about home on the Indian Ocean. Being stuck out there with never a sight of a tree was enough to bring on thoughts of George's old cows standing knee deep in grass in the shadow of the macrocarpa hedge. We'd always teased Grandma Kennedy for going on about Ireland and now I'd bloody caught her disease and couldn't stop seeing that damned home paddock.

Probably we'd all been feeling a bit cooped up being at sea for so long because the first sight of land got everyone whooping. As we got closer to shore a whole army of folks came out in small boats. They were falling over each other to sell us stuff. At first we were glad but it didn't take long before we were fed up with the whole thing. They just didn't take no for an answer.

Coming into the canal was something, though. The ship ahead looked like it was sailing straight through sand. Not a sight I'll forget in a long time.

And, it was a sight for sore eyes getting into Alexandria. Perhaps because of this we looked at everything with real interest. We'd come to see the world and here it was. The buildings on shore were all white, the sea a sort of ink colour and the whole harbour covered in ships. Not just troop ships but tramp steamers and lots of little native boats with upside down sails. It made Timaru harbour seem like very small beer. Unfortunately, all this shipping made it difficult for the Athenic to get into berth. I didn't know who was more impatient. Us or the animals?

Disembarkment took hours. The horses were unsettled. The sergeants shouted and no one seemed to know whether they were coming or going. Food and water was slow coming and the damn hawkers got in amongst us pretty quick. They had peanuts and strange gluey sweets but we took the biggest liking to their oranges. I think it was the smell as much as the

taste of those things. It really got your taste buds going. Some blokes bought more oranges than they could eat in a month.

We didn't take to the hawkers much. They seemed to come from the same miserable tribe as the folks on those boats and made absolute pests of themselves. Crossen gave one of the more persistent Gypos such slap it laid him out. Then all his ragamuffin mates set up such a wailing and flapping it put me in mind of the gulls at the Andersville tip. After that, the sergeant came over and shouted and bawled and threatened until the Gypos withdrew to a safe distance but they didn't go away. They stayed there, watching every single move we made.

Crossen said, "I bet some of them would slip a knife in your back if they met you in a dark alley."

And Benny said, "You don't know that for a fact, Crossen. They're just as good as you in the eyes of the Lord."

But, for once, Crossen didn't thump or push Benny. He just gave him a contemptuous look. "Now I know why there's so many of my lot and only a handful of your quaking lot," he said.

A few days later we were stationed just out of Cairo. You could see the pyramids from where we were camped. You couldn't help seeing them. They were the only bloody things out there in a whole sea of nothing.

On the first day of our leave we took an excursion out there to see what those pyramids looked like close up. The numbers of blocks in those bloody things made you think about the amount of work it had taken to make them. The jokers had their photos taken riding camels and larking about in front of the Sphinx. Then some bloke with a camera had the bright idea that we should all climb up the side of a pyramid so it looked like it was made of people. It looked easy as pie from the ground, but it actually took us a bit of doing. The blocks weren't neat step-sized ones. You had to haul yourself up block by block, and that day the sun was bloody murderous. Somehow, we got everyone up there and ended up standing about three to a block.. Crossen and me ended up being cussed but we got ourselves pretty near to the top. If we were going to get our photos taken then we didn't want to be lost in the crowd. But when we looked down the blokes with cameras were so little we realised we weren't really going to feature that much in their photos anyway. Then one of the camera-holding blokes hallooed out and we knew were on so we threw out an arm and a leg for effect.

I've seen a few of those photos since and would have liked one to send to Mum and Dad. It's just such a hell of an idea seeing all our blokes stacked up on a pyramid in the middle of a

frigging desert. The sort of thing that the folks in Andersville could never imagine. The very kind of picture Grandma Kennedy would put on her mantelpiece.

As well as the heat, we got fed up with the sand. As a kid, I'd always thought sand was good because it was about taking a day off, mucking about in the river bed. Sand was a different matter in the desert though. You only have to turn round once and it was in every orifice known to man, and some you hadn't even thought of before. You could shake sand out of your clothes or your blankets but if you got a measure in your boot it was bloody murder to march on. For a while there, Crossen regularly emptied sand into Benny's boots, but got so little rise that he got bored with his own torture treatment and stopped doing it altogether. Fanshawe suggested he should do it once in a while, just to keep Benny "on his toes." But Fanshawe's "funny" didn't even draw a grin from Crossen, who seemed to have completely finished with the idea of putting sand in Benny's boots.

Fortunately, we weren't out on a march when the first Khamsin struck. In fact, even more lucky for us, we were inside our tent doing a few last things before turning in. Benny was the only one outside, doing whatever he usually did outside, looking at the moon or some such thing. We heard him call out.

"Hey you jokers, come out and look at this."

Crossen said, "Stow it Benny, we're ready to get some shut eye. Keep your God stuff to yourself."

But Benny was not about to shut up. "I'm not kidding," he said, sticking his head round the tent flap, "you'd better come out and take a decko at this."

"Is it the end of the world?" Fanshawe laughed.

"Could be," said Benny, evenly.

"For Christ's sake, it better be good," I said, flinging my blanket aside. I pushed through the tent flap and stood shoulder to shoulder with Benny.

At first glance it looked like the usual clear night. There was the moon and the pyramids. Then I saw what had excited Benny. Something still at a distance but travelling fast. It was an uncanny sort of thing because as it came it wiped out everything in its path.

"Hey, Benny" I said. "This is no joke. What the hell do you think is happening?" The others came crowding out of the tent, then.

Fanshawe smirked. "I know what that is," he said. "You lot never listen to a thing you're told. Sergeant Roake told us about these sand storm things called Kammy somethings. We better get indoors and button down the flaps."

Benny and I stood together a moment or two longer. I thought of how Kennedy had told me about flying fishes and octopuses and now I had sand storms to tell my kids about. I

didn't have kids, of course, had never even thought of kids before. But I did now, even caught a glimpse of them. Country kids, a bit scruffy, running about in long grass. I grinned. I'd make damn sure there was a map up in my house. I'd be a bit of a Williams, talk about things you couldn't see in Andersville; just like Grandma Kennedy talked about flying fishes. Not that I'd frighten my lot like she frightened us. Her stories of waves as big as Mount Anders had us dodging round that mountain like a brood of frightened chicks. We must have had the brains of chickens too, to believe a bloody mountain could move against us; but, on the other hand, Dad was only partly right when he said she told fibs. Her stories weren't fibs, she was just letting us kids know things were stranger than we had reason to know.

"Get indoors," I said, giving Benny a bit of a shove. The moon had gone completely and I could hear the storm, although, close at hand there was a funny kind of stillness. I raced round the tent checking the guy ropes and, as the blackness swept towards me, I thought of Grandma Kennedy's wave and raised my fist.

Inside, we sat waiting for the storm to hit. Fanshawe told us that the "Kammy somethings" were regular, so we figured they couldn't be fatal or there wouldn't be any Gyppos left.

When it hit, Crossen said, "It'd be no joke being out there. It'd be like someone was doing a sandpapering job on you."

"How would you breathe?" Benny asked.

"You'd have to wrap up your nose and mouth and eyes and ears," said Fanshawe. "That's probably why the Gyppos have all those scarves and veils."

"And dresses," said Benny, and that afforded us a good laugh and plenty of talk about a visit to the Wazzir where, according to an Aussie corporal, ladies of the night were more plentiful than oranges and a damn sight more juicy. "About the same price too," he'd said, as an afterthought.

A day or two before Christmas we got down to the Wazzir. Naturally, our South Canterbury's gang went down town together. Smith said he'd had a woman back in Timaru who acted like she was his missus and let him turn up her skirt any old time he wanted. I'd looked at his plain face and jug ears and thought a good-looking man like me had been wasted up in Cheviot. Not much to get going with up there as the only sheilas on the station were all spoken for. Some blokes went in for a bit of buggering but most of us just put up and shut up. Certainly the stink of randy men never made me feel I wanted a piece of that action.

"I wouldn't get my hopes up if I were you, Hunt," Crossen said, barging into me as we stumbled about in the darkness. We'd just left some smoky den where we'd had a couple of local beers, but they must have put something extra in those drinks because we were rotten,

and that didn't stack up on the back of two beers. I had a bit of a fish around for my wallet but it was still there so they hadn't taken anything that wasn't theirs. It was a wonder, though, because I was fall-down drunk and just managed to get my back against a wall or I'd have been out for the count.

"Them wimmen," Crossen was saying, as he lurched back and forth in the small space between walls in the alleyway, "them wimmen, that Aus was talking about, are sure as hell going ter be the wives and daughters of them hawker bastards." He burst out into loud laughter. "Bastard beggars," he barked.

I shrugged. "So what," I said, "When a man's starving, he doesn't ask for silver service."

Smith came up then. "Hey," he said, "Where the hell have you two been? I thought we were going to stick together." Then he said, "By god, you're shickered. Look at them, Benny. Between the pair of them, they'd hardly be able to prop up a clothes line." Then he said, "You must have been drinking some of that wog firewater to get out of it this quick. We only saw yer twenty minutes back. Better stick with them, Ben. Taking money off those two would be as easy as taking sweets off a baby."

Smith had it right. Crossen and I were as stupid as a couple of chooks and the next half hour made little sense to me. I had no bloody clue where I was and blundered into every wall and tripped on every loose stone there was to trip on. I'd have to say Benny was good to me. He steered me very patiently and prevented me from being robbed on several occasions. Smith had a harder job with Crossen, who was threatening every Arab he saw with instant death. But then, quite suddenly, we came out into a wider place. It was lighter for a start. A few lopsided lanterns had been hung from wires stretched between some ramshackle houses.

Crossen let out a jeer. "The bloody red light district," he shouted. "That's what yer came here for, didn't yer, Hunt? Came fer a bloody shag, didn't yer?"

A few blokes looked up with a bit of a grin on their faces, but I must have been a darn sight more sober than Crossen, because I remember thinking Crossen's mouth was really running away with him.

Further down the street, we caught up with Fanshawe. He had his hands in his pockets and his hat was tipped right back. It was obvious he, too, had had a taste of what Smith called "wog firewater". He leered cheerfully at us.

"Wondered when you blokes would turn up." he said. "I've been told this one is a cut above the rest and that's why there's a queue. Satisfied customers always come back, right, eh? Me dad always said that. He was in the grocery business for twenty years and he always said, 'Get the price and the service right and they'll always come back.'"

"Stow it," Smith said. "Selling soap and biscuits ain't the same business."

"It pretty much is," said Fanshawe, barging Smith. But my eyes went to Benny, who was standing behind me in the queue. He had his hands in his pockets, which looked casual for Benny.

"What are we waiting for?" he asked, looking curiously up at the building we were stopped outside. Fanshawe stopped bickering with Smith and tipped me a wink.

"Well, Cooper," he said, "if your sainted mother could see yer now, I don't think she'd be very happy with you. This queue here ain't for freaking bible class."

I could see Benny beginning to blush and couldn't for the life of me understand how he could have missed understanding what we were up to. He must have heard all the dirty talk even before we left camp. Then I thought of Benny's mother walking all the way to our house to tell Mum I was a bad influence. Mum said Dad had told her she wasn't living in the real world. Dad's view was not original. Everyone in Andersville had stories to tell about the Coopers. They'd come to call Benny's place 'Coopersville' because thirty or so people lived on the Cooper's ten acre block and never came out from behind that high hedge, not even to go to the general store . Once named, Benny's place came to be the source of all sorts of rumour and gossip.

Looking at Benny now, I recognized how unfounded most of those rumours were. I remembered back to the time I'd handed Benny that territorial's uniform and how he'd fingered the khaki stuff as if putting on a soldier's uniform would pitch him straight into the fires of hell. And yet he'd left Coopersville to come to war with us. It took some figuring. Certainly he was an odd one to be lined up here in a queue of whoring soldiers. I could see Benny had his mother's freckled face, and, even as I looked, it relaxed into its normal faint smile as if he were perfectly content with his situation and not trapped in this noisy stairwell amongst men keen to buy sex for the price of an orange.

I reached down and put my hand on his shoulder. "You know you don't have to go in, Ben," I said. "You could just keep on giving up your place until Fanshawe and me are done, and then come downstairs with us." Benny looked at me without speaking and I couldn't take anything much from his expression. Then the door at the top of the stairs opened and a gust of warm air came down into the stair well. The three blokes closest to the door went in and Fanshawe and I moved on to the top step together.

