

PREPARING A LABYRINTH:

WRITING THE SELF IN THE WORLD

Volume 2: The idea of gravity

by Jen Webb

for degree of Doctor of Creative Arts (Writing)

2008

## *Table of Contents: The Idea of Gravity*

### **Beginning**

|            |    |
|------------|----|
| Chapter 1  | 1  |
| Chapter 2  | 7  |
| Chapter 3  | 11 |
| Chapter 4  | 19 |
| Chapter 5  | 24 |
| Chapter 6  | 30 |
| Chapter 7  | 37 |
| Chapter 8  | 46 |
| Chapter 9  | 51 |
| Chapter 10 | 58 |
| Chapter 11 | 65 |

### **Middle**

|            |     |
|------------|-----|
| Chapter 1  | 76  |
| Chapter 2  | 78  |
| Chapter 3  | 85  |
| Chapter 4  | 94  |
| Chapter 5  | 97  |
| Chapter 6  | 102 |
| Chapter 7  | 111 |
| Chapter 8  | 119 |
| Chapter 9  | 124 |
| Chapter 10 | 128 |
| Chapter 11 | 134 |
| Chapter 12 | 139 |

### **Ending**

|           |     |
|-----------|-----|
| Chapter 1 | 143 |
| Chapter 2 | 147 |
| Chapter 3 | 157 |
| Chapter 4 | 162 |
| Chapter 5 | 169 |
| Chapter 6 | 176 |
| Chapter 7 | 182 |
| Chapter 8 | 188 |

# The idea of gravity

Once upon a time a valiant fellow had the idea that men were drowned in water only because they were possessed with the idea of gravity. If they were to knock this notion out of their heads, say by stating it to be a superstition, a religious concept, they would be sublimely proof against any danger from water.

(Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*)

## Beginning

### 1

Where do you start?

At the beginning. You start with what you had on hand at the beginning; then go on and add what came in during the year; and subtract whatever was spent. That gives you a closing figure. Now you've calculated the ending. Compare it with what is actually on hand, and it should balance perfectly.

That's step one. You've traced the cash flow. Next, step two: where did the cash come from, where did it go? Can you find the receipts and invoices, can you identify the objects bought, the people hired? Can you substantiate every item? That's what the textbooks say to do. Calculate the odds and ends, make the adjustments, sort out the amounts receivable, amounts payable, depreciation et cetera et cetera. Add in or subtract, whichever seems right. And there you have it, that year's net surplus or, if the client has had a bad run, that year's net loss. Profits, losses; all quite easily calculated.

Now it's just the balance sheet, and you'll be done. Weigh everything, and weight it; reckon the worth of last year and all that everyone worked on, or worked through. Assets, liabilities, equity. Add it all up. Get everything in balance. You know it can be done. Figure it out, even it out, and for this year at least, you'll have found the perfect ending.

You start at the beginning, at *It was once upon a time*. From there, the only real starting point, it's up to you to sort out the middle, to put in order the parts that exist only because of what sandwiches them: the beginning and the end. 'You invested how much in those shares?' 'You sold what properties?' 'How much on bad debts?' Sort it all out, calculate, confirm. When you're finished, when you've reached the *happily ever after*, then you sign off on it, send it up to your boss, and call it good.

Alice's Rule, they called it at business school. Start at the beginning, go on till you reach the end, and then stop. You always know when you've come to the end because that's when everything stops. The statements are balanced; the housemaid marries her prince; they bury

the king. There's always a happily ever after. But after the ever after, what next? Then it's the next year, and the same story runs through its paces all over again.

They learned that in business school too: this year's *The End* is next year's *It was once upon a time*. Beginnings and endings are what they are only because someone drew a line through the story at a certain point and said *The End*, when in fact as everyone knows it's all just middle, all just *And then, and then, and then*.

It's accountants who draw that line, knowing that it's arbitrary; it's accountants who know that there's no real difference between the ending and what comes next. You laugh; you say, *accountants?* Well, why not? Why should lawyers and painters and doctors get all the good roles? Accountants are the perfect storytellers because they refuse to make moral judgments. They don't care what you get up to during the middle parts, just as long as you keep the receipts; just as long as you tell them enough so that they can make up the books. Your expenditure on cocaine, hookers, subscriptions to *Time* magazine, petrol bills; they don't judge. As long as it can be fitted into the legend of this year's accounts, as long as you give them the beginning and middle, they can make the story work towards its best end.

That's what Peter always said; all he needed was the cheque stubs, the old statements, a handful of receipts, and he could fit it together like a quilt. But of course his own story, all that stuff that he'd thought of as *just my life*, never did take shape. Now, sitting in his office, staring at the muddy tabloid print on the desk in front of him, he sees the face that is printed there and it takes him back three years, and he is again in the board room, listening to the Director-General announce *The End* and he wasn't ready, he hadn't made up the accounts, the story wasn't resolved. He is there again, looking across the conference table at Angela. She is sitting slightly apart from her erstwhile colleagues, desolate, frozen; and he is frozen and desolate too. None of the rules applied now. He left it too long. Peter: as washed out and as washed up as Angela, both in a way bereaved, but each capable of feeling very little, except numb.

Three years ago, and what point had they reached? They had already said their goodbyes, Peter and Angela, and in such final terms, some time before that meeting. After a lifetime of knowing each other there was that thing, that catastrophe, that event, and since then, except for the meeting in the Board room when Angela said what she had promised

wouldn't be said and then the Director-General called a halt to the whole exercise, Peter had seen her only twice. Once, when she'd closed it all off. Things already having fallen apart. 'Peter,' she said, 'Don't call me anymore.' She'd decided to start the new millennium, she said, with everything new. 'Don't call me any more,' she said. 'We've nothing left to say.' And Peter did as she'd asked. He didn't call, he didn't drive slowly past her house, she no longer worked with him and he had no opportunity to see her, and didn't make one. Knowing when he's not welcome. Or at least, capable of showing he knows how to behave when he's not welcome.

And twice, the second time he'd seen her since then, and what he'd guessed would be the last. That day two years after the meeting when he bumped into her in a bookstore and cornered her by the dictionaries. She hadn't seen him coming. 'Angela,' Peter said, 'I've missed you.' She'd looked at him out of eyes like sleet, a hand-painted scarf wrapped over her otherwise naked skull. 'I think about you every day,' he'd said. 'All my memories are written in your skin.'

How long ago was that? The phone rings, and Peter looks out of the window, refusing to hear it, and counts up on his fingers. Last year, that's one. The Tribunal? That was two years ago. The court case, maybe two and a half? It'd be well over two years, maybe three. Not that long ago really. The phone rings again then goes onto the message bank, someone's voice comes on and it sounds like *blab blab blab*. The answer phone clicks off, the trees move suddenly outside the window, and through the polarized glass he sees the Brisbane sun.

Three years since last he'd seen her. Maybe a month or two more or less, give or take, round it down. Angela had barely crossed his mind in that time, except in the interstices and in lonely moments. She remained in his memory the way her photo remains, still tucked between the pages of his dictionary. That is, like herself. Not the brutally thin woman he'd last seen, not the exhausted angry woman she'd been that time when she said goodbye, when she'd said 'Don't call me anymore,' when she had left the Office, falling or pushed, who's to know? Either way, after all the troubles she'd caused, after all the troubles brought on her by others, she had left, and barring accidents that was the last any of them saw of her.

She wasn't there the last time they all got together at the private wake they'd held for the Office, those who were still around, their last get-together after the Tribunal and before the laying of the blame. She wasn't the only one absent; several of the others were missing too. Graeme of course. No one knew quite what to say to him these days. Charlie, of course. He'd disappeared off the radar a long time before, disappeared before he could be arrested, or at least invited to assist the police with their investigations. Hinde wasn't there either. She'd been told about it but couldn't see the point, couldn't see her way clear to paying for a flight up from Sydney and a hotel room, sure she could have stayed with any of them but she wouldn't, she liked her own space. Hinde, who would anyway have been wretched if she'd come, broken-hearted, she'd have sat in the pub with the rest of them but everyone knew how it would be, she'd sit there drinking too much, with her cheeks ragged, marked by her grief, or guilt, or both, by all the awful things that distress uses against us to make us feel even worse. Then there's Shelley; well, she did turn up of course, dear old Shell, in tears of sympathy if not real sorrow. She'd been moved across to the Department at level, and none of it had really touched her, but still, everyone cries at a wake, even if they're farewelling a stranger. Every wake brings back all the people and all the things you've lost, it's like the memory lingers in the tear ducts waiting for the trigger of chapel and coffin and white lilies, of *do you remember?* and *where did it start?* Shelley was crying, but also enjoying the savouries and beer, and catching up with everyone, it'd been ages since they'd worked together, since they'd last seen each other, since the Director-General called a halt to their Office and dispersed them across the state.

Shelley cornered Peter over at the bar that evening, and grappled him the way she always does, a quick hug-n-a-kiss, and quick too to describe to him the last time she'd seen Angela, not all that long ago. 'So, I saw her at the airport would you believe and she looked totally like shit, you know? I gave her a big smooch, and I was all like, "Oh darling you're so thin! You look so tired!" and she was just like, "Oh hi, Shell, nice to see you".'

*This wasn't the first time Shelley had told Peter about it. She had described it to him just hours after the event, over the phone, and now as then he could visualise it, knowing Shelley so well, as did everyone at the Office, she's a performer, old Shell. He pictured Shelley bouncing through the airport, and Angela there too, head down at the baggage carousel. Angela wearing her grey outfit. Soft pants. Soft shirt. No colour. A bland hat soft over her head. Trying not to see or be seen. And Shelley calling out, 'Angela, Angela, hey*

*it's me, Ang, hey Angie, it's me.'* Shelley told Peter all about it again, now, tiptoe with enthusiasm, waving her glass.

'I've been ill,' Angela said.

She said, 'I've been away.'

And Shelley, everyone's pal, said, 'Hey you know, I miss you Angie. You should keep in touch. Everyone misses you.' So she smiled, did Angela, politely. No one but Shelley had ever called her Angie, she wasn't an Angie kind of girl, but for Shelley, well. She could respond politely. She smiled, 'polite-like,' Shelley told Peter later. And said: 'I won't be coming back.' So contained, so controlled, so self-possessed.

Self-possession. Who can exorcise that demon?

The phone rang again in Peter's office. He answered it this time, talked a little, made notes, said goodbye. Put his head in his hands for a minute. He knew it was a minute because he'd noticed the time on the clock above his desk as he hung up the phone, and noticed it again when he lifted his head, and then he looked again at the pixellated photos on the newsprint in front of him, and reached again for the phone, and dialled the number he had dialled on autopilot so often over the years, no brain involved, fingers knowing precisely the rhythm and pattern of movement. He heard the ring travel down the line once, twice, three times before a digital voice clicked in, and said, *The number you are dialling has been disconnected, or is no longer available. Please check the number, and try again.*

No need to check it; he knew the number like his own. *Had* known the number, that is. Had known it for years and years. Where are we? – it's been two years since the Tribunal, three years since Shelley bumped into Angela, four years since she said goodbye to Peter, five years since she took off, six years since they gave her the Haven's account. Six years by god since she started it all off, and for at least six years before then he'd been calling her on that same number. And now she'd moved, or changed her contact details, or anyway had become inaccessible. He could drop round, maybe? No. There was nothing left between him and her any more, nothing but her photo inside his dictionary. And her phone number, or what had been her number, now with someone else's voice announcing

absence. And a tabloid newspaper with a photo of someone who looked like her but who was no one. And that's the end of the story.

But after the ending, there is always another beginning, which moves into another middle, and then into the next end. Angela and Peter's story had ended, and the story of the Office too. But this tabloid Peter had picked up: that seemed to suggest the beginning of another tale, another *Once upon a time*, and by Christ wasn't that her face, her photo, looking at him out of the past? Looking barely changed; looking, surely, like her?

Peter had seen her, or rather this photograph of someone who looked like her, in the grocery store. He'd agreed that morning to pick up bread and toilet rolls and dog food, and when lunchtime rolled round he took himself down to the local store. Not the giant Woolies near their home, but the city grocer down the road from his office, a little shop with all the oddities that city grocers carry along with the groceries – cheap novels, cheap bracelets, cheap toys. Cheap tabloids too, on racks right by the cash register, where he was standing in line, waiting with his arms full of goods. That was Angela, surely, on the front page of *News of the World*, staring out at him, *It must be her, it must be she*. No one else has a forehead that shape, no one else could have that mouth. She looked almost unchanged and he stared back, and tumbled his groceries onto the check-out tray, and reached for the paper. 'That too?' asked the woman behind the cash register, who had already rung up the items he'd collected, and he said yes, and handed her the paper, and reached for his wallet.

## 2

The afternoon passed, and the evening, and the next day. The tabloid lay tucked under his desk. A week went by, and he still refused to check it out. It lay, still, near his feet, a silly thing, a nothing, everyone knows they're just trash, everyone knows they don't even pretend to report anything like the news. It's Angela's photo in the paper; no, not Angela, it can't be, it's someone who looks like her, it's a made-up story, it's trash; and the photo ticked away, under his desk, near his feet.

What a mess.

Peter tried to focus on the work that was composting on his desk. It's all such a mess. That's history for you; you think you've escaped, but it's always waiting out there, always ready to drown you in your or someone else's pre-used pain. It's never prepared to remain just history, just the prison-house of the past whose job it is to keep you safe from all the awful things you'd left behind. No, instead it's always trying to get itself into the future, it's that disaster that you always knew would catch up with you unless some how, some way, you could beat it to the end. *It's unfair*, was all he could think, at first. Unfair of her to re-emerge like that after these years of silence. Unfair to disturb his autopilot life, he's happy enough most of the time, he gets by, he doesn't really have to think about anything much, just tick tock, tick tock and his days slide by. He's in his late forties now, Peter, and has attained a certain tranquillity. His life is well structured. In the mornings the radio begins to play, waking him gently. He gets up and showers, eats and dresses, drives to work. If he gets there in time, he finds a parking spot in the basement of his building, and if not he has to walk the two or three blocks from one of the big car parks at Southbank. And then it's noon and he eats lunch and reads today's paper; and then it's evening; and in between times he answers the phone and signs documents and goes to meetings and occasionally, not often these days, sees a client. Then it's evening and he finds his car and drives home through the city traffic where the only thing in the world is the rear bumper of the car ahead of you and its brake lights and sometimes the sunset, sometimes the rain. He gets home and the house is empty, and he feeds the dog, and pours a drink, and watches TV until his wife gets home too, and then it's the evening routine of dinner and *how was your day*, and *have you fed Buster*. And at last it's bedtime and sleep; and then the next day it all starts over again. Barring holidays, weekends and sick days, that's been his life for the best part of five years. Everything certain. Everything known.

Till now. Now something completely improbable has floated across in front of him; yet it looks so true. It can't be true; can it? Surely it's just some fantasy, just chance, just the luck of his being in a certain place at a certain time. This is not how it's meant to be. And yet, there it is in the newspaper, the photograph and that macabre story:

### **Doctor Keeps Wife's Severed Head Alive**

'Her brain was perfectly healthy' doctor says  
'I've extended her life by years'  
'She's not lonely; she was always shy'  
'What I've done, that's genuine medical ethics'  
'perfectly comfortable without the benefit of a body'  
'healthy brain'  
'always shy'

Said the doctor.

It can't be them. It can't be Richard. Look at the photo again, of course it's not Angela, of course not, it must be an American, it looks like Angela, staring out of the print, a head in a glass jar, *a living head*, the caption said, *in a jar*, a woman reduced to a head in a jar. A woman, or all that's left of her, photographed in black-and-white; someone who once must have been quick, now stilled, her head shot from three angles under a perspex hood on a sterile plate in a sterile room.

'Angela was never shy,' he says out loud.

What is going on?

It has been a week now since he bought the tabloid. He is not thinking straight. Maybe he has a virus. Still, he can't work this afternoon. He reads the tabloid in snatches, and trembles. It can't be true; of course it isn't Angela, it can't be. Sophie, her sister; call Sophie. He calls Hinde instead; she'll be expecting his call, she's due in Brisbane next week, they always catch up.

‘Hinde. Peter here.

– Yeah, hi,

– Fine thanks,

– You?

– Hey Hinde, have you kept in touch with you know Angela?

– Yeah I know, but I’ve lost touch with them all.

– Yeah, I know.

– Thanks, Hinde. Yes, see you soon, yeah thanks.’

Okay, so maybe he should have kept in touch with Angela, or even with her family, but for god’s sake it’s been decades since he and Ang were a couple. Before Richard, whom she met when she was only twenty-two, she and Peter having recently come home from Europe, their relationship so strained they could hardly speak to one another, even to say ‘Would you puh-*leeze* close the *fucking* door?’ Not that it wasn’t a good trip, that year in Europe, her first trip abroad, the two of them together and as one, although you know in the next twenty years whenever she talked about it, it was all in the first person singular – *when I was in Berlin* ... And then there was Richard, and for Peter along came Emma, and later the kids, for Peter but not for Angela who tried for over a decade, and finally gave up and finished her degree, and went to work first for Tax and then at the Office. With him, Peter. Of course with him, he’d organised it, he’d pulled the strings, he’d made sure of it. He knew she’d be good, she’d fit in with the team; and how great, how fabulous, to be working together every day. So she took the job, working for the Office, a step down in a way from her role at Tax, but the money’s about the same, and it’s more worthwhile, she said to Richard, and so much more interesting.

Fewer than four years at the Office, and she decided to blow it all away.

*Angela. His Angela, off and on over the years. Angela, as much a habit as a friend. Angela, who blew him away too.*

That hardly constitutes the grounds to have kept in close touch with her family. But now it’s time, now he needs to touch base with them, to come back out of silence. He went

back to his desk, sat down and reached for the phone. 'Sophie? It's Peter. Peter Clarke? Yes, hi. I've been thinking about Angela.'

\* \* \*

Who is just coming round, in the sprawling hospital across town, coming out from under the anaesthetic. Who is looking into the middle distance, that grey place, that cool space she mostly looks to these days. Who has forgotten more than she knew. What remains? Not much. What does she do now? Not much. There's not much she can do to fill her hours. She has music – a radio, a CD player. She has a telly for when her eyes aren't too tired to watch. She doesn't have a computer with her though, she knows she could do it, could write up her account, her side of the story, but right now she wants nothing that will let her record in permanent form what was left to her, all that is in her head. She can't reconcile what is in her head: *Dies Irae*: that phrase circles around her memory and means, what? She hears it sung in a voice of old despondency. *Pie jesu, salve. What passing bells?* It is only memory, but she hears it still, one eye open, one shut against the pillow; all around her is only white noise. What happened? She can't remember, she doesn't know, she is drowning in the drugs, memory lies in the body, taps for attention, can't make itself heard through the pain. She is running out of time.

### 3

Monday night, and Peter headed down the street to the Terminus, ready to meet Hinde for drinks. She had dropped in at the Department; she still did a bit of consultancy work for them and he'd made a point, over the years, of directing other contracts her way too. So she had been in earlier, had stuck her head in and mouthed 'Hi' because he was on the phone at the time, and he waved back at her. She'd done okay. She had left the Office, left Brisbane too, taken a package, and spent a year being a mother again, and since then had been running her own little business. Financial consultant. And came from time to time back to Brisbane, and caught up with her old pals, and with Peter who said, after the first mouthful of wine, 'So, how are the twins?'

'Grown up,' she said. 'It's amazing; they've hit twenty now, they're so, I don't know, adult. So not kids. How're yours?'

'Getting there. One's at uni now, the other finishes school end of this year.'

'Amazing,' Hinde said again. Then there was that empty silence when no one really knows why they're there, or what to speak about, it slipped in between them, and they simultaneously picked up their glasses and drank. It was Hinde who spoke, who said, 'Angela though, poor girl. She never had any kids. No one left to carry on.'

Where did it begin, her infertility? Leave Peter and Hinde to their drinks, for a few moments, and remember. Where did it begin? Not in her late teens, when she was still with Peter, and that so-familiar wrestling with condoms, trying to manage the Pill, counting days, waiting sweaty-palmed for the first show of blood. Not in her twenties, at the start of her marriage, when the family thing was something she and Richard had simply assumed would be their next stop.

When they found it wasn't going to happen, Richard and her, that was a beginning of sorts. At first the delays in achieving conception, the month after month bleeding, didn't seem to, what's that word, *portend*. *To stretch forth; to point out; to foreshadow ominously. From L. portendo.* She closed the dictionary and put it back on the shelf. Mouthed the word: *portend*. The closer she got to thirty, the more it *portended*, conveyed portent; the more it foreshadowed, ominously, the impossibility that she would have that baby, something to confirm her own

life, something to seal their marriage, to set in precious stone the love they bore one another, Richard and Angela. So they became characters in one of those stories about people who want and want and are always trying and never succeeding, and the more they want it, the more it slips away, until sex becomes grim duty and love congeals under the vanishing fantasy of booties and nappies. *Oh Richard, oh oh Angela, Angel, ah.* Only after a bit they didn't say that to each other any more, it seeming to get in the way of the sperm. Instead she dressed in perfume, dressed in silk, cooked and cleaned and arranged flowers, set Miles Davis on the record player and later the CD player, enticing stars and satin skies into the house to provide the ambience and then, furiously, they'd fuck like it's roadwork, and over and over, nothing.

Angela's sister gave birth in the middle of this. Angela spent part of the labour with Sophie, in the delivery suite, spelling her brother-in-law who was taking it very hard. When he came back in smelling of whiskey just in time for the birth, she waited in Sophie's private hospital room for her sister, now emptied out and cleaned up, to be wheeled in to bed. Sophie struggled to feed the tiny crumpled baby-thing, edged with crimson as it was and with purple notes splashed across its little body; baby and mother both wailing at the pain of not being able to feed properly. How can nipple and mouth be so hard to connect, so governed by negative polarity? Angela watched, longing. To hold the baby, to hold her own baby.

Sophie finally settled it on her breast, and then it was all soft sucking sounds accompanied by little pig-grunts, and Sophie could address herself to modesty, pull the nightie down to cover the currently unneeded boob, and pull the covers up over her exposed thighs, though she perched on the bed still, tense and almost, on the verge of being, miserable. The conversation limped along like rush hour traffic, a little urgent propulsion, then anxious or tedious nothing, then another jerk forward, and no way off the road. Finally the baby had fed enough and dozed on Sophie's breast; and she passed the little thing across to Angela who stood to take her niece, and hold her, and it seemed there had always been a babe in her arms, it all felt so right, and she smiled, and the baby seemed to study her face, then wailed, and Angela rocked her back into quiet.

It never happened for her; her only babies were vicarious, or borrowed. Angela wasn't really surprised her body had let her down, she'd told Hinde, and now Hinde told Peter.

Not after growing up with the boys of her adolescence, with their fascinated hatred for everything female, and their obsession with genitals, and their ‘Close your legs, Debbie, your breath stinks’ so that for young Angela, everywhere she went, she smelt something foul drifting along with her. Not just her genitals, but her whole pelvic basin, her personal Australia, like some putrefying foundation on which her real self, her sharp rib cage and small new breasts and slender arms, were balanced, and she’d have to go through life dragging that rotting bleeding shitting thing around with her like an albatross, like a dead fish. No wonder it wouldn’t breed for her. ‘I love that,’ Peter had said in their early days, dancing so close in the nightclubs, grinding his pelvis against hers, ‘the way I can smell your cunt; god you’re so hot,’ and she knew he meant it for love, for lust, but all she felt was insufficiently clean.

So the next thing was starting out on the IVF program, which worked as well as they usually do; i.e., barely. Just a routine of implantation and miscarriage. At five weeks. At eight weeks, nine, seven; never more than ten. *I don’t mind taking them in*, her uterus would say, *but they needn’t think they’re going to stay*. First it was the hot hard edges on her breasts, then the low hot ache across her back, the pelvic basin. Then it was more aches, sometimes cramps running down her inner thighs, down the back of her legs, settling in behind her knees. Deep pains, like the could-be baby had hooked its little fingernails into the lining of her womb, and in being flushed away was clinging on, tearing at her insides. So then the red blood, later brown; then the tidy up, via the doctors; and then back home, empty.

They gave that up after a while, Angela and Richard. It was too distressing, losing one potential baby after another; too intrusive; too expensive. And if you’ve given up on the foetus, on waiting for the baby that never comes, why care for the body? So every night she drank three-four glasses of wine, though the doctor said only one a night, and many mornings she’d wake dizzy and determined to cut way back. Never did, of course. She took less care over what she ate, drank more than she should. Every evening the exquisite slow poison in arms, running along inside the big veins in the legs, food and wine lying heavy on the liver and the gut.

They investigated adoption, filled out forms, had the interviews, looked for an available baby at home – *some chance!* the agent said – then overseas. They’d left it too late, they realised after not very long. That wasn’t going to work either. So the next start was giving

up on it all and on each other. They began independently to look outside the marriage, both of them in a kind of grief and finding in one affair, and another, and another, some kind of forgetting. Both of them at it like rabbits, copulating desperately, mislaying their sorrow in bodily blankness, that state of silent ecstasy that forbids thought. With each affair she felt diminished, she saw her men – she thought of them as *her men* long after they were gone – and she saw them all and ached for that part of her that each had taken with him.

\* \* \*

‘No,’ Peter said. ‘Angela never had any kids. It was a shame.’

‘Okay Peter,’ said Hinde. ‘Why are you thinking about Angela now, after all this time?’

\* \* \*

Across town Angela waits, resigned, but not asleep. Day after day, night after night, she waits, twenty-four hours a day, that’s 1440 minutes or 86400 seconds, and seven days a week and around four weeks or thirty days a month, that’s 43200 minutes or 2592000 seconds, and twelve months a year, that’s 31104000 seconds, she’s had time to work it out, it’s easy when you know how, when you’ve not much else to do; and it’s been about two years now, that’s, that’s too many seconds minutes hours, it’s been ... actually she’s not sure how long. She longs for lovely sensation against her skin, remembers how in sleepless nights her toes would twitter and titter among themselves down there away among the bed clothes, restlessly relentlessly awake, running messages up to knees and thighs and groin until the only thing to do was reach in that drawer for her *little toy*, Richard called it, and *brummmm bummm* quietly so he wouldn’t be disturbed, *brummm* some tenderness, some machinic touch. Oh Richard, why didn’t you pay some attention back then? But she’s here, and now, and recall is something that remains at the corner of a memory, just out of reach. *Salve me*, an echo from before. From doing, having, being, breathing: a body; soul only a word for something in the body, she knows, she read it once, she knows there’s something to be said, she wants to sleep, there’s no sleeping, she can’t recall anything at all, no sleep, no resting of the eyes,

just machines calling, calling, each moment ticked out and away, yawn, the compulsion that never leaves you for a good night, for someone to say good night.

\* \* \*

How much can Peter tell without seeming, well, desperate? Not a lot. He asks, instead. 'Where did it start, Hinde?' Peter asked. 'When did Angela find out about Graeme's umm problem?' He, Peter, hadn't really noticed anything at all. Certainly Angela had been fretting about the investigation, but she did that, she talked and talked, thought with her mouth open, you might say, and he'd not really paid that much attention to what she was on about. Also he'd been away quite a bit, what with the annual tour of the region and then going off on leave, so maybe hadn't been as aware as he would have been otherwise. Hadn't noticed that there was some kind of trouble on the make. Not until just weeks before it all blew up, when he was standing beside her desk discussing some file or other, some process, and heard, 'Hey Ang, got a minute?'

That was Shelley, calling across the semi-open plan floor, the solid office walls having been torn down and transparent perspex barriers erected in their place just eighteen months before, to get them all out of private offices, to ensure transparency and collegiality and which by the way prevented Angela and Peter from bonking on their respective carpets, or would have, if they were still involved like that with each other. Shelley was making her way across the room, then she was standing in front of Angela's desk, holding something, two somethings, an A3 sheet of paper and a manila file cover, and frowning. Peter moved to stand behind her, to look over her shoulder, and as Angela reached out her hand to Shelley she noticed that Peter was frowning too.

'Would you look at this a minute?' Shelley asked. It was the record for the filing system, Shelley's main area of responsibility, no files to be removed without her say-so, every file carefully signed out to the staff member concerned, a record always maintained. Angela took it, looked where Shelley was pointing. The record was kept in two forms: a spreadsheet, part of which was the print-out in Angela's hands, which had columns for file details, date removed from and returned to the shelves, name of responsible staff member, reason for removal. The second was the manual version, the manila file cover that always

stayed in the system, inside which staff members taking the file proper were expected, indeed required, to record their initials.

Shelley was pointing at an entry for one of the files on the Haven, Angela's current investigation: file number 3, the file that contained her preliminary report, the transcripts from the interviews with residents, the statutory declaration Charlie had signed, Angela's note recording her suspicion about the possible existence of a second set of books. Then she gave Angela the manila file cover, and Angela looked at the number and name along the side – the Haven, file number 3 – and on the inside, in what might or might not have been her handwriting, her initials and last Friday's date. Signed out to Angela. A file that wasn't on Angela's desk or in her cabinet, not in her briefcase or her car, not on her borrowed desk at the Haven, god no, and not at home. Files were not to be taken home. And Angela's initials were on the file cover, Angela's name on the spreadsheet record, 'for checking' as the reason for the removal of the file, removal date last Friday. When Angela had come in to the Office early, had collected a minidisk recorder, her Palm organizer, a couple of A4 pads, a handful of disks, and had left for the day to work on site, gathering data before the weekend. Last Friday, when she hadn't flicked through the numbered stacks of files in the back room that was Shelley's domain, when she hadn't initialled her name on the file cover of the Haven file number 3, and hadn't left a note for Shelley to enter the details on the spreadsheet, or done it herself, booted up the records, entered the information, maybe forgetting to leave a little note to let Shelley know she'd helped herself.

'Graeme wanted this file last night for a meeting with that priest guy with the funny name...'

'St John Garfield,' Angela said.

'Yeah. But it's not there. And I couldn't find it on your desk or in your cabinets, sorry but Graeme said I had to look, and it isn't anywhere. Where have you put it, Angela?'

'Angela, where's the file?' Peter asked, Shelley echoed.

*'I've no idea.'*

*'That's not my handwriting.'*

*I haven't had the file over the past few days.'*

*I don't need this shit.'*

Any answer would have done. Any should have done. She didn't say, though, or not at first. Later she did: she said often, and loudly, and with increasing distress.

But it was that day, when Shelley brought her the empty file. That was the beginning, surely, the point when things began to go wrong, when Angela began to know someone was going bad. And she looked at both of them, Peter and Shelley, looked at them hard, thinking, *What's going on?* She needed to know what was going on. With the Office, and with Peter who was standing beside her desk, looking at her with a thoughtful expression. This, the man whose flesh used to melt into hers, whose touch used to spring her body and mind into wakefulness; this, the man whose absences once unseated her so she staggered like a sailor; this, the man who's known her since they were kids and who's been in and out of her life and her body over almost three decades, and now he's looking at her out of careful eyes, weighing the odds, coming to some kind of judgment. *And if that's paranoia,* she thought, *well what the fuck. I need to know.*

She looked straight at him and said, 'Peter, can I have a moment of your time?' He glanced at his watch, then said, 'Leave this with us, Shell, okay?', and he and Angela took the lift down to the tiny café on the ground floor of the building, where they ordered coffee and she began to tell him what she suspected. And he began, finally, to listen.

\* \* \*

'You hadn't discussed it till then? But you two were so,' and then Hinde paused, crossed the middle two fingers of her right hand, and cackled like her old dirty self.

'She'd told you though?'

'Yes,' said Hinde. She had known some of it too. They too had been like two fingers on the same hand back then, Hinde and Angela, they had talked about everything, right up to the last weeks when Hinde had figured Angela was losing it, getting obsessed, or maybe the word is possessed, and there were her kids down in Sydney who were fed up with living

with their dad, didn't like his new wife, wanted their mum, she had her own problems for god's sake. So she took off, took long service leave and took off, down to Sydney and to the twins, she'd meant to call Angela and keep in touch but a day went by and another day and another, she actually couldn't face the hassle, or deal with Angela's well what can you say hysteria, her kids were a nightmare, their bloody father should be put up against the wall, and by the time she phoned, Angela had gone overseas, and by the time she, Hinde, came back to give evidence it was all over. 'All bar the shouting.'

'So you just left Angela to it? To deal with it herself?' said Peter.

'I know,' Hinde said. She took another long drink of the wine, drained the glass, waved it at a waiter for a refill. 'Can't do anything about it now but.' She paused, but Peter didn't say anything. He sat with both elbows on the table, his hands cradling his head, like a migraine was setting in. Then he said, 'Did you know she was being stalked, and being threatened? The police never did resolve it. Then she took off overseas. It wasn't till she came back to Australia that everything went to shit for the rest of us.'

'I didn't know that part of it. God. But she was so, you know. She wouldn't let it go.'

And Peter said, 'Yeah I know.' And, disingenuously, told her nothing more. Keeping Angela to himself, even now.

Of all her men, Peter was always number one. He was the earliest, he'd been the longest in her life; in some ways he was the dearest. But was never safe. With him and her, back in their twenties, it was always *well yes, maybe, sometime*, and then Richard came along, a medical student, someone her mother liked, someone she married. Richard, who made her feel safe, with whom for some years she seemed to be making a life. Peter came to Angela and Richard's wedding and didn't invite them to his when he married Emma. *Angela, Angel, ah*, he'd called out in bed, all those years ago, and he'd remembered doing that as he sat in the church and watched her exchange rings with Richard. After a few years they'd found each other again, and had gone on finding and refinding each other, over and over again, but Richard and Emma were always there in the frame. Now it was twenty-something years later; and Angela was gone, and had left him nothing but an idea of herself.

Let's have a look. She is in hospital. Her little face is weary though she's aged well despite it all, hardly a wrinkle; dark soft hair – is it a wig? – tidily frames her face; her eyes are closed against the light. Too tired to move, it's like her body has left her, she is reduced to what she can hear in her head, reduced to shards of memory, no one left to her but the medicos, of course, and the machines. And Richard, poor Richard. Poor Angela alone in a sterile room, left to call, 'Richard, where's Richard now, where is he?' *Gone, lady*. He has to work, of course. He has to make a buck. She hears a bell sound, the Sanctus bell? The priest must be close by. No, it's the radio, tuned to the classical programme. She can't think about it, about sleep, or *sanctus*, or *salve*, salvation, she's not herself, she hasn't been herself for how long? For those days and weeks and months becoming years she's done, what? Move between hospital and home. Beg Richard to turn off the machines, feed her the overdose; would he, no, but *I'm still here and still he's here most of the time, and it's been about two years now, about 730 days, about 17520 hours, about a million minutes, 63 million seventy-two thousand seconds, but hey. Almost every one of them with me awake.*

It's the insomnia that's as bad as anything, it's the same insomnia that dragged out so many of her nights in the before time, the Office time and its aftermath. Especially in the last months of that time she couldn't sleep, she remembers it so well, and with the memory of sensation comes the memory of the fullness of body, a phantom takes form below her shoulders, below the sterile sheets on which she rests, it writes out of her senses the wires and tubes and the machinery that is all that she really is, just now. Her old body, how it

used to be: it comes back out of history, she feels that familiar tickle down deep in her throat, the kick in her groin, and in the unreachable core of her brain, in the spaghetti folds, something is grinning as she fumbles rough phantom fingers through lobe and hemisphere but it's some maze, that brain, no way of getting in, no way without a cotton-thread guide to the exit. So instead, let's hmm hmm, let's listen instead, listen to the lub-dub of the big blood pump pump pump flowing through her pretty neck, wasn't it pretty back then? Feel it lub-dub plunging like a lover into those grey brainy folds, feel the brain smile, *yum, blood, red blood with its air and water and food, yum yum, lub-dub*. And now follow the empty tired blood running pale under the skin, see there at the temple where it snakes, follow it down along her still unlined cheek over the chin down the throat avoiding the busy arterial route nosing its blind empty way, it doesn't want the hassle now, taking the back roads home, boom boom, down to the heart – or to the lung first? Yes, it's the lung, of course. Here it goes now, this tired empty grey blood, breathless and drained but the kindly lungs lean back, make room, sigh their pure oxygen its way, the blood, relieved, sucks it up, takes it in, and right away it's that feeling you get, that feeling you used to get when the endorphins kick in and the air takes shape, deep and thick inside the body, and suddenly you can run again, suddenly, you can sing.

\* \* \*

Sophie had said to Peter, 'Meet me in the foyer of the hospital. Don't be late.' He took the afternoon off work and was there early, and Sophie arrived, said like ice, 'Oh hello,' and led him to the lifts, and through the wards, and to the room upstairs. And now, after those years of invisibility, of being as he'd thought forgotten, Angela was looking at him again. Peter looked back at her, though uncertain of where to direct his gaze. She is not the woman he knew; and he's embarrassed to have noticed, doesn't want to draw her attention to what he is seeing. It's a little like noticing a naked person at a bus stop; do you gaze past their left shoulder, or resolutely above their chin, or let your eyes wander across their form the way you would with someone fully dressed? Peter elected to keep his eyes on the head of the bed, not on the bones below her throat, and not on the machinery that is keeping her, in a manner of speaking, alive.

She struggled up against the pillows, opened her mouth; her breath crackled and she looked directly at him, and then in a voice like a machine said, 'Peter, you're not looking so

good.'

She was the first woman he fucked without a condom, the first woman he loved. Now she was bones, now she was a machine. She drew in another thin breath, and said, 'Don't look at me like that, Peter. Smile, why don't you?'

They are so much older now than before, and maybe a little kinder: the kindness that holds back from saying what might be said. He could have said, for instance, *How could you cut me out?* And Angela, for instance, could have said, *Peter, how you let me down.* Instead he is fish mouthed, without words, and she is making small talk. 'Still married, Pete?' she asked. 'Still with the lovely Emma?'

He is, of course. He never had the grace to leave her, or she him. Peter and Emma still live in the same comfortable house. They are comfortable together. Emma is not Angela, but looks rather like her. Well you know what they say: men keep remarrying versions of the first woman they loved. Women don't; they're like cats, perennially curious, always willing to try something new. But Emma ignores any likeness, she doesn't allow any photographs of Angela, not in her house, she stands by her man and the two of them, Peter and Emma, have their careers, and they hang their washing out on the weekends and mow their lawns and do everything that professional couples should do, except forget. Never mind. It all worked out for the best, after all, for him if not for Angela. And now in his forties he looks strained, maybe he's beginning to have health troubles of his own; maybe his ankles hurt, the way he's standing looking at what remains of his old lover, his old friend, his old colleague, his you might almost say betrayer.

She spoke again. 'So, Peter.' Her words spackled the air, and finally he looked at her. 'So, what do you think?' she asked. Peter spread his hands, opened and then shut his mouth. 'Oh Angela.' He had brought chocolates, the idiot, and flowers. Well, if she can't eat, at least she can look at the flowers, she can breathe in their scent, she can decide that when she is back home she will sit outside, smell the air, feel the world against her skin.

Peter holds his breath. There is Angela, a hair away from being dead. Of course it wasn't her in that tabloid, it was just some doppelganger whose body was hidden by the table, some trick photography, some piece of crap journalism, nothing real. Angela is real, though

worse than he had expected. He's a professional; he knows how to handle stressful situations. He wants to cry, he mustn't, he tries to remember the techniques he has learned at one workshop or another over the years for containing the self.

'Well,' Angela tried again. 'How've you been doing, Pete? What have you been up to?'

Peter breathes lightly, he's shaking, he doesn't want to smell the sterile air, she must be bitter, she must, there he is walking and swinging his arms, and even if his throat's quivering with anxiety, at least his heart is healthy against his ribs, he can feel the strong blood arcing under the skin. And there she is, a head balanced on a pillow, a heap of bones resting between sheets, and below the sheet that covers what remains he can see some ghosting form of who she was, her old curves, her strong body hidden by what is here and now, but trying like memory to fill out the void. They face each other across the tiled room, her eyes as pure as saline.

He blinked, pulled himself together, and he might have said, *Angela, Angel, ah. What we've lost. All you've lost.* But all he could manage was, 'Hasn't it been ages?'

Yeah, right. Sophie cleared her throat, moved over to Angela, touched her cheek. 'Have you had enough, sweetie?' But Angela shivered down the length of the bed, pink came into her cheeks, and 'No!' she shrieked like a mouse. Then, turning her head, said 'Fuck you Peter, fuck your horrified face. This is me; this is where I live. How I live.' Her hollow throat moved like a machine cranking out the words. Peter turned white, then red, then blotched up. 'See me?' she cried again in her tiny thin voice. 'See the space where my breasts used to be? Now there's nothing left of me.'

'Angela,' Peter said, hovering cautiously beside the bed. 'I see you everywhere.'

'It's not me,' she wept. 'I'm never there.'

She cried, as Sophie hustled Peter outside. That woman in the bed, Angela, or all that remained of her, she'd looked at him with the same expression he'd seen in the tabloid's shadowed shots. Once his colleague, once his lover, always his friend, and now for so long lost to him, and lost to herself too. 'Peter,' she said when he stood appalled in the doorway

of the sterile hospital room, looking and not looking at bones of her skull, 'I hardly remember you. Your hands, your lips; it's all a blur. I hardly remember how you touched me.'

Sophie took Peter by the elbow, and ushered him out and into the sitting room near by. 'Wait here. I'll be back in a few minutes,' she said, and left him there while she returned to her sister. Who had turned up the volume on the radio. Who was waiting, closed-eyed, while the music pulsed: *Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus Dominus. Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini. Dona nobis pacem.* 'I can't stop, I can't sleep, I can't bear it,' she said to Sophie, and cried. This is what it is all day all night, non-stop, this is what she does, she's doing it now, she'll do it again tonight when the nurses have turned out the light and she'll have been on her own for hours by then, waiting and no closer to sleep. She needs a lullaby. She needs an end.

In 1995 Angela was working as a tax inspector, building her career, she told Peter, who had emerged again just months before out of a few years' absence, back into one of their *let's be friends* stages, *doing coffee but not bed* stages. And Peter said to her, 'You know that new set-up where I'm working? The Office? We're going to be needing another accountant in a few months. I'm about to begin writing up the ad for the Gazette. You interested? If you're interested we'll, you know, write the ad around you.'

The Office, as you'll probably remember, was very nearly what would constitute a quango, and active from the 1990s up to 2000 when it was not precisely disbanded but rather absorbed back into Queensland Health. The original idea of setting it loose from the department, setting it on a long line, was not a bad one: get a group of talented professionals together; charge them with the oversight of all those independent church- and community-run mental health or public health institutions. Keep it small, fast and independent. Have it answer to Parliament through Health. So it was there, headed up by Graeme, the lawyer with a second degree in financial management; his adjunct Peter, the economist with a specialty in public health management; Hinde the administrative whiz; Shelley the go-fer; Julian as number one accountant; and from 1995, Angela as accountant number two. Toss in a handful of contractors to oversee specific organisations that the team found it impossible to manage (too far away, too big, the directors too annoying); add extras to taste – like interns, and work experience kids. Stir, pour out, serve. You've got a team.

She was interested, of course; he did write the ad around her; she did get the job. So that was another start: beginning work with Peter at the Office, getting to know the new and somewhat idiosyncratic systems used there. 'We don't follow precise bureaucratic procedures, Angela,' said Graeme, the manager, 'because given who our clients are, we'd never get anything done. There are specifics, of course. Minimal paperwork, but we have to keep really accurate files. Every phone call, every conversation, every email; log and file the lot. And the filing system is managed by Shelley, don't remove files without getting her say-so, she has to keep the trail hot. Meetings every fortnight; everyone has to attend; everyone reports on all activities in their bailiwick. Audit trails: everything substantiated, absolutely everything. Given that we're using public funds for groups of people the public often think should be burned at the stake, we have to be like Caesar's wife. You have a degree of

autonomy, you're expected to exercise a degree of judgment. Just remember always we report to our masters at Health, to Parliament, to the trust boards of all the groups we administer, and to the public finally, always the public. We have to be two steps ahead, all the time.'

*So now she is confirmed as a public servant – her second department, though shifting from Federal to State, that's okay, she's happy with the change – and turns up to work on that first day and overdressed, as you do when you're not sure, and Hinde Gross, nominated to induct her and soon to be her best friend, is greeting her with a sloppy kiss on each cheek and an 'Oh darlin'! It's going to be great! Have I been looking forward to this, or what! We've been going like mice in a wheel, my mind's on permanent overdraft these days.' Because they'd been deadily understaffed, and had recently been given another three major projects to run: the Haven, for rehabilitation of junkies and recidivist drunks and other non-approved minorities; the children's home, with a name Hinde couldn't quite remember; and the multicultural support group with their new offices and their uncertain relationship to Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs and to the Queensland government's own Multicultural Affairs. Hinde held her at armslength then, and said, 'You look great. God you're so skinny. But only dress so formal if the Minister or the Director-General or someone is coming or something, okay?' And took her about the Office, introducing her to the handful of new colleagues in this tiny, almost autonomous splinter of Queensland Health.*

*Hinde ran things. She was minutes secretary on almost all their committees. She summoned the teams for weekly debriefs after the executive meetings. She leaned on Graeme for money for cake and coffee all round once a month – for morale, she said – and she was the only one in the building with her own toll free line. 'I need to be able to call the twins now they've moved down to their bloody father,' she'd said, and Graeme had agreed. Anything for peace, is what he told Angela.*

*'This is what happens,' Hinde said, introducing Angela to the project she'd now be managing, the youth shelter. 'You get to do audits on a bunch of the other projects ...'*

'Projects?'

'Non-government not-for-profit health agencies. Usually not health as such, not medicine, usually they're just care givers – disabled kiddies, Murri hostels, homeless shelters, drug rehab, the works. Not aged care though, that's not our responsibility, that's Federal. Now, Julian will audit the youth shelter instead of you, because you don't audit your own project,

saves fear of fiddling the books if you know what I mean. So what your responsibilities are for the shelter is to visit regularly which is great because it gets you out of this warren; and you liaise with the Department over mental health, and the shelter's board hasn't appointed a medical officer yet I don't think so you'd better look into that, you'll have to get them to call for tenders for someone to take on a contract there; and you oversee their management practices, and manage the physical infrastructure, and go to their Board meetings as our rep, and work with them on budgets because they get about a third of their running costs through us each year and the rest is donations and the residents pay something out of their benefits too. So basically it's like your baby, their administration, that is; you kind of co-parent with the director, and it should be really bloody interesting, a mob of feral kids and little junkies elbow to elbow. Oh, and they're god botherers too, by the way. The Baptists have a stake in them, they give a chunk of money each year, and the happy-clappies give a bit of money and they run you know bible classes and stuff there to torture the residents and most of the volunteers are members of their congregation. So you'll be rubbing shoulders with the saints, my dear. Enjoy.'

After Angela got rolling with that first project, the youth shelter, she began to take on audits, one after another: confirming the records for a smallish drug rehabilitation unit just outside Ipswich; then there was an alcohol recovery unit; then a street kids trust group; a regional health organisation; a Murri community shelter; then seven different residential units all connected by a particular church group. She learned to talk to church people, learned to interpret their dialect. She learned to talk to psychologists and social workers and junkies and hookers and all the people who emerge at the wrong end of the day, the ones who turn up after the office workers go home. She learned to keep a trail that could always be traced, the paperwork she managed for each audit, and her own comings and goings on Office business.

And she learned again about falling in love, or lust, that pattern of her lifetime, sometimes on, sometimes off, Angela and Peter, Peter and Angela, forgetting their respective spouses, looking only for each other. At times their being together was so tight neither could breathe. It's that feeling where all you can see is your lover, where just thinking about him your cunt softens and swells, where in bed with your husband you bite your lips so you don't by mistake call the wrong name. Peter, as much a habit as a lover. Sometimes he was everything she wanted, sometimes he was the shadow of her sleep, sometimes just a

mistake she wore like a scar. He'd go away for a fortnight, for three-four weeks, a conference in Europe, a holiday with his mother and his wife in Hong Kong, and for those two-three-four weeks she could breathe again and when he came back, she could see.

Of course it wasn't always like that. For months sometimes, for years even, she shrugged him off, whether she was still fucking him out of habit or duty or commonsense, or when they weren't seeing each other at all. But she took the job in his office – the Office – and the tension began to build, and she found herself arranging to walk past his desk or bump into him in the photocopy room; the obsession began to build; and he was always in her mind. Learning about Peter again, and him about her; and how to find moments almost every day to be together, sometimes racing off to a motel, sometimes early or late in the day a very quick fuck on the office carpet or desk, sometimes just a chaste coffee in the tiny staff room or in the downstairs café, touching foot to foot under the cover of the table.

So it was good, working there, it was better than good, Angela had never had it so good. After her first six-monthly report when her probationary period was up and she was confirmed as a fully-fledged team member, she took to buying a weekly bunch of flowers from the stand on the corner. She brought in photos of her sister's child, she brought a snapshot of Richard, black-and-white handsome on a friend's yacht, as proof she was coupled, as a reminder. She bought a very beautiful glass paperweight, and a heavy ceramic vase, and her own pencil sharpener, a brass circlet with blade and shavings trap, though she always used propelling pencils so never had anything to sharpen. She dusted her desk each day and had brought in a lambs wool duster to do this; she kept her in-tray and out-tray carefully segregated and manageable; she replaced, each evening, the files she'd received from Shelley during the day. 'A sensible girl,' the Director-General had been heard to say of her after reading her reports, and she wasn't sure whether to be offended – *sensible! girl!* – or flattered that he'd noticed, that he knew who she was. She had a warrant card, she knew how to check out a car from the pool, she waved to Hinde and Shelley once or twice a week and headed off to the youth shelter for her weekly visit, or to one or other agency to begin a new audit. She knew the place and her place in it. Every half hour or so it was 'Hey Ang, can you take a call?' and then ten minutes of conversation with someone out there in the city who had an idea or had a complaint or had a need, someone who'd read only the first paragraph on their website and if he'd read just a little more would have found all the

information he was hoping for. Or ‘Angela, I’d like you to sub for me at the meeting this afternoon – Shelley’ll brief you’; or ‘Ang, what happened with the Ipswich hostel?’ or ‘Angela, have you still got that file you were working on last week?’ or ‘Coffee time! Come on, everyone. Pencils down.’ She learned to concentrate in the interstices, to take small pieces of work home to finish during the evenings. She recorded her time spent and on what projects so that her monthly work sheets were accurate, not the fictions Hinde and Julian and Peter produced. She diaried her activities with the passion of novelty: *file TA72 to return box, 10:15 am, 16 Mar. To Shelter 2:30-4pm 17 Mar, discuss budget forecasts.*

It was good. It was better than good. Even though after a couple of years it cooled off again between her and Peter, and Peter turned his attention back, comfortably and chastely, to his family, a tiredness about their affair having settled over both of them. Even though she missed the intimacy with him, missed knowing everything about him, still they kept up the coffees and the lunches, and anyway she was settled in there now, she’d made a home in the Office, and gradually realised she’d begun to grow fond of her colleagues. They were the people with whom she felt comfortable, with whom she worked and played. Graeme’s Darren went with her each week to yoga; Hinde and she shopped and painted and planned each weekend together; Richard quite liked Julian, in small doses, at barbeques or at the pub; Peter’s Emma tagged along from time to time and everyone smiled. Angela knew the names of everyone’s children and pets, swapped cards and small gifts at Christmas and birthdays, such a small group, a tiny team, shirt-tail relations of Queensland Health, which body left them alone apart from checking their annual budget and the annual report. Their mission: to manage the emergency care of everyone who had fallen off the social wagon. The deadbeats, though they’re only called deadbeats between the Office walls. Their clientele: not the unwashed themselves, but the people who care for the unwashed, those non-government groups who take them on, all the little community groups and church groups who organise themselves and find old houses and office spaces mostly around the Valley or in the outer suburbs. They are busy, they apply for grants, and hire someone convincing to look out for the homeless, for the junkies who’ve lost heart, for those recently released from prison and with nowhere else to go, for those recently tipped out of mental hospital and with nowhere else to go, for ex-thieves, for ex-rapists, for lost souls; all those lost souls with nowhere else to go. They do the caring, that’s not the role of the Office staff. Neither she nor her colleagues are trained for that, their training is procedural, they manage the system. And one of the larger organisations within this stable: the Haven,

with all its own lost souls rattling around inside old walls, and the harried staff and the radiant volunteers all hoping for daily miracles.

## 6

Angela had already visited the Haven on several occasions since Richard became their pro bono doctor. 'I was made an offer today,' Richard had said, just a couple of years after Angela joined the Office. He kept his back to her, but only because he was chopping onions.

'An offer? What sort?'

“To give something back to the community”. You should hear that in inverted commas.’

'From whom? Who asked you? Don't cry, darling, it's just onions' – and she reached up with a tissue, and mopped carefully around his eyes. 'God, those are strong!'

'It was your chum – your boss, Graeme. Seems a comrade of his has taken up a Trusteeship with that place that started up a few years ago: the Haven? Rehabilitation centre for losers ...' He scraped the fragments of onion into a dish, reached for the ginger. 'Anyhoo, they've appointed a director who wants to expand operations, so now they're gathering a team, and of course they want a whole mob of volunteers.'

'What do they want you to do?' Angela asked.

'Oh well let's see now, kitchen hand? No, darling, obviously they want a medical officer.'

'But that's a full time job!'

'No. It'll only be for a few hours a week. There's only thirty or forty people in residence at the moment, and maximum capacity is no more than sixty. I'll just set up a wee clinic inside, deal with the ordinary stuff, pack 'em off to hospital if they need serious attention.' He ran his hands under the cold water, looked at her, said, 'Are you planning to help me, or just watch?'

'Just watch, I think. I could pour some wine?'

'Oh yes. Pour me some wine.'

‘Speaking of which, I thought that Haven place was just for alcoholics and junkies?’

‘Actually that’s right – mostly, anyway. I gather my role will involve maintaining them if they’re already on prescribed medication – apparently a lot of them are psychiatric outpatients. You having trouble with that cork? And the others: well, getting them through the worst of withdrawals, or admitting them to hospital if it’s too bad; dealing with colds and flus and contraceptives and STDs; there’s bound to be a few Hep cases too, with junkies coming through.’

‘This doesn’t really sound like your sort of thing, Richard.’

‘No, it doesn’t, does it? But in fact, Ang, I need to keep my hand in with medicine. The free clinic doesn’t give me quite enough hours to maintain my practice. And it seems to me it could become a nice little research project on the side. I met someone at that last conference in Melbourne who’s doing research into community medicine, you know, maintenance medicine with a bit of community activism. I’ve had an offer to come in on their next NHMRC grant application, and this would help. I suspect it’d be interesting work.’

‘It *really* doesn’t sound like your sort of thing, Richard. But hey. Cheers – here’s to your new offer.’

‘Cheers. Are you going out tonight?’

‘No. Staying home with you.’

‘With me? Really?’

‘With you.’ And she smiled at him over the top of her glass, and resolved to try a little harder, to take better care of his heart, and hers.

Richard and Peter; Peter and Richard. Her own two-sided coin. Richard is the better man, she told herself. After sex Richard would prop himself on an elbow gazing at her in what

must, by the calf look on his face, be adoration, but Peter would slap her on the hip and say *I'm totally shagged, babe – get us a drink*. Peter would say, *Great root*, and Richard would say, *That was making love, really making it, building our love*. She would try harder; she and Richard had too many years under their collective belt to play games the way they used to, to spread themselves across others the way they used to. She would love Richard. She would. And meantime she took her glass outside to the verandah, collapsed in a chair and propped her feet up on the railing. The solar lights in the garden were burning faintly, pale blue, and the next door rental kids banged windows, answered the phone, called profanities that drifted across the fence but not close enough to offend. Her cat Clearance, the little Burmese who had lived with her long enough for them to have forgotten the origins of his name, called to her from across the verandah, from the old rocking chair where he was curled, and she stretched out her hand.

\* \* \*

After his first day of service at the Haven Richard stumbled home grey faced. 'Aah, save me!' He collapsed into the deepest armchair. 'Hoo boy! What a day, what a place, what a mob!' Angela leaned across, passed him a glass of wine. 'Actually, I can do better than that,' she said, and came around behind him, and rubbed his shoulders, massaged his scalp. He moaned, sensually. 'Oh darling, that's wonderful. Really Angel, it's an extraordinary place. It's like something out of the Middle Ages. You'll have to come along and see it.'

'The people, or the premises?'

'Both, actually. The building if you ask me is a bit of a death trap, but apparently they're working fast to bring it up to scratch. It's one of those big old warehouse arrangements, down in the Valley. I think it might have been used as a backpackers about a decade ago, and it's a total disaster zone. A little to the left? Yes! It's extraordinary!'

'What, me, or the Haven?'

'Both. I mean, the building is amazing. Ceilings about twelve feet high; the doors are all heavy old timber, panelled – they'd be beautiful if they were sanded back and polished. Sash windows. But hoo boy does it need some paint! Everything is unbelievably dingy, and

the carpets are worn down to the tread, and everywhere there are these shells of people, shambling around, or having florid episodes and bouncing off the walls. I only had to treat a handful, but it feels like a whole day at hospital.'

'Probably because it's new, too. You'll get used to it, if you keep going.'

'I've promised to keep going – for a year, anyway. Just frankly, it'll be useful for my next application for promotion. And I want to look into that NHMRC grant I was telling you about – got to reel in that tame trick cyclist I met in Melbourne, I think.'

Angela started moving off, and he said, plaintively, 'Is that all I get of your tender lovin?'

'That's all for now. I'm in the middle of dinner,' she called back, over her shoulder, rushing now to check what sounded like the rice boiling over. 'Richard, we have to get ourselves a rice cooker. Everyone else has one, no one else has rice explosions like we do.' She mopped up the starchy liquid that was already crusting around the element. 'Shit shit shit ...' Rinsing out the cloth, wiping the stovetop again, rinsing her hands, setting the pan out to heat, finding the oil. 'Right,' and she reached for the wine bottle, and topped up her glass, and stepped back into the lounge to refill Richard's. 'Dinner in about half an hour, okay?'

'That's a bit early, dear, isn't it?'

'Have you checked the clock?' she asked, and he looked. 'How on earth did it get to be 7:40?'

'Don't know. Ask the Haven, maybe,' and she went back to the kitchen, leaving him the tv remote and some time to unwind, alone.

*And the next morning: 'Hi Graeme,' she said, when he appeared beside her at the coffee machine. 'What's this you're doing to my husband?'*

'Doing? Oh, the Haven?'

‘Mm. You didn’t strike me as someone who rounds people up for the do-gooder God boys, boss.’

‘Well of course I am – we all are, here. Anyway, the Haven is my project, and they do need some support. I’m happy to send a little extra help their way, in small practical ways. And it’ll be good for Richard to get away from the uni and get his hands dirty again. The Haven needs his help, it’s good for him to give something back – remember, they’re recording voluntary service on the Census these days. So, good news all round.’

‘Oh goodie,’ she said, with as much irony as she could squeeze out of two words.

Richard did his pro bono, there and at the free clinic, working for free, or rather bulk billing, making up effectively one day a week of time away from the university, keeping his hand in and at the same time giving something back, like a magician. He began to feel at home at the Haven, but Angela remained uncomfortable in the building, among the freaks. On her first visit one of the staff took her through to the games room, where the residents were about to sing a handful of jaunty hymns. The games room: a barn, that is, full of dart boards, pool tables, ping pong tables, an old-fashioned drinks fridge. Three television sets arranged in a laager, screens facing out, each on a different channel. People sitting gape mouthed, anaesthetized in front of the screens. Some squatted on the floor, one or two with their arms wrapped around their heads. There was a kind of silence, the silence of no conversation, no sound but the clunk of billiard cues on balls, the chattering of the syncopated televisions, and the bass note of the humming and sougning of people talking to themselves, conversing with their ghosts, forming a sound haze that rendered the room indistinct.

The Maori cook, Hemi, strumming his guitar, caught their indistinct attention, and led by his enthusiasm they croaked out, unconvincingly, off key and time, a hymn and then a chorus and then another hymn, missing most of the lines, missing most of the notes, while volunteers and members of staff quartered the room, urging more voice, more passion, more *One two three, Jesus loves me, one two, Jesus loves you, three four, he loves you ...* And Angela was bailed up by an outlier, a young man with stubble chin and heavy acne, with rheumy eyes, who cornered her, talking across her shoulder, ‘Ah mate you wouldn’t believe it, it’s stinkin in the Watch House, no fucken air.’ *Three four, he loves you more, than you’ve ever been*

*loved before.* Me mum hit me with a broom, look, me arm's still swollen,' *Five six seven, we're going to heaven,* 'and she fucken charged me with assault. I spent two days in the psych unit and then they remanded me to the Watch House.' *Eight, nine, he's truly divine. Nine ten,* 'Mate, can you give me two bucks? I gotta go up to the Salvos to get a hamper, and it's a fucken long trek in the sun. If you can give me two bucks, I can get a bus up and get my food.' *This is the end, but we've time to sing it again. One two three, Jesus loves* 'Going to spend Christmas at Darren's. You know? Me mum changed me address, I can't go back now.' *me, one, two, Jesus,* and just as Angela had reached the point where she felt herself, like him, trembling on the edge of mania, *loves you,* the director Charlie, a spider monkey of a man, rescued her – 'Come on now Davo, push off, okay mate? Get over there with the others, let's hear you sing for your supper.' After that when she accompanied Richard for a celebration or event, she stuck close to him, talking to the staff or residents only if they came up and engaged her, only if she had to, to be polite.

Which meant she had at least met the Trust Board, at least knew the staff by name, if not the residents. ('Don't say freak, not even in your head,' she told herself.) Which was good, because she was going to be spending great chunks of time there, over the next weeks. It had just hit 1999, and she'd made it through the Christmas-New Year break, always a bad time for Angela who felt the years slipping by too rapidly, each anniversary signalling all she'd not achieved in the previous year, every Christmas reminding her of what she didn't have. Christmas with her parents and siblings and their children, feeling her own hands so empty, herself so unprotected against the battering of emotions and family movements because of having no child to hold, no one other than Richard to whom she could reach across, with whom she might busy her hands, straightening a collar or smoothing a fringe. Resenting Sophie who was so offhand about her daughter, who never seemed to ... *cherish her,* Angela would say out loud, right in the middle of a family dinner, and feel a thwack in the vicinity of her heart, that ka-dumph of loss, loss of something she'd never had, will not now ever have. So she'd not think about it; she'd go in to the Office where she would move her hands professionally to her keyboard and mouse, to her phone, to the files. Back at home she would lift her emery board and nail polishes, slip on the rings she'd bought or had Richard buy for her, and over the last few months, during meetings she would roll in the palm of her left hand a small egg of pale jade.

‘Turquoise would be your stone, if you want my opinion,’ said Hinde. They were having drinks that evening, a six o’clock glass at the Three Monkeys while a band set up noisily in the front room, getting ready for their gig later that evening. Angela had knocked back half of the bowl-sized glass in one hit, and felt flushed and legless, giggly, young. ‘No, really,’ Hinde went on, ‘Jade is such a cold stone but. I know about these things, I started reading about them when I gave up on that feng shui shit.’ She pronounced it *feng shooney*, carefully ironic, and paused to light a cigarette. ‘I mean to say. Imagine believing that that works when maybe half a billion Chinese people – or more! – are living like hell.’

Angela laughed out loud, and covered her mouth, then reached clumsily to place her hand over Hinde’s. ‘So what is it about turquoise?’ she asked. Not without reason: Hinde’s fingers and wrists and neck were draped with turquoise set in silver, ‘Tex Mex,’ Hinde called it, mostly relics of one trip or another to the US, some of them gifts from friends encouraging her penchant to over-decorate. ‘So okay,’ said Hinde. ‘I know it’s maybe a bit over the top. But you know, it’s sort of grounding. Turquoise is warm, it’s dense, it’s like the earth. Jade, you ask me, it’s like water, or air, it can’t be trusted. Go for earth, baby, that’s my advice.’ And she leaned back, and bit into a cream-dipped potato wedge from a bowl the waiter had placed on the table en passant.

This evening was the prologue, you might say, for the next story. Because they were drinking that night to celebrate Angela’s promotion which went hand in hand with her taking on the audit of the Haven, that great tattered building she’d been avoiding, where these days forty fifty sixty lost souls lived and tried to find a way of finding their feet again. The *Haven*; under the oversight of the *Office*. Angela loved all those solid nouns, the nominative gesture of putting a capital letter on an ordinary word and turning it into an institution. Now she had been promoted, and appointed capital-I Investigator of the capital-H Haven. Now she arrived at the front door not as a visitor, the wife of the volunteer doctor, but as someone with her own identity, her own authority. The director Charlie smiled hello; the day manager Stuart called out ‘Hey girl, welcome’; and matron Maria looked up from her monitor, said, ‘You got all you need?’ She did, for the moment.

This the moment of beginning the job. This is where you start when conducting an audit. You need to find out: *How does this organisation work? What are its formal patterns of engagement, its processes, its policies? What do people in the organisation actually do?* – because as everyone knows, the stated procedures are more in the nature of a general statement of belief than how anyone actually behaves. You want to see if you can detect the values of the organisation in practice, the values of its staff, its stated mission – what it's meant to do – and what it does in fact do. Of course you want to establish the bottom line items – cash flow, income and expenditure, depreciation, assets, liabilities and equity. But you can't do this effectively unless you know how the place actually works.

So this is how you do it. You hang about; a lot. You arrange with the director or chief executive or manager to have a desk in the place, even just for a couple of days a week. You're tell them you're happy with a desk in an open plan area; you're happier, truth be told, with that than a private office because in the general workspace you get a better sense of what's going on. You listen to how staff talk on the telephone. You eavesdrop on their conversations with each other, across the desks and in the tearooms and in the loos. You listen to what they say and how they say it. You want to be as unobtrusive as possible, to be like wallpaper, like an accountant – quiet and grey. Or maybe like a machine: no threat, just white noise, you're ticking away in the corner of the office as efficiently and neutrally, as invisibly, as the air conditioner, the printer, the bar fridge where the staff keep their sandwiches in summer. The figures, the income and expenditure, the cash flow, the depreciation schedule, the balance sheet – those things matter, of course, but how can you make sense of them if you don't know the world from which they emerged, the world in which they flow?

Angela arranged to have a desk in the large reception room that was the first door you'd come to if you entered from the front, where any visitor would enter the building. First door on your left. A large door, wooden and panelled, with a large brass doorknob down low, about hip height for Angela, dressed with an appropriately substantial keyhole, and inside the doorway, to the left, on a board with fifteen nails, hung its large plain brass key. The huge desk nearest the door, just below the key board, held a computer, a small printer off to the side, a capable-looking telephone with more buttons than most. Towards the front of that desk, nearest the door, was the daybook and, below it, the night book. Beside

them, a sign-in book for staff and visitors, a stack of message slips, and behind the desk, Jessica, *that lovely redheaded girl* (Richard's phrase), who fielded calls, harried the residents who wandered or shambled into this (for them) no-go zone, and did everything that receptionists, or office managers, as she was termed, do: receive. She received: messages and instructions, by phone, voice, snail mail, email. And she transmitted too: typing up letters and records, forwarding messages, marking up on the big whiteboard where each staff member might be at any time. Jessica started work at nine a.m., had thirty minutes or sometimes about an hour for lunch, and began packing up her desk at 4:45 each afternoon. First thing in the morning she tidied the office, and prepared the first pot of coffee but no more than that, she didn't drink coffee herself, she couldn't see as it was her job, really. Oh, she'd make a fresh pot for Charlie if he was coming back from a trip, or for the Board members if they were gathering for a meeting, but not just for everyday, not for Maria and Stuart, that is to say. That was Jessica, first point of human contact as you enter the Haven.

Across from her, behind the door, were two desks, shared variously by the several counsellors who put in their hours each week, some of them established professionals, the others counsellors in training, fulfilling their internship at the Haven doing their pro bono work – Pro deo, said Charlie. *Pro: for, in favour of; deo, noun, God.* Pro deo; for God, said Canon St John Garfield, the excessively named chairman of the Board.

Angela never got them all straight, the counsellors. 'They all look the same to me,' she complained to Hinde, who snorted. They came, and went, and were rarely at the desks, which they used mostly as a place to leave their briefcases, and store their stationery and, if they didn't have anywhere else they had to be, to type up their reports on the patients they'd seen.

'Residents,' said Stuart. 'We call them residents.'

'God knows they're hardly patient,' said Maria, the joke tired long before Angela heard it the first time.

Behind the counsellors' desks was a door, quite unexceptional, in fact almost invisible. And if you knocked, and were told to enter, and went through the door, you would be in the office of the director, Charlie, that off-centre man who moved always as if he were

dancing, dancing away, Angela thought; a man with junkie's eyes and a face deeply scarred first by acne and later, in prison, by someone else's blade. Charlie, seven years since he'd given his heart to Jesus, six years since he'd got clean, away from the junk; five years since he'd gotten out of prison and all that world of crime; four years since he'd become a father for the first time and had married the woman he'd used once as an income source; three years since his appointment by an impressed Board as inaugural director of this centre, his own vision, as he'd tell anyone who asked; two years since he'd appointed his old mate, Stuart, now also clean and crime free, as assistant director, and his other old mate, Maria, as matron; one year since his second child was born, a wheezing wall-eyed tot; and now, 1999, he's on top of the world, and he caught up Angela's hand and kissed it, first appropriately on the back and then inappropriately turned it over, pressed a kiss into her palm, and folded her fingers closed over the mark of his lips.

Charlie had taken that rundown dump the Haven, he told her, a place where he'd once been a resident, as he'd tell anyone who asked, taken that crash pad, that squat turned rescue residence, that condemned building now largely restored thanks mostly to Charlie's skills in raising funds for its restoration; the empty coffers filled, the previously unknown centre receiving regular and national media coverage. He'd made it, and built it, and if he was too loud, and carried still all the crap of his old Kings Cross life so deeply in his being that it floated about him like Pigpen's filth in those old Snoopy comics, like a badly stained bath, well hell, he delivered. 'To run this kind of joint,' he told Angela, 'you need my kind of education, the kind that teaches you what people want, that keeps you on your toes, that lets you know how to deal with these mad bastards, excuse me, we have here. Your university training, excuse me gorgeous, but that means nothing in this world. School of hard knocks, that's me; and me mate Stuart too. Maria, now she's a trained nurse, don't get me wrong, I wouldn't take chances with medicine and shit, and the Board needed to know she could dish out the drugs. But she's done her time too, she knows what it's like out there on the streets.' And he smiled at her, with that over-prolonged eye contact, and here Angela could be open eyed and matey, or she could go sultry on him, which is what she did, and with a practiced grace, because she wanted him on side.

Charlie delivered. Since he'd taken over, three years ago, the Haven had cleaned up its physical environment to an admittedly limited extent – 'We've moved past the demolition warning,' Stuart said; 'Can't do anything about the outside, but.' The Haven was off a side

road deep in the Valley, that part of the city that stank of urine and garbage, where the cracked concrete collected discarded cigarette butts, and captured the high heels of hookers, and party girls on clubbing nights. Where the parking areas were patrolled but not lit, where the Haven's own steps, crumbling and grey, shaded by an ancient plane tree, provided as good a shooting gallery as any nightclub shitter. Charlie couldn't fix that; but he developed his crew of counsellors who gave their services free, his own crew of passionate Friends recruited from the local churches. He organized the six paid staff: himself, top of the tree; then his adjuncts Stuart and Maria; Jessica the receptionist – excuse me, the office manager; the cook Hemi, sober now for three years; and the night manager whose name Angela could never remember without checking her records. All of them but Charlie appointed in the last two years, all of them people of merit, St John told Angela at the very brief briefing he provided before she took up the audit. All rough as guts, Charlie said, and almost winked, they'd all paid their dues on the street, they were cleaned up now and cleared out and ready to give something back to the society that hadn't entirely cut them loose.

And the three principal staff at least, Charlie and Stuart and Maria, gave it back in spades. Each was in at the Haven by seven in the morning, and always there still at seven or eight or nine at night, seven days a week. They knew the life story, the phobias, the tragedies, of every resident in the Haven, all sixty-odd, the maximum they were licensed to accommodate. 'I'll say this for them,' Richard said to Angela, when she was preparing to begin her investigation, 'there's never been a time I've visited when Stuart and Maria weren't at their desks, or hanging out with the kids.'

'Kids?' asked Angela, picturing the ruined faces of more than half the people living there.

'Okay, "residents"'. They call them the kids when no one else is around. Don't look at me like that. I know they have a tendency to be a touch derogatory. But they're doing good work, those folk, and heaven knows your little social work graduates wouldn't do that kind of thing, wouldn't spend that much time, wouldn't have the insider knowledge about that community.'

'Set a thief to catch a thief?'

‘Oh Angela. Remember that all you have to do is drop in for a few days and look at papers, all I have to do is drop in and dispense a bit of medicine. They’re there all the time; they get right down in the mess. I take my hat off to them. And they do it all on the smell of an oily rag too. They’re the ones who have to convince the Board about every move and every decision, and Charlie is out there raising funds, talk about the Midas touch, and god bless him. There’s sixty people at any one time who’d otherwise be out on the streets, or in prison, or in mental hospitals, and Angela don’t look at me like that, neither of us really know what those places are like. We’re innocents, Ang. We’re in no position to judge those people.’

‘Richard, you’re browbeating me. Anyway, I can’t talk with you about it. Not while I’m doing the audit.’

‘Oh, for goodness sake, Angela. That’s just a formality. It’s not as though you’re engaged on a national security issue. Anyway, you brought it up.’

‘Richard. Sorry. Could you pour me another drink, please?’

\* \* \*

Stuart and Maria each had a desk in the front office too. So that’s five desks so far, if you’re counting. Each had a bank of filing cabinets, a phone, a computer. Stuart had the small safe below his desk, and Maria had, bolted to the wall behind her desk, the locked medicine cabinet. Stuart’s desk sported a plaque: *The joy of the Lord is my strength*, and space enough around and between his desk to negotiate his wheelchair and to prop his artificial legs. Both original legs missing. ‘Trains, huh!’ he’d said to Angela, and winked broadly.