I turned to speak to Benny again, "We won't be long mate," I said, but found I was speaking to an Australian light horse man.

"Won't be long," he drawled. "That's kiwi jokers for you. You kiwis just don't have enough lead in your pencils to be long."

I knew if Crossen had been around there would have been a fight, but I gauged that the stairs were rickety enough and if some sort of scuffle broke out it could bring the whole lot

down, so I just grinned and said, "Takes one to know one," and he gave me a bit of a shove and that was that.

I looked at the closed door ahead. It was hard to know what things might look like on the other side. How could so many blokes be in there all at the same time? And why didn't anyone ever come out? Either they had a hell of a lot of women up there or just a few hard workers. Either way the odds were stacked against it being much good. Besides I could feel the scald of acid at the back of my throat and knew I was in for a return bout with that firewater. I looked back down the stairwell to see if there was any way out but the space below was filled with heads craning up towards the bloody whorehouse door. I couldn't work out whether it was the firewater that was making me feel wobbly or the combined weight of all those bodies was actually making the stairs sway.

The Aussie behind me leered. "Thinking of piking? I saw your little nancy mate slip out."

I turned away. I felt too sick to get into any argy bargy with Aus but thought I knew which way to turn if it came to barfing and this gave me all the satisfaction I needed. I stared at the closed door. If it didn't open soon, I knew I wouldn't last the distance. I needed space and air, quickly. Where had bloody little Benny got to? The bugger was trouble. He'd probably think it was perfectly safe to go wandering about in the Wazzir on his own. Before I could think more about Benny, the door opened and I was propelled from behind by my bloody Okker mate and Fanshawe and I went stumbling forward into the room, and then the door was closed on the stairwell with some force and I was pleased to see the dumbfounded look on that Okker's face.

My triumph was short-lived though, for, if the stairwell had been crowded and unstable, this room, which was poked in under the eaves, was stifling hot and stank to high heaven. The acid rose once more in my throat but just when I thought I was going to flake, a woman took my arm quite firmly and steered me forward. Straight away the sickness seemed to recede. Perhaps the draft of our movement revived me but whatever it was, I began to think longingly of lying down. To hell with the rest, I'd gladly pay just to lie down.

I could see the room was divided up into many little stalls and thought how like a cow shed it looked, but you'd never get cattle beasts up those stairs, and that made me want to laugh. Those Gyppos probably got a better return on us than Dad got from years of milking his bloody Mollies. Then I thought about Smith saying some woman in Timaru had turned up her skirt for him and thought it sounded about as exciting as darning a sock. I looked at the woman who held my hand so firmly. I could hardly believe I was in this place, with this woman. I wondered what Dad would think if he could see me. All he'd ever done was hang around in the Rangitata. Most years, he didn't even make it as far as Timaru.

The woman put her face close to mine and I thought perhaps she expected me to kiss her. I noticed that she'd drawn coal black lines round her eyes and some of the stain had fanned out into the fine lines of her skin and that made it look as if her eyes were surrounded by big spidery lashes. I stared at her. Her lips were painted scarlet. Her hair hung loosely and had been oiled at the crown. I thought I must be mad. This woman more than likely had the clap but I didn't pull back. I'd left Andersville because, like all the other boys queued in the stairwell, I wanted more action than what you got in country towns in New Zealand and now something was actually happening. I watched myself being towed to one of the stalls. I could see the woman's ankles were stacked with bracelets which gleamed a sort of gold even in this low light. I'd seen bangles on wrists before but never on ankles. Women in New Zealand rarely showed their ankles.

I looked at the bracelets again and thought that if this was a savage custom, it was one I could appreciate. I looked at her dark-skinned hand. She was holding my arm quite tightly but the rhythm of her walking felt much less stiff than that of the women who had held my arm in the past. A faint tinkling came to me, and I could see many little bells sewn along the edge of her shawl. It was the sound of these shaking together that was making that silly, tinpot racket.

As I went forward, I saw that the stall she was taking me to contained a narrow bed and that there was a canopy of scarves hanging from a rack which the woman tugged creakingly across to create some privacy. It was a fussy domestic action, and for some reason I found it reassuring, but, as soon as the curtain was drawn, I got a bit panicky because I couldn't get the idea of farmed animals out of my mind. I could see the soft bodies of hens in the fowl house, and the rounded backs of pigs heaving backwards and forwards in a sty. The motion of these things made me feel sick and I grabbed hold of the side of the bed to steady myself. The woman was having none of this, however. She was not about to let me waste time on doubt. She embraced me firmly, slid her thin thigh between my legs and the next moment I was tumbled on the bed and she was beneath me, her hands working rhythmically. Her smell came to me as bitter as the little black stalks Kennedy put in her apple pies. She was working her tongue round the inside my mouth and the buzz of her tonguing set up a jangling that went right through me. She didn't ask me if I loved her. In Andersville anything more complicated than a kiss came only on an understanding of marriage. This woman took my penis in her hands, was wet and open and gripped and released me in ways that brought me quickly to a climax. Once she let out a cry as harsh as a bird's but when I'd looked at her, her eyes gave me no cause for comfort and almost immediately she pulled me roughly to my feet. Then she took my wallet and withdrew money from it, and passed it back and gave me a spiteful little shove in the small of the back. I turned to protest, and saw the tiny baubles of

her breasts, and recognised that the sex had been so swift I hadn't actually seen her body. But looking at the dark little dots of her nipples or the sharp ridge of her hips was clearly not included in the price, and she hissed at me and whipped my face with the edge of her shawl. The tiny bells tinkled madly, and I staggered blindly from her stall and almost collided with Fanshawe.

"Mad bitch," he said. "She threw me out."

"Factory rules," I said, " Clock in, clock out." Then some bloke in a red hat turned up and tried to sell us cheroots, but we weren't buying, and he showed us down some back stairs and I realized we'd been re-routed.

"I can see why they don't send us out the front way," I said. "What we had to say might put off the punters."

There was quite a group of people gathered in the alley behind the whorehouse. I looked around for Benny and couldn't see him, but then he'd gone out the front door and that probably led out into quite a different set of streets. Some of the blokes were swapping smokes. One or two were smoking cheroots. Fanshawe was saying how great he'd gone upstairs and I grinned to myself. It wasn't the story he'd told me. For myself, I didn't feel that it had been too bad. What I'd got was certainly not something to brag about but it had given me what Kennedy would have called an inkling. Kennedy got inklings about all sorts of stuff. For me, the inkling was that sex with a woman wasn't as difficult as I'd supposed. With that Gyppo woman, sex had been the body doing things for its own reasons, like a sneeze. But then I thought of the woman's eyes and how she'd spat at me when I left. I could see that sex was a balancing act. It needed to take you like a sneeze, but you needed some fellow feeling round it too. Back home, one or two women had told me they loved me, but actually I think what they really wanted was to be married and have kiddies, and I didn't think either of them had liked or trusted me that much.

I gave Fanshawe a shove and put my boot into the rickety steps at the bottom of the staircase.

"Bloody women," I said. "More trouble than they're worth."

Another joker threw a stone at the side of the building. "We got our money's worth, bloody nothing," he said.

"Bloody wogs," Fanshawe said. "They sure know how ter rob yer blind. I hope the Frenchies are a damn sight better."

We walked back to the camp, pretty discontented. But memory plays funny tricks, because a week later we were back in the Wazzir, mad keen for more of the same action. Fanshawe had remembered his woman quite differently. In the space of two days, she'd turned into a dusky maiden, whose pleasures he could not do without. I remembered how in the queue

he'd talked about sex as commerce and now his silly willie had led him into all sorts of flights of fancy. If the price and service is right the customers keep coming back. He'd become proof of his own theory. I thought of the grocer's shop back home and could smell the sour milk stink of cheese and the starchy clean-wash smell of soap, and grinned to myself. Fancy Fanshawe lumping all that domestic stuff with the stench of the whorehouse. Fanshawe was as unripe as a green tomato.

That second time we went to town we had much more where-with-all. Crossen and I bought a beer that was bottled and labelled. In the whorehouse we were more masterful, but everything seemed a lot more ordinary than before. More to the point, me, Fanshawe and Crossen all got the pox. As soon as Mick found out, he was ropeable.

"I'm going straight down there to set a few things straight," he declared. "I'll bloody clean those nig nogs out. Wouldn't take much to burn their stinking hovels to the ground. That old wood would go up in a flash. That would learn them not to go giving us bloody diseases."

At the time, we were all banged up in the hospital at Zeitoun and Crossen's argument sounded pretty compelling. We'd had our pay docked and were getting some god awful treatment that involved sticking bloody syringes up our sensitive parts and, I can tell you, if anyone had done any bell tinkling round me after those sessions they'd have got more than they bargained for.

Several weeks later we got wind that some blokes were going down to sort out the Wazzir. It was all Crossen needed. He was up and out the window in a flash, and away down town to see what mischief he could get up to.

"I'll pay them bastards out," he said, his head popping back up to look in the window at us. "You boys should come along. It'll be great sport getting some of them Gyppos on the run." His big black Irish brows were drawn so close together, it made me want to laugh

"Jesus, Crossen, one of them evil looks would be enough to warn most people off." I went across to the window, half inclined to follow Crossen, but then I felt a restraining hand on my arm and turned to find Benny standing there.

"Where did you spring from?" I asked, but I could see at a glance he was doing his hospital visiting stuff 'cause he had a bag full of oranges and some extra tins of tobacco. He never smoked himself and was always good for a tin or two. I looked out the window after Crossen, but he was already at the far side the compound.

"Once Crossen gets an idea in his head there's no stopping him," I said.

Benny looked at me. He was still holding my arm. I'd never thought of him as strong, but by god he had a grip on him that day.

"Jack," he said, "You're not thinking of going out with Mick are you?"

"Why not? I said. "Sounds like our jokers are out for a bit of fun, tonight."

"Fun?" Benny said. "Do you call burning down people's homes fun, Jack?"

"It'll serve them bloody wogs right," Fanshawe grumbled, turning his face away from Benny.

Benny stood his ground. "Think what you'd have on your consciences if you set fire to peoples' houses and someone got killed?"

Fanshawe groaned. "For god's sake Benny. You'll have to get rid of your finer feelings when you get to war. The government's bloody paying us to kill as many of these wogs as we can, or hadn't you realized that?"

Benny said, "That's not what I'm here for. I've put my name down for the ambulance corps."

"Go on," said Fanshaw. "You couldn't bloody tie a hanky round a blister."

But Benny had moved in front of the window so he could prevent either of us climbing out. I remembered how stubborn he'd been all those years ago in the shitball wars. He'd pitched those missiles till the last. But then nobody was going to get seriously hurt and I was beginning see that the trip to the Wazzir wasn't going to be as harmless as it sounded. When I was a little kid, I'd seen a stable burn down and, for a moment or two, I didn't know whether I was coming or going because the screaming of the horses seemed to be making the inside of my head buzz as loudly as a bee in a bottle. Fortunately, a group of men managed to prise some planks off the back of the stable and the horses came crashing out. A few of them were a bit singed but at least they were alive. It was in the nick of time too because, a moment later, the air got in and there was a terrific whoosh and the whole building collapsed into that bonfire like it was so much paper.

It took a day or two for the embers to die down, and then us kids poked around a bit in the ashes and found that not everything had escaped. Some barn moggy had got itself incinerated. We turned it over with a stick. It smelt horrible, perhaps because some burnt fur and roasted innards were still stuck to its bones. But it was the set of its teeth that unnerved me. It looked as if it had faced down the fire until the last. Some of the other kids laughed at it and I joined in so as not to appear a sook ,but those bared teeth put me right off my tucker for several nights running.

I thought of the woman with the bells. I'd seen the disrespect in her eyes. She'd caused me plenty of trouble but I wouldn't want to see her burned. I couldn't see that Mick, for all his talk, would want people seriously hurt either. Probably all Mick had in mind was seeing all those whorehouse cats jumping about in the nude and, if they screamed, so much the better. It wasn't in Mick's character to do much thinking. He saw himself as a man of action.