‘It was a car accident, not a train,’ Charlie told Angela later. ‘Poor old Stuart, he used to be a real drunk bastard. He was walking home one time after a night out, full of booze and weaving all over the road. Got hit by some poor bloody kid on just about his first time behind the wheel after he’d got his licence. God knows how it didn’t kill him, but it took his legs and broke his back. Not that it’s slowed him down much.’ Stuart had already shown Angela the knife scars on his shoulders, and the thick one across his belly. ‘After the accident,’ he’d told her. ‘Prison shit.’

‘Some kind of shit, anyway,’ said Maria, and smiled carefully, and carefully wiped a cloth across the monitor of her computer, and touched the start key.

They all remembered not to swear when the Trustees were present, which Angela found ... commendable. She did wonder about the depth of their commitment to their enthusiastic faith. But Stuart had a contagious laugh; Charlie, well he had presence; and Maria had, if not a compassionate air, a certain competence.

What was Maria’s role, really, Angela wondered. She turned to the minute book. There, a bit over two years ago; the Board had agreed with Charlie that the Haven needed a matron. After all, over seventy per cent of the residents were dependent on prescription drugs, many of them now prescribed by Richard; and none were in any condition to be responsible for their own medication. At best they’d forget to take it, or take the wrong dosage; at worst they’d sell the drugs to fellow residents, or steal them off one another.

‘Anyway, even if we didn’t have the drug shit, excuse me, nearly half of the residents are girls, and it’s not right,’ Charlie said, ‘for me and Stuart to be the only ones dealing with them, secret women’s business, you know.’ And besides, it was useful to have a female authority figure, the Board agreed.

Two doors down from the front office was a small examination room, where Richard attended the residents in his four-hour visit each week. He prescribed them the necessary drugs: anti-psychotics, under direction where necessary from a tame psychiatrist; anti-depressants; anti-convulsants; antabuse for the alcoholics. His entire pharmacopeia, it seemed to Angela, was negative, designed to excise, prevent, avoid, arrest. When the police, as they sometimes did, dropped a shuddering Hep C-ridden junkie on the front step, or some poor old alcoholic going through early stages of DTs, or some kid they’d picked up off the streets, Maria or Stuart or what’s his name the night manager would call Richard and he would turn out, grumbling, to sedate, rehydrate, or whatever was required by the new patient, sit at the bedside during the early stages of withdrawal, then go home, remaining on call if needed, though he never was, or almost never. Richard held his clinic in that room down the hall, the one beside the clinic room for group therapy sessions, no private consultations here, any seriously crazy resident was packed off to hospital and

psychiatrists, any seriously ill residents Richard sent to outpatients, but he handled all the everyday ails as the changing pro bono therapists handled all the everyday anxieties and Jessica all the everyday forms and Stuart and Maria the claims and reports that kept the Haven running.

‘So how do you record and account for the drugs?’ Angela asked. Maria sighed, quite heavily, and produced a bound ledger, and certainly all the records checked out. At random, Angela checked bottles of medication against the records of prescriptions; counted out tablets across the desk, then scooped them back into the bottles, securing the lids, replacing them in the cabinet, locking the door, handing the keys back to Maria who watched, but said nothing. Angela checked the cost of prescriptions against the cashbook, and traced the expenses through the ledgers to the individual residents’ accounts. Everything matched. All accounted for.

That was day one and day two. Angela mulled about in the office with Jessica, finishing up her preparation and going through the coming week’s problems and plans. She heard one of the counsellors call goodbye, and leave; she heard Charlie slam a door and swear; and now it was quiet, and about 5 p.m., and the walking wounded would soon be coming home from their little jobs out and about in the city. It was Richard’s clinic afternoon, so she stuck her head around his door and called out that she was through now, that she’d wait and go home with him as soon as he was finished. And she waited, reading a bible cartoon, choosing not to notice as Charlie cantered by down the passage, howling about the value of obedience to a howling youth who fled before him on tattered feet. ‘Richard,’ she said when he finally appeared, his hands still damp from the final scrub, as she hugged him, and nipped at the soft skin on his neck, ‘You’re so normal. I like that about you,’ and they shopped, and picked up some Thai, and were home in time to feed Clearance the cat and settle down with their take-out and chilled wine in front of the ABC news.

On Wednesday Richard flew down to Melbourne to consult with his new research partner. Someone Angela hadn’t yet met. She spent the day at her own desk at the Office, sorting out some requisitions for the youth shelter, discussing the Haven with Graeme, catching up on emails and paperwork. Giving Shelley some typing to do because she was more senior now, she was tied up with too many projects just at the moment, Shelley didn’t mind. Note

for the record: the Minutes, immaculately maintained. Part of Jessica's duties. Each set signed off by St John Garfield.

'Saint John,' asked Shelley, typing up Angela's notes. 'What sort of a name is that?'

'It's English,' said Angela. 'And it's Sinjin. That's how you say it.'

'Well, pardon me!'

Thursday. Back to the Haven, back to the audit. Position descriptions? Check. Payroll records? Check. That took all morning, but seemed pretty much okay. The Tax Office was happy, the returns were submitted on time, the amounts returned matched the amounts in the account, which themselves matched the hours worked and amounts paid to full time and part time, permanent and casual staff.

But under what circumstances was Charlie's wife employed? Angela checked back through the Minutes. Yes, Charlie had tabled a proposal that she be kept on standby for occasional labour, e.g. when additional support required in the office. The circumstances of that labour, or the actual capacities she might bring, not clearly spelled out. What does a barely literate ex-hooker with visible tracks on her arms have to offer the organisational capability of a rehabilitation centre, Angela wanted to ask, but it was semi-outside the scope of her audit. A note about propriety, perhaps, on the audit report. Some comment about the need for transparency. That'll do. *Make a note; put it in the report.*

The day book next, and the night book. Check. Both were meticulously kept.

Petty cash, check. They ran a text book system: vouchers, cash, receipts, all adding up to \$200, all recorded properly in the cash book, all reconciled each week. Jessica's job, and she did it just fine.

Except for some entries that didn't quite meet standard. 'What about these unspecified amounts?' she asked Jessica. 'The ones signed for by Charlie?'

'I don't know; he must of got money for petrol or something.'

‘Petrol? For his own car, or what? And wouldn’t it be noted on the voucher?’

‘I don’t know. I just keep everything balanced.’ And, after a brief pause, while Angela looked at her flatly, she said, ‘Look, it’s not my job to sort out Charlie. I don’t tidy up after the director, okay?’

The next week, back at the Office, before she left first to collect Richard from the airport and drop him off at St Lucia, and then drove on to the Valley for another day at the Haven, Graeme cornered her. ‘Angela, you must not embarrass our clients, or browbeat their staff. You mustn’t.’ And, as Angela opened her mouth to respond, ‘Look, don’t recite the ethics standards to me; I’ve been doing this one hell of a lot longer than you, remember. This is a public body. We produce a full investigation, and a substantiated audit report, but we will not embarrass our clients along the way. Ask me about it if there are sensitive issues to be chased up; I’ll deal with it, not you.’

‘Okay, Graeme. Well, the first thing I want to know is what Charlie is using the petty cash for. He draws around about \$100 a week, which is over \$5000 a year unaccounted for, out of petty cash. What’s he spending it on? Why doesn’t he produce receipts, like everyone else? You check that one out, all right, and then I’ll be able to make a proper report on it. Thanks.’

Graeme spread his hands. ‘Okay, okay, I’ll talk to Charlie, maybe get him write up a stat dec for last year’s expenditure. But for Christ’s sake, Angela, you’re talking pennies here, I mean \$5000 is hardly the crime of the century, even if he’d been ripping the Haven off. We’re not talking Skase here, okay? And think about it, \$5000 is worth maybe a week of your time, no more. My last big audit, before I took over the Office, I was checking up on millions. This job of yours is peanuts; all you have to do is substantiate the accounts, check on processes, let me know your findings, and then leave it alone. Okay?’

‘Okay.’

‘Tell you what, Hinde, the Haven is beginning to get on my wick. Not to mention Graeme and his *Angela, don't ask questions. Angela, don't embarrass the clients. Angela, don't conduct a proper audit.* I got to tell you Hinde, he's seriously pissing me off.’

‘Angela, Angela, Angela. You've got to get out more. It's been, what, nearly three weeks, and all you do is obsess about that rat hole. You've got to start having fun again,’ said Hinde, who was sitting on Angela's sofa, leaning forward to slice Italian bread on the perspex board on the marble top coffee table, managing not to knock over the carafe of red wine beside the breadboard, managing not to knock the bowl of hummus onto the slate floor below, not even spilling crumbs, in fact, although the bread was so crisp and crackly, as she swiped a slice of bread through the dip and passed it to Angela, who lifted a slice of tomato onto the hummus and laid a broad green leaf of basil on top, and bit into the whole. Hinde had spent more time in the job than Angela; and had more patience, despite her volatile behaviour. She paid her dues, she worked overtime without complaining, never fudged her timesheets, and had maintained a degree of humour along with her ever-increasing efficiency as she moved up through the public service levels until now, like Angela, she was semi-autonomous in their semi-autonomous Office. She was content. She believed things were fundamentally okay. Angela, on the other hand, had managed to retain a certain naïveté, a certain hopeful belief in systems, and believing, had over the years suffered the shock of heresy experienced, shock after shock as one project after another was dropped or inappropriately or inefficiently implemented, never by the spirit, only by the letter of the documentation, and others, dear to her heart, weren't dropped but instead left to wither in the thin air of ethics, or interest; and then more shocks as she saw kings become fools, and fools kings. She had thought the Office would be better, but that wasn't so, not according to recent experience. Angela had been keeping records. That's what she was trained to do. It's what she was employed to do. Keep records, record everything, balance everything, analyse everything, doubt everything until it's been tested against the figures. She was building a gradually mounting stack of evidence – of mismanagement, of inefficiency. Not yet of anything that really and truly amounts to impropriety, but that, as she was soon to find out, was on its way.

*Week three of the audit, and time now for her first meeting with the Trust Board, the group appointed to oversee the Haven's activities and orientation. Some faces she knew, some she would have to learn. Graeme*

*was there in his capacity as overseer of the Haven, with Peter there to represent the Office in his stead. There were three wealthy elderly people, Board members appointed on the basis of donations they had given or might yet give. Jessica was there, doubling as minutes secretary. Charlie Johns, the director, the man with whom she was now, briefly, for the duration of the audit, working so closely, the man she was getting to know. Someone else across the table, someone grey and without obvious portfolio. The general manager of that branch of Health which had responsibility for the Office, a woman by the way, there today by invitation, not to make up the quorum. And the Chair, St John pronounced Sinjin, cheerfully bearded and flesh packed tight with health and good food, dog-collared salt-and-peppered priest blissfully observing protocol and moving the meeting along with careful speed. Every suggestion a motion, every motion seconded, every seconded motion put to the vote provided it satisfied every bylaw and condition; and he knows them all by heart. Reports tabled, mostly oral: financial, staffing, administration, planning; mostly provided by Charlie talking talking talking, e.g. this and I gotta tell you that, taking up so much space, and sitting opposite her, his feet touching hers under the table possibly by accident at first but then there was no doubt no doubt at all that Charlie was stretching out his legs under the broad conference table, actually pressing his foot firmly against hers. Cheeky.*

When the meeting was over, and the coffee that followed the meeting was over, Jessica headed back to reception and Angela and the general manager, Marjorie B-something, began automatically tidying away used cups and serviettes, and then Marjorie something or was it Angela noticed that the men had vanished, that they were talking in the hallway, that the women were left to do the women's work; and they laughed, maybe ruefully, but hey we're nearly done, why stop now, why be petty, let's just clear up. And anyway, Marjorie wanted to talk a bit more about the meeting, something had bothered her, why had St John refused to countenance or include in the minutes a suggestion, a motion in fact from Peter that the external auditor of the Haven be changed, for appearance if nothing else, the auditor, it having recently emerged, being a friend at least if not more of the director Charlie Johns. Charlie had purpled, his cheeks flushed violet, his eyes reddened, and St John had insisted they put the question aside for another day.

'What was that all about?' asked Marjorie. 'Is there a what shall we say *impropriety* going on here?' And Angela said, 'Search me – I'm new here,' but thought, *what's going on?* And wondered why Peter hadn't mentioned it to her ahead of time. *A friend at least, if not more.* What? Angela and Marjorie walked together to the front door, but Charlie called out to her, 'Oh Angela, can you give me a few minutes before you go?' So they farewelled there, and

Angela walked back down the corridor, her back tingling because there was something happening between them, that's for sure – *a friend at least* – but what to make of it? She walked back to Charlie, and he laid his hot hand on her arm – *a friend at least, if not more* – and said in his voice that always had an urgent undertow, 'We really should meet more often – why don't we make it a regular date, Friday mornings for coffee, then you can do your hunt and peck around the place?' Charlie had the hottest eyes, the hottest hand, and 'Sure,' she said, casually, and then went out to her car, and drove back to work.

The next day was Friday, time for the regular meeting of the Office staff, their fortnightly meeting and Angela raised some of her concerns – the petty cash? private use of vehicles? the external auditor? – and Hinde wanted to know, 'So, how do they handle cash?'

'Hey, it's not like they're in business or anything; it's not like they have a lot of cash flowing through that place.' That was Graeme, speaking from the chair, but Angela responded, 'Actually, they do, from time to time. Let's see: there's the petty cash, and that seems to be managed just fine except for the concern I've mentioned. All present and accounted for. They don't use cash for the groceries they purchase, just for petrol. All bills paid by cheque, though I think I'll suggest a shift to BPay – it's cheaper, and it leaves cleaner records. All salaries by direct debit; that's okay too. They draw a chunk of cash every Thursday from the Trust account – the residents' money. That system is going to take me a bit more work, don't look like that, Graeme, I've got to get it done. I'll be ooh, delicate, I promise you. But the cash we really need to identify is what comes in from donations. Charlie does a funding run every three months or so, apparently, does a big talkathon at churches, and passes the plate around the congregations. He's taken some really serious money. Look at this statement' – and she passed across the conference table a sheet of paper showing deposits made over three months, deposits of thousands of dollars each time.

'Hey, that old silver tongue; who'd have thought it?' said Peter. And then, 'What kind of a surplus are we talking about here, by the way? Has anyone worked out the cost of his trips?'

'No, not that I've seen. I'd guess the costs are collapsed into general expenses; there isn't an entry for fundraising expenses, or an account for it in the books. I could do up one or two trips as examples, if you like?' Angela offered.

‘Yes, fine,’ said Graeme. ‘Have a look. Maybe talk to Charlie too, but for Christ’s sake don’t offend him. He’s such a prickly character.’

Peter cleared his throat. ‘So tell me, Graeme, what’s with you and this audit? Since when did auditors have to soft soap the clients? You’ve really been on Angel’s case about this – and face it, if she can’t sight the documentation and certify the operations, you’re in no position to sign off on the audit report. So what I’m wondering, mate, is why you’re being so sensitive.’

‘Oh what? Don’t be ludicrous, Peter. An audit is precisely like any job making up accounts, only more detailed. If we come at the clients like they’re criminals, or like we’re the Tax Office’ (a sideways glance at Angela) ‘then we’ve a, antagonised them from the start and b, prejudiced our chances of getting information in a full and free manner and c, damaged our reputations in the process. Look Ang,’ and he swivelled his chair around to face her, spread out his hands. ‘I know and you know you’re damn good at this, but face it, you do have that tax inspector attitude. Just sweeten up a bit, okay? And check everything in the R&M columns, okay, look at everything – check what was done, see the work, see the accounts, everything. There’s no need to be a bitch about it all. After that we’ll discuss the trust accounts. Okay?’

A moment’s silence; then Peter said, ‘Graeme, I need a few minutes of your time,’ and Angela scooped up her papers, and Hinde and Shelley did too, and they left the room.

She was at her desk twenty minutes later, totalling figures, checking a spreadsheet, when the conference room door opened and closed, and she felt Peter standing behind her, felt his cool fingers stroking ever so lightly across the back of her neck, the fingers she’d not felt for months now; felt him bend over her, felt a delicate touch, so delicate, where his fingers had been, felt his hands grip and rub her shoulders, heard him say, ‘Take it easy, sweetie, don’t let Graeme stress you out. You’re doing fine, you know that,’ and he kissed her cheek, like a brother. Then Graeme was there, at the front of her desk, and saying, ‘Excuse me, Peter,’ and Peter said, ‘Lunch later, Ang?’ and went back to his own cubicle, and rolled down the blinds, and closed the door.

‘Angela,’ Graeme said, ‘Don’t take this so personally,’ and he shook out his handkerchief and passed it across the desk to her. ‘It’s just a question of manner, of tone. Don’t let them think you have anything against them. I know they’re not what you used to be used to, but we just have to do a job of work, validate their accounts, validate their records, sign off, get out of there.’

She pressed the start up key on her computer, reached for the folder of her notes, and began to wonder, more seriously, began putting two and two together to make, appropriately, four. She opened up the computer file, began to enter figures in the spreadsheet, waited for lunchtime, waited for lunch.

‘So, they tell us you’re the lady who’s gonna find out how we’re all being screwed by this shit heap.’

Lunchtime at the Haven the following week, and Angela had been persuaded to eat in with the residents today. She looked across to see who was talking to her, assuming he was talking to her. He was sitting a couple of places down the refectory table, and to her right. His speech was thick and damp, probably because most of his teeth were missing, and his tattered red beard curled around and into his mouth. His hair had been red too, years ago. Now it was that distressed straw that redheads always seem to end up with instead of a clear grey. Everything about him sloped downwards: the crevasses around his mouth, the grey bags under his eyes, the lines of burst capillaries inscribing his nose and cheeks, his lips. Everything about him looked faded – alcohol, she had to guess, judging by his age and the texture of his skin and his flaking coat. As she watched him he pushed his plate aside and drew the cup of tea towards him; added spoon after spoon of sugar; stirred it loudly; propped both elbows on the table, arched himself over the cup, then leaned stiffly down to the table and slurped at the tea.

‘Screwed?’ she said, trying not to stare, trying to focus on the question. ‘I’m just doing the investigation, just getting the paperwork together, just checking the accounts.’

‘She’s making a list, checking it twice, hurnh’ – this from the hot man sitting on her left, a greasy young man, with greasy eyes, ‘She’s making a list, and checking it twice, gonna find out who’s naughty and nice,’ and he threw his head back and howled, high and loud, in what Angela through her alarm realised must be laughter, though it sounded like some sort of convulsion. The young woman sitting on his other side hit him hard across the shoulder: ‘Shove it, fuckface. You’ll get Maria over here,’ and he choked himself back to silence, hunching over his plate, shovelling the food in so fast she was sure he’d choke.

The woman, the girl really, the one who’d hit him, leaned back and looked at Angela over his back. ‘You want to find out who’s naughty and nice, you should fucken aks us. We’re the ones who wear every bit of shit, and pay for the fucken privilege, so he can get on fucken telly and talk about his good works. You want to know what goes on, you aks us, right?’ Her eyes slid up, alarmingly, leaving only blood-raked whites visible, then she

shuddered and the irises dropped back into place. ‘Fuckfuckfuck.’ Then, ‘You won’t find out, you know. He’s a clever fucker.’

‘Who is?’ asked Angela.

‘Who’d’ya think, cunt?’ And the girl swung her legs over the bench seat, one-armed her still loaded plate onto the rack, and flummoxed out of the room, bouncing off the doorjamb as she did.

‘Hey, hey,’ called one of her neighbours, ‘You didn’t scrape your plate. Suzie, you didn’t scrape your plate.’ Then looked at Angela, then down the table. ‘She didn’t scrape her plate.’

Another man, a few seats down, dropped his face close to his own plate, mumbling, ‘I must admit ... I must admit ...’; and the stained young man beside Angela howled out ‘Scrape, plate, scrape, plate.’

‘You just shut the fuck up, Dom. And who gives a stuff about that little bitch?’ That was a raddled woman sitting beside Toothless. ‘Charlie’ll sort that bitch out. Maybe you can put that in your record too, lady.’

‘Aah. Is there something I should know about?’ she asked carefully.

‘Something? What’d you fucken think? Why you think that bitch Suzie can like make shit like she just did, and Maria don’t even show? You watch, Dom has one more squeak and she’ll be onto him like god’s wrath, or if we talk too loud, or we leave a spot of gravy on the table here. But Suzie, no man, her shit don’t stink. Us, we work our arses off for this shithole, and pay for the right, and get screwed by those arseholes in the front office. Why d’you think they all drive hot new cars, why d’you think they get to go overseas on holiday when they’re always on about like how shit their pay is, how they do this for love? Gimme a fucken break. Love, my arse. Cash, more like. And cunt.’

‘I’m not sure I know what you mean.’

'Look lady.' It was Toothless again. 'Don't you know the deal yet? Find out the terms and conditions for residents. See what they tell you. See what they do with our benefits, or talk to the kids who work, ask them where their pay goes. Figure it out.'

'Oh well of course. That's standard in an audit.'

'Yeah, right. Then go ask them next how we walk out of here. What we walk out with. Check our income against expenses, that's what you do, right? Do a little figuring out, right, see how things break.'

'Yeah, and ask about the kids too,' said the older woman. Dawn, Angela had heard her called. 'Ask about services they provide.'

'Ask about the fundraising tours.'

'Ask about medication time.' Medication time?

'Ask about what God told me' – and this was Dom again. He took Angela's chin in his hand, swivelled his face up against hers, all greasy breath and wet eyes. 'Ask God what happens next,' and he protruded his thick tongue and forced it against her lips, and as she wrenched her head away, plunged it deep into her ear. She heard her table companions, *Dom, let her go; Dom, you mad cunt*; and then Charlie was there, unexpectedly, slapping Dom across the head.

'Let the lady go, Dom, that's my boy, that's gunna go in the book, you poor fool,' and Dom in tears now, saying 'Sorry lady, sorrysorrysorry, sorry lady, sorry,' and darting his head forward again, tongue out and ready, and Charlie yanking him away, marching him out the door.

Angela jumped to her feet – 'Excuse me' – and out the door towards the bathrooms. She could hear Dom's voice receding down the long, high-ceilinged wood-panelled corridor, a door slamming deep in the house, and then silence.

Ten minutes later she was back at the temporary desk in the front office, her mouth and ear scrubbed, and scrubbed, and rinsed, her surprised tears washed away, her trembling ceased. 'Sorry about that, darlin,' said Charlie, sitting silkily on the edge of her desk. 'That's just how it is, working with these mad bastards. Dom don't mean any harm. He wouldn't have hurt you.' He put his hand on her shoulder, squeezed, moved his fingers up to the base of her skull. Then: 'You don't want to take any of them too seriously; they get pretty paranoid after the kinds of lives they've led. If they don't know anything about anything, they'll make it up. The meds, you know, after the years of abuse they've had and the shit they've put into their bodies, it's all half-life of this chemical, half-life of that one, rattling around together inside them.' A moment, and he slid his hand down towards her waist, and looked at her closely. Then, as though nothing else were at stake, he carried on: 'Their brains are sponge.'

His eyes were black, Angela realised, she'd not noticed before, Satan's eyes, her mother had called them, when they were children, Angela and Sophie. *He had black, black eyes like the Devil*, she'd told them. This was a bandit who'd held her up at the bank where she worked as a teller two days a week. Unlucky, to be done at those odds. *Three other days every week he could have done the job but no, he had to choose my day, my window.*

'What did you do?' asked Sophie, though they both knew the story, were in fact word perfect.

I stood on the button, they were on the floor in those days, under the counter. I gave him all the cash in my float, and from Jill's in the next-door booth, and then I lay on the floor with everyone else, and he left.

'It's not like she told us every goddamn day,' Sophie said. 'Give the woman a break. These days she'd have been counselled, she'd have got it out of her system. Back then people were supposed to get better all by themselves.'

'But still,' Angela said. 'So much, so many times!'

The story had no ending. If he'd been arrested, their mother didn't know, or didn't tell. So all the story meant was, a man with the devil's eyes, a man with a gun.

Charlie leaned back, and put his hand over hers. 'But I'm real sorry he troubled you. He's just a disturbed boy, a nut. Too much' – and he gestured floridly, about his own head – 'too much STUFF going on up there.' He reached out and straightened a lock of her fringe. How could someone so ugly be so damn sexy?

It didn't happen that day, or the next, but by the end of week four he had her in the meeting room, across the table, his hand over her mouth to subdue her cries.

Whatever they say, every fuck really is much like another. There's only so much you can do, after all, only a limited number of orifices, of erogenous zones, only so many ways of stimulating them. Even those folk who play dress ups, or who beat and suture each other, once they've done it a few times, where do they go then for something fresh? 'I know! Let's take photos!' and then even that must stale, and then what next? Dress up like a nun? And then?

*All the same, being with someone new always lends an extra bit of frisson; and some people just do have a better touch than others, have something slick about them. 'Ugly people try harder,' Hinde said to Angela.*

*'They have to. Beautiful people: well, just the fact that they're condescending to screw you has to be worth heaps. The ugly ones, but – they have to prove their worth.'*

Some spaces are better, too, some spaces help you differentiate one instance from another. For some folk, it's being in a public space; for some, it's being in the outside with the possibility of being spotted, being busted; for others, it's being somewhere kind of kinky like a church, or a graveyard. For Angela, this place was pretty good. She'd never done it on a conference table so when after that week's confab he said, *Angela, maybe a few minutes of your time?* she stayed back. And just one passage away, Stuart and Maria were working, talking, leaning out the window to smoke, sending out for pizza. A passage away, that was her husband's examination room, though of course he wasn't there at the moment, she wouldn't do it if he were just over there, across the way, the room where her husband, her husband, the room, but not today, he's not, her husband, not husband, he's away again and she's here with this Charlie, this man with the devil's eyes, though to tell the truth she's not sure why she's doing it at all except that the front office was too busy for detailed discussion of the audit, and so they'd come in here, and spread the papers out across the

table, and were bending over them together, Angela critically aware, after a few minutes, of Charlie's shoulder at her shoulder, and then he turned his head, only inches from hers, and smiled at her with his devil eyes, then moved and locked the door and came back, and touched her face, and said, 'So where were we?', and she lifted her face to him, her lips parted, she smelled his skin so close, he smelt clean for all the appearance of grime though with a base note of brandy she thinks it is, she lifted her hand and seized his shirt collar and drew him towards her, and he complied, leaning over her, his hand first on her shoulder then down across her back, the small of her back, the curve of her butt, pushing hard, pushing her against his body, him hard already, she could feel the length of his cock erect between their bellies and she sighed, and caught his lip between her teeth, and pressed and rubbed against him. *Angela, Angel, ah*, he said, and for just an instant she recoiled, so familiar, they're not his words, who's this talking to her, then – oh, what the fuck, she folded backwards onto the table as he folded her, following her down, his lips still slick against hers, his hands moving to the front of her body, unbuttoning her long shirt, pulling it open, bending his head to her breasts, 'No bra?' 'No.' And his mouth on one nipple, his hand on the other, she spread her thighs and wrapped around him, drawing him close, her hands in his hair so surprisingly silky and then lifting her hips as he drew her tights down over her what do you call them, legs, knocking off her shoes, dragging the tights off, throwing them on the floor, the hard top of the table suddenly cold under her back. 'Come on,' she said, 'come on,' and he was up on the table beside her, her hands and his fumbling at his belt buckle, at buttons, pushing his pants down, his penis glossy and ready, and she wriggled into position, 'Come on, come on,' and he did, fucking her as she spiralled under him, the table biting into her back, the rubbed skin burnt and bleeding, her cunt open like a mouth, like something hungry. He plunged, and plunged, his knees bony against the timber, he must be getting burns too, all that friction on his knees, in her body, his cock so hot, his hand over her mouth, his mouth on her breasts, on her neck, across her lips, her hips lifting and grinding, feeling the rush that starts at the cleft and runs to toes, wrists, brain, and she came, and came, and he pulled his cock out of her, and said, 'Close your eyes,' and she did, and felt hot spunk spackle her cheeks. She knew that for the next few days she'd have to keep the abrasions out of Richard's sight; she knew that in all likelihood he would in fact notice, and comment on them as of course he would, as he'd be bound to do, and she would have to explain them away as burns from a hot stove, as too much exercise at the gym, as having bumped herself on a bookshelf as she stood too quickly. It

was worth it; not that the sex was all that fantastic, but it was pretty good, actually – great, even, for a first time.

‘Hinde,’ she said, the next day at lunch. ‘There was a damp towel in the meeting room. You know what that means, don’t you?’

‘Only that he’d planned it. Better planning would have put cushions on the table, or something soft, anyway. Don’t think it doesn’t show, the way you walk!’

‘Or maybe he’s not organised it for me. Maybe he uses the room for fucking all the time, and keeps that towel in there just in case he gets lucky?’

‘But it was good, yes?’

‘Oh my sweet Jesus yes. It was good. But it’s not going to happen again.’

‘Oh yeah?’

*She wasn't due back at the Haven till midway through the following week. Days before she'd see him again. And despite everything – experience, natural caution, personal preference – she couldn't help half hoping he'd call, wondering if he'd call, wondering what she'd say, trying not to rehearse. Meantime there were other cases to get on with; the Haven wasn't her only responsibility after all, though it was the biggest at present. There was time: five days. Time enough for him to call, time enough for her not to call him, time to feel embarrassed and a bit outraged, and embarrassed again to be so juvenile, she, who was usually so cool.*

'So,' Hinde said a few days later, 'Has he called?' And, when Angela shook her head, 'So how're you feeling about it?'

'Me? Feeling nothing. It's just one of those things.'

'One of those flings.' Pause. Then: 'So was it actually something you expected? Like, did he give you any clues? I think I mean cues.'

'Not really. He's just, you know, that kind of guy. The kind that gives everyone cues. Nah, bullshit. Of course I knew.'

On Wednesday that week, week five, she was back at the Haven, taking her now-customary seat at the second of the counsellors' desks. *Giddy* from Stuart; from Maria *Yeah, bello luv*. No sign of Charlie. Okay, that's okay, but she was thinking about his eyes tender and alive in hers and then his skin to skin or rather foot to stocking contact under the table, and the aftermath to their last meeting, and sure he vanished without a proper farewell, just 'Lovely', and a sigh, and a buttoning and a sliding out of the door; but still and all he'd murmured 'I love you' in coitus and if she, practiced and shelled as she is, was so eagerly I mean easily convinced, then what truth might there not be in any of the other stories she's heard? Is any of it real, or is it all just story?

Week five. Today it's time to look at the electronic records, compare them with hard documentation. Not everything was printed out, or even saved on zip disks or backed up elsewhere. *Make a note; put it in the report*. It goes to process. Okay, next? Invoices, bills,

receipt books, receipts. Random checking against the cash journals, the registers. All pretty much okay, just the usual imprecisions you find everywhere.

Time now to sight the assets, to check them against the depreciation schedules. What was purchased, and when and where? What were the prices, and what was market price at the time (*note to self: don't let Graeme know I'm checking that out*). What was sold, or otherwise disposed of, and for how much, and to whom (*note to self: don't let Graeme know I'm checking that out*). Angela walked through the Haven with the asset list she'd abstracted from the records. Electronic equipment: check. Kitchen equipment: check. Beds and fittings and fixtures. Yup. She walked through with her clipboard, making notes, comparing her notes with official records. What about the vehicles? There it was, in the Minutes from the middle of last year: Charlie had tabled a request for the purchase of two minibuses to transport the fifteen or so residents who were in employment to and from work, on the reasonable grounds that they could hardly be relied upon, at this stage, to get themselves there on time, or to get safely home. They needed to be delivered to work on time, to the factory or office, at seven-thirty or eight or eight-thirty, and collected again nine hours later. And someone needed to convey virtually all the residents to church twice each Sunday, move them safely through the streets, preventing the world and all its pleasures from seducing them away.

'Stuart,' she said, mid-afternoon of the next day. 'I'll need to see these vehicles. Can you point me in the right direction?'

'Nah, sweetheart. I'll send someone with you. They're all over the place.' And he wheeled himself out into the hallway, down down down to the end of the building, past the entrance to the dining hall, down the ramp. Angela walked behind, and slightly to the side. The corridor was wide, but she felt a bit out of place, not pushing him, not helping, being maybe in the way. She followed him into the games room, which hadn't changed at all since she'd first seen it nearly three years ago, still the size of a warehouse, still with two pool tables, three ping pong tables, a dart board, she noticed now a locked cabinet for the darts, and lines marked on the floor for a sometime basketball court; the whole place still rocky, draughty, too-hot/too-cold, some kind of barn, and in here were maybe ten, maybe twenty residents, mostly grouped around the television sets on the mouldy plastic couches.

At the very back of the room, in the half-light, Angela saw a shape. A plank. Long, horizontal, attached at one end to yet another couch, and at the other to the floor, bent knees ensuring that the body – since that, it transpired, was what it was – lay entirely parallel to the horizontal plane. As she drew closer she could see it was a man, someone she'd not noticed about the place till now. His head was at a ninety-degree angle to his body, pressed up against the back of the couch. His shoulders against the seat, his knees at ninety degrees, his feet flat on the carpet tiles, no other support to hold him in place. He opened both eyes, and looked at her. Not a hint of expression. Not a fragment of affect. His eyes were flat and hazel, and behind them she could see nothing, and on their surfaces nothing reflected, not even herself. Stuart said, 'Jeff, up you get, me boy, I need you to help this lovely lady. She has to have a look at all the cars and buses and shit out there, tick em off on her little pad. I'd walk her round meself, but you know. Take her round, mate?'

Jeff said nothing, but folded up like a ruler, and creaked to vertical, where he loomed, and turned, moving first one foot, then the other, and began walking like a tree towards the door, between his fellows and the television, ignoring or not hearing their wails of reproach. 'Go, okay, then luv. He'll give you the goods,' and Stuart slapped her hip, and spun off in Jeff's wake.

'Jeff,' Angela called, running a few steps to catch up with the plank man. He was tall and took very long but immensely slow steps, like a mantis, feeling carefully for the floor with each foot, gradually shifting his weight forwards, leaning into it, drawing the other foot forward, and repeat. He wore his shoulders high, and his arms hung stiffly and precisely against his sides, unable to swing with his steps; and his eyes looked only ahead. Nothing moved but his legs, and they without bending at all, without knees.

'Jeff,' she said again, 'This is very good of you. I hope it's not too much of a nuisance.'

*He stopped, and turned his whole body to face her. His eyes looked to somewhere behind her, but he spoke, and said, 'No nuisance. What else would I be doing?' He turned, slowly, away from her, then said, without looking down to meet her gaze, 'There's nothing wrong that you can document with any authority, no final guarantee. Umm. Nothing lingers, here. Not the assets, not our money, not our youth. Umm. Nothing lingers.'* And he took another step, and another, and waited for her to examine the collection of vehicles.

*She looked back at him, where he leaned like a ladder against the wall of the Haven, then uncertainly opened her notebook, and began to check her list.*

The new minibus: Ford, white, 12-seater, tick. The old minibus: white too, Nissan, 16-seater, tick. The director's vehicle: BMW, grey, 4-seater, tick. (*Hang on; if the car's here, where is he? Later.*) The office runaround, station wagon, white, Ford. Not visible here. Jeff tipped forward from the wall, and led her to an almost invisible alley off the laneway. There it is. Tick. (*Note to self: check this one. What's its purpose, with all these other cars here?*) Two minibuses, three cars, and sixty residents. Five staff. Umm.

Angela checked the logbooks for each; all trips morning and night and Sundays properly recorded; but the mileage didn't add up. Whoever was using the buses during the day wasn't keeping up with the necessity to log the trips. *Make a note; put it in the report.*

Then there were the other vehicles scheduled. Charlie's BMW she's seen and okay, he needed a good car, given the miles he put in, driving around, making representations to government, raising money from the public. Tick. Then there was the car set aside for Stuart, a Honda Accord, adapted for a disabled driver. Red. She followed Jeff out to the street frontage. One red car, with special parking authority propped on the dashboard. Tick. Then there was the huge Ford station wagon set aside for Maria's use, very big as befitted so large a woman. And used, as was one of the minibuses, to purchase groceries a couple of times each week.

'Why do you go to a store that's a hundred kays away, round trip?'

'Because they give us discount. The owners belong to our church. It's in the Minutes.'

'Oh. Okay. But the unrecorded kilometres?'

'Personal business.'

What counts as personal business, when you're using an institutional vehicle? *Make a note; check it out.*

Over against the wall was a motorbike, not on the list. Must be the cook's. (*Note: check that out. Note: check employment contracts – do vehicles come with the jobs? And if so, for all, or only for some?*) No other vehicles were here. Her own car was parked in a 3-hour zone out the front of the building (*note: remember to move it within the hour*). She couldn't remember seeing another vehicle that might have been Maria's personal car – *which isn't to say it's not there*, she reminded herself, but hey; maybe Maria doesn't have a car, maybe she only drives the Ford. And about the buses – who drives the buses? Jessica, maybe. No, she doesn't start till nine. Maria?