I looked back at Benny. "It's all right mate," I said. "Fanshawe and me aren't up to anything tonight. We're too crook to go anywhere aren't we mate?" and I gave Fanshawe's leg, which was dangling over the edge of the bed, an almighty kick.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"It's just to remind you that we're not even thinking of going downtown tonight, are we?" And Fanshawe looked from Benny to me and back the other way again and I laughed at the cranky look on his face.

As it turned out, it was a damn good job we didn't go down to the Wazzir that night. All hell broke loose and those bloody Tommy Red Caps laid into everyone with their batons. Then apparently everyone turned on the Caps. Us Colonists can handle ourselves in a fight, and once those Tommies were off their horses they were no match for us. It must have been bedlam. Crossen came back with a wrist swollen up like a duck's egg.

"Bastards caught me a nasty crack," he said.

"You were darn lucky you weren't collared," Fanshawe said. Crossen said nothing. He was nursing his wrist, and deaf to anything we said.

"They damn near broke me arm," he said. "How do they expect us to win their bloody war if they go round maiming us first?"

After the Wazzir escapade, there were no more trips to town. Our New Zealand commanders told the Tommies that keeping fit young men out of the action for so long was part of the reason for the Wazzir flare-up. Still, the Army kept us on a short leash. There were endless drills in the heat of the day and route marches, and horse treks out into the desert. In some respects we understood they needed to keep our heads down but what we couldn't forgive was being kept hanging round in this piss-awful desert when there was a war we should be fighting in. The sameness of everything was infuriating. Hot day followed hot day. I would have appreciated a sharp Rangitata frost and I think, if Sultan could have spoken, he would have said the same thing. The heat and the flies were driving him insane, and, although I wrote to Dad telling him Sultan was fine, it was anything but the truth. When I ran my hands over his back or down his legs it shocked me. I thought he must have some sort of wasting disease. I blamed the flies. The bloody things spread disease and the constant irritation of them settling on him seemed to have affected his mind. He constantly fidgeted and stamped in his stall. Besides, he bit all the Gyppo stable boys and this won him no friends. I think they tormented him with switches when I wasn't around. Then the poor old boy developed diarrhoea and that really had me worried as I knew how easy it would be for him to get blown. I picked up his tail every time I visited and this only offended him further. It must have seemed the ultimate indignity and I occasionally got a savage bite for my pains. The

only good times we had together were when I combed and brushed him. Then I'd talk of the Rangitata and he'd prick up his ears, and I liked to think he understood every word. It was make-believe of course and I kept my voice right down. Most of the boys were soft on their animals but describing the bloody home paddock would have sounded as if I was out a boat too far. I kept picturing him coming out of the stable the day Dad decided to give him to me. He'd been shined up like a nut and Dad had hardly been able to bear seeing him go, but somehow he carried through with his promise. Some folks bought war bonds. Dad had given Sultan.

A cheer went up when word came we were leaving for the Dardenelles. We were told the animals had to stay behind because the peninsula wasn't horse country. On the day we were to march to Alexandria for embarkation I went across to the stables to see Sultan. I'd salted aside a bit of my pay to give to the Gyppo kids who worked in the stable. I wanted to buy Sultan a bit of peace; but didn't have that much faith in my plan because I felt pretty sure the kids would do what they ruddy well liked the moment I left.

I reached through the railings to touch Sultan's nose and for once the old boy was accepting. I told him I was going to Turkey and that, by rights, he should be coming too as, after all, he had the right name and could have expected to mount all the mares he came across. Then something must have irritated him because he bit down on my hand. I held it up to the light and examined the semi circular bruise and the edge of blood where his teeth had punctured the skin.

I couldn't bring myself to discipline him though. Instead, I looked at the marvellous shape of his head. He was like a walnut gone sour because inside this once magnificent head lived a maddened creature at the limits of its patience. I looked at my hand. It didn't look good. Everyone round here was a good horseman and good horsemen didn't get bitten, but hearing Sultan stamping restlessly in his stall I couldn't help thinking that if I hadn't put pressure on Dad, Sultan would still be in the Rangitata.

"Poor boy," I said. "When I get back, we'll be sent to France and then things will get better because it won't be so frigging hot." I like to think he turned to look at me, but most probably he was just turning one of those tight circles he'd taken to doing, so endlessly. I hurried from the stable, determined not to see any further evidence of his distress.

When I got back to the tent, the boys in my tent group were already packed. Only my gear was left lying on my stretcher.

"Sergeant's already been by," Smith said. He gave us a bawl-out because of your stuff, Hunt. You better get moving, the tents are to be down in the next ten minutes."

As I packed, I could hear Crossen and Fanshawe sharpening their bayonets, and when I came out of the tent they were sitting cross-legged, heads bent towards the sound of their whetstones.

"You'll end up with bloody nothing," I said. Crossen was listening so intently to the pitch of stone on his steel that he didn't even bloody hear me, but Fanshawe said, "I'm leaving nothing to chance. If I've got to depend on this bloody knife, it's got to be so bloody sharp it goes straight in and comes straight bloody out again. I don't want the thing stuck in some bugger when I've need it back to stick the next bastard. Some bloke from Alexandria was telling me he'd seen them offloading some of them hospital ships and I sure as hell am not about to let some bloody Abdul get the better of me."

We laughed at Fanshawe then. He had such a scowl on his ugly mug. Then we had a bit of a laugh about the makeshift packs they'd handed out. Bloody things didn't fit over our bandoliers. Crossen wrestled with his for a moment and threw it down in disgust.

"Only fit for bloody boy scouts," he said. "Who do they think we are?" Smith said "Dib, dib," and we raced round after each other calling dib dib until we'd tired ourselves out with laughing. Then we had to pick the bloody things up because they were all we had to carry our rations in. They assembled us and there was saluting amongst the officers and falling in and out from us and then we were off, marching in squads with those bloody school-packs hanging off our shoulders at all angles. We had to admit that it didn't look the smartest and Fanshawe said he thought those Tommy officers had done it on purpose for a bit of a laugh at our expense, but really we all knew it was just the usual sort of Army ballsup. If you ordered guns from those British stores wallahs you'd just as soon get pots and if you ordered pots you'd get the ruddy guns.

When we got to the port we found a division of Light Horsemen already assembled there and a jeer went up when they saw our packs, but we weren't about to let Aussie under our skins so we gave them some unorthodox salutes and after a few groans and some mutterings from both sides we all settled down to waiting. A few hours were nothing. We were used to waiting. We'd been waiting over four months to get a go at this war.

When the gangway came down, the marshals had their work cut out keeping order, as every man jack of us wanted on. Crossen and me did quite well muscling our way up towards the front. Both of us were determined to get good possies on board for our tent group and, at first, we seemed to be doing pretty good.

"South Canterburys this way," I yelled, and Crossen and Smith acted as rouseabouts. But the authorities just kept shoving more and more blokes on board. In the end, there were about 1800 blokes in all. They must've used a crowbar to lever in the last few hundred. In some places it was standing room only, and, though such a tight fit meant we were always

jostling into people, we tried to be matey. We all had the feeling that any one of these blokes could end up a best mate if the going got tough.

As our tent group stood rammed up in the companionway waiting for porridge to be served, Fanshawe got onto Benny's case about not getting in the ambulance corps.

"Told you," he said. "Told you, you were worse than useless," But Benny didn't take Fanshawe's badgering amiss. He just smiled.

"That medic C.O. said that, even though the ambulance corps couldn't use me, they had a never-ending need for stretcher bearers."

"Never-ending, eh?" said Fanshawe. "Now that doesn't sound healthy to me. Sounds like there's a bit of a turnover. Not surprising given you'll be out there in the firing line all the time. For my part, I'd rather be taking care of number one, and not sticking me neck out for some other bloke."

Crossen, who'd been trapped beside us without saying a word, suddenly stirred.

"Shut it Fanshawe," he said. "That talk ain't proper just now."

"What do you mean, Mick?" Fanshawe asked, but Crossen didn't bother to reply. He looked sort of puffed up like a broody hen. The sea was calm so he wasn't sick and the most exciting thing the Army had offered since we'd been on board was porridge, so he definitely wasn't suffering from a hangover.

"What's up Mick?" I asked.

"Feeling windy?" Fanshawe said. But Mick didn't respond to either of us. After this, no one spoke for a good long while and then Mick heaved his bulk around and said, "That stuff you said to Benny was uncalled for, Fanshawe. When you said that, I got a bloody awful vision of me Mum at St Mary's at the Crossing. I'm not the sort of bloke to see stuff that isn't right in front of me nose but that put the fear of God into me."

"You're a bloody Mickey Doolan," said Fanshawe, "so what do you expect? Them plaster saints'd be enough to make anyone see visions. Besides, what if you did see your Mother at church? That don't necessarily mean nothing."

Crossen stood up. "What would you bloody know. I'm off up on deck to get some fresh air."

A few minutes later, I followed Crossen up the companion way. He was easy to spot. There weren't too many blokes on deck because the ship was surrounded in a chilly grey mist and most of us were feeling the cold after the desert.

"Strange," I said, "to think that only the day before yesterday we were complaining of the heat."

Crossen said, "Damn Fanshawe. All that stuff he said to Benny touched a raw nerve. In me last letter from home, Mum mentioned that Anthony and Bernard had joined up. She didn't

say it was causing her any grief or not in so many words, but Ant's fifteen and Bern's fourteen and, because they're such strapping lads and such damn good fakers, it'll take more than an army clerk to spot they're under age. Now, I don't mind fighting this war fer meself but them two? They wouldn't know trouble if it leapt up and bit them on the bum, and seeing Mum like that gave me a real turn. See she had on the black veil and it's just not in me character to imagine that."

"Well," I said, "if you ask me, it was just because you had them young fellows on your mind. But you Crossens always were hard men, and by the time the army's given those boys some training, they'll be better than most of the young blokes they're putting into uniform."

We stood side by side at the railing. I could smell the steamy smoke trapped in the blanket of mist above our heads, and when I looked down I could see the ocean twisting past the foot of the hull.

"Landfall tomorrow morning," I said. "Then we'll know what we're up against."

"Too true," said Mick. "Sorry about putting all that stuff onto you, Jack. Don't know what came over me. I have to say I'm never any good at being shut indoors. Do you remember what a dark little hole Williams's classroom was? It drove me barmy being shut in there and by the time we were let out, I was ready to do bloody murder."

"You're right there," I said, grinning. "And you're right about it being a dark sort of hole too. The windows in that place were right up next to the roof."

"It was like being shut in a bloody shoe box," Crossen said bitterly.

No one had told us much about the peninsula.

Fanshawe said, "I reckon they ain't doing no good or the bloody Army would have had them little bugle bands marching about and there'd have been bloody victory parades and no end of other polished button tripe." Generally we took no notice of Fanshawe's whining, but as our landing craft came out of the mist and we saw the beach, piled high with stores and bulked up with sand bags, we thought Fanshawe must have got it pretty near right.

"The enemy must still be up at the top of them cliffs," said Smith. "I'd have thought our lot would have pushed them a lot further back than that by now. They've been at it for over a month."

After that, nobody said anything for a good while. I looked up beyond the beach and saw the hills were deeply scarred from runoff. There were gullies and ravines and the tops were a clay-coloured yellow. It all looked pretty familiar. I'd walked and ridden over stuff like this all my life. It made me keen to get ashore. I hadn't been happy in the desert but this country looked like the sort of thing I could handle.

Just then there was a sort of a whumping noise and a bloke from Christchurch went straight down into the bottom of the boat. We looked at him in surprise. There was a hole in the sleeve of his jacket and almost immediately blood welled up and started soaking his sleeve.

"Jesus," said Smith, "we're being bloody sniped." He turned towards the bloke who'd been hit. "You all right mate?' he asked.

We all looked at the man. He'd gone white as a sheet and his voice sounded strange as if he were piping on a penny whistle.

"I've been hit," he said.

"Yeah," said Fanshawe, "You don't have to tell us that. We can see you've been bloody hit mate."

Benny raised both arms above his head and yelled, "Medic, medic." Then there was a volley of bullets and we all dived our heads down .

"What the bloody hell, Cooper. Do you want us all bloody killed?" said Smith.

"Yeah you bloody little waster," said Fanshawe. "If you do that again there won't be no call for a medic. It'll just be heave ho and over we all go to feed the fishes."