'Jessica,' she said when she got back to the office, 'does Maria drive to work, or take the bus, or what?' She kept her voice low: Maria wasn't in the room but might emerge at any moment. It seemed as though Maria had read the cliché of huge people moving silently, and had practiced it over and over till she had mastery of the moves. Now she glided, silently, on her padded soles, like a morbidly obese cat.

'Nah,' Jessica said. 'She's got her own car. But it changes all the time.'

Note: what about private use of institutional vehicles? Note: did the Haven own Maria's ever-changing cars? Note: ask about logbooks; she'd seen them all, and none recorded any private kilometres. Jessica didn't know. But certainly both Stuart and Maria popped out a lot – *I'm just popping out for a bit, Jessie darl. Back soon.*

The next day, back in her own office, Graeme called her in for a consultation. 'Listen,' he said, 'You're being just too aggressive. You need a bit more tact. You need a bit more flexibility. These people aren't accountants, remember, they aren't public servants. They're right down there in the mud, doing the work you or I sure as hell wouldn't be doing. So don't come on so hard.'

'But we need to have these things properly sorted out, Graeme, if we're going to sign off on the report. There's Government Estimates coming up in just, what, four months? We are going to have to front up to that, you're going to have to actually, and justify our expenditure and everything we're doing. In all honesty, Graeme, how would you answer a minister or pollie if they raise anything about this project?'

‘Look Angela, given that it is me who has to front up to the D-G and the government, I really think you can leave that in my hands. As for the Haven, like I’ve told you often enough to be getting bored with it, I don’t want you to be asking those sorts of questions of the staff, or of the director in front of the staff. They’re our clients, remember? We can’t offend them.’ And, seeing the look on her face, said, ‘Leave those sorts of questions to me, okay? I’ll sort them out.’

‘Driving between work and home is private, Graeme,’ Angela insisted. ‘Check the Tax Act. If they’re going to be using the Haven’s cars, then it has to be approved by the Board, and private use has to be recorded, fringe benefits paid et cetera et cetera. We can’t just overlook it.’

‘And we’re not going to overlook anything, Angie,’ he said. ‘But like I keep bloody saying, put the questions to the principals through me. Don’t go asking the junior staff, okay?’ Angela closed her eyes. ‘And by the way, don’t think that Jessica is necessarily reliable; she was on the street herself not long ago.’

‘She was? How do you know?’

‘Charlie told me. Anyway, you only have to look at her, you can see.’

‘Whatever. But being a hooker doesn’t mean being a liar, Graeme.’

‘Just bring any of your difficult questions to me.’

‘I’m concerned about this audit, Graeme. I told you about that day at lunch, at the Haven. The residents were angry, and made some pretty clear accusations.’ Graeme lifted his hand but Angela said, ‘Please, Graeme; I did tell you about it before. Now, I haven’t put it in the report yet, but I really think I’m going to have to raise it at Board level, and at least follow up their concerns here, chase the paper trail and the cash trail. Please?’

‘This, Angela, is in the nature of a difficult question. Give me an off the record memo about it, okay? I’ll talk to Charlie, I’ll talk to St John, and I assure you I’ll bring you information. Okay?’

‘Okay.’

Week six. What had Hinde said? How do they deal with cash?

Time to think about the cash.

Charlie goes off on fundraising trips, comes back with buckets of cash. Jessica opens the mail, there's money in envelopes, donated. Petty cash, that's fine, Angela has gone through that carefully (except for Charlie's unrecorded drawings, she remembered; then thought, no, leave that to the report). The money that's mailed in – that'd be okay, surely? Jessica opens the mail with either Maria or Stuart present. Cash and cheques are put to one side, receipts are made out, along with standard letters of thanks, the gifts are banked, the receipts mailed, all present and correct. Okay. Petty cash is replenished only from cheques drawn on the working account. Okay. Salaries: paid by direct debit; bills: paid by cheque. Okay. What about when the residents are paid in cash, the ones who do receive pay packets?

Jessica scrolled through the folders on her monitor, clicked on an Excel file. 'Here,' she said. Each person's name, their own column, the date and amount received, if cash kept back by resident for personal use, all noted in its own column. Amounts collated and banked in Trust Accounts. Okay. *(note to self; what did toothless guy and the lunch crowd mean? What funds are missing from there; if any; and how have they gone; and who took them – if they have in fact been taken? Check again. Interview the residents. Run the numbers.)*

Meantime, that just leaves Charlie's fundraising unaudited. How does it go? – boxes of money brought back as cash or cheques or credit card imprints; short term investment accounts set up, or bonds purchased; always, the money turned over quickly. *Where's the interest,* she asked. Spent. Absorbed in daily running costs. *So why isn't it reflected in the accounts?*

The money. Everything always comes back down to money. 'Well d'oh,' said Hinde. 'You're an accountant. Money is your game.'

Yeah, well. It's the money, honey.

‘Charlie,’ Angela said, ‘I’d like a bit of your time. In private.’ And Stuart hooted. What had Charlie said to him – or was he just being a smart arse?

‘Eat your heart out,’ Charlie said, and winked, and then to Angela, ‘Hey, why don’t we go to the conference room?’

‘No,’ she said, ‘Let’s go out. Let’s go to a café – or to my office?’

‘No, a café. Come on, we can take my car’; and he hooked his keys down from the board, tossed, caught and pocketed them, and held the door for Angela who walked ahead of him, juggling her bag and notebook, shrugging into her light jacket. He took her collar, straightened it, helped slip the jacket around her shoulders, moved in front of her, straightened her lapels, smoothed back her hair, smiled, looking into her eyes, someone must have told him some time he had great eyes, he sure knew how to play them. ‘My place or yours?’

‘Somewhere public,’ she said. ‘We have to talk.’

And when they had driven across the city and over the bridge, down to West End, and had parked in the Market car park, and walked down to the Gunshop café and had ordered coffee she said, ‘Charlie, tell me about the money.’ She meant, what’s the process.

Process is what it’s all about. So here’s how it works: Charlie goes out on tour. Five nights in Sydney, five nights in Melbourne, two in Adelaide. None in Perth this year, none in Canberra. Six or seven in various regional cities, depending on where he was, and when he’d last been there, rousing the crowds. He goes to the regular services at local Pentecostal churches, evangelical churches. They’ve got the deepest pockets, he said, they’re the ones most convinced God wants them to hand over their money to His service. The congregations are big, too: huge compared with say the local Anglican or Presbyterian churches, and much more, umm, conditioned to giving up cash. And they have many young people among them, people susceptible to all the things Charlie tells them about: all the devil’s playthings. Drugs, first up; that still freaks them out, the straights. Lovely young people, someone’s son, someone’s daughter, prime to be seduced by Satan’s game. He often takes the younger residents – the Suzies, for instance – on tour with him as object

lessons; takes clean-child photos of them, if he's been able to find any: photos of glossy kids, projected huge onto the screen behind the battered young bruisers now up on stage with him, and flicks then to the slides of when the Suzies or Doms were first brought into the Haven, smacked out, and often yellow with fever, emaciated, bruised and with infected sores on cheeks and pustulent grooves along their arms, and sure they don't look like their pre-street selves now but by God's grace they're better, they're a thousand per cent better than in the second shots Charlie shows them, and in that he shows them the value of his work, the value of the Haven. He tells their stories: about the darkness, about the streets and the pimps, about the shit (though he doesn't say shit, not to this audience, he says maybe smack but more often, bluntly, heroin). Someone's lovely child, who gives their body for drugs, a trick here and a trick there, the hit that clots their veins, poison running through their young bodies, someone's lovely child captured by the world, the flesh and the devil, another family grieving, another grief that can't be healed. His talks, they're like a tv advert produced by St Vinnies or the Salvos, only in his story the characters are much, much worse off, it's not just your wayward child, your prodigal, but also those who have no alternative, the aged alcoholic who gave all he had to the bottle, the woman who's been in mental hospital for fifteen years and has no one waiting to nurture her, the man just released from prison who's lost everything, even his own dear self, even the memory of hope. All the lost, all the radically homeless, all the accidentally, helplessly criminal, all the lost sheep. *It was once upon a time*, he'll say, and describe how they got there, to this lower circle of hell, and then how he found them, because he knew how to get there, having been in the same place not all that long ago himself before he too was captured and redeemed by the blood of Christ, by the redemptive work of the Lord, and he knew what he had to do. He had to start a home to provide shelter for the lost, and teaching to bring them back into the fold. He had to care for his sisters, his brothers, to snatch them like a brand from the burning, bring them home, those lost few over whom the Lord, the shepherd, rejoices more than over all those sheep who have remained safely in the fold.

It was once upon a time. And who's to say they're worse than you, sisters and brothers – oh yes, they've fallen short of the law, but haven't we all fallen short of the Lord? A murmur comes up from the congregation, and he's caught them, him, a man who'd emerged from the darkness with scars on his shattered face, his arms still needle-stained. They look up at him, up there on the stage, pacing back and forth, never resting, no stasis behind the pulpit, they see the marks of the world on his body, they imagine the others to

which he alluded, all the devil's stigmata, yet he has been saved, and is saving others, doing the work they should do but it's too hard, they're too settled in their suburban worlds, they should be doing it but don't, but hey, they can get in on it, they can support it, they can give money if not time, and be part of this work of God.

'And the money?' Angela asked.

'And the money just keeps on coming. They can't give enough. Jesus called me,' he said, 'And I responded. And the Haven is here, proof positive of God's call, and the Board is beyond question, there's a fucking canon of the church running it, excuse me, and the Minister of Health is our patron, and Jesus is at my side.' And he looked at her, sideways, out of his black flat eyes, and laughed, but gently, not like some devil, and put his hand over hers. 'Don't look at me like that, lovely Angel. The money comes in because they want to send it in. It's all used for a good cause. It's all clean stuff. So the gentle folk, the saved folk, they want to be part of God's work, and I let them. They need the story to make their own lives real. This stuff I feed them – first it's a legend, and then it's true. It's what they want. They get their tears, they get their stories, the wallets come out. We even take credit cards, if they run them through their own churches' accounts – too expensive to have our own access. Cheques, cash, cash, more cash, and that's how the fuck we keep this baby on the road. Praise Jesus,' and he grinned across at her again.

'But Charlie, you know, you must see, there's an issue with how you handle cash. It has to be recorded, and be seen to be recorded, properly. What records do you keep? Who all handles the money? What about receipts? I have to be able to say I've asked you, for the audit report. I have to say we've recognised your processes.'

Charlie grinned again, and released her hand, and gestured for the waiter. 'You're a hard nut to crack, young Angela. Right, so let's go through it. I've got all kinds of records, some at the office, some at home, still in my briefcase from travelling. I have to carry it with me when I'm on the road. God knows, I'm never too sure what's at home, what's at work. Yeah yeah, don't look at me so fucking pure! I barely know the difference between home and work, Angel – there's no difference between those lives, there's only one life, Angel, and that's the path of God. I can see you're not a believer, but I am, however I sound to you, and as God is my witness, my hands are clean.'

‘The records?’ Angela asked again; and that night again, for the sixth time, once for each week of the audit so far, Graeme paced in front of her desk, red with annoyance.

‘Angela, for God’s sake, how often have we gone through this? You’re like some goddamn terrier. There are. No. Improprieties. I know this organisation; I know the Board. Do you have any idea how much it costs to run a place like that? Yes of course you do, you’re reading the accounts. But for heaven’s sake, if there was any skimming of cash, where would it be going? They’ve rebuilt the place, it’s all above board; they’ve bought assets, all above board, they’ve hired good staff –’

‘Hardly qualified,’ Angela butted in.

‘They’re Charlie’s mates from his early days. And that’s none of our business,’ Graeme said. ‘The Board approved the appointments, and they do their jobs, and it has nothing to do with our audit.’

‘It goes to process,’ Angela said, stubbornly. ‘What, you think I should just put my head in a bag and pretend it’s all okay?’

‘Oh the fuck, excuse me,’ Graeme said. ‘Angie, just do the figures, confirm the balance sheet items, do a random check of receipts and expenses, and let’s get out of that place. You’re taking too long on this. And I don’t want it screwed up, either. The Board – no, hear me out – the Board administers seven of these residences across the state, and St John has the ear of the Minister, and I don’t want any shit coming back on us for harassment. Yes it bloody is harassment, or close to it. You’re sailing too close to the wind. This isn’t the Tax Office, Angela, we’re not looking for guilt, we’re just overseeing, and confirming, and reporting up the chain.’

‘Graeme, I know this: one, the Department pays me my \$25 an hour and I owe them good time back. And two: I have an ethical, institutional duty, obligation, whatever, to fulfil the conditions of an audit as laid down in the charter. You can say all you want that there are no improprieties but I have to be able to confirm it or I can’t sign off on the report. We

have a legal obligation not just to believe but to demonstrate that we have fully and competently audited this enterprise, and that everything is entirely above board.'

'Christ, Ang, don't come with the fucking lecture, excuse me. Don't you think I know that? I've been doing this for considerably longer than you have. I have not one black mark against my name, there's nothing against me, don't you; Christ Angela, I'm going to have to recommend you be disciplined if you refuse to follow process.' He staggered as he lifted himself, purple, out of the chair, leaning on her desk, panting with rage or pain, she couldn't tell.

'Graeme, please, stop. You'll burst something. I'd never say anything or think anything about *your* probity. Maybe I'm being too I don't know blunt. I'll back off, promise. Calm down, okay, let me bring you some coffee, some water, yes? Okay? Then maybe we can talk a bit more about the cash records?'

'Christ, Angela. Yeah, okay. Coffee, thanks.'

Two hours later. Moving along. Angela had called Peter, who was too busy to talk, who couldn't discuss it now, Emma wasn't well poor girl, he'd have to leave early, maybe they could catch up tomorrow or whatever. She checked two days' worth of emails on her workstation. She knocked up entries in the audit sheets. She recorded the blank facts from her conversation with Graeme, her conversation with Charlie. She recorded too, in a private file note, what John and Suzie and Dom and Dawn had said. What credence could she, should she, place on their stories? None, said Graeme; none, said Charlie; none, said common sense. One was practically catatonic; one had a pickled brain, one was psychotic, if she knew anything, and the last a bitter old slapper. She had checked and double-checked all the figures, and no they don't add up. But counting grows less reliable, not more, with repetition. Angela should know this; she has often counted the socks into the washing machine, and then again as they go up on the line, getting a different result each time. She has spent afternoons hunting (obsessively, says Hinde; thoroughly, says Angela) for the missing sock, the mislaid five per cent, the book she was reading and had left, just that morning she was sure, on the kitchen bench. She must be getting it wrong. Mustn't she?

She checked her voicemails, deleted a call from Richard about picking up milk on the way home, listened to three calls. One from the little audit on the Koori Shelter she was almost finished, and she phoned them back: ‘You’ve not received the reports yet? But I mailed them to you several days ago. Okay, well let’s leave it till the end of the week, and if I’ve not heard from you, I’ll get back in touch and see what’s to be done.’

Another call was from a voice she didn’t recognise. ‘Do you know what you’re doing?’ it asked; a pause, then the click of a receiver being replaced. Nutters. And then Hinde’s voice. ‘Hey, Ang, stop by my place en route chez vous, okay? Let’s have a drink, and I’ll let you admire my new security screens.’

It was 4:35 now. She could tidy her desk – that would take maybe ten minutes. Then she could reply to the five more or less urgent emails. That would take maybe fifteen minutes. She could be out the door by five.

The 191 was only twelve minutes late. Angela swiped her ticket through the machine, swayed to the back of the bus and took the last vacant seat, waited through five, six, seven stops, all the way down Gladstone Road and up Dornoch Terrace, then rang the bell for the next stop and was at the front door of Hinde’s apartment building well before six. Hinde buzzed her in, and had the door open, cheese and crackers on a plate, and was pouring bubbly into iced glasses as Angela came through the door, kicking off her shoes and dumping her bag in one almost smooth move. She kissed Hinde – left cheek, right cheek, left again – *Cheers, sweetie!* and Hinde led her out to the deck, sliding open the ranch slider with a *tab dah!* gesturing flamboyantly at the new screen door. *Fab, sweetie!*

‘Come on, a little libation to the screen gods’, said Hinde, and each solemnly poured a splurt of wine onto the potted basil bushes that scented the verandah and Hinde’s pasta. ‘Fabulous screens, congratulations. You must be so proud,’ said Angela, swooping into one of the squatter chairs, and slurped down half the glass of wine in a single long draught. ‘Aaah!’ She stretched her legs until her muscles squeaked, and sighed. ‘It’s lovely.’

‘Lovely, yes. A good distraction too from that bloody ex-husband of mine, and the poor bloody kids,’ but when Angela raised her eyebrows and made talk-to-me gestures Hinde only said, ‘Okay sweetie, tell all. What’s the goss?’ And she straddled the dining chair that

had been dragged out there to accommodate guests at a fairly recent party, and hadn't made its way back in yet. On the road beyond, the rush hour traffic slowed and speeded up, slowed and speeded up in time with the traffic lights, moving mesmerically, and across the river the lights of the city were clicking on and off, off and on, and the clock on the Suncorp building shone out the time, 6:15, 6:16, 6:17, 6:18, counting off the hours. And Angela told all.

'Christ, that Graeme can be a prat!' said Hinde, 'A real dickwad.'

*'Dickwad? You've been watching too much telly, my friend.'*

'No, but really. You scored the promotion, he gave you the guernsey to do the audit, and now he's trying to stop you doing your job properly.'

'I don't know that he wants me to stop, as such. He's probably right too, I'm not the most tactful person in the world; I probably come across as a kind of policeman. I should sweeten up, be a bit more, I don't know...'

Hinde said, 'If this were a murder mystery, he'd be the one to be murdered. One of those bosses who everyone hates –'

'None of us hate him,' Angela said.

*'– who no one likes, who makes everyone's job tougher. He'd be murdered, and everyone would be shocked, and no one sad. Come on, sweetie, can't we just drop the subject? Hmm? Lighten up, okay?'*

'Here's to lightheartedness,' said Angela, and knocked back enough of the wine that she decided to call Richard to collect her, and take her home, and they were almost home before she remembered the milk. Too late now, oh shit, oh well. She'd make a quick run before work if they needed coffee with breakfast; and Richard helped her up the stairs into the apartment that smelt pleasantly of something with tomatoes he was cooking, and he poured her a glass of red – red on top of two glasses of champers? Well hell, it had been a long day, a long week; why not? – and she drank it, and then to his pleased surprise undid

his belt, massaged his penis to tumescence, and sucked him off, efficiently, though erotically enough to get the job done.

After that, and after the dinner that Richard had managed to salvage despite the interruption, she sat outside on the erratic steps they still hadn't repaired though it'd been for years on their to-do list. She leant back on the worn cement and looked at the sky, her hands clasped across her tender belly. Her skin was silky still, smooth and warm. Inside was a different matter, she could feel the days and years of too-much-coffee too-much-wine move like gravel through her gut, which felt jagged and hot. Probably time for a check-up. She should make an appointment. She'll do it soon. Planes murmured high above the city roofs. She could see the tremble of their navigation lights, but few stars were evident, not here in the centre of the city, stars burn dead light and how can that compete with power stations and all the energy they produce? Electricity versus dead light; no contest. It was still hot, even though evening had moved over into night proper. She imagined a bungalow in the suburbs, or a rural sprawl where the air would maybe have room to move. But this is home, she is here, and whether comfort or pain it's what she has.

She told herself that night, and later told Hinde too, over coffee first thing in the morning before either of them set about their day's work. 'I'm going to be a good wife,' she said, 'also a good employee. I'm going to be a good girl.'

'Is Peter going to be a good boy?' But Angela coloured up, and clanked the spoon against her coffee cup, and Hinde went on, 'You don't have to convince me, babe. I don't give a flying fuck about Petey. My only concern is that you're the one who gets hurt, and Peter, let's face it, doesn't really give a rat's arse about you.'

'He does. In his own I know limited way. Look, forget Peter. Hinde, what am I going to do about this audit without pissing off Graeme?' And she described it yet again, step by step, and they ordered more coffee, and Hinde talked and talked while Angela sketched out yet again, though briefly, the holes in the steps she'd taken thus far.

'It does sound a bit fishy,' Hinde said, conceded, 'It could be just lack of process but. You're going to have to find out a bit more about the standard of living of each of the principals, you know, if you think they're maybe skimming money off the top.'

‘Yeah, right, like Graeme’s going to approve that!’

‘Well, at least you have to note concerns in your report. It’s not like you’re accusing anyone. You’re just recommending a tightening up of the records. And on that, I wouldn’t worry about Charlie using the pretty kids to convince the punters. Hell, it’s the first principle of advertising. Even the Salvos do it.’ She paused, took a sip of wine, said, ‘That is all he does with them, right?’ And then, after a longer pause, ‘Even if he doesn’t, it’s not worth your time, your mind, Ang. You have to let it go. You can’t change the world, and this case is really fucking you up.’

That night was the beginning of her new pattern of sleepless nights, when Angela lay awake and on the edge of panic. Hinde thought she was over dramatizing it all. Richard didn’t really take the problem seriously. Richard wasn’t here, anyway, he’d gone back to Melbourne this morning, he was always in Melbourne these days. Peter – well screw him. He’s never around. Graeme? Yes, well, Graeme was impossible. She hadn’t talked to St John yet, and Graeme clearly thought she shouldn’t, that it should be he, Graeme, who dealt directly with the Board. Her bedside clock flickered, a minute ticked over, another minute. She needed to sleep and sleep keeps slipping away into the future, she is trapped in the present tense so she focuses on her body, dream it, dream, and if you listen there’s that lub-dub, that’s the heart, lub-dub or bah bah *boom*, bah bah *boom*, depending on how you read rhythm, lub *da* dub, like a cautious washing machine. Go lower, listen to the blood flow, the gut swill, the gentle pump and grind of digestion and expulsion and that whole alimentary process she once deplored. Listen to the skin breathing softly, breathing like a baby, like an old, old woman, so lightly connected to life, so tightly connected to the idea of stopping, just stopping the whole shit fight, just giving it up for sleep, sweet sleep, but you can’t so instead there’s the skin doing its breathing thing – *bab* huh huh/*bab* huh huh – the susurrations of shedded cells, the silent wrapper of life slipping over and across and through surfaces and depths and oh god how she longs to escape her skin. She watched the clock, she focused on her breathing, and eventually she fell asleep.

And just a week later she found a message from Hinde on her voicemail – *had to go, sweetie, I’ll be out of contact for a while. The kids, you know, hassles. I’ll be in Sydney.* The beginning of an end, if not of The End.

Weeks later again she arrived at Heathrow on a late flight from Sydney through Japan, a flight that had previously shifted her from Brisbane to Sydney on the first step of her decision to change everything about her life, here at the end of a decade, at the start of what she planned would be a new era, the start of the new millennium. Even though she knew, even then, rationally, how unlikely it was that she really could change everything, really undo the time that went before, the life that she'd latterly crafted for herself, the life she had actually chosen, and had come now to regret.

Peter said it'd be all right, that he'd sort everything out. He said everything would be all right, everything was in hand. 'Go to Leeds, Angel,' he said. 'Have a chat to other people, see how they handle things over there in England. Have a bit of a break, okay? Everything's okay.' He must have heard her silence, the silence that lingered, that seemed to glue her mouth shut, she said nothing from Brisbane to Sydney, Sydney to Narita, Narita to London. 'Angel,' he said, 'You can trust me. I've got everything in control.'

It was her own fault. Yes or no? That's what they'd said to her, or intimated, her colleagues and friends. Drop it, they'd said. Put in the requisite hours, do your work well, and leave the rest to the gods. 'Leave it at the office,' they'd said as she spent their time wrestling through the problem. And as the weeks went by, and she grew more, in their eyes if not hers, obsessive, 'Who died and made you god?' they began to ask. Or, 'drop it, Angela. You can't win this one. You think you'll beat them? You and whose army?'

And then, weeks later, she was describing the Haven, the audit, the whole schmozzle, to a delegate at the convention in Leeds. Secure in his comfortable inattention, lying beside him in his half-empty queen-sized bed in his well-appointed hotel room, she told him something of what had been going on. And he said, 'I think you're crazy to take them on. What's it going to achieve? It'll be your head, not theirs.'

## Middle

### 1

Inside London's Albert Hall is not what Angela had expected from all she knew about it, which wasn't much more than *now you know how many holes it takes*. It's like the inside of an egg, or a half egg, whose curved shell scrolls smoothly overhead as the heavily textured floor steps up to meet it, one layer overlaying the next, raking upwards to meet the descending wall. It's like being inside a mouth, the silent red plush across the ceilings and walls, silent red carpet on the floor, no saliva, no membranes, but pillars that reach like teeth between the curved ceiling and the geometric floors, the red chairs wait row on row for the audience, seats sprung up against the backrests, rows tiered and curved to mirror the walls. At the front, the lowest point of the hall, the nadir, and hedged about with rows of seats marching down towards the pit, is the stage, the piano waits at stage left, the flanks of choir stalls fade off to each side.

Angela was there, inside that hall, in a private box, her aunt's box, the royal crest on another box just two balconies away, the house lights bouncing off the gilt that is spackled over everything. Angela was being treated; she was having a treat. They had arrived early, Angela and her aunt, so that they could eat supper in the box before the show. It was laid out waiting for them, plates individually gladwrapped on the table at the back of the box, opposite the coat hooks. By ones and twos her aunt's guests arrived and stood around, eating salmon and salad, drinking wine poured from bottles opened by one of the grey men in their party. They arrived by ones and twos, adding up to a round dozen, and they hung their coats and hats and brollies and scarves and handbags on the coat hooks, and trilled at one another, affectionately, and took a glass of wine, and a plate of salmon, and trilled again, and drank and ate. Once they were all accounted for, once no one else was expected, once they were all eating their suppers and drinking their wine and murmuring and twittering among themselves, Angela's aunt reached out and locked the door of the box.

This is the moment; let this be Angela, being in the moment, in all this luxury, still attractive, still slim, still polished, not as happy as she might have hoped but more successful, and here she is now in England, thinking here in this grey land about how to find her way afresh, how to find some way back home. And it was, for the moment, she decided, the present, *her* present; she would live, now, in and for the present. It felt a little

like the past because she was wearing her best clothes, smart clothes she'd thought she would have to put permanently aside, and she was surrounded instead by the pleasures of wealth and the wittering voices of the wealthy, and it felt a little like the past because in a few minutes the orchestra would be coming out onto stage and would take their places and begin tuning their instruments and then the conductor and the principals would come out too, and bow to the audience, and be applauded, and take their places in that moment of hush that precedes the lifted hand, the lifted baton, the lifted bows, the lifted eyes, and then it's bang, into it, and the lights go down, and the music rises. Remember that. Keep remembering.

*We all know the world is smaller now; but travelling to the UK is still a big deal if you live in Australia.*

*Twenty-four hours away or more, even, if you count layover time, all the hours used up in making connections and being processed and waiting to board and waiting to disembark and waiting for your luggage. It's far enough away to feel you need to go for more than a few days, to feel it's worth sending postcards, to feel like you're being, or at least that you're playing at being, a tourist. Far enough away to be beyond anyone's reach.*

Twenty-four hours away; and the rest. So much time is spent in the no-time that is travel, especially cheap travel, and here she is again, just as she was at twenty, flying economy class, sacrificing comfort for dollars, smeared into hard seats in planes, trains, buses, her bags balanced around her, leaving nowhere for her feet. She sits bolt upright in seat C, on the aisle of row 52, eyes squeezed shut, holding her breath as the engines scream and the plane shudders and gradually, gradually, lurches into the air. Now she is in true flight, disconnected from the earth and from everything that is her life, except what she has carried with her; a sponge bag, some clothes in a suitcase in the hold, a handful of photos – Sophie, Sophie's daughter and, turned face to face, both her exes, Peter and now Richard too, in matching black-and-white. She is sitting bound in her seat, breathing the suddenly strange air.

When she and Peter had travelled together so many years ago, he'd been there beside her, alternately moody and manic or increasingly, as their time away from home stretched out, not beside her, arranging to meet up with her somewhere along the way, later on, and each of them going their own way, wondering if after all they really would reconnect, wondering how much they'd care if the other spiralled off into history. And in those cases, on her solitary jaunts, a stranger would usually lean in towards her, however unwelcoming she made the seat beside hers. Sometimes to tell her their small life stories, sometimes to ramble about religion or politics or any other taboo subject. Sometimes to fall asleep, an unfamiliar head rolling closer and closer to her shoulder, breath burbling from between a stranger's relaxed lips, she could count the freckles on their scalp through the hair, she could think about dandruff, lice, and it's too much and there's no way of getting away, nowhere to go. Gets to the point where you loathe everyone. Especially, you loathe travelling, being *unheimlich*, she learned that word once along with *gemutlich* and *schadenfreude*, those fabulous German portmanteau words, she feels, she in fact is, *unheimlich* here in 1999

when nothing is as it should be, and she is heading over to the UK on a long, slow flight up over Australia and then across the ocean, heading north.

Still, travel has its compensations. Flying over the top of Australia, heading north, from above it looks exactly as it does in the atlas only greener, edged with the coral necklace of the sea, lovelier than you might have expected, and you look down from ten thousand feet or is it metres, she never gets that straight, from however high you look down into the clear water and see the reef and the almost submerged atolls mirroring the shreds of clouds and sometimes they are in fact the shadows of clouds reflected on the surface of the sea. And now you've left the continent behind, and there's only sea and air, nothing solid anywhere within reach, only coral reef below, and it's like every tourist brochure you've ever seen, turquoise and aquamarine, but what the brochures never say is that it's laid out in regular patterns like a town plan, avenues and parks and street lamps. It's the stuff jewellery is made of. Nothing prepares you for the last fragments of the reef, out in the middle of the ocean which is now a uniform khaki blue-green and there it is, the iridescent splash of reef colour, Kalamalka blue, posing just for you.

It was late afternoon Japan time when they arrived at Narita airport to refuel, mid afternoon the next day when they landed again in London, and were called and began to prepare to leave the plane. She is always ready to disembark, to what they so annoyingly now call 'debarb' – 'What are we, trees?' she asked a flight attendant and immediately felt like a peevisb old woman and embarrassed. But really: it's *disembark*, verb, trans., from Fr. *desembarquer*: des-, + *embarquer*. That's what she expects to be doing. What she wants to be doing. She always wants the journey done before it's done, and will, on bad days, get off a bus or train before her stop because she can't bear any longer the suspension of motion, can't bear any longer to sit pinned by public transport that weaves its way slowly through Brisbane or Calais or Hamburg, she needs to be on the go. Back in that Peter trip she'd get off at the outskirts of a city, gather her bags, shift items into various crannies of her backpack, sink to the pavement to saddle herself with its weight, then rise, and look about her, choosing which way to walk.

She will not do that now; she didn't do it yesterday in Japan and won't do it now in London. She is forty, and has no backpack, just a suitcase on wheels, a briefcase, a handbag, an umbrella which she thinks she can tuck down inside the briefcase, an overcoat

she'll have to carry slung over her shoulder because really it's too warm now, April and something like summer is in the air. When she reaches London she will take the train to Victoria Station. She'll get out there – she'll *disembark* – and find a trolley, if there is such a thing, and get herself to the roadside, and flag down a taxi, and be taken care of, her suitcase hoisted by someone else into the vehicle, herself handed in, her seatbelt fixed and buckled. God it's heaven having disposable income. Enjoy it while it lasts, god knows how long it'll last. Because in all that no longer makes sense there are, she realizes, still two certainties. One, that her job will not survive this event; and two, that she will have little further access to financial support from Richard. She'll give the driver the name of her hotel; the driver will nod, he will know precisely where to go, he'll pick the route, negotiate stop signs and traffic lights, intersections and other cars; he will deliver her safe to her hotel and she'll check in, go to her temporary home, and shower, and then stretch out naked on the bed and concentrate on calming the jangling that is busy at work in every muscle, each neuron, each limb.

At Heathrow she stood in the hall, watching bags go around and around on the conveyor belt, collected her suitcase quickly, being among the lucky first to spot hers on the carousel, and was processed quickly too. It was nearly twenty years since last she'd flown to London and arrived at Heathrow, and walked through the Nothing To Declare corridor to Customs, and through passport control to baggage retrieval. It seemed to take longer this time. Twenty years ago she could sleep anywhere, she could curl up like a ball, she could stretch unselfconsciously in the doorways, and sleep. But this trip, at 40, she found herself sitting more carefully, protecting her back, on the plane pacing uncomfortably between the toilets and her seat, looking from time to time out of the window, here at the airport leaning against a pillar, tilting her pelvis to ease her spine. She can no longer fall easily into conversation with strangers. She waits, she is always waiting, it seems, always on hold. Circling the airport with her carry on bags weighted down by duty free, souvenirs, magazines, sponge bag. On hold, circling the gate lounge, waiting for the call.

Still, they had landed, and now began to move through the airport to the buses and taxis and trains waiting beyond. The black family, the Guinean family – now living, as she knew because she'd eavesdropped on their conversation with the Australian couple behind her, in LA – were stopped by the officials who'd waved Angela through, glancing at her white face, her Commonwealth passport. She looked back over her shoulder and watched them

argue with the uniformed man, who finally ordered them to stand to one side and wait for further instructions while he cleared the line.

Being ahead of the crowd, Angela didn't have to queue for the train, but decided anyway to hell with the expense, buses take too long, trains are too full, there's too many people, and she found a taxi which took her directly to a private room in the hotel she'd booked on the internet, student residences really, at Bankside, so many pounds per night plus a cooked breakfast and a shared bathroom. She'd worked out the costs, doing the exchange in her head, and thinking about how much money she could access, how much she could dump on her credit card, how much she could get from EFTPOS. She'd left in a rush, she'd not bought traveller's cheques, she didn't have much cash. Never mind, never mind, she's finally off the bloody plane and there's no stranger sitting beside her whose needs she needs to consider with every decision to visit the loo or simply walk up and down the aisle, no flight attendants smiling and smiling until their hearts or cheeks must crack. Settled finally in her room, she went downstairs and ordered a meal at what was called a restaurant but was really no more than a cafeteria, and ate, then went back upstairs and showered for a long time in her shared bathroom, and went to bed between cold cotton sheets on a hard mattress and under a hard duvet. Hinde had said weeks ago, well before she got to this point, 'You have to get out more, Ang. Take a holiday, take a few weeks extra; a few *days* even, for god's sake. Have some fun. Pick up blokes.' This would have to do. For now.

Sleep lurked somewhere else, over behind the windows, under the door. Five p.m. in London, but she was still on Brisbane time, and so tired. Oh the traveller! Having to deal with aeroplanes filled with other people's bodies, and their bodily fluids and bodily gases. Or long distance buses with the throat-closing chemical smell of the toilet every time someone enters or leaves. Or trains with cracked upholstery and old people settling in for a night of seated sleep, their picnic baskets opened, sandwiches insanely offered to anyone within reach: *sardines, dear?* Or even driving, for that matter, your vision weaving between the white lines that mark the lanes or counting 1001, 1002, 1003, between lamp posts, to keep awake, to pass the time, the radio signal blurring in and out as the road falls into a hollow between hills, or goes behind a rise in the land. Eating at cafés with virtually indistinguishable menus, coffee often unexpectedly good but still not your own, not from your home, your local café; nothing in your own time, everything ordered and bought and paid for in a manner outside your real time, your real choice. Having to use public toilets,

usually pretty clean but with the traces of all those peeing strangers who were there ahead of you, contagious presences, contagious space. No way to wash them off because every restroom is equally public, inhabited by every lonely person who drifted in there along with you and maybe even now is queuing outside your cubicle door. Angela sat upright on the bed. No sleep, not now, sleep mites scurried for the dark corners. She stood up, grabbed her towel and robe, showered again in the tiled shared bathroom between her little room and her neighbour's. Came back into her room, spent ten minutes stretching various parts of her body, it felt like an hour, a day. Then she dressed and left the building and began to walk, fast and loose as she warmed up, along the gum spotted pavements.

1999. Everywhere there were signs of change. The twentieth century just about over, however you choose to cut the numbers. Everywhere anyone looked were the signs of the coming millennium. Angela walked these streets, looking at the signs, for hour after hour on those first few days. Fighting off jetlag, fighting sleep at five p.m., fighting the frightening awokeness at four a.m. when minutes pass by, minutes and more, no change, each the same, wait it out, in zen they say if it's boring after two minutes try it for four, try for eight, sixteen, thirty-two, it will repay, breathe in breathe out, the touch of air on your nostrils and where does it go? She refused to buy into the ridiculous yearnings of the body, her body's nostalgia for home and its organisation of time. She refused to accept any of it, the ridiculous yearnings for Richard, now lost, for Peter, so far away, for everything she'd left behind. Instead she walked late into the evenings, staying awake, swaying awake through the high-sided London streets, and refused to get out of bed, or even to read, until seven in the morning, racing herself to get clocked on to English time. In and out of the British Museum, the British Library, the National Gallery, the Portrait Gallery, the Tate. Piccadilly Circus, where she snapped a shot of a London bus against the Coca Cola sign. Through tube stations in the centre of London where she listened to the shrieks coming down the line ahead of the train; where she listened to the PA system advising commuters of a good service on this line, of delays on that line; where she watched a young nun who wore a modern habit in blue, Reebok socks, Nike sneakers and no smile. Then down to Trafalgar Square, brushing through pigeons and other tourists, stopping to pat a lion, then to take its picture. Where else? She consulted the Lonely Planet. Of course: the Palace – and oh what a dull building, some Lego block dropped down on a concrete part, gilt scattered about, guards in careful order, click, snap, unexpectedly it's the changing of the Guard, another photo opportunity.

After that she began to walk through the office areas, through semi-residential streets, guessing the number of bricks in randomly chosen walls, occasionally sitting at a bus stop and trying to calculate the area by counting bricks across, bricks up, then multiply. The London Museum, St Pauls, Cleopatra's Needle. Click, click, click. Remove the film, insert a new cartridge. Her eyes were growing tired from looking and looking and never touching, her body tired of the heavy food, the poor drinks. Then at a Charing Cross café, after she'd about given up on finding proper coffee, she found a place that understood; that explained, by means of a poster on the wall, what different coffees involve. She ordered a cappuccino, which the barista made properly. Pressed the espresso; frothed the milk, spooned the hot milk and froth onto the coffee; then held a stencil over the cup and shook the chocolate over it, to define a perfect '1882'. Decent coffee at last. And soon thank god she'd have a meeting, one of the three that Peter had set up for her over these first two weeks and then she would be off to the convention in Leeds where he'd registered her as his proxy, and then after that: she would have to think about what she would do after that.

A day, and another day, and another day. And finally it was today, the day when she was again a professional, and dressed in smart work clothes she made her way to Old Street where she met the chair of a charity group and described the work they did at the Office. An exchange of business cards and annual reports, an exchange of mission statements, of strategic plans in their public form at least, an agreement to begin considering the possibilities of establishing a memorandum of understanding between his organization and hers, some international liaison over process and knowledge. Then walking again, back along the Embankment, past the cafés and under the bridges where the trains roll, past the boys on skateboards and the healthy folks on bikes, watching the water move against the river banks, against the sky, back she went to Bankside and her student-level digs where she changed into jeans and sandals, and then was back on the beat, pacing the city, trying to tire out her body and her mind and to get herself to sleep.

This is another kind of flight. She has flown to the UK, and is here now, in flight. Peter knew she was here, but not how to reach her. Richard didn't know where she was, but how much would he care, busy as he was the bastard banging that bloody woman in Melbourne, that psychiatrist, that research partner, and already putting her, Angela, into the story of his past. Hinde – where had she gotten to? What a time for her to disappear – not that I can

blame her, Angela thought. Must have driven her nuts with that endless straining at the situation. But now that Angela had herself disappeared, dropped out of sight, now that she had started her run, it seemed she would never be safe again. She had betrayed everyone and everything. Even herself. Her head ached, her stomach was bloated, her period was all out of whack, having come two weeks early and with pain, and she found herself weeping without warning or cause. Sleep, sleep. Evening, and a woman may weep, maybe even attractively, but then will snore all night, her nose stuffed with tears. Every morning comes with a clang, the garbage trucks rolling by. Every morning comes with a shout, like Granny's goat that moved like a cat then pissed in its beard, like the sound of history kicking. Every morning is just like the last. Peter, are you listening, did you hear? She lay in bed, trying not to twitch, trying not to toss from side to side, and finally stroked her own breasts, still sobbing, and licked a finger and stroked her cunt until she came, and then she fell asleep.

### 3

Finally she settled in, of course; we all do; it really only takes about ten days to adjust your body clock; and she began sleeping a little later each morning so that on what proved to be the last morning she spent in the hostel, she came to breakfast too late for the early, six to seven a.m., grown-ups only sitting. When she got to the dining room, every table was smothered with trays and half-spilt breakfasts and between them moved the skinny and plump children mostly of Europe, a few groups from elsewhere in England, a gaggle of Americans. Teachers moved purposefully among their student sheep, dishing out instructions in English and Spanish and German, or some incomprehensible middle European tongue, taking a bit of shit but all in good humour because after all this was a school trip, not serious education. Angela managed to find a small round table, and to snaffle it before anyone else got there, but hadn't more than started on her breakfast before two girls asked if they might join her. She gestured with a pretence of grace at the spare seats, and bent her head to the newspaper to indicate a refusal to converse, not that it mattered because they immediately continued their conversation in, what? Polish? It sounded like Polish. All those hard consonants. They must have been about fourteen, about the same age as her niece, Sophie's daughter. Each wore an identical enamelled drop on an identical black string around her young throat. Each wore a tight black tee shirt and too much make up around their eyes, their mothers would never have let them out looking like that. During the course of the breakfast sitting, hordes of the kids, gobblers all of them, finished and left, taking their trays and their noise with them. Suddenly there were empty tables everywhere. Angela wished she could move to one without looking, well, rude. She wished the girls would move, but they didn't; and then suddenly they did: they stood up, and said *Thank you*, and like adolescents everywhere didn't clear up their own mess, but left their large used trays all over her little table.

*What am I doing in this dump?*

Shelley, of course, that's where it had started. That morning a handful of weeks ago when Shelley had called out, 'Hey Angela, hey, hey Angie.' And there she was, dropping four, five files on the desk as Angela minimised the window on her computer monitor, quickly, before Shelley could see what she was working on. 'Ang, Graeme wants you to make a decision about these. He says you have to sign off on them.'

Angela picked up the first file and looked at the name; then the second, then the third. Each was for a small project she was working on. The first was the Youth Shelter, the organization with which she'd begun her Office career four years ago and which was still under her oversight. The top sheet in the file was a request for approval to purchase a new vehicle, a back-up vehicle; she didn't remember seeing it, and didn't think it appropriate right now. The second file was her report from the audit she'd conducted on a drop-in centre in the Valley, one of Julian's places. Three cautionary notes initialled by her, which pointed out her concerns. Beside one Graeme had pencilled in – *Maybe a bit picky, A? Reconsider, report back to me.* The third file: a request from the director of the Koori shelter, whose financial necessities were also under Angela's ambit, to have evaporative cooling installed, and a memo written by Hinde, or so the initials at the bottom of the page indicated, approving the request, under Angela's name, needing Angela's signature.

The fourth file was one of the several she'd generated so far in the course of her audit of the Haven. She flicked it open. On top was Charlie's statutory declaration confirming that he received cash from the Petty Cash box only for Haven business, and below his signature the red stamp APPROVED and on a post-it note, in Graeme's hand, the comment – *Sign here, Angela.* She picked up the fifth file. Another Haven file, this the one she'd opened to record concerns about the residents. In the file, a memo jointly signed by St John and Graeme limited the scope of her investigation to financial matters, agreeing that all matters relating to personnel or clients be referred directly to the Trust Board for attention. A note, in Graeme's handwriting: *Angela, sign here.* She looked up from the file, to see Shelley still waiting beside her desk.

'Look, am I supposed to just sign off on them? Or am I supposed to make a decision about whether to sign off on them? Do I actually get a choice?'

Shelley took Angela's hand and stroked it that way she did, and laughed, and said, 'Oh come on Ang, just sign. They agreed on it in Board. The meeting you missed last week. The Manager knows about it, it's minuted, it's been sent up to Health. Sign it, and then we can go out for coffee.'

'Umm, later, okay Shell? I need to see Graeme right now.'

Board meetings, it seemed, only took place these days when Angela was away, at lunch, off sick, inter-state, on holiday. She didn't get any say, but the files were always signed off in her name. At first she hadn't thought anything of it, except maybe to be kind of flattered. Like she was important, now she'd made it to executive level. But the more it happened, the more suspicious she grew, and this day when she confronted Graeme he just stonewalled.

'How do you mean, stonewalled? What did he actually do?' Richard kicked back the La-Z-Boy, out of fashion now but so comfortable, moulded by the years to his shape. He lifted the heavy glass, rattled the cubes, and took a long slow drink of whiskey. Angela hesitated, and in the silence Richard turned back to his book.

'What did he do? That's just it, Richard. He didn't *do* anything. He told me not to be paranoid. He asked, didn't I trust him. He asked, what was I afraid of. He said it was all approved at Board level and recorded in the minutes and I could check it for myself.' Richard, head in his book, said 'Hmmm,' and Angela tossed a cushion at him so he placed a bookmark between the pages, laid the book carefully on the occasional table, locked his fingers across his gently rounded belly, and looked at her. So patiently. And said, 'So anyhow, he showed you the minutes?'

'No. Never. He was always going to get them, and never actually produced them.'

'Well, why didn't you go and fetch them for yourself?'

Why indeed. This, this *thing* happening around her, the thing sucking her into it, implicating her in it, was the last thing she had expected. It's the last thing you'd expect to be happening anywhere in an organisation where you have some seniority, where you've been working reliably for quite some time. The last thing you expect is to find that you're now the enemy, that people are watching you and are careful in your presence. That people are keeping things from you. Especially, she fears, Graeme is keeping things from her. Actually and physically keeping things, in at least one case. She'd borrowed the mini-disk recorder from Stores via Shelley, and had taken it to the Haven where she had illicitly recorded interviews with several of the residents. The suspicious residents, the residents who had brought themselves to her attention. Toothless John; florid Suzie; angry Dawn; silent Jeff.

They'd talked about pressure from Charlie to donate chunks of their tiny incomes to the Haven, via him. Pressure they couldn't always resist.

'He doesn't steal from us,' said John. 'But as near as dammit. It's the girls that worry me, but.'

Jeff's interview was mostly the sound of breathing. She pulled a small seat up close to the couch where he lay like a jetty, extended into the games room. 'What are you [breathe, breathe] looking for? [breathe] What do you want to find?'

Angela leaned towards him. 'I need to be able to confirm that the Haven is being run according to the accepted standards of good management and honest financial dealings.'

[breathe, breathe, breathe] 'Who can you [breathe] believe?'

'I'll believe everything I'm told, by anyone, as long as it all adds up.' [breathe] 'As long as I can substantiate it.'

'Start [breathe] at the top. [breathe] Ask yourself – purpose, process [breathe]. Ask yourself [breathe] what's in it for me.'

It's like talking to a sphinx. As good as useless. But just as she was about to thank him for his time and make her escape, he said, 'Ask about the second set of accounts.'

'The what?' But he had shuttered his eyes now, and had nothing more to say.

Suzie wasn't much clearer. Suzie was a cat, all static electricity, fizzing, twitching. Mostly she wanted to talk about the voices. Voices?

'My voices. Charlie says they come from the devil.' She looked hard at Angela, and something shifted across her face, something that made Angela break out in a fine patter of sweat. 'I'm not gonna hurt you, lady. Charlie aksed me to wind you up. He thinks you're trouble. Charlie can go fuck himself. I'm not gonna turn tricks for him no more.'

‘Umm, Suzie, can you explain what you mean?’

‘What do you mean what I mean? Go fuck yourself!’ and that shiver, or shadow, passed across her face again, and Angela left, trying not to look afraid.

Dawn was easier. ‘Look lady, I got nothing to gain, something to lose, if I go shooting my mouth off. But I’ll tell you where to start looking. At the top.’

‘The top? You mean physically, the building?’

‘Oh for chrissake, luv. The top. The top dog.’

‘Charlie?’

‘Charlie, and the rest of the top dogs. I’m talking money. I’m thinking drugs. I’m thinking pussy. I got no proof, you understand. But you look at kids like Suzie. She’s getting crazier the longer she stays here, the mad bitch. She’s shooting up too, you can see it on her arms; she’s never away from the hostel on her own, so she’s getting the shit from someone here. There’s the others too, there was Tania, said she was fucked every which way to Friday by Charlie’s mates. There was Shona, there was Chrissy, they come and go, only the young ones, the pretty ones. They’re the ones Charlie takes out with him when he goes. I’m not saying nothing more. You sort it out, you’re the one being paid to sort it out. No, get on with you, piss off.’

Angela took the machine to Graeme, played him the interviews. He sat behind his desk, listening, holding his head, looking tired. ‘Okay Ang. I’ll take this up with St John. Leave the disk with me, okay? I’ll have to get it transcribed. I’ll get a copy to you for the files.’ Which he did, but the disk, which should have been stored in the file along with the transcript, never re-emerged.

*Graeme is keeping things from me.*

‘Richard, listen, please listen. Is a sexual encounter legal if the person is in care? Is it?’

'I'm not a lawyer, dear. How would I know?'

'Please, Richard. I need some ideas here.' And finally he put his book aside, and turned off the TV, and lifted her foot and began to knead it with his stumpy strong doctor's hands.

'Well, Suzie at the Haven has been saying that she and some other girls have been having sex with Charlie and his mates, and he'd told them it was okay and that it was the least they could do after all he's done for them blah blah blah. Turning tricks, she called it. And also I think he's giving her heroin.'

Richard placed her foot carefully back on the floor, and lifted the other. 'And?'

'And, if he's bonking patients – okay,' as Richard opened his mouth, obviously to correct her. 'Residents. And if he's running some kind of sex ring, well, that's just not on. And if he's supplying drugs, that's seriously not on.'

'Yes but do you have any evidence about it? Are you convinced the girls are telling the truth? They're all damaged individuals.'

'That's right, Richard. Charlie wouldn't do a thing like that because he's so honourable, and they're junkies and their lives are so narrow that of course they'd invent this sex thing to give themselves a bit of a fillip.'

Richard flushed around the chin, turned his self-justifying shade. 'Hoo boy. Angela, listen to me. I am not your enemy. But people do say things, people do misunderstand things, and people sometimes lie. What do you want me to say?'

'I want you to tell me what to do.'

'Get out of there. Give it up. Refuse. Quit your job.' He paused, as she opened her mouth, then closed it again, and then went on, 'I don't trust Charlie, you know that. I've told you I don't think he's honest. That place is run down and I know there's an upkeep budget and it's not being directed to the fabric of the hostel. And he's always encouraging me to let him manage the medication for the kids – god help us, an ex-junkie in charge of a

dispensary? No, okay,' he held up his hand as she stood up, impatiently. 'So I'm a snob, okay, but I don't trust him. Your job is just to check it all out. Do your job, put in a solid report, let the Board know, let Health know, and someone will sort it out.' He let a moment pass as she let the moment pass, and then he asked, 'What does your *friend* say?'

'My *friend*?'

'Peter. Your *friend*. Your ex.'

'I haven't asked him.'

She had, though. Of course she had. She had handed him a three-page document. 'Read it,' she said, 'and let me know what you think,' and then she left and disappeared into the women's room. Peter was watching for her when she emerged, and took her elbow and said, 'Christ, Ang, what's this all about? Haven't you heard of libel? Or is it slander when it's written?'

'Oh, don't give me that. It's a report, that's all, it's not an accusation. If four young women tell the same story... Well, they're junkies of course, they're could well be confabulating. But we have to investigate it anyway, and someone is going to have to talk to the girls and make some sort of decision about their credibility. Check it out. Make a recommendation.'

And he had said, 'Don't you think that's outside the scope of your investigation, Ang? Put it in your report, and pass it on. Graeme will deal with it.'

*Will he? Will he?' she asked him. 'What's going on with Graeme?' Peter looked strained, but not sympathetic.*

She can no longer lean on Peter, she can no longer trust Graeme, she no longer wants to be in the same vicinity as him, he makes her feel distressed, displaced, misplaced. Graeme, who has been such a good mate – hasn't he? She loved him, in a way. Graeme, her boss, her sometime friend, who could be unfortunately hearty but fell into depression at every state election when the Libs lost more and more ground. Who knew how to pay attention. Who remembered, the way men usually don't. Who could pick up a conversation eight

days later and know where you'd left off. Who neglected to sit his bar exams though he'd taken out a good double degree – economics/law. Who didn't play sport though he followed Carlton keenly. Who was, she'd thought, her friend. He'd been her supervisor now for over three years, and yeah sure he can be a wanker – who can't? – but he's fundamentally one of the good guys. He'd looked after Angela, he'd looked after her career, he got her the promotion she didn't expect so soon. And now he was putting her name on documents, he'd put a memo on her personal file, and when she asked Personnel to show her the note they always said, 'It's difficult'; they said, 'Why do you want to do that?'; they said, 'You don't want to go down that road.'

'And they want me to see the Department's therapist, it's the work stress thing they've been going on about.'

'Who's they?' asked Richard.

'Central. Personnel, human resources, that mob. The Department's mob.'

'Angela, darling, if you've put in a report, if you've kept a paper trail, what do you have to be concerned about? You just do the audit, that's all they hired you to do. Be patient. I don't think you should go putting your own head on the block. Systems may be flawed, but they always self-correct in the long run.'

The long run. 'That takes too long, Richard. There's something rotten going on, and I'm being caught up in it.'

'Then cut yourself loose. See the therapist, finish your report, play the game, then take Hinde's suggestion and go on leave. Heaven knows you have enough leave owing.' The phone rang, Richard answered and his voice shifted into warmth, and Angela went out to walk, pacing the streets, burning up the misplaced energy. Something is going on. But she can't work it out, and she can't keep up, hasn't time to think about it, to sort out what might be going on. Every day gets busier. There's no time to contemplate what she's doing, there's no time to clarify. The files keep coming across her desk and she signs a purchase order here, a requisition there, she sits in meetings that go on for an hour, two hours, three hours, she votes on motions she supports, more support for the youth shelter, her project,

her baby, it's probably just about time she was relieved of that one, it's been, what, four years now and she's just too close to it. You need to maintain objectivity. *L. objectum, noun. The state or quality of being objective. From ob, against, and jacio, to throw. That towards which the mind is directed; some visible and tangible thing.*

Later that evening she lay in their warm bed in their dark room, practicing objectivity. Directing her mind towards the tangible, which here and now was Richard, asleep already, in gentle snoring, and Angela curled on her side, her back just touching his, leaching his warmth, and behind her knees their soft cat, Clearance, purring away the night. This is visible, this is tangible. She knows, she can say with certainty that she is surrounded by the sounds of sleep, none of it hers. She is growing very tired. When she sleeps these days, she dreams of administrative tasks, waking exhausted after having balanced accounts and checked minutes all night, or at 5a.m. dream-sitting in a dream-meeting debating a clause. Surely there are better things to occupy her nights? She's waiting to take holidays, and three times now has delayed it to deal instead with something urgent, there's always so much to do, a rush to help one agency with a grant application, a sudden call to attend a conference on Julian's behalf and read the paper he's prepared, then a Board meeting for a different agency again, and she knows things are piling up at the Haven and there are calls and emails from Jessica and indeed from Charlie but she can't get to them, they'll have to wait. She needs to get away. She is developing a look she recognises in others, that watchful fear under a coating of bonhomie, the look that compliant wives develop. She needs to get away. She is under threat. She is over-reacting.

Of course it didn't start with Shelley, that morning some time before. It really started just a few weeks ago when Shelley showed Angela the filing system spreadsheet, and she asked, and Peter asked, 'Angela, where's the file?' Or maybe a little over fortnight ago when Jillian, the new intern, had come to see her, and said, 'Angela, you know that missing file of yours I was looking for last week, the one with the transcripts?' And told Angela that she, Jillian, had (1) seen a file she was sure was the lost one, lying on Graeme Savage's desk when she took some memos in for him to sign – 'So did it turn up after all? No one said anything to me, and I didn't want to ask'; and (2) that Angela's colleague Julian was incongruously pursuing her. Incongruous because of the euphony of their names, and because he was married and a nerd. And incongruous because he was her supervisor's supervisor, and some fifteen years older than her; and because he'd got her home number and was calling her during the evenings and on weekends, and hanging about her desk, and touching her hair.

It is not what Angela wanted to hear. The Julian one; that's easy. But the other. This is not what she wants to be doing, to know about. She'd almost rather be wrong, acknowledge that she's been paranoid – *oh mates, sorry about all this the last few weeks, I really need a holiday!* She'd rather hand the investigation over to Peter or even Julian. Things had been going so sweetly for years now. Angela has progressed to a semi private cubicle with glass walls and a door and blinds she can open or close by twisting a light wooden dowel. She can do her work with one hand tied behind her back, she knows the system so well, she can cruise along, at least as long as Graeme lets her get on with it. But this – Jillian's report of a file on Graeme's desk, the Haven's file, the one containing the now-missing transcripts, the one for which she has been held accountable, on her own supervisor's desk; that she can't handle so well. Her stomach aches, it's pre-period pains she thinks, it must be the eighteenth day, she's like Switzerland, regular as clockwork. So think first about the Julian thing. Okay. She took Jillian to the sexual harassment officer, she set the ball in motion, Julian was called in for mediation, he apologised, it's over, Jillian was set the task of forgiving and forgetting and when Julian walked to Angela's door and leant in and said, 'Bitch,' she said 'Don't push it, mate,' but otherwise didn't respond. That one's over. One for the records. We must record, we must, we must; how else will the future know? Every moment may seem like the last but someone has to note it all down, has to save the records for seven years, maybe for ever, has to be able to prove that it happened, that we

were there.

But as for Graeme – that’s another matter. In 1995, 96, when she was new, Graeme had often come by her desk a little after noon and said, ‘Want a muffin?’ And had taken her to a café nearby, and bought her soup and sandwiches, and explained the structure of the Office and everyone’s role and their mission and their plans, and where she fitted in, and how they all fitted in to Queensland Health and its broader mission, its broad strategic plan, and later on, when she knew all this, talked about programs and plans, and office gossip. And had won, by treating her like a real colleague, a small but permanent part of her heart. Now she doesn’t know what to do. She should leave. She doesn’t want to leave. The Office has become her home. Four years now, and every day she moves sometimes from her garage to the car park at work, sometimes from home to the bus stop to the bus interchange to Grey Street, either way from home to office up the lift through the desks and doorways to her own desk, her body taking her by habit where it belongs. She has loved being here, loved working here. Every morning it’s the same. She enters the building on the strength of her ID card that dangles from a lanyard about her neck. She smiles hello to the one or sometimes two security men who loiter in the foyer. She walks up three flights of stairs, rather than take the lift, it’s her assertion about health and fitness, on good mornings she takes the stairs two at a time and is only slightly breathless by the time she reaches the top, though in truth she prefers not to go up with a colleague because then you have to talk and it’s so much more difficult to manage your breathing in between phrases. She has her own way of making coffee in the little staffroom near the back door they all use every morning and night, and her favourite cubicle in the loo, and her own routine for greeting each day – *Hi Julian; hi Shell; hey, Hinde, coffee? Morning Graeme;* and the phone call around ten from Peter almost every day – *Meet me in the café?* She usually brings her lunch, a vegemite sandwich she’d thrown together between cleaning her teeth and tying the laces of her elegant boots, or an apple, or sometimes yoghurt and dried fruit, and eats at her desk so she can keep dealing with the emails and reports and requisitions and the tower of files on the floor against the wall. She fits in there like a socket, like a hook into an eye.

This morning, like every morning, she had stopped at the staff room near the stair door and made a cup of coffee. She had gone across to her cubicle or rather to her desk, since there’s no walls as such, just clear dividers, no way unless she winds up the wooden slats, which is obviously a bit unfriendly, uncollegial, to shut the others out or herself in. And last

thing before work proper began, she had reached out to her computer and pressed the little button that jerks it into life; it buzzed for thirty seconds, then hummed and whirred before calling her to its wakefulness, she has it set to a single ring, like a telephone, not the jaunty Microsoft jingle, and it called out to her in a tone more inquisitive than demanding.

Another day. Another in-tray full of email messages she will have to check, with which she will have to deal, messages which will certainly include among them the bad ones – *Who do you think you are, fucker? And You'd better leave us alone if you want us to leave you alone.*

Who does she need to leave alone?

Morning. April 1999, and she's feeling chilly, her body clock is reset to London time but her thermostat is still on Brisbane temperatures, feeling for Brisbane's ambient air, the subtropical air that is laced almost all year with heat from the north, with the promise of rain in the humid droplets, with the scent of jacaranda and frangipani and on bin nights decaying garbage, perfume and shit mixed in the Brisbane air, the fragrant colours of cassia, bougainvillea, poinciana trees in the suburbs, the tended gardens along the Southbank walk where she had sat with Peter just over a week ago and he'd given her these contacts, this information, these promises, the assurance that she had one friend at least back in Brisbane. She is cold. London is always cold for her blood, even on days when local girls strip down to singlets or halter tops, to shorts or short skirts, long white legs in strappy summer sandals, hair scooped up into barrettes high on the back of their curved young skulls. Angela takes off her heavy silk shirt, sitting in one park or another over lunch, and puts it back on when the sun slides behind yet another cloud. She is eating well, at least, or if not well, she is at least eating. A balanced diet, more or less. Breakfast, English breakfast. 'God how foul,' said a delegate at the convention in Leeds two weeks later. 'English breakfasts are like some chemical weapon we unleash on the world and ourselves. "Would you like lard with that lard?" – that's actually what they should ask in cafés.' Yes, she knows, she's not used to eating fried food but it's protein and she chomps it down each morning like a chore, eggs, bacon, mushrooms, tomatoes if you're lucky, toast. She pockets an extra bread roll or two, a slip of foil wrapped butter, a little pack of jam, a banana or apple if you're lucky, and that's lunch and breakfast both dealt with, and just dinner to find. She's beginning to yearn for fresh food and will sometimes buy a prepared dish at Marks and Spencers, its little plastic tub of dressing sealed and waiting, its little plastic fork wrapped in a paper serviette, wrapped again in plastic. Not much of a salad, but thank god raw food, that and a bottle of water or sometimes a half bottle of wine and sometimes instant noodles, she really has reverted, she thinks, to student days, and it's enough for now.

Each night, in her adequate hotel room, she sat at the dressing table and looked into the mirror, and saw her mother. Her mother at thirty when the light was just right; definitely her mother at forty; on worse days, her mother at fifty. Gwen. A perfectly decent mother who had provided Sophie and Angela with a perfectly decent childhood, just your everyday story, nothing to write home about. Mown lawns; white sand; Christmas tree; the uncle

who touched what he ought not to have touched; the first day at school; the pony; the puppy. Angela and Sophie in family photos, little fair girls with bobbed hair and their sweet girl smiles, good girls, their good-girl eyes wide in a shadowed flash, or flash-bulb red, or screwed tight against the sun. Gwen, like every sixties mama in a full skirt, waving Sophie and Angela off to school, cheering from the parents' benches on sports days, helping out at the school canteen, sending them to school with their hair scraped into order, with lunch boxes full of sandwiches cut into triangles, and with red apples polished to gloss, and with bottles of orange cordial. When they came home in the afternoons, she fed them again – chocolate milk, cheese sandwiches, all that calcium laid up against the impossibly distant future. And when she'd fed them and watched them change out of their school clothes she drove them to ballet or choir or horse riding or on rare free afternoons a friend's house to play for a couple of hours. And she shouted at them, up to the bathroom in the mornings and evenings to hurry, hurry, it's time for school/breakfast/supper/bed; or called to them where they played down at the end of the garden to hurry in for more food, more drink, or later, as they grew through adolescence, to take a phone call or greet a friend. Once a year Gwen-Mother disappeared and some flirty doll emerged instead, every New Year's Eve, the party was always at their home, and then she'd dance all evening on the rolled-carpet polished boards, too close to men Angela and Sophie didn't know, and would smoke for christ's sake, and the men were always called Uncle-something, and they had a tendency to stroke her legs when she sat down and stretched out to catch her breath and their dad would watch, just watch, as his friends entertained themselves, and his wife. And once, just once, Angela heard her yell 'Shit!' very loudly; she was a *darn it!* kind of girl; and shortly after the *shit* their dad walked briskly out of the bedroom, and closed the door behind him. Angela stood outside the door, listening to her mother weep as though the world had ended. Once only. For all the other days in all the weeks of twenty years or more she was their mother with brown hair and lipstick and sandals on her tidy tanned feet.

Angela had the same feet in her twenties, and in her thirties, but gradually the wrong shoes, the badly fitting boots, squeezed and bent her feet into their own shape, leaving just enough deformity so she preferred Colorados or Birkenstocks to the elegant red things Sophie wears. Less than a month ago she had stretched out her right leg in the therapist's office and turned her foot to and fro, watching the light form shadows on her polished boot, and the way her calf muscles shifted under the skin. Richard was away for a few days, seeing his research partner down in Melbourne, and she went to the therapist, ready to talk

about her concerns about the Haven, about the Office, about her colleagues and her boss. About the missing file, signed out to her, blamed on her. All the obvious stuff. Then said, 'So, do you think I'm paranoid?' to the therapist. Who replied like a counsellor in a movie: 'What do *you* think?' Angela drained the water from her glass, leaned back against the cushions of the little couch, waited him out. After a bit of silence between them, the psychologist took out his blue whiteboard pen, and while he explained to her what contemporary psychology understands by paranoia he drew pictures and circles on the board, joined by arrows, and columns with names, and dates when books were published, and when he'd finished she no longer knew anything. Except this: there was something fundamentally wrong. Except this: that it was to do with the Haven, and maybe Richard would be compromised by it and maybe she was already compromised and the Office surely or people in the Office were up to something. And if she was indeed paranoid, if she was inventing the sideways looks and the reproach in her last progress report, if she was somehow taking files from the system – though only those files dealing with the Haven – and emptying them of contents, and signing away contracts; if indeed she was doing all this and she was indeed no longer herself, still she was sure that something was wrong with more than just her.

Not that there was anyone with whom she could discuss it. She'd even called her mother, Gwen, in the late afternoon from a public call box, stopping off especially on her way home from work. 'Mum,' she said when the familiar voice answered, 'I think I've lost my way.' And then, when Gwen immediately put her on hold and returned breathlessly to say she must have left the street directory in the car and would Angela like her to fetch it, she realized that her mother was not the person to choose as her confidant; and changed the subject, and chatted briefly; then said goodbye and went home, went straight home, did not pass Go, did not collect \$200. She made a mushroom lasagna on the energy of half a bottle of red, and put it in the oven. Didn't check the label on the wine bottle, though she usually did that like a reflex, it drove Richard nuts, he thought she was checking out his taste. And when Richard came home from Melbourne that night, he'd caught a taxi from the airport and got home about eight, there was dinner organised and ready, and she failed to do what she used to do like another reflex, to check his lapel and throat and lips for signs of other women, careless smears of colour, or just the puffiness of too much kissing, the kissing you don't do with a familiar lover or wife. For once, her watchful eyes were directed not at him, or the stove, or the television, but somewhere, Richard said, about a thousand yards away,

and yes she could feel her own eyes gimleting into her heart, or memory, or hopes. And Richard didn't press her about it, and Angela didn't feel up to a conversation, so he went to bed, and a little later she went to bed, and they fucked as they did these days, on the rare occasions they did these days – like practice – and fell asleep.

Next evening she tried talking to Richard about it, thus:

*-Coffee, darling?*

*-Hush a minute – the news.*

Pause. A long pause. She poured coffee anyway. He turned down the volume on the telly, leaned back. Looked at her. And Angela said:

*-You know that thing I was worried about, that missing file? So Hinde –*

*-What on earth?*

And he grabbed the remote, and turned the sound back up. She was, she feared, wearing him out. Anyway he had stuff of his own, his research project in Melbourne, the need to travel there pretty well every week, spend a day or two in town, sometimes stretch it into the weekend. He was losing interest in her anxieties; he was growing weary.

There was Peter, but he was evidently on the side, if there were sides, of Graeme, of the Office. He too doubted her findings, or at least her analysis. Or, at least, her objectivity. Certainly he wondered about the way in which she was conducting the investigation.

Hinde was going, going, nearly gone. Her kids were making demands, down the phone lines from Sydney. And like Richard, Angela feared, Hinde was being worn out by the whole mess. Starting to cut Angela off if the word 'Haven' was mentioned; starting to throw her hands in the air with an 'Enough already!', starting to suggest she shit or get off the pot – that she lay out a full report with all her concerns, or throw in the towel. Either way, that she wrap it up; that she get over it.

Graeme: well now, there's a problem. They had drawn up battle lines, she and Graeme. Graeme watches her these days; he is watchful. When she is working, she feels him looking at her; when she is on the phone, he is, she thinks, listening in – she can hear the click and hum on the line. She goes to the staff room to fill her water bottle, and bumps into him on the way out. And when she goes off to the bathroom, he is often hovering about outside after she's flushed the loo, and washed her hands, and flung the door open to leave.

Who else can she talk to – the police? Don't be silly. There's nothing to report. But the union, yes; a lawyer, yes. And herself of course – keep your own counsel. No one else is sure; even the computer second-guesses her, double-checks her: *Are you sure you want to do that? Are you sure you want to shut down?* She took advice from everyone who offered it, and kept careful records of her own. Trying not to be paranoid, remembering that Shelley was the one who had sparked her suspicions, and Shelley is hardly the brightest spark in the fire. A sweet girl, but really.

But still, but still. A second set of books. A string of girls. Where's the proof?

She arrived home late, eight-thirty-ish, needing to talk to Richard, wanting to talk to Richard who was again in Melbourne. She dialled the number he'd left, but all she got was a woman's voice saying 'This call has not responded. It *may* respond if you try again.' Why the emphasis on the possibility? She tried again, dialled and dialled, and an automated voice came on, saying like a polite machine, 'We cannot connect you at present, *please* try later.' She went to bed, alone, and into fitful sleep until the light came in through the curtains she'd forgotten to draw, and jogged her into wakefulness.

Every morning's waking takes its own shape. Sometimes Angela wakes quietly with the sun, and lies awake-alone, Richard in that deep breathing soft body state beside her, and she touches his hip, nestles wrapped about him and he turns in his sleep and his cock is morning-hard and he comes half awake and easily over onto her, easily into her, and kisses her with slimy morning mouth while he slides into her, still mostly asleep, so quick, those mornings, five minutes, seven minutes and it's all over and he groans, and lets his full weight rest on her for a few minutes while he comes to wakefulness, and props back on his elbows and smiles into her wide awake eyes and says, 'Good morning, gorgeous,' and kisses her again, and rolls off to lie on his back beside her, she on her back beside him, they're like two calm playing cards, king and queen of spades, and then he sighs, and strokes her hair, and creaks out of bed to start the day.

That's one kind of waking. That one hasn't happened lately, not at all.

Then there's the waking when the alarm clicks on and the energetic radio voice cuts in, in its cheerful patter, and she gradually becomes aware that someone's speaking in her room and that yes, she's listening, and she's missed the news but is half-aware of another bomb blast in Jerusalem, and she's missed the weather, Brisbane's weather, but it's going to be 28 degrees somewhere else, maybe Perth, and a chance of showers, and she comes more and more back into her body from wherever it is she goes when she's asleep, she thinks of it as something like her soul, comes from reading astral travel books in her teens, and she thinks of her soul, something that looks like her but transparent, like kitchen wrap, and one dimensional, and it – or she – hovers up against the ceiling all night, wondering about going somewhere else while the rest of her, her heavy three-dimensional clay body, lies inert on the mattress. And her two selves, in the early morning to the sound of Triple J and

the announcers and all their good will and the music that rasps her ears in this lemon light; her two selves drift together again, gradually finding their form each in the other, and she becomes one whole, one Angela, and the words on the radio start to make sense, and that's another kind of waking.

And then there's the other wakings. The mornings when she hears the click as the alarm reaches its setting, before the radio voices come through into the room, and she groans and she moans *Oh no oh no not yet*, and every joint aches and she doesn't understand how she can drag her body together and get through a-whole-nother day. Or the mornings when the alarm shrills through her, something sharp in every vein, and she leaps from sleep to terror and screams herself awake, and clutches Richard if he's home, and clings to him trembling. And that's a fourth kind of waking, the kind that happens more often these days, that starts her with the palpitations that usually only a solid pot of espresso would induce, that ensures each day her eyes are a little more bruised, her face a little more lined, her mouth a little more set.

The best thing on any morning though, after any kind of waking, the thing she knows she should do right now, is get up right away and pee and shower and clean her teeth and then begin stretching and breathing, and breathing and stretching, and loosen every joint and every muscle, and feel her heart begin to slow into a steady rhythm, to cease its anxious patter, and beat confidently, correctly now, and her lungs begin to work *whoosh whoosh* and her muscles knit properly and her body begins to think, then, about food and the new day. She should certainly do it this morning, this morning is a bad waking after a night of twitching restlessness and the sound of the wind rattling the ranch slider out the back, and it always sounds like some intruder. There are intruders in fact, of a sort. Wildlife is coming into her life. The bathroom window, kept set just ajar for the cat, is also the front door for spiders and praying mantises. Every day, pretty much, in the shower, she always checks it for alien life, it and the shower curtain, before she gets in, but still half way through her ablutions there will be a tap on her leg like a fairy's touch and when she looks down she'll see a mantis, holding up its pleading arms as the water thunders down. So she saves it, and feels somehow connected. Except the one she trod on, her eyes full of water and shampoo, and then felt dreadful, it was still alive, waving its arms as feebly as they do in old books. It's not even that she likes mantises; to her they're like those old mandarins out of English colonels' memoirs; inscrutable, unreliable, their mendacious hands folded so cunningly and

their faces closed down. But still, to tread on one; to feel its body fold under her weight. *What passing bells for them who die as insects?* She scooped it out on a cloth and laid cloth and all on the windowsill. Later it was swarming with ants; and later again, the cloth was empty. And now there's another intruder, a spider somewhere in the house, and it's not just big, it's huge, it's a huge probably very old spider, a huntsman, somewhere in the house. She didn't mind so much a day or two ago because it was in full view there on the wall of the passage, but yesterday afternoon it shuttled into the bedroom and darted about while she watched, she guessed catching tiny bugs, and she went out for a while in the evening and when she returned it had disappeared and god only knows where it is now, on her dressing gown maybe, or in her slippers, maybe on the light switch in a dark room so that she'll put her hand right on it tonight when she goes to turn on the light. 'I know they're harmless, huntsmen,' she told Hinde later that morning over coffee, her hair dry and scraggly, not looking sharp today. 'But it's god those thick legs, that thick body, all that hair.'