"Jack," said Crossen, pointing towards a patch of scrubby bushes on the hillside above the beach. "I reckon I can see the cheeky little bastard. See that flash of light up there, I bet that's the barrel of that bugger's rifle. He's about to take another pot at us, heads down." And sure enough a scatter of bullets plopped into the water beside the boat and one ricocheted off the gunwale. "Bugger's got the range but he's not that hot a shot," Crossen said. "You and me, Jack, we're better than that. I reckon we could take that bugger out," and he started unslinging his rifle.

"Are you bloody daft, Crossen?" said Smith. "The way this boat's pitching, you wouldn't have a shit show. Besides, how do you know that flash is that sniper. You could be taking out one of our blokes. You only have to look to see the whole frigging hillside's filled up with blokes and from what I can see most of them seem to be our lot."

"Main difference," said Crossen grinning," is that our blokes aren't trying to wipe us out."

Next minute the medic was beside us. "Make some space, mates," he snapped. Then he knelt by the Christchurch man, who was starting to yip a bit, now.

"Steady on son," the medic said. "This isn't too bad." Then he cut off the man's sleeve in two swift passes and our heads all swivelled to get a decko at the wound. My angle allowed me to see the actual bullet hole. It had drilled into the man's arm as neatly as dad used his brace and bit to drill a hole in a piece of wood. Blood was coming out through it at a fair old pace. The medic stripped the jacket material and tied it tightly above the wound and almost immediately the flow of blood halted.

"That's a nice neat wound, son," he said. "They'll probably be able to dig the bullet straight out on the beach and if there's no damage to the bone you'll be on the mend pretty well straight away."

Then the boat was grating on the bottom and we were in the shallows. The sun had started coming through the mist, and I looked into the water and saw stones and shells. But these weren't the only things lying on the seabed. There were drifts of bullets as well. There must have been hundreds of them. I looked up, suddenly aware that these bullets must have been fired at blokes coming ashore like us. Perhaps the others saw them too, because nobody was hanging around and we all slopped wet-booted up the beach to assemble in the vicinity of the sandbags. I looked back at the landing craft and saw that Benny was still there, standing in the water, arms upstretched, and that the wounded man was trying to scramble over the gunwale. A couple of navy scouts just picked him up and threw him overboard. There was an almighty splash and he and Benny disappeared together. Then Benny's head came up and he had hold of the other bloke's collar and was hauling him up through the water. He landed the bloke as a surge of frothy water ran up the beach. The poor bugger was completely sodden and coated in sand and there didn't seem to be much life left in him, but Benny wasn't moving. We saw him trying to get that bloke to sit up and take an interest, and then suddenly a couple of stretcher-bearers came from out of nowhere. They were crouched down and scuttling like a pair of sand crabs and I thought, they think they're going to get shot. I looked at their armbands. The red crosses looked obvious enough. We'd been told not to shoot at red crescent arm bands and their lot weren't meant to shoot at red crosses, neither. The stretcher-bearers crouched next to Benny's bloke. They had their act together because they rolled him onto the stretcher and scooped him up off the ground in short order and started back in that funny running style of theirs. They obviously knew what they were about, because just then there was a terrific roar and a rain of shrapnel came down not far from where we were standing. The impact of those pieces of shell drove up sand spouts and made the surface of the sea hiss.

"Jesus," said Smith. "Where the hell is Benny? A moment ago he was right there where all that lot came down."

We looked around expecting the worst but then Fanshawe said, "That little bugger leads a charmed life. He's high-tailed it off with his new stretcher-bearer mates." And we looked down the beach, and were just in time to see him disappear into a gap in the sandbag wall.

"Gone to get his Boy Scout badge," said Fanshawe ,sourly.

"Makes you think," said Smith. "We'd have been sausage meat if we'd been coming up that beach when that lot came down, that stuff was coming down thick as rain."

"Luck of the draw," said some fellow who'd been standing nearby. He drew on his cigarette. "You'll get used to it," he said. "You can't let yourself be worrying every minute of the day. If your number's up, your number's up and there's not a bloody lot you can do about it. Hear the stuff that's flying up there, now?"

We didn't have to listen especially hard. There was a terrific din going on, a crumping, whining, roaring noise.

"That's beyond that ridge, up at Walkers. It's wall to wall lead up there and you'd think there wouldn't be a living thing left standing, but you see everybody who can be is below ground-level and there's plenty of blokes been up there week in week out with not a scratch on them. The thing that kills us is when those damn commanders get it into their heads to send us out after them Ottomans. Then as like as not you'll stop a bullet."

I could see our sergeant coming down the beach.

"Look at that," I said to Crossen, "that bastard's got something to tell us. You can tell by the way he's walking."

"Waddling like a bloody mother duck," said Fanshaw.

We drew ourselves up in a crooked line and straightened our hats. I could see the man whom we'd been chatting to smirking. Right from the start we'd noticed he wasn't bothered about looking sharp and we couldn't have even picked what regiment he'd started out with because he was in shirtsleeves.

The sergeant stopped near me and Crossen and we pulled up as straight as we could and stared unflinchingly ahead.

"All right," he said. "You're all a bloody disgrace but seeing yous just swum ashore it'll do for now. I'm looking for volunteers."

Crossen and I stood even straighter.

"Major Chilton has asked for some Canterburys. Said outdoors boys were best for what he had in mind. You South Canterburys might just do at a pinch. Come from Chilton's neck of the woods don't you?"

His beady eyes flicked across our tent group. "Where's Cooper?" he said.

"Gone off with the stretcher bearers," said Smith.

"Good job, too," said the sergeant "I weren't about to pick him anyways. Crossen and Hunt fall out."

Then he gave us a last looking over. "All right," he said. "You'll do," and marched us down the beach to where a few other troopers were standing. I recognized Roper. He'd been a musterer up on the tops round Andersville and I'd met him one or two times at the Everton pub. Then Major Chilton appeared. I knew him by sight. Him and his family owned a run

down river from Andersville. It was funny boggy country and there were limestone overhangs with oddball drawings on them.

I looked at him. Officers always acted as if they were better than the troops. Chilton had the usual officer's clipped moustache. He looked very directly at us as the sergeant called out our names. Perhaps he recognized me, perhaps he didn't. His face was bright with wind burn, his eyes a cool blue. I'd seen those sorts of long-sighted eyes in high country blokes before. They belonged to the sort of blokes who thought nothing of climbing cliffs after a runaway beast or using their wits to come up with a tool that no one else had ever thought of before. They said that he had been a bit of a hero in the South African war. I thought he must have been as much of a kid as Crossen's brothers at the time, because he didn't look old like Stannard and Baldwin.

Chilton nodded to our sergeant. "Alright, Roake," he said, "the two men you've picked look right for the job." My eyes slid across to Roake. His face twitched slightly. Chilton hadn't chosen Roper, he'd picked me and Crossen. I saw Dad half in the shadow of the stable door as he led Sultan out, and heard him say,' "Do good, Jack. Do good." '

Chilton turned that long-sighted look on us. "Hang a blanket over the opening," he said, leading us to a nearby dugout. "It'll cut down the light and keep the flies out and then you men can get some sleep. Tonight we're going behind enemy lines. The objective is to find out the lie of the land and map out the Turkish positions. Your job is to provide me with some extra eyes and ears and some straight shooting if required." Then he walked off in the direction of the officers' dugout. We watched him go. His walk was as casual as if he'd just suggested a night out possum shooting.

"Fun and games, eh?" I said, and pulled my blanket from my pack. Crossen grinned at me, his teeth white in his dark stubbly face. Then we climbed down into the dugout like a pair of over-sized rabbits. Although we didn't do much talking, you can't force sleep, and, with two big blokes twisting about in the same small burrow, we didn't get much.

At some stage I must have dozed off, because I got some odd jerky views of Miss Tinkle Bells from the Wassir. For some reason me and Pierce were in the cow shed back home but what I was noticing most wasn't Miss Wassir's dark hairy piece but Pierce's cut-down trousers and I was just reaching out to give Pierce a slap when I felt a jolt like I'd just been dropped from a great height and opened my eyes very quickly. But I wasn't falling, I was firmly on the ground and, for a second or two, I couldn't think where the hell I was. Then I heard the noise of the guns and remembered that Crossen and I had crawled into some bloody little bolt-hole to get some shut eye. My heart was racing because of the jolt I'd received, and, then and there, it came to me that, if that dream had been absurd, then being in this place with all those blokes trying to kill me was even more crazy. I sat up. There was a

flat stale taste in my mouth. I could see Crossen had gone off somewhere. I brushed myself down and began to feel ashamed. Those thoughts were the sort Baldwin would have called defeatism. I saw him, standing under the oak tree outside the Mason's Lodge in Everton. That day had been a blinder and the shade of the tree had given the groper-slope of Baldwin's face a green tone. He'd been giving us a pep talk. All the usual stuff about keeping your kit maintained because taking pride was what gave a soldier self-respect. All of a sudden, he said, "Straight up though, war isn't about riding about in your best clobber, it's about killing people. To survive war you need a portion of luck but by far the biggest portion is what you've got going on inside your head. The moment you think you're done, you're pretty much a goner." We'd all nodded like flipping Mandarins.

I yawned. It was a good thing Baldwin had said that, because I thought I knew what he meant now. I straightened my back. I sure wasn't about to let those enemy bastards get me down.

I knelt up and pushed the blanket to one side. What struck me first was the sun. It had turned into a bloomin' flameball and the island of Imbros looked like a great lump of coke in a fire pit. If Esther had been here she'd have gone on about it being beautiful. According to Mum's last letter, Esther had gone into service. Poor old girl. There'd be no call to read books and think things like trees and skies looked beautiful in a job like that.

I could see Crossen sitting just to one side of the opening. His powerful shoulders were moving vigorously. First to the left, then to the right and I had to grin because I could see that all this effort was going into opening a flaming beef tin.

"Your bloody dinner getting away on you?" I said, and made a drumming noise with my fingers.

"Naw," he said, and he waved the opened tin at me. "Go on, have some," and dug out a chunk of meat and passed it to me on the flat his knife.

We sat shoulder to shoulder and ate. The taste of that meat was familiar, neither nice nor awful, and yet, sitting there, looking out at that island and the ships anchored just out of range of the Turkish guns, seemed to alter the taste for the better.

As the sun went down, the surrounding hills glowed as if the ground still held heat. Then Chilton appeared. Like all the officers now, he'd got rid of his brass and looked as earth-coloured as the rest of us.

"We need to get most of the way up there before the moon rises," he said, indicating a valley to the left of where we were sitting. "Take some water and some rations with you. We've got a busy night ahead."

He took us across to a rise in the ground and showed us how to keep our bodies as close to the earth as possible without actually crawling.

"Going up's the easy part," he said. "Coming down's more tricky."

We started moving out over the ground that led towards the near side of the valley.

"Honour the charge they made, honour the light brigade," Chilton said suddenly, and then he laughed.

Crossen and I looked at each another. It was the sort of stuff you expected from officers. They sometimes seemed to need to recite things they'd learnt out of some long-ago school-book.

I hadn't gone more than a few strides before Chilton stopped me.

"Re-organize the stuff in your pack, soldier," he said. "There's something in there banging around loose and a noise like that will give away our position." I felt the colour rise in my face. I hadn't thought of that when I'd packed my kit, but it was obvious now Chilton had pointed it out. I bent down to hide my embarrassment and as I stuffed my blanket between my water bottle and my tobacco tin, it suddenly came to me that I was on a raiding party going into the hills somewhere in Turkey. In some ways, it was easier to believe a Gyppo whore could be in an Andersville cowshed.

Once in the throat of the valley, we started climbing. My fingers became clever at finding holds in the clay cliff-side. I could smell the earth close to my face. Occasionally, we found tough little bushes that were well anchored and gave stable handholds, but the bruised leaves gave off a resinous smell and Chilton warned us against using them to support ourselves.

"A smell like that might be enough to warn an alert sentry," he said.