'Fascist,' Hinde said, 'Spider nazi,' and reached for the sugar.

'I am,' she said confidently. 'I hate their greebly legs. Anyway, they could just leave me alone. I don't go looking to pick fights with spiders.'

'Spider fascist, eh?' said Peter, passing through the staff room en route to a meeting, eavesdropping. 'I'll report you to the RSPCA.' And then, seeing she really did look wretched, 'Richard still away? You want me to drop around this evening and hunt the huntsman?'

'Just so long as there's no hide the sausage,' said Hinde, and cackled.

'Would you, Peter?' Angela asked. 'Oh, that'd be so great.'

That day sputtered along; she was unfocused, slow, edgy. Three times Shelley had to remind her to finalise the paperwork for the new position they were advertising, and each time she turned back to the file, and the type smudged under her damp eyes, and even when with an enormous effort of will she gazed it into clarity, nothing about it made any sense to her at all. And then the phone rang, and it was the manager of the Shelter, asking about the budget and about the requisition he'd placed for a new vehicle, a 12-seater to

drive the kids around, school and sport and probation officers, a perfectly valid request but after all the old van was still roadworthy and hadn't they recently purchased a brand new government white Holden station wagon? Wasn't that one of the memos Graeme had asked her to approve without consultation or confirmation? But she wanted to think about it a bit more, the other staff at the Shelter had been complaining that the run-about had become just his, the director's, his personal car, no one else allowed to drive it, just him and his wife, and their chocolate smeared children, no one else even allowed to ride in it they said, and was this something she'd have to raise at the Board meeting soon? Oh god, how petty. Thank god Peter would find the spider and they'd be able to have a little drink and unwind just a tad and maybe tonight she'd get some sleep and tomorrow wake with that new feeling you get after a good night, when the skin on your feet is silky and you know you've had enough sweet sleep.

Peter drove her home that evening, his faded orange VW trailing through the traffic up Caxton Street, onto La Trobe Terrace and onto Given, then down her steep little side street to the front of her cantilevered Queenslander. He parked in the street and stood on the pavement while she checked the mailbox and greeted her shrilling cat, and then he walked beside her, elbow to elbow, like someone who had rights, up to the front door and took the keys from her in that casual way, and opened the house, and ushered her in. The door swung to behind them, Clearance the cat only just slipping in safely, and he pushed her up against the wall of the airy entrance hall and kissed her fiercely, aggressively, banging her lips against his teeth against her own sharp teeth and his tongue between her now bleeding lips so he tasted the iron and kissed her more gently, and she didn't turn around and wriggle away as she had intended, as she had played it out in her head, but shifted slightly so that her body fit against him in that old so familiar way, her thigh against his, her breast pressed against the curve of his ribcage, body bleeding into body the way they always ought and she kissed him too, and felt his cock stiffen against her leg, held down by the pressure of his trousers, by the pressure of her leg against his. After a moment she eased away, eased him away from her, and ran her hands down his belly to outline his erection through the fabric of his linen pants and then said, 'Come here Pete come with me, come,' and led him to the spare room. Not hers and Richard's. The spare. There are limits, after all. 'Come Peter, come,' and she wound an arm around his shoulders and he undressed her urgently, it'd been months, longer, he'd not known if he'd even be welcome but he is, clearly he is, and she welcomed him almost lazily, lifting her arms softly above her head as

he tugged and hauled at her shirt, letting her breasts fall free from the cloth, taking his hands and taking them to her breasts and he moaned, lightly, and squeezed perhaps a touch too hard, a little over-enthusiastic, and she said 'Wait' and stepped back, and stepped out of her skirt and now she was barelegged, barebreasted, still wearing her sandals and her deep blue knickers that she hadn't expected him to see when she put them on this morning and he said 'God Ang why's it been so long?' She drew him back with her to the bed, her busy hands undressing him, unfolding him, and he came up hot and eager and she wouldn't let him touch her cunt, she straddled him and guided him in all herself and though it was a bit awkward for a second, that *will I need to reach for the lube? Will one of us laugh and the moment pass?* thing, then he was in her and it was all presence and memory, defining the texture of their skin, the rhythm of their movements, the way the late sun threw a nimbus around Angela – *Angel, ah!* – as she rode him, bestrode him, the old memory of their eighteen-year-old bodies, their twenty-something, thirty-year-old bodies, on again, off again as she rode him back into friendship, back into grace, back into some kind of love, and he said 'Oh Ang' and it was over. She lay in the crook of his body, his arm heavy across her waist, still trembling slightly, and she felt his sticky salty cum stinging slightly at the mouth of her cunt and hoping he didn't notice she bent her wrist just slightly so she could see the face of her watch. 7:55. They'd taken 35 minutes. Neither good nor bad. Actually it was pretty good, really, considering how long it had been since last they'd done it. Another hour and hopefully Richard would be phoning from Melbourne, and she wanted Peter and the spider both out of there, and herself alone and still warmed by his familiar body, his familiar love, ready to smile down the phone at her husband.

That was then, she thinks, packing up her slight possessions in the crusty student room where she has had enough, which she is vacating. She is too old now to have to share a bathroom, even with just one other stranger. A woman about her own age and, judging by the silence with which she came and went, as unsociable as Angela herself. Too old to share a dormitory style breakfast with dozens of Euroteens. The girls this morning – that's enough. She is too old for this.

'Is there somewhere nearby you could recommend?' she asked the blank boy at the reception desk.

'Aah, no, couldn't say.'

She held his eye, stared him down, he blushed, blinked, shifted his feet, and said, 'I'll ask someone.'

A young woman – older than the boy, but considerably younger than Angela – emerged from the back office. 'Mrs Noble?' she said. 'Ms,' said Angela automatically. 'Sorry, *Miss* Noble. I'm afraid there's nowhere near here. But a few stops away, on the tube, and one change, there's a very nice Comfort Inn which may have a room. Would you like me to call?' She would, and they did, and Angela checked out and dragged her wheeled bag to the station at London Bridge, ten minutes away, rumbling over the sometimes pavement, sometimes cobbles, sometimes potholes that paved her route.

The new hotel was very near the Victoria underground, in what must once have been a spacious home, and was now a puzzle of rooms and stairs. It wasn't too dear, £60 a night b&b the man had said over the phone, and she didn't plan to stay much longer in London, just a few more days, and then she could go up north to Peter's convention, her formal justification for coming here at all.

*A very nice Comfort Inn*, the young woman had insisted. The room was considerably smaller than the student lodgings; but had a private bathroom. Good. And a small desk as well. Okay, a table, but with a wall light fixed over, perfect for reading or writing or spreading out the *London Times* and hopelessly attempting the crossword. What else? A kettle in a wall mount, the smallest kettle she's ever seen, the most ingenious support because not only does it furnish a stand for the kettle, and the heating element, but also has room for a cup, and a container with packs of instant coffee and sugar, teabags and whitener. Okay.

She kicked off her shoes, stretched out on the bed. Single beds don't suit her after twenty years of double, then queen, then more recently the king sized bed she and Richard had bought. 'What's that about then, the thrill of the chase?' a friend had asked, *hur hur*, and Richard had gone blokey with him, but really, what it was about was room to spread out room to sleep without touching. The sense of proximity without the actuality. 'No wonder he fell for that bitchface,' she thought. Ah well. Old news.

Though only recently it had been new news. More bad news for her to process. It was party time, because Richard's semester had just begun, a new program had just been added to the stable managed by the Office, it was Graeme and Darren's seventh anniversary, and so the crowd came together at Graeme's house, Graeme and Darren's house, for a generalized celebration, a late New Year's party, an early Easter party, congratulations and aspirations all round. There weren't many people, and nearly all were very familiar; people from the Office and their friends; people from Richard's workplace up at St Lucia. People with whom one can be at home. Angela and Richard walked down from their home, and arrived about forty-five minutes past the nominated time. Richard immediately spotted someone he wanted to see, seized a drink, and headed out to the verandah that led off the airy living room, high because the land falls away there, on the sharp Paddington slopes, and the view takes in the whole of the city, a fragment of river smeared with lights from the passing cars, smudges of Highgate Hill on the south side, lights and scents and darkness spreading out like a trompe l'oeil, a sublime view with the fantasy of a faint scent of mangrove swamps drifting up from the river. Angela went to congratulate Graeme and then Darren, who drew her into the kitchen to lend a hand preparing the various bits of food that would count as the meal tonight, to top up drinks, hand out the ice trays and direct the people who came and went in the splendid kitchen. After half an hour Darren closed the oven door firmly, and said, 'That'll do, darl. Let's go and join the crowd.' They clinked glasses, and headed out to the verandah. Angela found a chair near Richard, who was sitting on the slate floor, nursing a drink, talking animatedly. She noticed, she couldn't help but notice, that he was sitting at some woman's feet, some woman Angela didn't know, who was wearing a short tight skirt, and that Richard was sitting where he could like a schoolboy look straight up her skirt. Angela watched for a few minutes, letting the conversation move around her, and then when Richard touched the stranger's knee once too often to attract her attention, to make a point, she got up and went back inside. She wouldn't, couldn't, watch Richard on the hunt.

Inside she flopped onto a deep leather armchair and eased into conversation with Hinde, one of Richard's colleagues, Peter her sometimes lover and Emma his wife. For nearly twenty years they have done this, from time to time. Made conversation, been sophisticatedly calm with each other in public, Peter/Emma/Angela/Richard, none of them ever never fully at home in the quadrant formed by those four names. The coolness between Peter and Richard, between Emma and Angela. The shifting space between Peter

and Angela never discussed, never acknowledged. But that doesn't stop history biting back, of course. Who is ever comfortable, ever entirely at home, with their partner's ex? Angela, for instance, knows, and Emma knows she knows, all about Peter, his childhood stories, the birthmark high on his left inner thigh, the compulsion to clean his teeth after every meal, every drink, every fuck. She knows how the perspiration bursts out on his forehead as he reaches orgasm, she knows how he will suddenly sit up during the night and howl, then lie down in silence again, and in the morning have no memory of the disruption. And Peter knows all about Angela too, of course, knows how she panics without cause and how she can be calmed, knows about her insomnia, knows that she can't bear to be touched on the back of her knees. Richard knows he knows, of course, knows that Peter knows what should be their secret knowledge, his and Angela's. And both Emma and Richard know when from time to time their partners fall suddenly back in love, or in lust, with each other, and all their energy is directed away from home. Peter will say, 'Let's have Angela and whatziname around for dinner'; or 'Oh, I bumped into Angela at work today; she's looking tired'; or 'Ang took me across to the meeting at blah blah blah'; and every time he says her name it's like breath in his voice. Right now though, Peter and Emma are being together, and he holds her hand, he plays with her fingers, he pays all his attention to her. Outside Richard is talking intimately to a woman Angela has never met, and on reflection she thinks she'd just like to go home.

But: 'Come in, everyone,' Graeme called from the kitchen. 'Food's ready, come and eat.' The dozen or so people squeezed in around the great long table, and passed dishes and comments, and offered toasts, and then after a few more drinks the conversation turned to work. Conversations always turn to work. And Angela having had one too many glasses of wine, said, 'What do you folk think an auditor should do if there's a suggestion that the director of a care unit is prostituting the residents?' and Graeme's hand slipped, and his wine glass cracked against his mouth. 'Shit, shit, shit,' he said wetly, pushing back from the table. Hinde said, 'Graeme, your teeth are bleeding!' and Darren snatched his serviette up from the chair and held it up against Graeme's mouth – 'Come here, love, come to the bathroom, let's see what the damage is.'

'Well, that's a conversation stopper,' said Emma; but Peter said, 'Ang, do you have proof or is this just the ongoing trauma of the Haven?'

‘Oh Peter, you know the crap that’s going on at that place. There’s got to be something I can find, with all those allegations floating about; but I can’t put my finger on it and Graeme,’ she threw her head back, raised her voice, directed it towards the passage door down which Darren had escorted Graeme, ‘He’s stonewalling me at every fucking step so I can’t sort anything out.’

‘Angela,’ said Richard, sitting at the head of the table, his head in his hands, such a cliché of despair. ‘For heaven’s sake.’ His pose: an ‘I don’t want to know any more about your troubles’ gesture. Richard. She has worn him out.

‘Sorry, sorry.’ She leaned back in her seat, held up her hands, closed her eyes and lips, then waited as conversation gradually limped back and picked up pace around her. The woman sitting across from her at the table, the woman to whom Richard had been speaking on the verandah, smiled at her and said, ‘I’m so relieved Richard’s managing to get a bit more rest now; I’ve been worried about him.’ To which Angela replied, ‘I didn’t know you were familiar with my husband’s state of health,’ and then Richard was there with them, smiling, saying, ‘Ang, have you met Cecily? My research fellow? She’s up from Melbourne for a few days.’

*Monstrous anger*; the tenor is singing, in a voice like glass, filling the Albert Hall with something brittle, and then the chorus comes in, chanting martially *Dies irae* against the martial shout of the bugles, she thinks they must be bugles because he's sung about bugles *saddening the evening air*. She wants to go home; she needs to be alone. But the brick-shaped man, one of her aunt's friends, reaches out and pats her hand, and hands her a white handkerchief.

*'I'm so glad you're here right now, darling,' her aunt had said, when she'd rung up. The aunt she hadn't intended to see, because she'd wanted to be invisible, obscure, responsible for no one else's day. But the shower at her hotel, it was impossible, hopeless, or maybe she's hopeless, she can't get it to run hot and steady. The concierge tried, he's hopeless too. She can't bear it, hot showers are about all that are keeping her going just now, so she gave up, and phoned her aunt and after the hellos said, 'I'm here for three days, any chance of a visit?'*

'Of course darling, come on over. Pot luck, because of no notice.' And then, 'You can come with me to the concert hall tomorrow night. Britten's *War Requiem* – don't you love it?'

'I don't know it,' Angela said. 'I go to the opera sometimes with Richard' – she would not put him into the past tense yet, she would keep him present – 'but I don't really follow it. He calls me his lowbrow bride.' And her aunt laughed, and said, 'I'm sure you'll love it, darling.'

So she checked out of the very nice Comfort Inn and moved into her aunt's spare room, and the next night in her aunt's box at the Albert Hall she listened to the opening lines: *Requiem aeternam dona eis Domine / Oh Lord, grant us eternal rest*. Not eternal; just enough for the present; that'll be enough for me.

\* \* \*

Hang on; go back to where we left off. It's the morning after the party, and she has to consider her hangover, Richard's behaviour, Graeme's bleeding teeth. Oh god, another day. Another kind of waking, another day. 'Did I behave badly last night?' she asked Richard,

who had highhandedly spent the night in the spare room. 'Did I make a fool of myself?' and he said, 'Yes,' and picked up his briefcase, and left for work. Angela took aspirin and vitamins and a very long shower, and arrived at her desk an hour late, though she wasn't the only one, neither Graeme nor Peter had turned up, so Jillian said, and then added, 'Angela, I didn't thank you properly for sorting out that Julian business.'

Angela waved a deprecatory hand, trying not to grip her forehead, trying not to let the hangover creep through. Jillian dropped into the chair on the visitor's side of the desk and said, 'I don't want to seem like you know a gossip, like I'm always talking about Graeme. But on the weekend I was out with my boyfriend at the Terminus, and Charlie was there, with this really trashy girl all over him like a wet shirt, and Graeme and Peter were there too.'

'And?'

'Well I know it doesn't need to mean anything. But Charlie also had this other girl with him too, and she was being real flirty with Peter, and Charlie kept buying the drinks and talking like real fast the whole time.'

'Oh Jillian. Graeme and Charlie have known each other for ages. They're surely likely to hang out from time to time. And if Peter was there too, it was probably about work. As for the girl – you know what Peter's like. Can't stop himself from flirting.'

'Yeah I know. It just looked a bit you know suss. Especially with what Graeme's been saying about the Haven and about you.'

'Mmm? Like what?'

'Like you're obsessive, like you've been having an affair with Charlie so now you're really jealous about him, or angry with him, so you're making things up, making problems where there aren't any ...'

'Jillian, where the hell did you hear this?'

'I was sorting files outside Graeme's office last week when he and Peter and St John had a consultation. They were pretty noisy, you know, shouting almost, and I wasn't actually eavesdropping but I couldn't help but hear. St John and Graeme both said you were inventing stuff...'

'Inventing? Did they mean stories, or records, do you think?'

'St John said you couldn't find anything wrong because even though you might not like it the auditor was properly appointed, and so anything you'd found wrong, he said, was manufactured. That's the word he used. And Graeme said he wanted to take you off the case, and Peter said the auditor's appointment was suss and needed to be addressed, and that you had at least got those interviews with the residents and the talk about a second set of books, and that had to be followed up even just to prove it was faulty information. Then Graeme said that it had to be faulty because the transcripts had been stolen, and you were the only one who'd had the file, and obviously it was you who'd done it, that you must have realized you had to pull them. Then I wanted to jump in and say I'd seen the file in Graeme's office, but you know.'

Angela tried to laugh, a little – 'God Jillian, did you have a tape recorder or something? That's a real mouthful.' But then, seeing her face fall, said 'No look I really do appreciate you letting me know. Actually, is there any chance you could get it to me in writing?' Jillian smiled a little uncertainly, but didn't refuse, and then she left the cubicle, left Angela to turn off her computer, and put her head down on the desk, forehead first. Where she closed her eyes, trembling, and tried to fight back the nausea. What to do next? *I've lost it; I'm out of control.*

'Are you okay love?' That was Hinde, coming in late.

'No. Hungover. Feel like shit. Feel like everything's gone to shit.'

'Oh babe, come on. Let it go!'

‘No, you know, there’s a line from somebody – maybe I read it in Economics? – something about drowning because you believe in water? That’s how I feel. That I shouldn’t believe in water.’

‘You what?’ said Hinde, and Jillian came up behind her and said, ‘It’s gravity. I had to read it just last semester for Community Studies. It’s Karl Marx, and the line is something about people only drowning because they’re obsessed with gravity. If they could break the obsession, they wouldn’t drown.’

And Angela said, ‘If I can break the obsession, I won’t drown. Got it, okay. Stop believing in gravity. Or in crime.’ And the nausea swept across her again.

Maybe it’s true, and it’s all in her head, she’s killing herself over nothing. Maybe Charlie doesn’t steal from the residents. Certainly St John says this. Certainly Charlie says this. Charlie had held her chin in his hand, gazed at her with that trick he has of gazing, so clear and direct, you’re the only person in all the world he’s thinking about right now. But no, it’s not true. The auditor’s appointment was suss, after all, even if nothing else is wrong. Peter thinks so too. Okay, some of the residents do want to donate cash to God’s work, they had told her so. Okay, some of them sometimes are fined for various infractions. Charlie spends the money from fines on treats for all the residents, or sometimes on incidental expenses, like taking a corporate donor out to dinner, for example, or *for e.g.*, as he puts it. Do you keep records of their donations and fines, she asks. She hasn’t seen any entries to this effect in the books. No, he says. Donations are just put into the general donations account; fines – those are locked in a cash box in his office until there’s enough money to be useful. ‘I know, I know,’ he said. ‘You don’t have to tell me I should put it through the accounts. But there’s never very much, just a few bucks here and there. I don’t put it in with petty cash because it’d screw up Jessie’s records. It’s just easier this way.’

*Follow the money.* One of the lecturers at uni, the financial accounting man, said that like a mantra. *Chercher l’argent.* Chase the cash. And the professor who gave guest lectures in the MBA she completed eight years ago; he had said that dodgy finance managers invariably keep a set of dodgy books. For some reason, they rarely just pocket the dosh. Hidden away somewhere, maybe in a handwritten diary, maybe in a set of drawn-up accounts, you always find it, he said, as long as the embezzled amounts are big enough.

She drove around to the Haven. Maybe she was manufacturing something; who knows if they are in fact losing their reason? But still, something isn't right. The cracked concrete steps were shabbier in the late summer sun, she made a mental note to check about the repairs and maintenance schedule, remembering Richard's complaint, it's relevant to the scope of the investigation, it's about maintaining the value of the building. The wallpaper in the tall slender hall was cracked too, and yellowed from the years, until quite recently, when everyone smoked, and smoked inside. The carpets were poor too, hadn't she sighted an invoice for new carpets, obviously not these ones, where had they been laid? Better check it out. Angela rapped on the high wooden door of the reception office and pushed it open without waiting for a reply. No one else there. Of course: it was prayer meeting time. The daybook lay open on the big table. She turned it towards her with the tip of one finger, and though that was somehow less intrusive, and read: *John to clinic 10am. Charlie to Trust. Joshua P on discipline. Payday.*

Charlie to Trust? Why didn't she know about a meeting of the Trust Board? She should have been there as the Office investigator. She paused, scrabbled for her small purse diary, flicked to today's page. No meeting scheduled there. Maybe it wasn't a meeting. Maybe it was just Charlie meeting personally with a trust board member, St John for instance. For e.g.

Payday. Not her payday, that's for sure. She crossed the office, avoiding the two squeaky floorboards, and sat in Jessica's chair, and leaned back and casually slid the drawer open. Nothing but stationery. Nothing in the next drawer but tissues and peppermints, and a blank notepad. In the cabinet beside the desk were the records of the residents' money; that must be okay, except insofar as Charlie maybe leans on them to give him money, stand-over, extortion, but not dodgy accounts. Their pensions, their small incomes, those are paid directly into the residents' own bank accounts. She's checked them already. The account books or ATM cards or occasional cheque books, they are held in the office, under lock and key. The residents are permitted to draw limited amounts of cash against those accounts; no cash changes hands immediately, but Maria keeps an IOU book where she records who drew how much, and when; the resident signs it; Maria countersigns it. Once every couple of months for long-term residents, or at the point of leaving for short termers, the amounts are totted up, the resident signs a withdrawal form, the IOU is

marked as paid. Angela sat in the Haven, studying the records. She couldn't see any way that records could easily be fabricated; and in any case, the amounts being drawn by the residents were small, \$30, \$50, cigarette and chocolate money, little more. Long term residents sometimes took out much more, but this could be justified by their shopping for clothes – Maria or Stuart took them around the stores every few months – or maybe gifts for their families, for those still in touch with their families. Maybe donations, as Charlie had suggested. Not enough, really, to be worth ripping them off.

Okay. Then what? It has to be donations. It has to be from the fundraising tours, surely. She could only get any sense of that if she accompanied him on a trip, and that's not going to happen. How about drugs? There's no evidence, not that she'd know what she was looking for. Bags of cocaine? Hardly. Only unexpected money would show up something wrong. What if he is in fact running a brothel? It would be easy enough: the younger women sentenced to or stumbling into the Haven; it would be easy enough for him to keep them aside for himself, or to make them available for richer sponsors. And justify at least the second option as having good ends, if not means. It isn't illegal to run a brothel. Is it? But even if it isn't, these kids are supposed to be in care. He is being funded to help them rehabilitate, not to supply a business of sorts.

Is there a second set of books? *If I were keeping dodgy records, what would I record? Where would I keep them?* She hauled across her desk the files to which she did have access. The day book and night book. The record of complaints. Staff records – she's confirmed all the employees recorded, even the casuals. That has to be okay. But how could she be sure? Who's to know who is and isn't brought on to serve casual hours cooking, counselling, running interference? Then there's the cashbook, the ledger, all the running expenses. It's easy enough to inflate those, though her random check of invoices and receipts had turned up no problems, or none of significance.

She picked up her mobile phone, locked her handbag in the filing cabinet, went out onto the road away from the hostel. Dialed an old mate at the Tax Office. 'Angela, we can't release that kind of information to you, you know that!'

'Okay ... sorry. But listen, I'm convinced this guy is receiving cash illegally, or at least shadily. And I'll bet you any money that he isn't reporting it on his tax return. How hard

would it be to organize an audit of his personal tax, and check his living standards against his income?’

That’s the thing she had hated most, in her early days at Tax: having to follow up the spite file, the anonymous calls and letters about someone’s neighbour running a motor mechanic business out of his back yard; about an ex-wife who is moonlighting for cash; about someone bragging in a pub how he only paid tax on \$7000 last year but we all know he makes a mint, he’s always loaded. She loathed having to check them out, and despised the faceless people who’d put in the complaint. But a full audit – the tax officers going through his bank account, going through his house, his kitchen cupboards, his fridge; going through his personal possessions, comparing his measurable cost of living against his recorded income, looking for discrepancies. That would at least show up if he were indeed skimming cash off the top.

The complaints from the residents that Charlie was ripping them off; that could be explained. That had been explained by her therapist. ‘People in this situation,’ he had said. ‘They have no power, no personal authority, they don’t have a good grasp of reality, they’re being looked after and that strips away their sense of worth. Often this sort of confabulation about the abuses of their caregivers is the only way they have to hold any sense of self-value: “I may be at the bottom of the heap, but look, that person apparently giving me everything is in fact not doing it for me; they’re doing it for themselves”. Makes them feel better about their own infelicities.’

Where would another set of accounts be held? At Charlie’s house? Perhaps. But then his kids – they’re wild, they get into everything. And his wife – would he trust her? *I wouldn’t*, she thought, knowing it didn’t necessarily correlate. Hmm. Charlie’s office door was never locked. Did she have time to sneak through his desk? Not today. Maybe on a Sunday when the whole community went together to church? Meantime she slid into Stuart’s chair, bent to open the cabinet beside his desk, found a small diary. Fair enough; maybe I’d keep it in my old mate’s cupboard. Is this it? Is it? Isn’t this too easy? But easy or not, she flicked through it, looking for consistencies, looking for a pattern, and was making notes from it, jotting figures down onto her pad when she heard, tapping in the passage outside, Jessica’s heels. Angela pocketed the diary, slid the cabinet door shut and lifted the receiver of the phone, talked into it busily as Jessica opened the door and started, squeaked, to see

someone sitting so unexpectedly there. 'Oh Angie, you frightened me,' she said, then, 'Ooh sorry,' noticing the phone. Angela said goodbye into the dial tone and then, 'Don't mind me – I've only just arrived' as Jessica said, 'Have you been waiting long?' They air kissed, and hesitated, and Angela said, 'Come on, let's slip out, just for ten minutes, let's get a coffee.' And Jessica smiled and unlocked the top drawer of the grey filing cabinet, took out her bag, and they crossed out of the foggy building and into the morning sun.

She went back to her desk later that morning at the Haven, Stuart's diary burning against her hip, and the light on her phone was blinking. Messages. She lifted the receiver, she clicked the code, the mechanical voice said, *You. Have. Five. New. Messages.* One was from her sister, wanting to organise a weekend for their mum's birthday. One from the director of the shelter, wanting to know if the 12-seater has been approved. One with an unknown voice: *Do you know what you're up against?* And the last two, one hard on the heels of the other, were from Hinde. The first: 'Ang, can you get away for lunch? I really want to see you.' And the second: 'Ang, darling, I'm going to miss you, sorry. Had to go to Sydney, and it looks like I'll be out of contact for a while. The kids, you know, hassles. I'll call as soon as I have a number, or whatever. Kiss kiss.'

Gravity. Like it or not, it's possessing her, it's pressing down on her. There is something going on, not nothing, whether it's a matter of belief or not. Follow the facts. What is she up against? She can't prove many of her allegations. There are some small improprieties, some small inconsistencies. She could put in her report with the problems noted, and call it good. But Stuart's diary; it has dates and names and places, sometimes important names, names she knows well from the media or indeed from the public service. Meeting places. Only two or three different spots. And always alongside the entry, a girl's or occasionally a boy's name. That doesn't say *Brothel* but it does suggest something to check out. From a record she has stolen. It doesn't constitute a second set of books. But it is a problem.

*You'd better leave us alone*, that email had said, *if you want us to leave you alone*. There is only one 'us' she is not leaving alone, only one where she's making trouble, the only place she's found irregularities, the only trace she can follow. Trace it back to the Haven. And of course to Charlie. Okay. She needs to talk to Graeme and to St John, maybe together; she needs to show them today's emails, Stuart's diary. She needs their response. Because she has to wrap up this investigation, it's making her feel ill, it's making her lonely, because after all, who can you talk to, keep talking to, that is? Her therapist – she only went back to see him once, he left her more confused than when she began. She has, she knows, worn out the patience, the interest, of Richard, Peter, Hinde. What can she do?

She can email Graeme and St John, schedule an appointment for next week. She can go home, kick off her shoes, relax.

Home by 5:15, almost unheard of. Richard would be in presently, she guessed. Meantime she scooped up Clearance, her little cat, who tolerated it briefly then wrestled out of her arms and leapt down and sat, and cleaned himself urgently, his elegant dark coat shining against the shining floor boards. She shook out his food, poured half a glass of wine, and began her usual if desultory Friday evening tidy-up. And tidying their shared study, she picked up a few sheets that had been left lying across the printer, and read them, idly at first and then appalled. Emails to Richard. Not from her. She is reading his mail, and it's not from her, and it's about what? Love, or something like it. Passion. Not hers, not from her. She is reading. His mail. And the distress rises in her chest, the panic arrives.

What is it about panic? It swells just above the solar plexus, just below the diaphragm. It binds the chest. In the pit of the belly, in the cradle of the pelvis, something cold stirs. It becomes difficult to breathe, easy to wail. The brain kicks in then with its *nothing's any good/ everything's going down/ what have I done / what have I done?* The only thing to do then is to reach into somewhere in the self, assume a quiet tone, and say: *Nothing is wrong. Nothing is wrong.* And keep it up, breathing steadily but not too deeply, until the trembling slows.

She read the emails again. Richard's correspondence. Why this, now? Because she's worn him out. Because Richard has lost interest in her. Because she's too obsessive, too compulsive, too not available, too too. Let X equal Richard. Let Y equal Angela. Let X plus Y equal their relationship. Z. Z then equals two personalities multiplied by time spent together minus a thousand small and larger betrayals plus shared history and property, then divide by mid life crisis.  $X + Y + Z$ . Which equals, what?

He wasn't home yet, he wouldn't be home till later, and then she'd have to decide what if anything to say to him. Later arrived, and at first she said nothing. She waited until they were sitting down together in the living room, until he'd settled back into the house, until he looked comfortable and calm. 'Richard?' she said. They were drinking Moët, because Richard had just been appointed to an important committee reporting to government on child health, and because France hadn't bombed a Pacific atoll for several years. Richard's wine glass was a spun-stem piece in crystal, the survivor from a pair she'd bought him a couple of years ago; hers was a plain Marie Antoinette. Those days even their glasses rarely matched.

'Richard,' she said, and paused again; and he, with a gesture, lifted the remote and silenced the television, even though the news was still on, the finance section, which he followed assiduously, even though he only ever bought and never sold. 'Richard,' she said for a third time and he said, 'What is it, Angela?' and she gulped some wine though you should never gulp Moët.

'Look what I found in the printer.' He took the sheets she'd lifted from his desk. He read. He smiled, but very abruptly. He stood up and walked across the room, opened his briefcase and slid the sheets inside. And said nothing at first, and then said, 'I thought we

agreed we'd never read each other's mail. Now, give me a few minutes, please – I'm taking the 8:30 to Melbourne, and before I leave I do need to relax for a bit – in my own home.'

The fact is, they both of them had had affairs during the eighteen years of their marriage, so resolutely you could almost think it was some sort of duty. But the rule had always been, *don't ask don't tell*. The neglected rejected spouse – the one who constituted what Richard called *the primary relationship* – shouldn't have to know. Rules are rules. So why would Richard leave a letter from his lover in the printer? Unless, of course, he wanted to break the rules, wanted her to know, wanted to – I don't know – force the moment to an overwhelming question? Don't ask, don't tell.

She would ask; she would make him tell; she wouldn't leave him to shut her out, to relax, to prepare to go out and go away and spend the weekend with Cecily in Melbourne. Why not the overwhelming question? So she did ask, pushing him, nagging him, forcing the moment to its crisis. A mistake, he said at first. 'I didn't realize I'd not put the emails away.' And then: it's serious, he says, it's the love he's been looking for all these years. Now he wants out. He left the print-out for her to find because he intends to leave her. In her head she hears, *You're dumped*, the schoolyard chant. She's devastated; outraged too of course: 'But how could you do this?'

To which he replied, 'Darling, I don't see that you're in any position to judge me. Heaven knows you've done it to me often enough, in the past.'

'But I never told you about it, about them. I never rubbed your nose in the shit – not like this. I never planned to leave you.'

'Maybe you never met someone who wanted you to go with him.'

'No, that's not it. None of it mattered, it was always just something that happened, just a fuck.'

'I'm sorry, Angela. This one matters. To me.'

She stood up, breathing hard, shouted: 'How could you do this to me? How could you do it to me, now, when you know all the shit I'm trying to juggle?'

And he said, 'This is not about you, Angela. It's about me.'

An uncomfortable silence that drained a moment, then two, then three, four. Richard gave up first. 'I'm sorry, Ang, really I am. Very sorry about the timing. But it couldn't be helped. It just happened.'

And despite her frantic instructions to herself – *Be cool! Be unmoved!* – her voice rose and cracked with the wail that filled her throat. 'Bastard!' and she fell to the floor, her hands fists, her head buried between them. 'You're leaving me!'

'Oh for goodness sake.' He squatted beside her. 'Angela. Ang. Don't be so.' He stroked her hair. 'I'm not leaving right away; there are no dramatic changes, not right now. I'm going away to Cecily this weekend, and then I'll be coming back, and then I expect I'll return to Melbourne the next weekend too. I'm not suggesting any radical or instant rupture.' And as she rocked to and fro, wailing, he straightened his back and said, 'Don't let's turn this into a wake.'

'Richard,' she howled, and he put his arms around her, and then was unexpectedly kissing her, sucking at all the fluids all over her cheeks, biting at her neck, pulling at her clothes as she tore at his shirt, his belt, and he nipped her breast and hauled up her skirt, and pulling her knickers to one side, thrust his sudden erection into her and plunged, and she plunged against him, clinging on like death, her body coiled, her face buried in his shoulder, soaking the bit of his shirt that still hung on. Richard was grunting with the effort, and she lifted her hips, opened wider, wrapping her legs around his waist, crossing her feet at the ankles, crossing them across his spine, her face wet with the tears that still flooded her eyes, her thighs wet with juice and then with his spunk as he shuddered, with her, and shuddered again, and came hard and hot, and sagged down against her. 'Angela, darling. You have to let me go,' he said when he'd got his breath back. And he disentangled himself from her, and vanished. She heard water run in the bathroom, and presently he was back, kneeling beside her, fully dressed again and his hair damp. 'Here,' he said, and wiped between her legs and across her belly with a damp warm towel. 'I have to go now, Angel. I'll call you

later.' And he picked up his bag, and the front door opened and closed, and then she heard the engine of his car start, and roar, and then fade away down the street.

*Hinde, I wish you were here, she said into the empty air. You would make this funny.*

Everything, it seemed, was conspiring to send her away. And so she went, but instead of the quick disappearance, the magician's flourish, it was an awkward staggered leaving. In several stages. The first leaving was for Sydney, to see an expert in public service legislation, recommended by one of her MBA professors, whom she'd sought out for cautiously worded advice. She flew to Sydney in the late afternoon, took a taxi into the city, met the woman at a café in Oxford Street, laid out the problem before her, listened to her advice, made notes.

She'd booked an early flight for the trip home the next morning, 7:40 a.m., that would get her to Brisbane by nine, and plenty of time to be at the Office with no one knowing she'd even been away. At seven she was at the airport, checking in; at 7:25 a flight delay was posted. Fog. Can't be helped. By 7:45 there was still no sign of her aeroplane. All around her people were slumped irritably in seats and across the floor. Promises of refreshments and reallocations drifted across the PA system. If planes can fly in the dark and in rain, why not in fog? 'I'm so sorry,' said the young woman at the information desk. 'It won't be long now.' Angela hovered about the desk – was there another plane she could take instead? 'Sorry about this,' the woman said again, and looked past her to the next customer.

The woman was right. It wasn't long now, though the minutes crept across the face of the day. Every waiting passenger watched, like a tennis match, a pair of toddlers who silently headed towards a baggage trailer that was neglected in the waiting area, made a beeline for the vehicle, one staggering, the other crawling in a convinced kind of way. Their weary mother picked up the crawler and lugged it to the departure lounge and put it down and told it to stay, and headed back for the walker who had now reached the car, and was climbing aboard. She scooped him back, and as she carried him back towards the lounge, the first was already halfway back to the vehicle. So she put down the one, went back, collected the other, over and over. The bored crowd watched her walk back and forth, carrying babies through the departure lounge over and over, while the children grew ever more silent and determined, and the small frown buckled and deepened between her eyes.