We moved steadily inland. Now the curve of a bluff rose up and cut out the moon altogether, and we could no longer see the water. No air was circulating within the enclosure of these bluffs and instantly the metallic stench of dead things became obvious. When I looked down I saw what I took to be ten or eleven blokes tumbled into the bottom of a ravine. I'd not seen a dead person before and it took me several glances to understand what I was seeing. It was the stillness of those blokes that somehow got to me. They looked like dressed up store dummies that had been dumped in a charnel pit. I remembered how one day up in the Amuri, I'd had a chance meeting with a bloke and we'd had a cup of tea together. He didn't see so many people and clearly was in no hurry to let me go. He built a fireplace up out of river stones. I can still see the joker's face. He had curly yellow hair and a few teeth missing.

"This here creek's got a bit of a story," he said, as we hunkered down and watched smoke go lifting up the valley. "Did yer know that this here creek's called Stinking Creek?" I shook my head and he pointed up at the bluff behind our backs. "Would you credit it? Some damn bloke ran a mob of sheep off the edge of that. Whole mob just kept coming and coming until all them sheep were piled up on top of them ones at the bottom. Nothing nobody could do

about it. They bloody suffocated. That darned drover must have been on the piss or something. No man in his right mind would do a thing like that."

He poured tea out of his billy and into my cup, and unrolled a twist of paper and shook in clumps of raw sugar. He was being generous. Out here, sugar wasn't so plentiful you could afford to throw dollops into another bloke's tea.Then he made heaping movements with his hands to show how the mouth of this creek had been piled high with dead sheep. "Them carcasses," he said, "were jammed up to just about where we're sitting. The story goes that farmer came down here and didn't have the heart to clear all them bodies away. A day or two later no one wanted the job. They say the stink of them animals was unbelievable."

I looked speculatively into my tea-cup. I knew where the water had come from. "How long ago?" I asked.

"Eighteen ninety-two, mate," he said, clapping a hand on my shoulder. Reckon the water's had a bit of time to clear since then."

"Come on, you men," said Chilton. "We're dropping behind. We need to achieve the head of the valley within the next twenty minutes." He nodded towards the ravine where the bodies were piled. "Machine gun," he said curtly.

We moved on. Chilton didn't allow us to use the goat tracks. "Leave those to the enemy," he said. We climbed steadily and came to a place that intersected with a track which curved out of sight round the contour of the hill. Chilton put his hand up and we stopped to listen. Our ears had become accustomed to the roar of the guns over at Walker's, and now we found we could hear an undercurrent of local sound, even quite soft sounds, especially if they had any sort of pattern. We stood on the path, heads up, listening like animals. I convinced myself I could hear the scuffle of footsteps, and obviously Mick thought the same because he brought up his rifle and trained it on the place where a person using the track would first appear. I climbed to about ten feet above the track and dropped to one knee. I knew I needed to be in a higher position if I was to get a chance at some good shots before I was seen. Chilton remained next to Crossen. He held up one finger. We waited. I wished I'd taken better care in positioning myself. My knees were awkwardly bent but I didn't dare change my stance in case the sound of it alerted the oncoming traveller.

We trained our eyes on that point in the pathway straining to get that first glimpse of what we were up against. I couldn't have been more surprised when a young boy came into view. I would have put him at about twelve or thirteen. He was loping along as if he had a lot of ground to cover. He was obviously not expecting company because his head was down and he came to within feet of Crossen's rifle barrel before he noticed us. When he saw Crossen's gun pointing at him, his eyes became as round and shiny as a pair of shillings. I relaxed my shoulders. This barefoot fellow didn't look like any sort of opposition. Nevertheless, I was

surprised when Chilton stepped out onto the path and knocked Crossen's rifle barrel down. The boy must have wondered what he'd struck because his eyes became even rounder. I thought Chilton must consider the boy harmless and had to admit that, at first, I'd thought the lad little more than a shepherd out on some errant of his own but, now he'd stopped running, I could see he wasn't as innocent as I'd first supposed because he was wearing an ammunition belt. The boy looked uncertainly up at us. From my angle of view, I wasn't able to pick up his expression, but supposed he was grateful because the Major had saved his life. I saw Chilton beckoning to him to come closer and the young fellow stepped hesitantly forward. I saw then that Chilton was fiddling in his pocket for something and I thought he must be ferreting out his chocolate ration. Next he had the kid in his arms and I thought giving the kid chocolate was one thing but coming over as the friendly uncle was going a bit far. In fact I felt that embarrassed about the turn events had taken, I looked away up to the ridgeline Chilton had been so keen on reaching. It seemed a bloody rum deal that he'd ticked us off for loitering and now he was treating a Turkish boy to cuddles.

I can't have looked away for too long. I'd been partly aware that the Turkish boy hadn't appreciated Chilton's cuddles either because I heard a kind of scuffling noise. Then I heard a slithering sound and Crossen's smothered coughing and looked back to the track and saw the boy lying on the ground. He looked delicately placed, his knees drawn up, his long pale toes arched as if he was about to spring away like a young hare.

"All right, Hunt," Chilton said, squinting up at me. "Get that fellow off the track and under cover and be quick about it. We're behind schedule."

I clambered down from my perch and crouched next to the boy. His face was the colour of a bruise and a bright red line circled his neck. I put my hands along the length of his back and began rolling him to the side of the track.

"Take the ammo," Chilton said brusquely. The boy came up off the ground like a bundle of rags, his arms and legs knocking against me as I worked to loosen the bandolier.

"Better," said Chilton. "Take him down to that sage brush and put a few branches over him." I noted that the Major had set Crossen to sweeping the track clean of drag marks.

I laid the boy just beneath the sage-brush and pulled some of the spiky branches down over him and scuffed up clay clods and sprinkled them across his face.

I could see Chilton and Crossen were already leaving. I paused momentarily, looking back. The boy had all but disappeared although I could still see one foot pointing down, the toes curved like claws. I told myself I could only see it because I knew it was there. Then I turned and clambered up after the other two.

No one said a thing until we reached the summit, and here, Chilton had us crawl over the rim inch by inch. It wasn't till he considered we were far enough back from the ridge line to

be inconspicuous that he sat down. Then he unslung his binoculars and scanned the flanks of the nearby hillsides. After a bit he drew a notebook from his pack and we heard the steady rasping of his pencil. Our job was to be his eyes and ears. Crossen and I took a sector each. I stared into the night, following the contour lines of ridges and watching the scrubby patch of sage and oaks for movement. We weren't allowed to smoke and as the night went on I got very twitchy from lack of tobacco. The racket across at Quinns and Walkers never let up for a moment, and I wondered what the hell they were shooting at. If all those jokers were underground there didn't seem to be a hell of a lot of purpose in keeping up that infernal barrage.

The major seemed to know his way around up here, and we moved to various vantage-points in the course of the evening. I'd have to say that though we were keyed up, the night passed quietly. All we heard were the noises of the countryside. At one point, I saw a family of fieldmice skirting a bush, running in that concentrated way as if they were on wheels, and I once heard the sudden trill of a bird startled out of sleep.

From Chilton's last vantage point we got a long view of the sea. I saw the dark shape of Imbros and the shadows of the fleet spread out on flat water. The moon was at its highest, and I could clearly see groups of enemy soldiers camped out on the hills to our left. I wondered how Chilton had got us up here unseen. I glanced at the Major. I could only think he must have been here the night before and plotted our route. Then he straightened from his paperwork and laid his drawing on the ground, and I glanced over. He had plotted a series of projections. It looked clever to me. The Major would have been sent away to school in Christchurch to learn that sort of stuff. That'd be where he learnt Honour the charge they made, Honour the Light Brigade.

I rubbed my chin, which was growing itchy with stubble. I wouldn't have wanted that sort of education. I wouldn't want the public responsibility of being an officer, being a landowner. There was too much expectation round the way those things should be done. I thought of riding the hills round Cheviot. They'd been good days. I'd been a musterer, a nobody, free to do whatever occurred to me. I watched Chilton pick up his drawing again. He leaned back and considered it for a moment, then his hands started flying back and forth across the page. Thin hands and small, compared to mine. I thought he'd probably been forced to play the piano. I turned away from Chilton and looked out beyond where we were stationed. Nothing moved. It was a windless night, although the iron-flat taint of blood came up from the closed tunnel of the valley below.

On the way down, we avoided the goat tracks again. Once Chilton motioned us, and we picked up the smell of cigarette smoke. Then we saw a man only a yard or two distant, lying

supported on an elbow looking down the valley. The beehive dome of his hat stood distinctly out from the cover of the brush. Chilton indicated that we should drop our bodies lower and I noticed that the gesture had been made with his service revolver.

Our major's timing was nothing if not exquisite, because we reached the mouth of the gully just as the horizon began to lighten. Perhaps the rise in the light made us more visible or perhaps we'd just come into someone's line of sight because bullets started thumping into the hillside just above our heads and we dived into the beginnings of a trench. Bullets were coming thick and fast and one pinged off Crossen's rifle barrel.

"Come on," said Chilton, "it's only a few more yards. Those bullets are probably courtesy of our smoking friend. I was tempted to take him out as soon as I saw him but that would have started up a shooting war, too far from home."

A few minutes later, we were back on the beach. I had to admire the fact that Chilton had landed us in pretty much the same place we'd started out from.

"Get some shut eye[AMERICANISM?] ," he said, adjusting the strap of his pack. "I'll find you again if I need you." And then he walked off down the beach towards the officer's dugout. Crossen and I looked for ours, but found it already occupied. We sat shoulder to shoulder and smoked, watching colour come back into the day.

A little while later, Roake came by with some letters. "So you're back?" he said gruffly, Then he stood around fiddling inside his mailbag for ages. Bur eventually he got pissed off with us for not telling him anything and tossed a letter down on the sand next to me. There was nothing for Crossen.

I turned my letter over and could see Esther's even hand writing on the envelope. Her writing had always been copybook perfect. Inside were a few lines telling me about her job at Highclere Station.

Such silver, she wrote. Fish knives and soup spoons and salt scuttles and sugar basins and tongs, all decorated in oak leaves and the sugar basin with acorns for handles. It is very decent silver but I have come to hate oak leaves because all them creases trap the polish and puts an extra half hour onto my job.

Madam has parties every few weeks. I'm told it is the season. One night we had Mr Massey at our table. Getting everything right took us girls extra time and for a few days we didn't get to bed much before eleven and that comes hard after a five thirty start. I was allowed to bring in the sweets and looked hard at Mr Massey because he had been the cause of all our labours but he disappointed me. He was little and old with a dull darkish moustache that looked the colour of silver tarnish.

Hope things are good for you Jack. There's so much talk about the war, I can't stop thinking of you and wishing you all the luck in the world..

There was a second sheet of paper folded into the first and, when I shook it free, I saw that Esther had sent me a money order for two shillings.

"Jesus, Mick," I said, "How about that? My sister's just sent me some money to spend. When we were kids she was telling tales on me to Mum, now she's gone and bloody sent me all her bloody savings."

"Nothing to spend it on here," said Mick kicking at the sand with the toe of his boot.

"You'd be right there, mate," I said, slipping Esther's postal note into my pack and glancing down the beach. About four hundred yards away I could see stretcher-bearers going in and out of a gap in the sandbags like worker bees entering and leaving the hive.

"By Christ," said Mick, "there must be at least twenty stretchers down there. Some poor buggers must have copped it. We should go down and talk to Benny and find out what's been going on."

I said, "I don't need Benny to tell me what's been happening. But what I do bloody need is some sleep. What if Chilton wants us to go up there again tonight?"

"He won't," said Crossen. "We were worse than a couple of kids."

"Well," I said, "all I know is I'm a damn sight more useful than I was this time yesterday."

"Well, that's bugger all use, then," said Mick, and started to shamble off down the beach towards the first aid station. Then I wriggled into a bit of a shade at the base of the sandbag wall and pulled my blanket over my head. I could hear people talking and shrapnel bursting, somewhere not too far away, but I didn't care. It was like what that fellow said, there was no use spending any time wondering about when your number would be up. I scooped sand and lay in the hollow I'd made. I'd seen working dogs do the same after a day suling cattle in the hills. I heard the drone of flies, could feel them settling but I was too far gone to care. Inside my head a tall space was growing like the loft ceiling in Killinchy's barn. They'd sent Pierce home. Esther's postscript said his papers had been returned stamped "unfit for active service." I felt myself sliding down into darkness, my eyes loose somewhere in my head. I put my hand out and felt hot gritty sand under my fingers. Then I saw that thread of nerves running through Pierce's cheek and Esther in the shadow of the fuchsia bush. She was looping string. I could feel it coming over my hands, stepping between our fingers and suddenly catching so the loops pulled tight. "Cat's cradle," she yodeled, and for a split second I saw the bruise at the point where Chilton had broken that Turkish boy's neck..

Synopses: Chapters Seven to Fourteen

Chapter 7

This chapter returns the reader to Sybil's world. Its theme is contrast. A free child, Addie, embraces their new location in Evesham. She doesn't seem to have brought the past forward with her, whereas Nettie sees only impoverishment in their new situation. Another contrast is set up between Sybil and Guinie: Sybil is weighed down by what she sees as her duty of care to Nettie and to her simple-minded sister, Addie: Guinie, on the other hand, is carefree, and doesn't burden herself with responsibility for maintaining relationships. She sees them as transitory and wants to get what enjoyment she can milk from things moment by moment. Guinie is sexually liberated, and sees kindness and cruelty as an innate part of sexual relationships. Sybil has repressed her sexual instincts and when she thinks of sex at all, it is as the inexplicable greedy behaviour of Wilfred and the pain she has suffered retrospectively. She takes little pleasure from kisses as they all seem insincere and out of any meaningful context.

Another contrast is the light enhancing beauty of the conservatory and the darkness of the family's rented rooms. Sybil is constantly drawn to the glasshouse. 'She opened her eyes and the glasshouse took her attention. It looked like a great vertical shaft of light, the sort that ought to have an angel trapped at its core'. On the other hand, she describes finding the upstairs flat as 'a series of dark, stale-smelling rooms'.

The chapter begins with the family arriving at their new lodgings in Evesham. Unfortunately Nettie's dissatisfaction with the new location is all pervasive. She feels the rooms are a peculiar form of punishment meted out by Emma and refuses any of the comforts Sybil offers. ' "Tea?" said Nettie, snatching her hand away. "I'm not some child to be cajoled out of my feelings."' Nettie's negativity causes Sybil to tap into her loss theme and she is constantly remembering the Salisbury garden and the last time she saw her dead brother, Terry. 'She wondered if the friends Terry had brought home in August had out lived him. If so, she'd like to talk to them. Not to ask anything embarrassing. Just to find out what they'd spoken about in those last few hours and what they'd eaten'.

Sybil writes to Guinie asking for help with her mother. Reading the letter she'd just written, she notes, 'She hadn't told Guinie much. She couldn't say her mother was so angry she refused to sleep. It sounded too close to madness'. Guinie arrives and Sybil observes that '[Guinie] had on a pert little beige hat that matched her beige coat and a big ginger fox-fur slung casually around her shoulders'. Immediately, the tempo changes. Guinie brings her vitality to the situation, teasing Sybil about behaving as if she were 'middle-aged'. She shows Sybil her boy friend, Miles', car and Sybil sees: 'two pairs of goggles [lying] tangled casually

together on the passenger's seat' and guesses Guinie has an intimate relationship with Miles. Unfortunately this reminds her of Wilfred's 'white knees and panting breaths.' Guinie mistakes Sybil's unhappy expression for envy and assures Sybil, that she too would soon find someone to fall in love with.

On the way to the flat, Guinie buys flowers and an alcoholic-based tonic for Nettie. She laughs off Sybil's objection to the alcohol and telling her the alcohol will make Nettie feel happier. Then Guinie tells Sybil that she is booked to go to New Zealand and Sybil feels shocked and resentful because Guinie is escaping any future responsibility for Nettie.

Nettie is wildly excited by Guinie's surprise visit but just as emphatically disappointed when she finds out Guinie is not even staying the night. She turns her chair to the wall and refuses to look at either of her daughters.

Sybil accompanies Guinie to Miles' car, and, because of the lateness of the hour, Guinie is concerned he will have left without her. The car is still there, however, and, a short while late, Miles emerges from a nearby pub. He is drunk and amorous and kisses Sybil and is annoyed when she pulls away. Sybil watches Guinie and Miles set out for London. Miles' kiss has opened up unwelcome thoughts about sex and she visualizes: 'Miles and Guinie in some hotel. Miles's big frame smothering Guinie with the roughness of his purpose [and sees] no kindness in such a connection'. This, in turn, triggers a memory of how, 'Wilfred had trodden her down. Forced her back as if he intended to break her open against the unyielding ground.' The flash-back is disturbing but as Sybil walks home, her upset feeling over Guinie and Miles are overcome because she realizes that looking after Nettie is her preferred choice because caring for her mother helps her to feel purposeful and safe in an uncertain world.

Chapter 8

Chapter Eight continues where Chapter Six left off . Mick Crossen returns from speaking with the stretcher-bearers and kicks Jack awake. He is in a distressed state but manages to tell Jack that their close mate, Smith, has lost most of his face in a shrapnel blast. His anger however, is directed at Benny Cooper because, when asked about Smith's chances, Benny response was not emotional as he had merely said, '"everyone's got the same chances, we're all going to die one day".'

Mick has taken further exception to Benny's comment ' "that the enemy wasn't the Turks so much as being frightened and living narrowly".' Jack, who knows Benny is a Quaker, is not surprised but upset in his own way that Smith has been hurt. He reflects that 'Smith was a nice sort of bloke. Could see another's point of view as easily as his own.' Later, Jack observes that his preconceptions about his friends have been over turned because he'd 'always thought Mick [was] a hard man and Benny, a mother's boy. But on the face of what

Crossen had just told him 'it was Benny who had been able to look right in Smithie's poor old injured face and say he'd be fine, whereas Crossen couldn't bear it'. Having taken Smith's injury to heart, Crossen swears vengeance on the Turks and begins sharpening his bayonet.

The next morning the Canterbury boys are deployed to the front line. As they come over an incline they are met by enemy fire and dive for cover and Jack reports that 'me, Crossen and Fanshawe lay together behind the same bloody bush. I put my hand out. I couldn't help wanting to touch Mick's meaty old Irish back and he turned and gave me an enormous grin. "Great, eh?' he said. "Best thing I ever done.''

The mates struggle forward to the relative security of a trench. From above, Jack notes that, 'the trench looked as packed as a sheep yard on dagging day and about as noisy'.

Once in the trench Jack sees dead men on the trench floor and Crossen can't stop crossing himself. They are teased immediately for being 'fresh off the boat' and Diggs passes out cigarettes and counsels them, 'to keep a cigarette in your mouth, otherwise things don't smell so good'.

Mick and Jack take turns at looking through a periscope and Jack is alarmed by the numbers of enemy troops massing outside the trench. Diggs reassures them, telling them that the invaders are generally kept in line by 'a few educated shots.'

Looking for work, Jack finds a machine gun crew short of a man and loads the cartridge belts for them. Then a sniper picks off one of the gun crew. Jack responds impulsively. He climbs out of the trench and sneaks in under the range of the marksman and beats him down with his rifle butt. An officer commends him and directs him back to fill in for the dead machine gunner. Through the gun sights, Jack sees Turkish supplies being brought forward and comments that, 'they [the Turks] looked as busy as ants on a sugar trail,' but a short while later admits to getting satisfaction from seeing 'those folks in that gully hopping about like flees.'

Some hours later, there is a break in the action and Jack lies on his back, rolling cigarettes after cigarette. As he rests, Jack becomes increasingly bothered by the cries of the wounded. He finds it disturbing that there is nothing to be done for them.

As night comes down, the sentries warn of another Turkish attack and Jack seizes his rifle and rushes to a periscope. At first he sees nothing in the blackness of the night but gradually he is able to see men sheltering in the rock strewn landscape. He focuses on the soft target of a bush and rakes it with fire but misses the fact that a Turkish soldier has just scaled the parapet and is about to bayonet him. The two men tussle desperately, and Jack saves himself by stepping back which throws his enemy off balance and causes him to pitch forward into the trench where Jack can shoot him. Then Jack hears squealing from further down the trench and is unnerved because it reminds him of 'the deep-down guttural screaming stuck pigs

make'. The silence after this frightens Jack even more because it causes him to believe that his mates have all been killed. In the morning Jack is relieved to see Fanshawe at the end of the trench and later finds Mick sleeping as peacefully as a baby.

A few weeks later, Fanshawe leaves the peninsula with a foot wound. Some say his wound is self inflicted but Jack and Mick don't believe this and accompany Fanshawe down the beach to the lighter. As emotional as always, Mick generously gives Fanshawe his tobacco ration. It is a great sacrifice but Fanshawe takes it for granted and stows it matter-of-factly in his kit. Next Mick hands him a brooch which he suggests Fanshawe give to Smith's girl in Timaru. Fanshawe is surprised because it's clear Mick thinks he's softening the way for Smith's return when, in actual fact, Smith has died. He tells Crossen this and it has a devastating effect. 'Mick stopped walking. He stood alone in the sand frowning after us as if we'd all suddenly become his worst enemies. "Silly bugger," Fanshawe said, glancing back. "He [Mick] can go out there and shoot up any amount of theirs but when it comes to one of ours he can't take it".'

Jack continues down the beach with Fanshawe. He can see that Fanshawe is in pain but notes he hasn't let go of the bag with Crossen's brooch in it. Curious, Jack asks what he intends to do with the brooch and Fanshawe says, 'give it to [Smith's girl] of course. I'll say it's from me. A one-footed man has to make his own luck."'

Jack thinks how typical this is of Fanshawe but leaves the beach concerned for Fanshawe, nevertheless, because he knows that waiting in a lighter just off the beach, 'wasn't the best of places because Turkish fire could be deadly once you were out of the cover of the cliffs.'

Chapter 9

This chapter addresses the death of Sybil's father and the family's decision to emigrate to New Zealand. It is a chapter about transitions and is both about physical and psychological journeying.

It opens with Sybil packing the family possessions into crates. The packing depresses Nettie, who is reluctant to see treasured possessions disappear from view and says sadly, "soon nothing of us will be left in England." Sybil consoles her, saying that going to New Zealand will bring the family together and Nettie agrees.

That afternoon Sybil uses shopping as a pretext for taking a last walk in the lanes around Evesham. Coming out of the house with her shopping basket, she glances across at the glass-house and it reminds her of the time when her father came home and 'insisted in living in the glass-house' likening it to 'a glass tent' because he liked 'the idea of seeing summer skies through the ceiling.' Sybil recalls how hard she and Addie had worked to make the place a comfortable home for her father but that Nettie had 'remained upstairs, tight-lipped.'

The glasshouse is painful for Sybil now because it is the place she associates with images of her father's death. She tries to console herself with the thought that they will be on their way to New Zealand in only a few days but this only increases her desire to walk in her beloved English countryside one last time. Later, Sybil lies down in the shade of a hedge and shuts her eyes and is sad because, 'leaving these trees and these lane, felt graceless' and as 'a watery kaleidoscope built beneath her lids' she wonders why she should have so much attachment to trees? 'They weren't people, just water pumps tapping the earth's juice, opening their leaves to the sun's light; actions which compared to those of people seemed exemplary, blameless. Her father said it was free will which made people complex. "I choose, therefore I am."'

Discomforted by her melancholy thoughts, Sybil leaves the lane and goes home to make her mother's tea. She takes comfort from the fact that 'placing a tray on her mother's chair-side table felt like affection.'

Surprisingly, in the last few weeks, Nettie has been cheerful about emigrating, and Sybil suspects the brochure from the shipping line has whetted Nettie's appetite and that her mother is looking forward to being waited on 'hand and foot'.

Coming round the side of the house, Sybil sees the glass house and hating what seems like its smugness, throws a stone. She watches the stone 'enter the glasshouse like a ferret entering a rabbit hole, and this destructive act gives her cause for satisfaction.

They sail from Southampton in the pouring rain. Sybil pauses halfway up the gangplank and takes a last look at England and sees 'the smudgy green hills,' and feels as if her nerves were like a piece of cut electrical cabling.

Once in their cabin, Nettie orders tea. A perfect platter of cucumber sandwiches arrives and Nettie comments that 'cucumber sandwiches are such a very English thing,' and this causes the family to be aware that the screws were already turning and to recognize that the ties with their mother country have been cut.