Finally a plane roared in and staggered along the runway, stopping just within vision, like an empty bird, and at 8:30 they were called on board. Boarded, propelled, fed, watered, tidied, disembarked at Brisbane. Just after ten now, and it would be another half hour to

get to her office, she'd be there in plenty of time, just a little later than usual. But she went home instead, and went into the spare room where Richard now slept, and lay on the bed and breathed in his clean scent from the linen where he'd been. She'd hardly seen him since last Friday. They rarely bumped into each other in the increasingly lonely home. Which now feels not so much like a home, as someone else's house. God what timing, Richard. She wouldn't go in to work, not today. She had to rest, had to think, had to stay at home. This was her house, her home, though now she moved about in it like a stranger. She slept badly that night, and early in the morning sat in the living room, looking at the new window they'd had built into the south east wall which with its rattan blinds and the newly budded mock orange outside with its heavy scent, and light and shadow falling across each petal as framed by the window frame, looked a little like a kitsch Japanese watercolour made for tourists, but in the unmediated form of itself, nevertheless lovely. Her hands wrapped higher around her coffee cup. It is no longer her home. There is a hint of presence in the house all the time. Day after day, this past week or so, there have been subtle shifts of papers and tables, books lying open when she'd left them closed, or closed when she left them open, face down. At night, in her sleep, she smells the traces of someone else's presence in her room where Richard no longer comes. *He*, the faceless person, the unknown, the stranger, is invading her dreams so now they are full of dread and she sleeps brokenly but heavily, and dreams she's a vast landmass, heavy, immobile, practically lifeless, splayed across the ball of the world like a threat, she wakes breathless and fish-gilled in the empty dark to a smell she can't identify, to see her cat sitting on the spare pillow beside her head, watching her curiously.

Home. What does it mean to say home? Where the heart is. It's everything you know. It's all you can rely on. Home: where you can be safe. Where you can be. Where. Home: and all Angela saw was Richard placing a fresh shirt, clean underwear, a shaving kit, into his small leather holdall. All she could hear was the telephone ringing, and the unknown, though increasingly familiar voice saying through the answer phone speaker, *I know you're there. I know what you're doing. Don't you want to talk to me? Don't you think it would be a good idea?*

We all know so many people, but when it comes down to what we call 'it', to the catastrophe, to at least a sort of end, who do you really know? Who can you call for consolation? Angela lists her friends, running through the notebook in her mind, then opens her address book and reads off the names: no; no; not her; no; maybe; no. It comes

down to this; a company of one; or if you're lucky two or three. Angela counts, recounts, discounts. She's down to family now, or else is done. She has to wrap this up. So she went to work the next day, met and confronted St John and Graeme, refused to meet with Charlie. 'I've taken legal advice,' she said at that private meeting, where only St John and Graeme looked at her across the table. 'There is something wrong at the Haven, and I believe you are both preventing me from resolving the problem. I've kept copies of everything I've filed here. The originals may be missing from the files, but that's not the only evidence. I also believe I've found solid evidence of the Haven being the base for an illegal sex business, and I'm confident my complaints will stand up if I take them outside here. I need you to convince me that you're not complicit with Charlie, and help me find the second set of books I've been told about, or else I'm going to the Director-General and if I need to, to the Attorney-General's office. In other words, sort this out, or I'm going to blow the whistle on this whole investigation, and on you.'

'You have copies?' asked St John. 'Surely you should make them available to us.'

The copies were nearby, in the cabinet in Peter's office, a bundle of papers she had hidden there, knowing he'd be away for a while on his annual holiday. She had laid the parcel in his office, papers wrapped together in brown paper. A photocopy of Jeff's report. Her handwritten notes from meetings with staff and residents. Her photocopies of vehicle logs, her photocopies of the day books. The transcript of her interviews with the residents. Stuart's diary. Everything that had been lost in the missing file and more, all safe here. Copies.

'No,' she said, and looked at Graeme. 'You lost the originals; you find them.'

'Angela,' said Graeme, 'You're blowing everything out of proportion.'

'Oh really,' she said, her voice a bit too high, cracking a little. 'Are these out of proportion?' and she passed across the table copies of the emails she'd printed out: *Who do you think you are, fucker?* And *You'd better leave us alone if you want us to leave you alone.* And *We know where you live; don't you think you'd better leave us alone?* And then passed them a photocopy of just one page of Stuart's diary.

*There was a pause. Graeme flicked through the sheets of paper, passed them one at a time across to St John. Pause.*

‘Do you have any idea who is sending these to you?’ That was Graeme.

‘Well of course I have an idea, but I can hardly prove it. Look at the email address.’ Which was just a string of numbers@netmail.com. ‘There are the phone calls too, I’ve kept copies of all the messages threatening me. And I’m sure my home is being invaded too. There is evidence of someone being in my home. There is evidence of mail tampering, there is evidence of someone being in my yard. It has to be associated with my investigation at the Haven, I’ve never experienced anything like this before.’

*Graeme sighed, and lay a hand on each side of his head, Richard’s gesture. St John said, ‘You are having a bad time, aren’t you. Still, this,’ and he flicked the diary copy, ‘is evidence of nothing. We’ll investigate it, of course, but I think you’ll find that it is someone else’s private business. Information you have stolen, by your own admission. But Angela, I am concerned about you. Have you been to the police with your concerns about harassment?’*

‘Yes,’ she said. She’d called them in, shown them the small note, printed on small white card, propped beside the telephone: *Just to let you know I dropped by.* Showed them the marks of her house being invaded while she was at work, her papers gone through and left visibly disturbed, her linen cupboard upended. Described how her letters in the letter stand had been read and rearranged. Her unread mail taken from her box and placed in the neighbours’ boxes, so she got it late. The locks of her car damaged. Small acts of aggression, and of course she had some ideas about who it was had gone to war against her. The police looked at her, carefully, and said, ‘You must take more care over security.’ They left their card, and the number of her complaint, printed there in black ink.

‘Now, to move on.’ She handed a document to each of them. Copies of her report, spiral bound. ‘This is everything I’ve ascertained through my investigation, and copies of those emails, transcripts of the voicemail messages, transcripts of my interviews with the residents, and a copy of my report detailing my concerns and my suspicions. I’m sending a copy to the Director-General by the end of the week if you haven’t come back to me with some proposal to resolve this.’ And she pushed back the chair, stood up, and left the room.

The next day St John called her at the Office. ‘Angela, meet me for lunch at Jazzy Cat, would you?’ She would. She did. He was confident, compassionate, concerned. His mouth curved just so, his eyes were like salad, even his beard shimmered with sincerity. She would have told him anything, wanted to tell him anything. She ordered an omelette, a glass of mineral water, a basket of bread. He had steak.

They ate, they sipped their drinks, they made polite conversation. Then once he’d pushed aside his plate and called for coffee, St John said, ‘Angela, I’m very grateful you’ve brought these problems to my attention.’

‘Problems?’ Angela said. ‘I’m suggesting they’re evidence of crime.’

St John smiled. ‘I hear what you’re saying. But we have confidence in our director and in his integrity. And you must understand that on the other hand we have little confidence in the capacity of the residents to apply reasoned analysis to what they think they see, what they think they experience. Now, certainly the director and the senior staff aren’t trained book keepers, and it is quite likely that there are faults and inconsistencies, but I’ve interviewed them all, including Charlie, and I’m quite sure that there are no serious issues here.’

She began to speak, but he interrupted her; ‘Just a minute, dear. Now, I have to tell you that Charlie has made some serious allegations about you. He tells me that you have sexually harassed him, and forced him into a sexual engagement.’

‘What...’ she began, but he held up his hand. ‘I’m not saying I necessarily believe it. But it does put a bit of a cloud over your investigation. Also, he suggests that you have removed something from the Haven without permission, some personal records. We both know what that was. He’s talked about involving the police. Now of course I’m not suggesting that I support him in any way, or have any concerns about your professionalism, but I do suspect you are very tired and very strained. I really think you need a holiday.’

‘And I’ll take one, just as soon as this investigation is completed,’ she said.

*I think you need to consider taking a break immediately. I've talked now to the residents named in your report. Suzie denies everything you're alleging; in fact, she denies she's ever spoken to you. Jeff has become catatonic, it seems. He's been admitted to hospital. I do understand your concerns, Angela, and I appreciate the care you've taken. But clearly you're feeling under enormous stress, you're getting burned out. I suggest you hand over your files to Graeme, and Julian or Peter can complete your investigation. You need a holiday; you need a rest.'* He paused, laid his hand over hers where it clenched on the table, and said. *'My dear girl, I know how passionate you are, how ethical, and I entirely applaud that. But in this instance, there is no doubt – and all your colleagues would back me up in this – there is no doubt that you have lost perspective.'*

*Angela tugged her hand away from his, ran her fingers across her scalp, pulled at a handful of hair. 'I can't believe you're doing this, St John,' but he rolled right over the top of her, 'And because I, and they, care about you, I'm going to insist you take some time off. As it happens, the Board owns a small cottage at the Gold Coast which we've not been using, and we have in fact been thinking about disposing of it. I want you to go to the Coast, spend a bit of time there and get your health back. And of course if you find you like the cottage, then we can discuss terms for making it over to you. It's not as though we need it, at the Haven.'*

'Are you bribing me?' she said. 'Is this a bribe to keep me quiet?'

*Bribe. N. Middle English, from Old French, piece of bread given as alms. Something offered to a person in a position of trust to influence that person's views or conduct. To bribe: v. intr, to offer or give a bribe.*

'Good lord no. But don't you see, Angela, your reaction is clear proof that you have lost any real capacity to judge, to trust, to keep your eye on the mark.'

What is true, and what just looks true? What is real, and what just a metaphor? Maybe St John is right, and she can no longer tell the difference. A gift/a bribe. A problem/a crime. Proportion lost or misjudged. But still, something is influencing her views and her conduct. And that evening she came home to find her house turned upside down, contents of cupboards spread across the floor and across tables, books knocked off shelves, furniture moved, doors and drawers standing open. She called the police but before they arrived, the phone rang. Charlie.

‘Hey there Angel. Missing me?’

*‘You’ve been through my house haven’t you, you bastard? I’ve called the police, they’ll be here any minute, I’m going to tell them all about you.’ She replaced the receiver on the phone; within a minute it rang again. Charlie again.*

‘Just wondering if you remembered our big romance. Just wondering what that might mean to your fucking report.’

*She said nothing, but felt the chill creep up the bones of her arms, spreading from the telephone she held in her hands to the base of her gut. And he went on: ‘Never fuck the fuckers, Angel. I know more about this game than you’ll ever know. I know everything about you. And I’m not going to let you screw me around, no way. You’ve got no chance, sweetheart.’*

*The police came, the police went, the police left her another card bearing the number of this new investigation. She paced around her suddenly noisy house, trying to restore order, then gave up, fed Clearance and tried to watch television, starting at every sudden movement, listening to terror sneaking up the stairs towards her. Clearance moved away from her disdainfully, going off to find a calmer resting spot, and she hastily packed a bag and drove to her sister’s home for a night of no sleep. At work the next morning she cornered Graeme and said, ‘Now this has to end,’ and told him the previous evening’s events.*

*‘Oh Angela, you poor thing.’ Graeme laid a large warm hand on her shoulder. ‘I do understand, I begin to believe you. But we can’t just rush into things. I promise I won’t stand in the way of any police investigation. But you really do need to stand back from this a bit. You’re so tense, look at you,’ and he smiled, with compassion of a sort. ‘You can’t be sure that was Charlie phoning you last night – you certainly have no evidence it was him breaking into your home.’*

‘I am sure. I’m not waiting till Friday, Graeme. I don’t feel safe any more. I’m going to the Director-General today, later today.’ She began to walk out of his office, but Graeme stood up, with much more energy than he’d shown so far, closed the door, and caught her wrists, pulling her back towards the visitor’s chair. ‘Please Angela, please don’t do anything just yet. I just need a bit more time.’

‘You need time, Graeme? What are you up to?’

‘Oh god. I’m not up to anything, not like that. It’s just ... I just need some time.’ He paused, and horribly, began to sob. ‘I’m gambling, Angela. I’ve gambled too much. Charlie lent me money and I can’t pay him back. He’s been putting the heavies on me, my tyres, my dog, Darren’s been threatened. I just need more time, I just need a couple of months, I just need to keep anything from going wrong for the next couple of months. Please Angela please take St John’s advice, please don’t go to the D-G, I’ll be ruined.’

*‘You’re already ruined, Graeme,’ she said, cold, frozen. ‘Do you have any idea what you’ve brought on me, what you’re leaving those residents to face? I can’t, I will not, turn a blind eye,’ and she stumbled out, blindly, leaving him weeping behind her.*

All afternoon she looked at the telephone, and finally picked up the receiver and dialled the number of Richard’s mobile phone. ‘I’m sorry to interrupt,’ she said, letting the sarcasm slide through the words.

‘Yes dear. What are you calling me for – and can you make it quick?’ So she told him. Quickly. ‘Did you get it on record? No? Then it’s your word against his. And really Angela, you may have misunderstood him. You’re hardly yourself at present.’

‘The hell with you, Richard. Our house has been broken into. I have been threatened. I have been bribed. I really don’t think I’ve got any trouble seeing what’s happening at the moment. Don’t fucking patronize me. I just want a bit of advice: do I take it to the police?’

*‘Not just yet. Give me a couple of days, don’t do anything yet, I’m coming home at the weekend.’*

Home?

Three o’clock passed. Three-thirty. No one called her phone, no one sent emails, no one issued any threats. Nor did either Graeme or St John contact her to come to any sort of understanding. Four o’clock. Peter was due back from New Zealand in a couple more days, was due back at work on Monday. She needed him back, needed his suggestions. Four-thirty. By five she packed up her desk and went home, and phoned Sophie to hear a friendly voice, and dialled Hinde’s number just in case she’d come back unexpectedly, or

maybe had changed her voicemail message, maybe left a number where she could be contacted in Sydney. The phone rang, and rang, and finally rang out, Angela imagined it, the tendrils of her longing threading out from Paddington, stretching across the city, looping between the towers, leaping then over the river to sidle through the streets of Highgate Hill, slipping in under the door, filling Hinde's tiny entrance hall with sound, the phone trembling on the small mahogany table, spilling into the empty rooms beyond.

The evening wouldn't pass, and wouldn't pass, and then it had passed, and she had fallen asleep on the couch in the living room, waking stiff-necked in the morning with her mouth dry and foul, the television still humming away to itself. She got up, put the kettle on to boil, stood under the shower letting the hot water wash away the tension, the soreness, the bad temper. Coffee, toast. She called the cat, shaking his biscuit tin, and finally set out his breakfast so he could help himself when he deigned to come home. Time to go to work. She collected her keys, her handbag, her umbrella because the sky was heavy, picked up an apple on her way past the fruit bowl, locked the house behind her, walked out to the car, and as she slipped the key into the driver's door lock, she saw him, Clearance, her cat, draped across the bonnet. Around his neck, a cord, biting into the soft fur, the soft skin. Oh god. Oh god.

She dropped to her knees, screamed very quietly into her hands, scooped up her cat whose body was already like a plank. Clearance. Then she began to sob, rocking to and fro, holding the stiff dead body against her, stroking the cold dead ears. Clearance. How could they.

Finally she calmed down a little, began to think, went back into the house, still nursing the little body. She wrapped him carefully in a soft sarong, found a box, managed despite the stiff limbs to fit him in, laid beside him his bowl and a handful of biscuits, a small tin of fish; grave goods for a cat. The back garden was kept well watered, well cultivated – it was where she and Richard both gardened actively, annuals, soft fruit, vegetables. The ground was soft enough for her to dig. She dug his grave, dug it deep enough but not too deep, and laid him in, blind with tears, reluctant to let him go. It was time now for her to go too. So she did. Washed her hands, washed the crusted tear marks from her face, packed a small suitcase, called a taxi, left.



So this is it. Time to run. First to a hotel at the Gold Coast, where she waited for Peter to return to Brisbane, dialling his home every couple of hours till finally a teenaged voice answered, and put him on. Saturday afternoon, and Peter sounded drained, but after just a few hints of what had happened he warmed up and arranged to meet her the next day, next morning, 9:45 am, Sunday morning in the Myers Centre.

She got there first. It was so silent, only a few people there, waiting, marked with anticipation. Lights were low. No one else but a guard here, a guard there. By 9:53, all through the Centre the security grills were being raised by puffy-eyed 17 year olds. Angela waited, counting her fingers, watching the entrance near Roger David, waiting for Peter, who arrived precisely ten minutes late, hugged her warmly and said, 'Come on you poor sweetie, let's get some coffee and you can tell me everything. I think I have some ideas.'

He did. Turns out he had been scheduled to attend a convention in Leeds, within the month. 'You could go instead of me,' he said. 'I'm so stuffed anyway, I really don't want to have to go to the UK. You could go right now, soon as you're ready. We'll call it Office business, some of it anyway, long as you can pay your own way there I can organize the convention fees and hotel fees while you're doing that. Maybe you could interview a few service providers too, while you're there, in London? Maybe Leeds too? I'll check it out, you can call me, or email, we'll sort it out, okay?'

Sorting it out. Peter has sorted it out. And Angela, she fled her home, her job, her husband, her country. Fled the sight of her choked cat carefully arranged across the bonnet of her car, left her house, her home, her fear behind, and now only ten days later was still trying to find some peace, still waking goosebumped and breathless in the London night, and her reserves were low, and if she was a touch melancholy, and a touch overdramatic, who could blame her?

It was quiet at the Comfort Inn, after the residence at Bankside. The traffic hummed outside, but where she was, in the very heart of the house, her window facing only a tiny internal courtyard, the trains and buses and cars were muted. Ten days away from home, and tonight, she was confident, she would sleep. Meantime, though, it had just gone noon. She could call Peter. It would be, what, nine at night. She could, for that matter, call

Richard. She should call Richard. He should be back, now, from his weekend trip. Only nine o'clock. He'd be awake. Unless he and bitchface were bonking – *in my bed! The hell!* And she got up, washed her face and hands, ran her damp hands through her hair in lieu of a comb and then, freshened, calmed and away from the noise, went outside again to find a phone booth.

The first had been vandalised, and the next, but the third took her – actually, she revised, Richard's – credit card, and then it was his voice on the other end. 'Angela, where on earth are you? Is this some sort of game, some revenge?'

'I'm in London, Richard. I left you a note. I had to get away.'

'Oh for heaven's sake, Angela, don't play games, there's no need for all this drama. I told you about Cecily, it's all been, umm, transparent, on my part.'

'Uh huh.'

'I'd like you to come home; and on that note, where's Clearance? I can collect him from the cattery.'

'He's dead, Richard,' she said.

'You – what – what's happened? What's going on?'

'You were away, remember? Without your phone. I had to get away, fast, and there wasn't time for' – she paused, took a breath – 'domestic arrangements, forgive me.'

'Hoo boy. Angela...'

'And besides, I hardly wanted to put a big bummer on your romantic weekend,' she said, she spat.

'You had Clearance put down?'

She placed her finger on the button, pressed disconnect, stood there for a few seconds longer. A man passing looked at her, paused, and said in an American accent, 'Lady, you okay?'

'I'm okay,' she said. 'Just had a bit of bad news. Thanks.'

'Well, if you're sure,' and he walked on.

Angela swiped the credit card again, dialled again, heard Richard's voice again, testy now, higher pitched. 'Angela, is that you.'

'Listen to me, Richard. Clearance was murdered. Someone killed him. Left him for me to find, along with a note. Like the other notes I told you about. Like the phone calls I told you about. Like the fact that my boss is up to something shady. Like my audit has gone all pear shaped. Like my husband has left me for some woman he hardly knows. Don't you tell me I'm being melodramatic, fuck you Richard, it's not about you.' She felt, rather than heard, heads turn on the street around her, but now was beyond paying attention.

'Angela,' she heard faintly through the telephone, Richard's voice faintly calling to her down the line, but she had run out of things to say and air to breathe, and she said, 'I have to go,' and collected up her credit card and her hotel key, replaced the receiver, and stumbled back to the hotel, past the uninterested concierge, to her room, where she wailed, loudly, feeling something give in her chest, wailed *Richard*, over and over.

It's difficult to pace in a room that's six by eight, but she did it by using tiny steps, tears the only thing in her vision, a black hole between her breasts, over her solar plexus, splitting, opening, deepening, she could feel it seizing what you might call her life force, dragging her down. *Richard*, she wept, eighteen years of admittedly uneven love, but still, hadn't he been constant as presence, even if the warmth ebbed and flowed between them, still he'd been there, and their future had been scrolled up and secured, she'd assumed, rolled out along just a single line, and now it was split, divided into two, he was going away, he was gone, and Hinde, the only person who she knew would both care and not care, would make her laugh, was out of reach, and her cat, ludicrous to break your heart over a pet, but there you

have it, he came running to meet her when she arrived home each night and curled purring on her lap, and he was gone too.

The tears gradually slowed, and stopped. *You're just feeling sorry for yourself*, her mother's voice said in her head. 'And why not?' she said out loud. 'I'd feel sorry for anyone else in this situation; what's wrong with it being me?'

She was shivering now, sweating and cold. But she had a bathroom of her own. She would calm down under running water. *Chance'd be a fine thing!* Her mother's voice again. And was right. Because the shower was like none she'd seen before. An arrangement of knobs and taps. She fiddled one way, then the other. Cold water gushed out, full of pressure, full of energy. The hot water, though; that she could not resolve. She stood there, naked and goosebumped, her eyes red slits, she couldn't ask the concierge about this, not even if she dressed, she couldn't be seen like this. She must be able to work it out. 'You English,' she said out loud, disgust thick in her tear thickened mouth. *Can't even organise a shower system.* Eventually she coaxed a dribble of half-warm water out of the showerhead. That would have to do, for now. But she couldn't stay, not like this. She'd have to move again. Tomorrow. The hell with it for now. She towelled down, got into bed exhausted though it was still afternoon, closed her eyes, immediately blinked wide open, startled, and began to focus on calm breathing, calm thinking, emptying her mind, and at last, just a few more startles and whimpers later, slipped into uneasy sleep.

\* \* \*

It is the following night. Her aunt has rescued her from the Comfort Inn, she is here now, at this point, at this place, here in London at the centre of the universe, in the Albert Hall, listening to this anguished oratorio in opulent surroundings. Here, now, and the soprano is coming in, her huge voice, more of a mezzo, really, than a true soprano. Her butch-cut hair, her name unpronounceably Eastern European, lacking in vowels, and her voice is multi-layered, the bottom note running through every bar cracked and throaty as a blues singer, the top notes are soprano pure, the middle part is melted chocolate. She holds the heavy Latin phrases through the impossible, desperate rhythms, a song of yearning for peace, or even for the dream of peace, *Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona eis requiem. Dona nobis pacem – grant us your rest; give us peace.* Is it true, is peace possible, or is it just a

hope? The choir comes in behind, the boys' choir in the stalls with their fine young voices, the adult choir down beside the orchestra, layer upon layer of tone and colour and volume, and against the fifty massed voices the soprano's is the first, the most insistent, the most believable. The drums rattle out gunfire, the battle resumes. Listen to the notes, listen to the tones. The tenor, his windowpane voice filling the hall with composed despair: *what passing bells for them who die as cattle?* She saw one of her aunt's guests, then another, dab unobtrusively at the corner of an eye. She tried to concentrate, to focus on something outside her, but the notes slid around and around and all she felt was forsaken. *What passing bells* indeed. When you have to run away, when the better part of valour is packing a hasty suitcase and grabbing a flight and most clichéd leaving a note for your husband – ex husband – on the fridge, then *what candles can be held* to speed you on your way?

She sat in that red egg, the concert hall, her heart sinking, sinking. *Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus Dominus. Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini. Hosanna in excelsis.* Her feet and the lower part of her velvet dress were damp from the soft rain she and her aunt had run through, from the parking spot up the road to the Albert Hall, and though its cool touch soothed her, and though the desperately shattered music, the impossibility of any good outcome to this oratoria comforted her, still in her head were all the fears that had latterly been building, and all the resentments. Comes a time when all the lies are all too much. Comes a time when you can't bear any more betrayal. She has betrayed, and has been betrayed. And now she is here, lost in England, and though it's small and safe and well mapped she feels defamiliarised; if defamiliarisation feels a little like death. And later tonight she would walk again, now pacing the floor of the polished spare room in her kind aunt's elegant Barbican apartment. In the quiet hours when she should have been asleep she'd be walking, sometimes weeping, sometimes talking urgently, quietly to herself. Her aunt would stir in the master bedroom, Angela knew she must be concerned, knew she would not ask. And knew she'd have to leave.

It was almost time, anyway. She could go to Leeds a day early, settle in at the hotel, prepare for the convention.

'I hate this country,' said one of the delegates, over dinner. 'There's a soft drink you can buy here that's quintessentially British. It's, and I'm not making this up, semi-sparkling, low calorie, with a trace of fat and a trace of salt. I mean, that's a drink that's really trying to be inefficient, eviscerated, charmless.'

The convention was full of flute-voiced British men, busily deprecating Britain, as fluent and themselves as they had not been during their presentations, during question time. Maybe sixty people were there, mostly academics, a sprinkling of public servants and other professionals. Nearly all were friendly and English. Nearly all were men. Angela asked her table companions about this imbalance, and they told her it's probably because men are more likely than women to be funded for conferences, and that she was lucky, being Australian, and so she bought them all drinks, paying for them with Richard's credit card, feeling colonial and rich.

'Australia? My god you're so lucky, living in a place that has real weather. I mean, British summer!' said the man sitting beside her. 'And Yorkshire, this is the absolute pits. When I was living in Leeds a few years ago, my associates and I decided in autumn to count the number of days when we didn't see the sun. It got to six – six! – weeks before the sun came out.'

And Angela, slightly tipsy, immediately bragged about Australian sun and Australian wine and Australian food. And bought another round of drinks, delaying the end of the evening, delaying the moment she'd have to think about the fact that the convention was almost over and what would she do next?

Only one more day of presentations and discussions. There had been advances in thinking about the management of community organizations since she'd last studied at uni, and because she hadn't been keeping up with the literature it all seemed new, though you'd never believe most of these people had even spoken in public before, so dull their voices, so halting their delivery. She dozed through session after session, pretending to take notes. Sometimes she would forget, and find herself weeping unexpectedly, and creep out of the syndicate room, and hide in the loos until she could breathe steadily again, and felt ready to splash cold water on her face, and touch up her eyes, and get back in time for questions

and coffee. The coffee was foul. She choked it down because tea tasted worse, and waited for the evenings when she could drink wine instead. The conference droned on.

She'd travelled there by train, through little England, slowly, slowly, through the back yards of the many small towns. A block of dark cloud rose like a building above the fields. She travelled through tunnels so dark she couldn't tell whether the train was moving or standing still, while the pressure on her eardrums built. Back in the light and travelling now past stained stone houses, she looked out of the window and up, and saw an aeroplane flying slowly overhead in the half blue of the sky. Green and yellow fields, small tall houses, all the architecture in the UK lifts upwards – going where?

Justin was one of the delegates. From Sheffield. He was a sociologist, he told her over breakfast on the second morning, and spent about fifteen minutes speaking very rapidly about Giddens and Habermas and other names Angela certainly didn't remember hearing when she was at uni. So she nodded, she raised her eyebrows, she frowned slightly, and encouraged thus, he raved on. Loudly. A couple of postgrads come across to their table, carrying breakfast trays full of meat, and sat down, and one of them, a young Danish woman, hazarded a criticism of some theoretical point, to which Justin responded with startling rage. Angela swallowed the last of her orange juice and excused herself. Thinking, *for Christ's sake, she's just a kid!* Then, as she came back out of the washroom, Justin cannoned into her. 'I was waiting for you,' he said. 'I'm sorry about that, that,' and he paused, and his discomfort was enough to touch her and she softened, as she always did, and smiled at him, and strolled up to the main auditorium with him, responding to his questions, asking him questions of her own. She thought, *maybe I'll sleep with him*, and though she didn't honestly fancy him that much she'd been watching his hands, and they were large and looked warm, and she could imagine him laying them on her body, between and over her breasts, his heat momentarily melting that aching frozen space beside her heart.

Inevitably he sought her out, after a session full of papers that made no sense to her at all. 'How about I pick you up for dinner?' he said. Him, a colleague in a manner of speaking, someone working in the same area, someone with the same interests, someone based in the UK, and she looked at him more closely, thought *what the hell*, and said yes. And later that afternoon she showered again and shaved her legs and plucked her brows, she shaped her

hair with more care, she put on makeup and tried on several outfits before she was satisfied with her looks. Because you have to play the game, after all.

She's had practice with this sort of thing and knows precisely how it will go. He met her in the hotel lobby, said, 'You look fabulous'; and she did. Next: the restaurant three blocks away, where all the other delegates were arriving too, some early and already seated and drinking, others wandering up and down the street looking for the door. Next, some small talk, and the standard you always get in this situation – his confession about a recent separation or divorce or the nursed hurt of a long ago separation or divorce, or his despair about the growing chasm between him and his wife or maybe his ex-wife, or his talk about how much he loves his children, or how lonely and cold the world has become. Her questions about the children's ages, names, interests, tastes. His enthusiasm, her encouragement, maybe touching his shoulder or the back of his hand, lightly, not sensually, just a butterfly contact. She'll smile, looking into his eyes, this is what she always does at this point, and as they always do at this point he'll melt a little, he will cover her hands with his, he'll maybe lift her hands to his lips, she will hold his gaze.

It went according to the script. After dinner and before coffee they sneaked off from the other delegates to a little pub he knew about, they had another drink, danced to the tune he put on at the jukebox. And at precisely the point she'd predicted, she could have put hard money on it – 'I like you,' he said, 'I really like you.' And then, 'What are we going to do about it?' He hasn't had much experience at this, Angela thinks, though perhaps he has, perhaps he's had lots and he knows if she has to say the words, it'll be all her responsibility. Whatever. She'll go back with him to his room, and later that night she'll put her clothes back on and decline his invitation to stay the night, to sleep together, to hold each other, stranger comforting stranger throughout the night. She never stays. She will shower and dress and kiss him affectionately and smile, and say good night, and go to her own bed in the hotel where like always after sex with a stranger she will shower again, sometimes she'll throw up, it's the tension, she expects, or sometimes weep, or sometimes, maybe this night, she will fall into smiling sleep.

Benjamin Britten was on the radio in his hotel room – there was to be no escape, it seemed, from that sad composer. Justin was beside her, tuning the radio, looking for news, not even a new lover could distract him from his first obsession, his profession. 'Leave it

there, just a moment,' Angela asked him, and he stood beside the bed, a little baffled, while the recording took her instantly back to London, back to the Albert Hall, placed her back in that private box with those charming people, her aunt and her aunt's friends, back where the baritone began to sing, incongruously harsh to her unpracticed ear though her neighbours in the box were smiling, were closing their eyes, were borrowing one another's opera glasses and leaning into space to get just that bit closer to the sound. The discordant battle noises of the orchestra shattered and spackled around the tenor as he stood to sing his next lines, standing immovably, only his face shifting from mood to mood as he balanced the breathing, *No mockeries for them from prayers or bells nor any voice of mourning save the choirs* – and the choir came in behind him, the thin boys' voices high above, falling from the balcony, the grown-ups flanking the tenor, and he was all the same alone there before the orchestra, frowning into the projection of sound, leaning into the level and pitch and the sense of the desperate words. Despite everything, despite her own tastes for easy listening, although she was at the far edge of herself in this, for her, most unlikely of environments, Angela was reeled in all the same by the mood of the – I hesitate to call it music – by the mood, shall we say, of the sound. The choir came in behind the tenor, the Latin cries for peace and forgiveness falling unexpectedly in jagged layers, and down from the balcony drifted the boys' voices, so high, slightly cracked by the pressure of the music and its shapes, the sounds of falling angels. There was still some wine in her glass but the brick shaped man to her left leant in against her shoulder and reached around in front of her and filled it to the brim again, and again she drank. *Requiem aeternam dona eis Domine / grant us rest*. It's all too much. Angela blinked, back to the hotel room, away from that great hall. Justin reached across the bed and took her face between his hands, he was ready now, while she'd been listening he'd been loosening his tie and taking off his shoes and he reached for her and she smiled automatically and moved forward, into his arms.

That was that evening, and the next day at the conference he behaved like someone schooled in casual sex, not a scent of tension from him, no paying her particular attention, no awkwardly avoiding her either. So, secure in his inattention, the next night Angela went to his room again, her last night in Leeds before she'd have to return to London and think about what to do next. Lying beside him, in his half-empty queen-sized bed in his better-appointed hotel room, she told him a little of what had been going on back in Australia. And he said, 'I think you're crazy to take them on. What's it going to achieve? It'll be your head, not theirs.'

## Ending

### 1

Where do you start?

At the beginning, of course. You start by adding and subtracting, calculating the ending from what you have at hand. Start with what you had at the beginning; add to it what came in during the year, and subtract whatever was spent. The beginning plus or minus the middle gives you the end.

Angela has time these days to calculate everything. Start at the beginning. What was on her books at the beginning? She was. Up and down, side to side, blood and bone and tendons and limbs and breath and flesh and thoughts and mind and all of her. Then take into account the expenditure, all she used up, all she consumed. Remember, this is how you calculate it: start with what you had at the beginning, subtract whatever was spent. And this is what was spent: energy, self, health. Hopes, sex, life. I'm getting maudlin now. But stay with me just a little longer. Take all those items consumed, subtract them from the balance, and what do you have left? Just the idea of a someone, just the memory of breath and bone. All gone, equity gutted, profits and losses forgotten in the overwhelming fact of being at the end.

Though she's not there yet, in fact, she hasn't yet reached *The End*. After all, if you are still capable of calculating the ending, then clearly you haven't yet arrived. And anyway, Angela's calculations are flawed. We can agree with her opening balance, that's true and fair and what you might expect. We can agree with the deductions too – it's what anyone would use up. But that is as far as she went: to the deductions. All she did was subtract, she didn't add what came in during the period under examination. And what might have come in? Knowledge, certainly. Determination. Friendships. Awareness of each day. Quite a lot of fun along the way. Sex, and sometimes love, and a feeling that a body was for living in. Wine, and pickled artichoke hearts, and nights when the air was thick. Thinking, and therefore being. If you add all that back in, then of course she still has some equity.

Angela ran the numbers again. The end is still ahead, though she thinks of herself these days as being in the final phase. Oh, she's not yet at the stage of deciding not to buy a

whole case of wine, but she doesn't expect to see, say, fifty. But hey, she's an accountant, and prudence is among the fundamental principles in that discipline. It's what you learn in business school: expect everything to cost more, and earn less, than you might have hoped it would. Ensure your accounts meet the principle of true and fair recording, of consistency, of orderliness – but never get over-enthusiastic or over-ambitious. She never has. Still, applying the principle of continuity – because every accountant assumes an ongoingness about their enterprise – she hesitates before ruling a final line. She must have some assets left, surely? Okay, there's her mind, her memory, her thoughts. Her comfortable and mortgage-free home. She doesn't have to worry about what will become of her children, because there are none and never have been. She can still walk, except right now of course, she's only just come out of surgery for god's sake, you can't expect too much. What else does she have in her favour? No dementia – that's a plus; she still has a small circle of friends, despite all her betrayals of those she held in trust. She has Richard, who is so very kind. And she has today, and today, and today. Now finally, now that she is getting close to the end, she has a sense of the present tense. She is free from the pressures of the future; she no longer attends to the past. She is no longer imprisoned, she thinks, by time.

Once you step outside of time and all its driving imperatives, its insistence that you attend always to *now*, or *when*, or *then*, finally you can direct your attention at what you really have, all that any of us can in fact have; and that is your bare life. The present – a gift, as its name reminds us – steps you out of time and into space, the space where there is only material stuff. Your body, the scent of rain on hot roads, the way sun burns your skin. Once outside of time you lose the capacity to categorise or abstract, you discard language and thought, you move into your fingertips and that great slender organ that is your skin touches everything else in the world, touches it to you. Time is after all a secret, and the secret is that it is always too late. Step instead into the present where it's never late, or early.

The only real freedom is to be free of time.

It's the worst gift you'll ever receive.

On bad days the future is all Angela wants, when she will be able to leap into nothingness, when someone else will be saying *The End*. She dreams about shucking off her body, living

only in her head, reducing herself to pure energy, to thought. She will be only thought, no sensation; only language, nothing real; only memory, no event. She will be reduced to cognitive function, divorced from her body. But where can sensation reside if she can't feel it in her solar plexus, in her gut, in her cunt? All the points of juncture and conjunction where feeling erupts; they'll be gone, and all she will have left is her throat, the base of the neck, the base of the skull. Armpits that tingle and burn, nipples that harden and tingle, soles of feet and palms of hands that contract, the anal sphincter that grips, the vagina that softens and moistens, all have to go. The throat that will remain – it is what closes against life. Everything else in the body opens and closes; only the throat shuts down.