To Sybil's surprise, she has been allocated a separate cabin. It feels liberating to be traveling alone and she looks in the mirror and says her name over and over. As she moves away from the mirror, she hears, 'a continuous buzz like bees swarming, as if all the people behind the closed walls of the single cabins were communicating their barely expressed desires.'

A few days later Nettie receives an invitation to dine at the captain's table. She takes it as a sign that that the captain has recognized her class and quality but Addie unexpectedly points out that everyone invited for that night have names beginning with c. Nettie discounts this assertion and spends hours preparing for the occasion.

On the night of the dinner, Addie has been excluded but, when challenged, by Sybil Nettie refuses to justify it. Soon, Sybil and Nettie are seated at the captain's table and it pleases Sybil to see Nettie has been placed right next to the captain. However, she feels patronized when an officer pushes her seat in for her and the situation is only redeemed when she recalls Nettie's expectation of 'being waited on hand and foot,' and smiles. After the officer has gone, Sybil is surprised to find that she can still recall the details of his face.

Looking round, Sybil takes stock of the scene. She sees the shimmer of wine glasses and the sparkle of the passengers' jewels and wonders 'what these people wanted? Courting each other with little burning lights like insects whose only imperative was to spend themselves utterly in the moment.' She sees her mother looking unusually animated and wonders whether Nettie has broken her cardinal rule and is drinking alcohol. However, when she looks back at her own place she notices she has drunken an entire glass of wine without noticing and worries that she might start behaving like her father. This causes her to feels disloyal to her father's memory and she realizes how much she still misses him.

Coming out of her reverie, Sybil notices that the officer who has placed her at the table has come to sit next to her. He introduces himself as Malcolm Ansley and when the band strikes up offers to dance with her.

Affected by the wine and the glamour of the occasion, Sybil accepts Malcolm's offer to dance and finds herself captivated by 'the plangent sound of the music, the brilliant lighting above the dance floor and the contrasting backdrop of the night.'

Chapter 10

In this chapter Jack leaves the Middle East to return to New Zealand. He has misgivings. It seems a retrograde step to be going back to Andersville and he fears being constrained in a domestic regime run by women. He is not alone in his feelings. Mick says going back to New Zealand might feel 'too tame' and he would have to get away from the towns and into the hills.

On board 'The Malta', Jack observes Douglas and Diggs. Douglas is young and handsome and fancies his chances with women but Diggs doesn't have a manly physique and wears thick glasses and is suspected of being queer. Diggs is picked on but when a pugilistic boxer punches Diggs glasses into his eyes, Jack surprises himself by defending Diggs. He defeats the boxer not because he is bigger but because he has the stronger killer instinct. Later, when he has time to reflect on the fight, he worries how easily he could kill if someone annoyed him sufficiently. He realizes he must especially guard his anger against his father.

When his ship arrives in Wellington, Jack is disconcerted because he has always thought of New Zealand as 'a man's country' and the wharf is crowded with women and the look and sound of them feels very alien. Once on land he a makes a bee-line for the train but can't avoid some contact with women whom he sees as 'skipping all over the place' and 'all those burbling conversations and sudden changes of direction [make Jack] think of chickens going after a scatter of grain.'

Discharged from the army, Jack is on his way down to the wharf to catch the ferry to the South Island when he is over-taken by a man on a motorbike and is amazed to finds that man is Diggs. Virtually blinded from the boxer's mean punch, Diggs nevertheless rides a motorbike with confidence and delivers Jack to the wharf at breakneck speed. He then rides hurriedly off and Jack suspects the bike is stolen and, for a moment, is envious, 'wondering where [Diggs] would be when the petrol ran out' and that dicing the future in this way 'was as good as throwing a dart in the map.'

On board the inter-island ferry, Jacks stays on deck. As the light fades a girl comes up to him. She is jiggling a baby on her hips and, after a desultory conversation, propositions Jack. Jack, who is half tempted, is annoyed with her and himself as well. He felt 'the sweat crawl down [his] spine. There'd been whores in Egypt, but I'd always thought of New Zealand as a place of mothers and sisters.' He sends the girl away but can't help being a little sorry for her and thinks that, if his sister, Esther, had been present, things would have been better resolved. He thinks how staunch Esther has been writing to him all through the war and how it is her letters which have kept him in touch with news of the family and that's why he knows Pierce has been invalided out from the Western front. He then worries that George might have already given the farm to Pierce in his absence. In many ways, Jack dreads renewing his relationship with his father. He fears how he will respond to George's ignorance and doesn't know how he will explain the ignoble way that Sultan died.

In the morning the ferry reaches Lyttelton and when Jack sees 'the houses set out as regular as tombstones,' he feels some bitterness that these people have lived in safety, narrowly ignorant of the world's more brutal truths.

Still feeling out of tune with what he sees about peace-time New Zealand, he comes down the gangplank shy of how he might find Esther. He catches sight of her and she is wearing a 'pale coat and a hat that curled back like a sea shell.' He feels conflicting emotions and more so when she announces she is engaged.

Esther gets him a window seat on the train but the confinement of the carriage and Esther's closeness make Jack perspire. He looks across at Esther and 'the sight of her narrow body [makes him] feel peculiar.' Then he thinks of the sex he had in the Wazzir and 'the thought of being shut inside a woman [makes Jack] sweat even harder.'

On the train trip Esther tells Jack that George has sold the farm and that George and Amy now live in Timaru. This explodes Jack's cherished notion of coming 'home' to land in the Rangitata and all his angry feelings towards his father come to the surface. Esther tries to placate him but Jack turns his anger on her and gets satisfaction from seeing her cowed. After failing to mollify Jack, Esther explains her parents' reasons. Jack, however, is not satisfied and almost abandons the journey home when the train stops at Ashburton, but, somehow, Esther persuades Jack to complete the journey.

As the train stops, Jack feels shy again. He feels the gulf between his experience and that of his parents' and asks Esther what he should say to them. Esther is bemused. She doesn't understand Jack's problem but gently steers him off the train and onto the platform where Jack's mother engulfs him in her arms. He tries to fend her off but she will not let go and it is the glimpse he gets of his father shifting his feet and whistling tunelessly that redeems the moment. Jack observes that George feels as awkward about the meeting as Jack does and Jack observes, 'I thought it probably wasn't so bad to see my old man again' and that 'I might manage to live with the sale of the farm.'

That evening, Jack's mother sends him into the kitchen garden to pick rhubarb and he lies down in the grass of the backyard and sees the sea through a gap in the hedge and feels that at last he had come 'home' and would be able to sleep in a way that make up for all the times he hasn't slept since he'd been away.

Chapter 11

This chapter takes up where chapter nine leaves off and returns the reader to Sybil's cabin where she is assessing the experience of dancing with Malcolm. She has 'a faint mirage of shivery silvered shapes, of Vanessa's icy outline and the stack of Malcolm's hair.' Although she feels these visions are fantastical she hears the 'the sluicing of the ocean beyond the ship' and is aware that different things are bound to happen when you are in 'no country at all.'

Next morning promenading on deck, she hears noise from a swimming pool and is joined by Addie who is dressed in a sailor suit. Sybil winces at the inappropriateness of this. The girls arrive on the pool deck just as Vanessa emerges from the changing sheds. Addie is enthralled by Vanessa's glamour, as is Tim Hindesmith, who ends up in the pool fully dressed for his pains. Although, not admitting it, Sybil is intrigued by Vanessa's flirting and the freedom of choice she exhibits. She nevertheless, declines Vanessa's offer to join her in the water. Addie, on the hand, takes it up and Sybil is left to watch and be embarrassed by Addie's uninhibited behaviour.

Once out of the water, Vanessa invites Sybil for drinks that evening in her cabin. Sybil is non-committal believing that it would not be something she would feel comfortable doing.

Addie, however, is delighted to accept Vanessa's invitation to try on some of her clothes and even more excited when Vanessa gives her a canary-yellow shift and matching headscarf.

Meanwhile Nettie is disappointed that the reality of shipboard life doesn't match with the brochure she had so much admired. She has fallen foul of the cabin staff for being too demanding and is constantly complaining that the staff are deliberately being disobliging.

That night Sybil puts thoughts of partying in Vanessa's cabin out of her head and goes to the family cabin to settle Nettie and Addie for the night. After Nettie has taken her tonic and is safely asleep, Addie begs Sybil to let her wear the canary yellow dress that Vanessa has given her. Sybil agrees on condition she does so out of Nettie's sight. Thrilled with her sister's permission, Addie kisses Sybil passionately. Sybil is discomforted by Addie's ardour, feeling such passion is inappropriate between sisters.

Leaving the family cabin for her own Sybil encounters the party-goers 'alighting like butterflies' outside Vanessa's door. She hurries on and only feels safe behind the closed door of her own cabin. Her peace is short-lived because a moment later she has Malcolm knocking on her door and insisting she come to Vanessa's party. Sybil had nothing fashionable to wear and resorts to the black silk dress she wore at her father's funeral. It feels odd and inappropriate but she has no time to review the choice and goes with Malcolm to the party where she' 'relaxes into his arms caught up in the lazy envelope of gramophone music'.

Later Malcolm takes her on deck where she is charmed by his comprehensive knowledge of the stars. She tells herself she knows the risk but is a self-possessed woman now and no longer the ignorant girl that went into the field with Wilfred. Malcolm kisses Sybil but becomes inexplicably hesitant and quickly returns her to her cabin. He tells her nothing is wrong but Sybil is left feeling bitter and lonely. The feeling persists over the next few days and Sybil is unhappy that on-one has chosen to become her special friend.

A week later the ship's company participate in a 'Crossing the Line' ceremony. Dignified people such as Lady Carmichael consent to being ducked and even the captain is wearing fish-net stockings. After the ceremony a tea dance is arranged and Sybil is claimed by the odious Tim Hindesmith only to be inexplicably rescued by Malcolm. She is puzzled by Malcolm's sudden re-appearance but does not question his change of heart and the pair go to a recess and kiss, both determined that, this time, nothing will get in the way of their mutual desire. Sybil notes that 'there were no stars this time' and 'that she was a day-time person making a day-time decision.'

The ship leaves the tropics and as they approach New Zealand, the skies darken. Nettie becomes fretful and Malcolm's feelings once more seem to be cooling. Sybil believes that she

must be responsible for this in some way and perceives that the fault must lie in her body. After all her mother has always told her is too tall and ungainly for a woman.

The day before landfall, Vanessa comes unexpectedly to Sybil's cabin. She has significant news. She says Malcolm is married but has inadvertently fallen in love with Sybil and doesn't know what he should do about it. She advises Sybil to declare her feelings to Malcolm so they can work together on resolving the problem. Sybil however is horrified and takes a hard line and condemns Malcolm out of hand for what she perceives is his treachery.

The second thing Vanessa has to say is even more of a bombshell for Sybil. It appears that Addie has been having regular sex with one of the sailors. Vanessa advises Sybil to get Addie to a doctor once they are ashore so she can be tested for sexual diseases. Sybil is devastated and says she hasn't any idea how she will cope with any of this. Vanessa offers help, suggesting that all three of them go to the doctor for a check up so that Addie doesn't think she is being singled out. Belatedly, Sybil realizes that Vanessa is and has been the true friend she has been looking for and the two women embrace whole-heartedly.

When the ship docks in Auckland, Nettie sees little to like about New Zealand. She perceives that the houses are no better than shanties. However, determined to send a jaunty photograph of the family back to Emma she calls over a photographer and is annoyed when Malcolm appears. Her suspicions are further aroused when Malcolm gives Sybil a parcel but eventually everyone is posed to Nettie's satisfaction and the chapter closes with the flash of a photographer's bulb.

Chapter 12

Back in Timaru, Jack is trying to adjust to civilian life. He finds his parents' bickering unattractive and suspects he should have high-tailed it like Diggs. He concedes he was too tired to think of anything but rest when he first got to Timaru and that his mother encouraged him to stay in his room for days on end and that this had the same effect on him as 'buttering a cat's paws'.

The thing that keeps Jack most content in the Timaru environs is his motor bike The bike enables him to ride out into the countryside after work and in the weekends. On one occasion he goes back to River Terrace Road and is disappointed by the state of the old farm. He sees that no improvements have been made and compares this with what he would have done if the property had been his.

Further up the road he comes to a stop in the shade of Benny Cooper's hedge but is disinclined to go in because he has heard about Benny's injured face and doesn't want to have to see it. He is partly angry with Benny because, as a stretcher bearer, Benny has put himself unnecessarily in harm's way. He rides away without seeing his old friend and, after a long

hard spin on his bike, decides on having a cup of tea at a country store. There he encounters Violet and is predisposed to like her because the incidental turn of her head subliminally reminds him of a girl he once saw in a vineyard in Palestine.

Jack's relationship with his father has always been difficult, but is now exacerbated because of Jack's resentment over the sale of the farm. On the other hand, he has an affectionate relationship with his mother, who understands his disappointment over the sale of the Rangitata land, and is the main mover behind Jack application for rehab- land.

Mid-way through 1920 Jack succeeds in getting balloted land in the foothills beyond Timaru. He immediately throws in his job at the railway workshops and he and his mother ride into the hills intent on walking the new territory. They are both delighted with the grazing potential and have an agreeable picnic in a sheltered river valley. The only accommodation on the farm is a dilapidated whare and, seeking to broker peace in the family, Jack's mother suggests they get George and Pierce and the Hunt cousins to rebuild the place. She intimates that it is a Hunt family tradition as this is the way the Rangitata house was built. Jack is amazed by the possibility of this initiative but agrees it is a good idea. In the meantime he sets himself up in a tent but is soon rained out and returns to Timaru to get his gear dried out.

When in Timaru, he hears talk about people getting shot at on the tracks up Mt Anders. His mother says if it goes on much longer, the Troopers will have to be sent in. Jack suspects the renegade maybe 'Mick gone bush' and resolves to go up there and sort it out himself. Naturally, his mother is unhappy with the idea and warns him that 'whoever is up there isn't a nice person' and Jack assures her that, if that is the case, he's not a nice person either. Amy is offended by the suggestion but consents to pack him provisions and insists he take his father's rifle.

Jack hires a horse and, approaching Mt Anders, recalls how Baldwin had ambushed the boy Territorials in the valley at the base of the mountain. He then rides up through the bush and makes camp before nightfall in a rock shelter. He cooks food and climbs into his tent and has just settled when hears his horse whinnying and the next moment a bullet wings the top of his tent. He challenges the man poking his rifle out of the tent and his assailant retaliates by untying his horse and sending it down the mountain and then warns him to be gone by morning. The attacker rides off leaving Jack with two problems to solve. His father's rifle is as 'bent as a dog's hind leg', he no longer has a horse and the man is returning in the morning and will expect to see him gone. Rather than being scared, Jack feels stimulated by the situation. He finds he is all too ready to play at war again. His strategy is to leave the tent up to draw the attacker and hide behind the rock shelter. Jack sees that this gives him two

options. He can ascertain whether the man is Mick and call out or he can have the advantage of getting in the first shot.

Unfortunately when the man appears, Jack cannot identify him because although he is wearing a service greatcoat he is wearing a bandanna like a highway man. Jack is ready for any eventuality and watches the man intently. Strangely, the man appears off guard and strolls casually about Jack's camp and eventually saunters up to the tent and goes inside. Jack can hear him talking to himself. Then he hears the words of 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' and Jack knows his hunch is right and that the person in the tent is indeed Mick Crossen. He calls out but when Mick emerges from the tent, Jack sees he is terribly altered. He has lost condition and finds it hard to remember who Jack is. Jack brews up tea and Mick eventually, starts to talk. He tells Jack he has no use for people and just seeing them makes him angry. Jack suggests he should travel further into the high country where he won't have to see people. Both know there are shepherds huts 'out the back of beyond'. Jack cautions that the winters up there will be difficult in winter but Mick says he'll take his chances. They share a cigarette and part company and Jack is left to walk back to Andersville.

In the months before winter, the family gather on Jack's land and start re- building the whare. It is as cathartic as Jack's mother had hoped. The family work together, swim in the river and eat the bread and scones Amy bakes in the camp oven .As the building progresses Jack begins courting Violet. He cannot see her often because distance and time prevent it but he begins to appreciate her no nonsense character and for the first time in his post- war life feels optimistic about the future.

Jack and Violet are married in a country church in the spring of 1921 and Jack focuses on his marriage vows, saying them loudly, hoping that this stands for conviction. He still cannot quite believe in the certainty they imply but is keen to act in good faith. The chapter closes with Jack and Violet standing on the veranda of their newly built house looking out across the fertile plains to the twinkle of the lights of Timaru and beyond that to the curve of Caroline Bay.

Chapter 13

This chapter resumes Sybil's story as she steps ashore in New Zealand. She, Vanessa and Addie visit a doctor ostensibly to check out Addie's sexual health. The doctor's careless and suggestive handling taps into Sybil's repressed memories of Wilfred. Vanessa, who is more worldly soon calls a halt to the doctor's fumblings and takes the girls downtown for tea and cakes. Sybil recognizes the ceremonial aspects of the occasion and, knowing they are about to part, becomes painfully aware that her innate snobbishness had precluded her from capitalizing on Vanessa friendship during the course of the voyage. For, perhaps, the first

time in her life she appreciates that friendship can't be preconceived and is a transactional thing.

The Courage family travel to Christchurch. Nettie is upset that they must live in a wooden house. Sybil, on the other hand, is delighted with the garden because the mature trees in it remind her of their Salisbury garden.

Insecure in her new environment, Nettie becomes a domestic martinet making endless lists of chores which she delegates to Sybil. Sybil resorts to hiding the lists from Nettie and, whenever possible, escaping into the garden. She identifies a hiding place under the dome of a weeping pine. It is a sort of substitute glasshouse and, from inside the pine, Sybil is able to think her own thoughts and watch the house, unseen.

One day, Addie passes by Sybil's hiding place. She goes out into the street, and Sybil is both curious and miffed because Addie is not only oddly dressed but has borrowed Sybil's only pair of high-heeled shoes. She goes to the gate to remonstrate and sees that Addie is meeting a man.

Sybil becomes concerned when Addie is gone all day. Fortunately Nettie doesn't notice Addie's absence at lunch because she seems to have become obsessed with unpicking a treasured piece of heirloom needlework. Sybil soon becomes concerned because there is no way of reasoning with her mother who doesn't seem to recognize how destructive she is being.

When Addie does not return for dinner, Sybil goes out to look for her. She finds Addie and her man friend making love in her secret place under the fir tree. The man catches her peering at them and storms into the house intent on packing Addie's things and taking her away. He tells Sybil that Addie isn't a child but the woman whom he thinks of as his wife.

Addie's removal from the house wakes Nettie who appears at her bedroom door distraught. She seems to have no understanding of the situation and once the couple leave, Sybil is left trying to console and placate her agitated mother.

Over the next few months, Nettie's dementia becomes more than Sybil can handle but she is nevertheless devastated when her mother must be institutionalized. When Nettie dies, Guinie, May and Sybil gather at the cemetery for the funeral. Sybil hopes Addie will be there so she can reassure herself that her sister is safe and well, but Addie does not come to the funeral.

After they leave the cemetery, Guinie walks on the beach with Sybil. She tells Sybil, it is time she has a life of her own and suggests she take employment as a governess with a family Guinie knows who live near the Rangitata river.

Sybil takes the position and starts on a high country station with the Atkins family. This complete break with the past, causes Sybil to reassess the death of her father, the disaster of Wilfred and the misunderstood affair with Malcolm.

One day, Mrs Atkins, sends her on a shopping errant and, in Timaru, she is introduced into Jack's world, meeting miserly storekeeper, Fanshawe and Jack's brother, Pierce. Pierce recognizes her and reminds her of the family picnic he came on in 1916.

On another occasion Sybil is tasked to buy fresh produce from Benny Cooper's market garden. Here she comes to see that Benny is perfectly reconciled to the present even though he must permanently wear the scars of the past in his war-damaged face.

On a subsequent visit to the store, Pierce petitions the Atkins's chauffeur to take him up to Jack's farm because it seems his brother, has run amok with a gun after the sudden death of his wife.

This incident propels Sybil into Jack's life. She temporarily takes charge of Jack's orphaned son and instantly empathesizes with the confused child and subliminally sees a caretaker role for herself again in the context of Jack's small boy. It is clear that accommodations must occur if two such disparate people are ever going to negotiate some sort of live-in relationship together.

Chapter 14

Sybil has become engaged to Jack and daringly agrees to spend some days with him in a bach at a remote beach. This chapter is designed to run Jack and Sybil's perceptions in tandem which enables the reader to ascertain how the misconceptions between them arise. Their different expectations for the holiday collide from the offset. Sybil has expected to come to a pretty cottage surrounded by English trees and has brought a bathing costume imagining that the beach will be good for swimming. In actuality the bach is a plank hut perched on a cliff above a shingle beach beyond which is raging surf. Jack is disgruntled by Sybil's disappointment. He goes off fishing without her. Sybil watches him slide down a shingle scree to the beach and sits on the edge of the cliff above, overcome by vertigo. In an extreme act of will she forces herself down the cliff after Jack. As she gathers momentum she realizes she is completely out of control and Jack has to knock her down to prevent her from toppling into the sea below. He realizes how reflexive hitting her is, a vestige of the fast reaction has needed to defend the margins of trenches in the past. Shaken by these flash-backs, he turns his attention back to fishing, hoping Sybil will believe her fall resulted from her own lack of control and not from his instinctive reaction to hit out.

This incident provides a critical pause in which each character has reason to believe their relationship is doomed. To break the tension, Jack shows Sybil the path up the cliff. Sybil

climbs resentfully back up to the bach, recognizing that if Jack had shown her the path in the first place there would have been no need to put herself in danger by coming down the cliff face. At the hut she cuts bread and opens a can of sardines and her sense of security reasserts itself. She finds herself content to be making food for someone other than herself.

Unfortunately, when Jack comes up from the beach, he sees Sybil at the door and half hates her for not being Violet. He declines the lunch she has made and getting into his car, drives off without explanation. At first Sybil is hurt and sits alone eating sardines straight from the can but, after a while, finds the ambience of austere hut strangely liberating. Enjoying the luxury of the moment in this alien place she decides to walk along the beach. The hut is soon out of sight. Later she finds shade under a thorn bush and sits down. The bound and armoured bush reminds her of barbed wire entanglements and she is back to thinking about Wilfred. What surprises her is the fact that she no longer sees herself as a passive victim but feels angry about the peculiar set of circumstances that caused it to happen. For a moment she transfers this anger across to her current situation and tells herself 'it would give her a measure of satisfaction to say good bye to Jack.' It is a healthy sign which shows Sybil is no longer a victim but sees she has negotiating power.

As the afternoon turns towards evening, Sybil's mood softens and she picks grass heads which she visualizes putting in the window alcove of the hut and thinks about what she will make for Jack's tea. In this moment, she catches herself in the act of making 'home' again and recognizes this is what she wants.

Meanwhile, Jack is exploring his own feelings and thoughts. He is ashamed of hitting Sybil and blames it on the reflexes and subliminal images he still has of the war. He also starts addressing the idea that Sybil is not Violet's replacement and faces the fact that he and Sybil are ill matched in so many ways. He sits alone in his car and sees his father's mean face in the car mirror and half drowsing in the heat, dreams again of the Rangitata farm. On waking, he visualizes Sybil being awkward on the beach, looking like 'an ant carrying a pea' and is strangely moved. He understands that even though she is out of her element she is still trying to make it work. He drives to the river out-take and catches fish for their tea.

In Jack's absence, Sybil has set the table and Jack is moved to see the two laid out plates. In his current mood, this is enough to suggest that they can at least be companionable. Jack then suggests a cook up on the beach and though it is a change of plan, Sybil agrees to it.

On the beach, Sybil watches Jack's competence. She admires the economic way he cuts wood, fillets and cooks the fish. They have a silly tussle over the salt and Sybil ends up burning her hand in the fire. Again she is comforted by Jack's actions. He does not fuss over her injury but produces ointment which he puts on the burn and then bandages it so she can no longer see the damage. She kisses him in gratitude and allows herself to 'taste the salt in

the warm wetness of his mouth [and allow] sand to slide between her legs' and knows then that, 'it was the beginning of summer and [that] they would sleep here on the beach, tonight.'