That can't be. It has to be all or nothing. So on bad days she checks the Internet for lethal recipes, she has tried to persuade Richard or Sophie to agree to help her out of time, out of the present and into nothing. They will not. They beg her not to ask, beg her to wait. So she waits, sometimes in hospital and sometimes in her own home. Her house is silent during the day – they never had the heart to buy a new kitten – but as long as her pain is kept at bay she can read, usually detective novels, or listen to music in a taste that these days is more like Richard's, more what he thinks of as sophisticated. She means to, tries to, hear the news every day, to keep up. But somehow always misses the entire lead story, and the opening of the next. She hears that some cabinet minister has resigned but doesn't know who, or why, or from what government. She hears something about something in the Middle East, but has no details. She ought to know, she ought to keep up with what's happening because maybe she can do what we're all told to do, think locally and act globally, no, reverse that. She has a sense of civic responsibility, despite everything, but for the most part it's just a kaleidoscope of words and sounds. Sophie visits her every day, drives her to hospital when she needs to go or just hangs out at home where they chat or watch tv or flick through magazines. Spending time. *Investing*, Sophie thinks. *Spending*, thinks Angela. Sophie doesn't mind; she has the time; she wants to be with her sister now that her daughter, little Natalie that was, is in Melbourne at university, she is coming to think of Angela as the shape around which her life is currently formed. Angela thinks that this is too much, that it's too much responsibility for either of them, and what will they do next? But Richard helps, Richard intervenes and sends Sophie home when he comes home each day as he does these days at a reasonable hour, and massages Angela's shoulders, and tells her stories he has picked up along the way. He and Sophie still dislike each other, but they are finding some grounds for accord now after two decades of muted hostility. This is another

of the good things, the assets, Angela counts them on her fingers, following her therapist's advice, feeling like Pollyanna but what the hell, anything's worth a crack. And as well, let's see: she still has flowers, and they still give her pleasure; when she can eat there are delicacies; every day there are warm showers and a soft bed. Every day is a new day, it is another *once upon a time*; but lying here in hospital today, still reeling from her latest surgery and the hands and blades that prowled through her body, her thoughts insinuate down along her shoulders and hips and spine, remembering the shape she once bore. She tries not to remember; she tries to stay only in the bare moment, in the present tense.

*Sounds filter in from outside, from the park outside the hospital. There are young people, chatting, playing, giving that shrieking laugh that only the young can manage in the last part of the day, just as evening turns to darkness. And then a male voice breaks through, singing, just a boy he sounds, but his voice is true, a tenor, it's a love song in syncopated time, he doesn't miss a beat except the ones he should and now he sounds old enough to have mourned, not a boy after all but a man.*

## 2

This is not the ending, or even where the ending began. The ending began to begin when the Leeds convention ended, and what was she supposed to do with herself now? Justin had recommended she spend a bit of time in the area, have a holiday, be a tourist, and on his advice she took a train out to Horsforth, to the student accommodation at Trinity College. She booked for three weeks, with no real idea of how long she'd need, what she'd do. £20 a night, bed and breakfast, and with coffee makings and shower gel supplied. Clean towels every second day, clean sheets once a week. That'll do.

*Breakfast was, inconveniently, from eight to nine only, each morning. That was too narrow a space for her; either she was awake and hungry at five, or drenched in sleep at eight, and had to tear herself out of bed, negotiate the shower with its vicious spray and capacity to drench the entire tiny en suite, and then dress in something vaguely suitable and make her way down between the great blocks of buildings to the refectory. The food was foul, everything done in oil, but she valiantly ate – all but the blood sausage, which she couldn't face. Every morning, eggs and bacon, sometimes a sausage as well; tomatoes or mushrooms but never both on the same day, toast – grilled, not fried; she took a piece of fried bread once, by mistake, not realising, and was wary after. Sometimes they served hash browns, which made the rest of the food seem almost healthy by comparison. By the time I get home, she thought, if I do go home, I will be considerably fatter, and greasier. But at least having eaten plenty of protein. And as she did in London, here each day she abstracted fruit, a bread roll or sometimes a croissant wrapped in a paper serviette, tiny packs of butter and jam or marmite in her capacious handbag. Some days she bought cheese and bread down in the village; it wasn't not too dear, despite the relation of dollar to pound. She found a special, four small bottles of wine for five pounds, and she bought them and drank them although being so cheap the wine gave her headaches.*

For the first day she occupied herself sleeping, listening to the radio, and washing out her knickers and socks in the tiny bathroom. She left her room only to eat breakfast or to buy a drink at the student bar, or a sandwich from the cafeteria. The next day she felt more confident, and began to walk about the campus. She found the laundrette, and carefully washed and tumble-dried every garment she'd brought with her, and those few items she'd purchased in London.

Then she began to walk, as she had in London. She walked during the morning, all around the village. She walked in the late afternoon, up to the grassy slopes below the tennis courts and, to the sounds of boys and the soft whack of ball on gut, clambered up the heavy

boulders under the small tree and sat among the soft young blackberry vines to read whatever book she'd found in the Oxfam or Cancer Society or Aged Care shop. The village is full of op shops and she wandered about in them, sometimes trying on a garment, occasionally buying a tee shirt or cotton blouse, though they never suited her, she'd decide, when she got back home – back to the residences – with them. She walked again in the evenings, in the bright English evenings, when the light stayed in the air and the wind wailed through the wire fences around the tennis courts and in the mown fields beyond young bulky men ran and stretched, ran and stretched, dropped in to do press ups, hooked ankles for mutual sit ups. Tiny English rabbits startled in the grass ahead of her, though she walked so softly, and meant no harm. And despite the open sun, the air carried a constant reminder of the biting ice only a few degrees of latitude to the north.

A few days later she caught the train into Leeds, and hired a car. 'So it's £17 on top of the daily rate,' said the man behind the desk. 'That's special tax, because we're classed as being a convenience, so, because we're classed as being at the airport, you see.' He was the young man anyone should expect at a car hire place, or travel agent, buff and bland, sure of himself, attractive, very sure of himself.

'*At* the airport. I've just paid £5 for a taxi ride from the station, and the station must be about ten miles from the airport; how are you *at* the airport, how is this feasible?'

'It's just how it's classed, is all. It's the government, it is, they're what sorts all this.'

She passed her – Richard's – credit card across to him with what she hoped was a certain dignity. Nodded to this, agreed to that. For an extra seven pounds a day she could reduce her excess from £500 to £75, so, and she agreed and left, finally, with what he'd termed their cheapest car, he'd told her that with what was almost a sneer. She left, feeling almost obliged to have an accident in order to justify the additional expense.

Now she could begin to range more widely, and did. She became a tourist, going to museums, out onto the moors, going to a ruined abbey; another ruined abbey; abbeys raised to the glory of god, the brochures always stated. Certainly she could believe they had been raised to the joy of a job well done; and they were well done. It must have taken lives to collect and shape and stack those great honey coloured stones in just the right

arrangement, to build row on row on row on row, until the whole soared light in the sacred air; and then to start it all over again, start building the bake house, the brew house, the buttery; the cellarium, the chapels and the chapterhouse; the dorter, the infirmary, the locutory; all the strange and sensible places that made up that world. She visited all the ruins on the map, trying hard to feel history and all its weight, to imagine how it was once upon a time, but could find no sense of time, only of space.

Who records history? Who knows what to record, or when, who knows how posterity will know what we mean when we say *garderobe* or *almonry*, or if indeed they will care? I must care, we must care in the present tense. We must record, and hope we get it right. We must look forward and back like Janus, we must keep the present at bay because once that present has been gifted to us we are only a breath away from the end. The past is mostly safety; the future is all we can dream, we can hold past and future close to us, we can force the tenuous, elusive *now* to leave us, even as it stretches out, trying to claim the rest of time, even as it fills up our lives with those sorrows that you know don't start in a day. Ask everyone who has ever lived, the sorrows are never for one day only, they always labour for a day and another and another and still the mothers weep, tears are like the poor, always with us. It was Nietzsche, wasn't it, who said that we must forget; that without the ability to forget, it would be impossible to live at all. But who can forget the things best buried in the past? It's only the innocent events that disappear.

If only things were different; if only time didn't return every day in its own familiar way. If only, Angela thought, I could go back and fix it all. If only I could be new.

She left the college every morning just after nine, and returned some time after dark. When she actually got back was determined by how easily she'd been able to negotiate the ring roads, or to find the turnoff to the village of Horsforth. The roads drove her to flurries of rage. Too narrow, too winding, too many dreadful drivers. No room to navigate between the stone walls of each village where people jumped up onto doorsteps as she drove by, or on the third world roads edged with nibbled fences where heavy young men driving tiny built-for-the UK Mercedes or Saabs or BMWs tailgated her, hooting.

It took her days to realize that many of the road signs were labelled on one side only. If you come from the wrong direction, you're out of luck. For the most part she gave up

trying to decode the maps, trying to second guess the roads; she found a certain consolation in driving around and around, heading as she hoped towards her temporary home, beginning to notice familiar landmarks, listening to the radio as she drove, to the unfamiliar shows, and knowing that this was not where she belonged. She would never be able to navigate the roads in this region. She would never feel at home in the accents of this place. Every day she tried to get back to the college, quartering Yorkshire, mislaid on the moors, feeling terribly Bronte. Stone walls, stone houses, stone fences, all stained by time. Great open valleys, great rolling hills, green fields, that's surely a spreading chestnut tree? Another photo opportunity, and everything looks like England in a book, like everything you've ever read about it, except for the sea.

One evening she pulled off to the side of the road and got out, and walked across the moor a little way, feeling alternately like Jane Eyre on the verge of perishing because of her own stubbornness and the unexpected complexity of the moors, and then in an instant like Cathie, running desperately she thought in must and list, I mean mist and lust, and on the edge of hysteria she threw her head back and wailed *Heathcliffe*, and laughed, and got back in the little hire car, and drove on again in the sub-twilight, beginning to feel the need now for a pee, and a coffee and a glass of wine, in any order. Where has that village gone, how can the whole place be elusive, invisible, lost? She pulled over to the side of the road, studied the impossible map for the *n*-teenth time, muttered *pleasepleaseplease* in something approaching a prayer, then pushed the car back into the traffic and drove on, peering ahead with now burning eyes, straining for any familiar sign. It wasn't all bad; the longer it took her to find her way back, the later she got home, she realized soon enough, the more likely she was to sleep. Arriving back at the campus after nine one evening after driving for nearly twelve hours and dealing with the frustration, no, the fury about the road system, she was exhausted and ready to close her aching eyes, she was sure to sleep now, too tired to mope, too tired to weep. Being lost has its consolations. All the same, finally she decided she could no longer bear the roads, could no longer bear to realize that she couldn't navigate in this area, and so she picked her way through A this and M that, and through the morning Leeds traffic, and returned the little car to the same, she was convinced, discourteous young man who had arranged the hire. 'Had enough, then?' he asked, and to her steely glance said, 'I'm guessing you're ready to go home, so.'

Home.

'I think you'll find that's none of your fucking business,' she said, and he flushed, and said, 'Hey I didn't,' but she held up a hand to quiet him, and he sputtered, then returned to the paperwork. She refused to care about her discourtesy; she refused to let her mouth move in apology, or her eyes shift in tears, but the word *home* had slipped away from him, this awful glossy young man, and moved across the desk, then leapt from the edge of the desk to her heart, burrowing in under her breastbone, slashing into what felt like a black hole between her breasts. She could feel it open wider; she could feel the bone and muscle and tendons around her solar plexus part, slowly, steadily, and could sense the great dark space that opened, beneath her skin, into infinity. Home.

'Aren't you done yet?' she snapped at the boy, who finally looked at her properly, 'Just a minute, Ma'am,' and printed off a final document for her signature and then tried to call a taxi for her, but she brushed him aside, seized her bag, and stumbled on her way to the door.

'Mrs Noble, you okay? Let me sort you, so,' he said, but she swiped her hand at shoulder height in a definite negation, and shouted, 'You English. Who do you think you are?'; and then, as his face shut down, 'Oh god I am sorry, you've been very kind, I'm so sorry,' and then she'd made it outside, and to the edge of the road, and there, maybe a hundred metres away, was a bus stop that would take her back to Leeds, and then she could walk up the hill to the station, and she could buy a ticket and be at the village station within ten minutes, and then just another ten minutes, a short walk up the hill, and she'd be back in her small room, and alone.

She lay awake for what felt like all night, though everyone knows that even the worst insomniacs sleep now and then on even their worst nights. Her eyes were hot. They moved grittily in their sockets, scratching the delicate membranes that supported them. She focused on her breathing: in two three four out two three four in two three four, over and over, trying to feel her diaphragm rise and fall in one indivisible whole, one unruptured strip of muscle, but try as she might the left side and the right moved independently, each side of the great rift that was growing wider and deeper, a gap into which she was falling.

She was up very early in the morning. By eight, as the doors were opening, she was at the refectory for breakfast, and took everything the loud smiling Yorkshire woman offered, but when she'd carried her tray across to a solitary table, and had sat with her back to the hall, refusing any company, and had picked up her knife and fork, she felt her throat close in an angry spasm. Okay. A small sip of fruit juice; that's okay. A nibble of toast; okay. Maybe a little stewed fruit. No more. Her stomach felt empty, but the idea of eating was impossible right now. Though the idea of food nauseated her she pocketed an apple and a croissant, slid her tray into the rack and left. Today she would walk. And she did, all day, and by the time she made it back in the early evening her feet were blistered, her lower back aching, her balance almost gone. She'd bought another bottle of wine and dragged it home with her, it grew heavier than it had seemed in the shop the further she walked, she staggered the last hundred metres back to the residences but made it home, or what we call home where we are dislocated – wherever we happened to be, wherever we happen to sleep – and now she kicked off her sweating shoes, unscrewed the top of the bottle, and took it, and the bathroom tumbler, and a book, and made her way to the tumble of rocks near the sports grounds. By the time she'd finished half the bottle and most of the book the light was near gone. Her skin felt cold to the touch: she laid her fingers on her cheeks, and then touched one hand with the other. Certainly she was shivering, but she didn't feel cold, as such. She could barely feel her skin. She could barely feel anything.

Another night. By morning her face hurt with the effort of holding herself in, keeping her sense of self away from the black hole that was drawing and drawing at her, that terrifying vacuum that demanded satisfaction. Do not fall. People only fall when they're obsessed with the idea of gravity. Put it out of your mind. *Do. Not. Fall.* Pace, instead, walk, though your feet flinch away from each step like the Little Mermaid. Another day, and another night, and another day, and every twenty minutes or so an aeroplane passed overhead, coming in to land at the airport that was only a few kilometres away. Another day, and then in the middle of that night she crept through the silent dark to the call box, and dialled Peter's number.

'Angela,' he said, his voice round and rich and sounding like home. 'Ang, you've been gone so long; I didn't know how to find you.'

'I didn't know what to do,' she said.

‘Come home, darling; come back home, Angel darling.’

‘But there’s everything, there’s...’ She paused. ‘I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to deal with it all.’

‘Yes.’ The space between them was immediately vast, and empty. ‘Angela,’ he called, and she replied, from a long, long way away, ‘Yes.’

‘Angel,’ he said, ‘come home. I’ll help you. We’ll sort it together.’

‘What’s happening there, Peter?’

‘The Director-General is getting involved. He got the copy of your report – you sent it from England?’

She said nothing.

‘Graeme has gone off on stress leave,’ he went on. ‘I don’t think he’s in any real trouble, but ... I don’t think the Office is going to come out of it well.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said automatically, but he quickly interrupted, ‘Don’t, Angela. You did what had to happen.’

There was another moment, and he said, ‘Are you crying?’

‘No,’ she wept into the phone. ‘What about Charlie?’

‘Gone. He’s just disappeared in a puff of smoke, and so have Maria and Stuart. The Trust Board is frantically trying to replace him, and to work out what to do – though the police are getting involved, I hear, so I don’t know how long they’ll be around. You really stirred the shit, sweetheart.’

‘Peter,’ she began, but he interrupted her again. ‘What I’m saying is, it’s safe. It’s in hand. Come home, Ang.’

‘Yes,’ she said again, then hung up without saying goodbye, and sat on the floor of the phone box, among the dust and cigarette butts, like Cinderella she thought ridiculously, and wept and laughed and couldn’t stop either. *Hysterics*, she thought, as she banged her head rhythmically against the glass wall, hysterics, then she stopped thinking, and went onto autopilot, going through the motions, doing what she needed to do. First thing, pack up her few possessions, check out of the College accommodation, and fly home, back to Brisbane, back to face the music. She’d finished all the wine stored so tidily in her little wardrobe. She’d read all the books from the local shops. She’d walked everywhere within walking distance, seen all the rabbits and stone walls and green fields she needed to see. It was time to go home.

She called JAL and arranged her trip back home. There was a stopover at Narita, if she didn’t mind, which she didn’t, and so she settled on a flight out of Manchester in two days time. Then deep in the night she took three long breaths, the way her mother had always told her, and called Richard’s office at the university. The call was picked up by the school administrator, a woman she knew slightly from social functions, knew well enough to call her by name, Liz, and be addressed, in turn, as Angela.

‘Are you all right,’ Liz asked. ‘It’s just that Richard’s been having a bit of a panic – he didn’t know you’d gone and then didn’t know where you’d gone, and he just went to pieces.’

‘Oh really,’ she said, her voice flat and, to her own ears, hard. ‘I’m sure Cecily would have been a comfort.’

There was an awkward moment, then Liz said, ‘I really wouldn’t know,’ and Angela laughed because she sounded suddenly English, English in a tv show, not in real life.

‘It’s okay,’ she said. ‘Can you tell him I called?’ But the woman said, ‘Hang on, I can hear his voice,’ and Angela, thousands of kilometres away, heard her call out, ‘Richard, can you get to the phone? It’s your wife, calling from England,’ and she heard Richard say, faint but clear, ‘Bloody hell,’ but before she could decide to hang up Liz was back on the line. ‘Can

you hang on just a second?’ and then Richard was on the line, saying ‘Angela? Angela?’ and the space between her breasts twitched, and tore a little more.

‘Hello, Richard.’

‘Angela, bloody hell where are you? When are you coming back?’

‘I’m in England – you know that, I told you before.’

‘Yes, but then you disappeared, I called the hotel, they said you’d checked out, I called your aunt, she said you’d gone north but she didn’t know where. It’s been weeks now, Angela, this is no joke.’

‘No Richard. It’s not.’

‘Please, Angela, come home, we’ll sort it all out then.’

‘Sort what?’

‘Everything.’

‘Richard, you can have the fucking house and the car and everything. I just want to clear things up and get on with my life.’

‘No no no, you’re not listening. I want you to come home. To me.’

‘What about bitchface?’

‘Who?’

‘You know, that bloody woman of yours.’

‘Angela, that was just a fling. You shouldn’t take things so seriously. It didn’t mean anything –’ and she sobbed out loud, and hung up.

Ten minutes later she called back, more contained, and before he could say anything besides hello, and his name, she gave him her flight details and said goodbye.

### 3

Her story began to end rather more definitely on that trip back home. Overnighting in Japan. A bus carried the mostly Australian travellers up to the Hotel Nikko Narita, a concrete pillar a few minutes by bus from the airport. She spent the evening watching television in a language she couldn't understand, watched people doing things that made no sense, but that passed the time. Then it was morning and time for breakfast and she went down in the quick elevator to a wide, light dining room full of transit passengers. An older couple sat one or two tables up from Angela, and they ate slowly, returning often to the breakfast buffet. They were very organized; or routinized. When the woman went to refill her plate, he waited till she returned, then went up alone to refill his coffee, to bring back toast. They started with English breakfast – bacon, eggs, beans, toast. Next, they tried Japanese style: rice porridge, miso, fermented soybeans which made the woman grimace and reach for her tea. Then the Continental option: cereal, stewed fruit, juice. They spoke to each other only twice in the forty minutes Angela watched them. He said: 'Packed?' and she said, 'I think it's all as it should be.' Finally they finished their meal. He left first. The woman sat there a few minutes longer, finishing her toast, drinking her tea. She picked up the banana that was lying on her tray, peeled it, and began to eat it in small bites. Two thirds of the way through the banana the woman took another bite, then failed to chew. She sat, arrested by a thought; then sighed, long and soft, swallowed hard on the banana lump, and all the planes of her face slid a few millimetres further down into sorrow.

Angela finished her breakfast and followed the older woman out of the dining hall, and back up to her room where she packed her bag, and hauled it downstairs to the JAL counter in the hotel lobby. The line was long, the attendants very slow. Instant friends chattered all around her, strangers describing to strangers details of their lives, comparing travel stories. She has heard it all before, in so many airport queues. After sixty-five minutes in the queue she was still three groups back from the check-in counter. She stepped out of the queue, left her bag in one of the several corrals that mosaiced the lobby floor, went back up to her room and lay on the bed, looking up. At 10:30 the maid came in, and shrieked a little to see her lying there so unexpectedly, and so still. Angela waved her hands helplessly, saying *Konichi-wa* which she hoped meant either hello or thank you; and then broke, and ran downstairs, not waiting for the lift because there were people already standing before the doors, waiting for it to arrive, and she couldn't stand to be near them, her skin felt burnt by their proximity, she must keep moving, and alone. Her bag was still

in the lobby, the only one of that crop though new corrals had been opened here and there across the forecourt. Her wallet was in her jacket pocket, she still had her credit cards and ID, but somewhere had lost her carry-on bag.

The woman at the hotel counter was terribly young, terribly polished, terribly crisp. Angela started to speak, stopped, started again, her tongue confused. The young woman reached out and took her ID, her passport, her ticket, studied them, then said, 'Ah, you have missed the flight.' Angela raised her palms, shrugged. The woman said, 'You want I fix this?' Angela shrugged again, and began to cry.

Poor girl, she immediately looked nervous, picked up a phone, spoke into it in that language that Angela to her shame knew not at all, she couldn't even distinguish one word from another let alone pick out what the girl might be saying. *Woman*, said her tidy brain. *Woman*, not girl. Still she's young, she's new compared with me, and Angela felt the tears bank up against her eyes, filling her head, her brain soggy on her soggy spine. Then, like a *deus ex machina*, an older man in a suit was at her elbow, guiding her into a private office, closing the door, offering tissues and water. Gradually she calmed her sobbing, and sipped the water he provided. Gradually he elicited from her her agreement for him to perform certain actions. He had her credit card, he had her passport, and when she collapsed slowly onto the carpet, only, she told herself, because she was too tired to remain upright, he called first for an ambulance, then for a staff member with blanket and small pillow, then dialled the home number that was written in pencil in the back of her passport.

A night, and a day, and another night. Angela barely leaves her bed, where she was helped by the staff after the ambulance men had checked her heart and pulse and decided she was, she imagines they said to each other in Japanese, tired and emotional. She gets out of bed only to use the bathroom, and drags herself there, weeping, across the carpet to the cool tiled floor. The concierge returned her to her room, presumably on the strength of her credit card and maybe Richard's assurances, or Sophie's. Room service brings her rice and miso, at which she picks. It is restorative, she thinks, but she has almost no appetite. If she eats more than a spoonful of rice it rises back in her throat, and she has to stagger, cold sweat rising, to throw up in the loo. The absence of coffee has generated headaches that drive behind her eyes, on her temples, across the base of her skull. She drinks water, too fast, and rushes again for the bathroom to throw up. It is hard for her to stop crying,

though her eyes are swollen, her skin patterned, her whole body dehydrated because of the volume of fluid she's expelled in tears.

Late in the afternoon of the third day, someone knocks and then turns a key and opens the door of her room, and it's not the cleaner, and it's not room service, she looks up through hooded eyes from where she is huddled on the floor, and sees one of the hotel reception staff, as young and crisp and embarrassed as the girl at the front counter who had first offered to fix, and behind her is Richard, looking tired. He thanks the staff member, closes the door, and crosses the floor to the patch of carpet where Angela is crouching. Bad timing, she thinks, should have been in the shower, should have been in bed, but it can't be helped, nothing can be helped and she starts weeping again.

'Angela? Angel?'

He lowers himself to the floor, takes her hand, lays the palm of his other hand across her brow. He bends, to kiss her very gently, like a father, on the forehead. 'Angel? Poor girl, poor little girl.' She subsides to the floor, and he rolls her over on her back so the tears run down her cheeks to pool in her ears. Deep somewhere in her memory she hears that stupid song Peter used to sing her: *I get tears in my ears/ from lying on my back/ crying/ over you*, and laughs, and chokes a little, but Richard is checking her pulse, looking in her eyes with his little sharp torch, listening through a stethoscope he's produced like a rabbit from somewhere. She realises she must smell bad, all that vomiting, no showering, it seemed too hard to get there, to turn on the taps, to adjust the water, to remove her clothes, to step over the edge of the bath and under the cascade. Richard is examining her with his head held a little to one side, his nostrils tense; yes, she stinks. 'Richard,' she says, and heaves herself to her elbows. 'Richard, give me a minute. I need to clean up.'

He won't leave her. He walks with her to the bathroom which is only slightly larger than the conveniences in an aeroplane, supporting her around the waist. He can only just squeeze in beside her, but he turns on the shower taps, strips off her clothes, lifts her into the tub, stays to watch as she scrubs, and scrubs, and scrubs. Says, 'That's enough' as a bead of blood appears, mixes with the running water to palest pink, beads up again. He turns off the taps, and she is weeping uncontrollably again, there's barely time for breath between each sob. Richard shakes out a white hotel towel, wraps it around her, lifts her

from the tub. She won't leave the room till she's cleaned and flossed her teeth, which she does so hard she raises more blood, and can taste it around her teeth and in her throat. Richard carries her through to the bed because her knees are sagging, her balance gone. He dries her, very gently, and breaks the lock on her suitcase because there's no sign of the key and she can't respond when he asks her where it might be. Finds clean knickers, clean socks, a clean Bonds singlet, a fresh cotton blouse that feels like summer on her skin. He pulls cotton trousers up over her exhausted legs, kneels to shrug the soft shoes onto her feet. Then, while she lies there, finally quiet, finally dried up, he bundles up the discarded clothes, the ones she's worn for four days and three nights, pushes them into the wastepaper bin, and calls reception for a wheelchair.

They are going home. Richard has come to take her home, and finally the tears have stopped and the black hole in her chest is not, at present, hurting, not sucking in everything about it, and she feels at some level, calm. Empty, and calm. Her heart is still beating; she can feel it thudding away, pumping air and blood around her body. The black hole feels like loam now, rather than hot space – rich, dark, still rather frightening, but sufficiently moistened by grief to hold itself together in some kind of friable ball. She breathes in, deliberately, consciously, and feels her diaphragm rise, her lower ribs spread, the air plunge then seep down through the stiff cilia to the bottom lobes of her lungs. Her legs tingle, nearly numb; and deep in her pelvis something shifts, like a stone in water. She is calm, empty, flushed out. She is going home.

Flying to Europe, she had followed the light all the way. Flying back now, the plane followed the night, chasing the edge of darkness across the dark sky. Only when they reached the northern coast of Australia did more than a sliver of light slide up along the horizon, lighting their way home. From high, from up above, she looked down to see she thought seagulls following the fishing boats like iron filings. She fell asleep finally in the seat, in the last minutes before the plane began its descent, buckled in, devoid of emotion, the grey soft blanket pulled up to her chin like a child. Bereft of emotion? No, I don't think so. Just devoid. Continents of cloud below them. Coming home, the pilot had ducked and weaved the plane between clouds like icebergs – and then the nose began to lift, and she woke, and looking out the windows could see the Sydney cliffs, the plane starting to bank, Richard took her hand, she was almost home. The flight attendant walked down the aisle saying, over and over, *You staying in Australia? You staying in Australia? You staying in*

*Australia?* as she handed out arrival declaration cards. Yes. She will be staying. Richard has flown from Australia to Japan to find her and bring her home. She will stay.

She didn't go back to work, not right away. She slept for days, began taking the antidepressants Richard prescribed, rested for a couple of weeks more, and finally went to a fabulously expensive hairdresser, bought a fabulously elegant suit, and against Richard's advice went in to see the Director-General. Of which there is little more to say. The investigation, the one she'd set in motion as she fled the country, that was well in hand. Her job? No problem, of course not. The Office would be restructured, of course, and Graeme was away on sick leave. Charlie? Disappeared, probably into Indonesia where no one looks for the wilfully lost. 'And the Haven?' she asked. There's nothing wrong with the Trust Board, she was told. They'd appointed a new director and new senior staff, and everything was continuing just as before. 'But St John Garfield, it was in my report, he tried to bribe me!' she complained. Ah yes, that was in the report. But what evidence is there, what likelihood, he's a canon of the cathedral, you've had a nervous breakdown, it's right here on the records, you must have misunderstood, everything is being managed just fine.

Everything is fine. Everything is being managed just fine. She repeated that to herself as she climbed the stairs to the Office. Peter was there, and leapt to his feet to embrace her, then kept an arm around her shoulder, supporting her, leading her to the staff room, making her coffee, holding her elbow. So glad to see her back, so glad. Things are okay, everything's worked out just fine, for now. Hinde? She wasn't there. She was still in Sydney, maybe she'd found a guy, she'd taken a package, she was with her kids, she wasn't coming back. Shelley, of course, was there still, and she shrieked 'Oh my god oh my god!' when she saw Angela, it was like some family reunion, Angela felt her stomach clench and turn and then Shelley was all over her, hugs, kisses, oh my god. Julian raised a chilly eyebrow at her, and turned his back. There was no one else there she recognized.

It was not a coming home, not that she could have expected that, in all honesty. Still, maybe it could have worked out. But the word 'whistle blower' began to take shape around her, become a form more dense than a shadow, less constant than herself, but always there. Julian still refused eye contact with her. The Minister wouldn't see her. The acting manager treated her with caution, a cool courtesy but no more. And as the restructure began to bite, and it became clear that the Office would be disbanded and everyone would lose something in the process, Angela began to detect the same coolness from everyone around, and from Peter something like resentment. From Peter, who had been considerably closer

to Graeme than she had. Who might have been expected to notice something had gone wrong. Who was now being looked at sideways, and don't even think about applying for promotion for a while. Then the acting manager, the new boss of the Office which of course could not remain any longer the Office, which would have to be entirely absorbed into Health Services, interviewed Angela in the presence of a union representative. 'We have enormous respect for you, for what you've done,' he told her. 'But.' But there's evidence that you were sexually involved with the director of the unit you were investigating. But you took nearly three months instead of the standard six weeks, and never did resolve the investigation. But you took off without organising your leave according to the correct procedure, and by the way leaving your work undone. But you presumed to represent Queensland Health to people and institutions in the UK without the correct authorisation. But we have concerns about the process by which you were appointed to this department in the first instance. But we have concerns about your relationship with some of your colleagues. We have enormous respect for you, really, we do appreciate your courage. Of course you'll always have a place with Health if you want it. But we were wondering whether you really want it?

She debated it with the union rep. She asked a lawyer. Who mentioned phrases like 'detrimental action' and 'protected disclosures', but in the absence of a concrete piece of legislation, and in the face of her own alleged improprieties, which she couldn't entirely deny, suggested she just let it all go. She looked at the fences in the eyes of her colleagues, and then took a package, as Hinde had done, though with only a few years' employment at Health it didn't add up to much. She took a package, and began to think about the rest of her life. She saw a psychologist. Who described ways of dealing with negative thought patterns, who urged her to keep a journal, who gave her exercises. Whom she saw twice only, and never went back. She saw a priest. Who had no help to offer. And finally, she saw an oncologist.

\* \* \*

At first, when Richard had brought her home, when they revived their love for each other, their confidence that the world could be, should be, a safe place, she had felt that she was creeping back to herself. She could feel her muscles re-emerge, the rupture between her breasts begin to knit together, she felt at though she could look outside again. Then

something else began; the thick fast blood that had fallen month after month, regular as Switzerland, became irregular, her rhythm lost, or faltering. The blood forgetting to come, or coming but forgetting to cease. ‘You’re perimenopausal,’ Richard said. ‘That’s the typical pattern. I wouldn’t worry about it.’

She is near menopause, of course. Angela is in her forties now, and wakes each morning with breath like an old woman. Of course her body is running down. And the blood came and came, trickling away each day of the month like a thin complaint of the womb. Every day, so that the iron leached out of her body, and her legs began to tremble and give way, and her steady head failed her; fainting, unsteady at moments, no longer reliable, can’t walk upstairs safely, can’t be relied upon to get things done. In the mornings, in the bathroom mirror, grimacing at her reflection, shouting down to Richard, *I look like hell, I look like someone’s bad dream*. ‘It’s the lights,’ he’d call back. *No, it’s me*.

Perimenopause, Richard said. *Peri = around, about, from Gk. peri (prep.), cognate with Skt. Pari, L. per. And men"o\*pause, noun. Greek expression, month to cause to cease. See Menses*. Which doesn’t explain dysmenorrhea; still, Richard assured her she was normal; and she raced for the bathroom in the middle of the night, feeling the wetness spread between her legs. Older women, they’re more aware; not like girls who wake in the morning in a puddle of blood on stained mattress, stained sheets. Older women will wake like a bell’s gone off during the night, always just in time to change the tampon. But now she’s losing her touch, her sense of timing, now Angela squats over the loo, watching between her thighs as the strings of blood and the clots run into the water below, how can it be possible to bleed so much? She’s thinking about all the things men say about women and blood, she’s removed the used tampon and her hand looks like it belongs in a shambles –

‘A shambles?’ asks Sophie, eyebrows raised, when Angela complains to her later. ‘A *shambles?*’

‘It means slaughterhouse,’ says Angela, coolly – and when this rush of blood finishes and she can mop up and get tidied up and dressed again she’ll have to scrub the loo, wash the seat, the floor, the lid, the wall behind and beside, and all in the middle of the night, trying not to disturb Richard. How does anyone manage to murder someone indoors, she wonders, and clean up enough to deceive the police and their own flatmates or family? I

mean, this is just like a spoonful or so ... and she closes her eyes, elbows on her knees, her womb contracting towards the earth, head in the clouds, trying not to fall. She is unsettled.

But she knows how to deal with uncertainty; she has been trained, and now the habits of organization reassert themselves. Clarify. Investigate. Substantiate. So then, she feels unsettled. Which means the opposite, we may assume, of settled. Which itself means *established in residence; fixed or resolved. Middle English, to seat, bring to rest, come to rest, from Old English setlan, from setl seat*. Unsettled therefore the absence or lack of those properties. Or maybe not: she is after all *established in residence*; she has thanks to her own actions and then to the decision of her employer been *brought to rest*. She's not working, for god's sake, just spending time figuring out what to do with the rest of her life. Brought to this – the rest of her life. And perhaps that's where the problem lies; this is the rest to which she has been brought, a rest that is not restful, a rest that comes with absence and presence, something uncanny, something beyond her ken. That gives her the sense of being not-at-home in the world, being not-at-home in her own skin. There's a French term for it. She can't remember what it is.

She is not at home in her skin. Well, every death begins somewhere; in the skeleton beneath the skin; in the way the skin recoils from what is happening inside. The way the body turns against you, and against itself, the way it can no longer bear to communicate between skeleton and surface, organs and blood. The failure of connection between the self and that organic machine that is you too, that is the place where you live. The loss of a sense of being at home, of being settled, when under and across your skin something is moving that is no longer you. You stand in the shower and watch the skin on your arm, withering (old skin, loose on the flesh) under the water's blast. You lie too long in the bath till you're at the prune hands stage. In cold winter you turn puckered and purple, in summer red and then brown. Your surface is like fruit, today an apple, tomorrow a durian; but something you can't manage and can't own. This is nothing new; Angela has had time to give it some considerable thought. Think about it: in the earliest days of your life there is that nappy rash that remains stubbornly resistant to treatment; then comes childhood, and with it measles and chickenpox et cetera et cetera; then adolescence with all its horrors of acne and bulges et cetera et cetera. And then as you age there are other issues: eczema, scarring, and of course the implacable sagging and spotting of age. Your surface has never been yours, or even *you* as such. But what about what lies beneath, the muscles you can still

see sheering into patterns of smooth fibre, the bones you can feel through skin and muscle and fat, the pockets of fat themselves that shine through the skin, the hum of blood? All that matter can't just give up on you, surely. And if it does; how can you keep hold of yourself, remain yourself, when your body, the skin, the muscle and fat, for all those days edging into weeks edging into months edging into years begins to turn away from you?

It's not perimenopause, of course; or not just that. She succumbs to test after test, to specula and needles and foreign fingers, she lies under the cat scans and pet scans, she stands in front of a screen while an X-ray machine images her insides. And then with Richard at her side she listens to the oncologist, and she fights off the panic, she begins the treatment, begins to believe because it's the only thing she can do. Richard believes too. He researches options, calls someone he'd heard at a conference once, someone whose paper he'd once read, he talks to his colleagues. Morning, noon, evening; each day creeps by. She will recover. It's not going to happen, not to her. They buy a juicer, and both consume vast quantities of fresh fruit and vegetables, all pushed through the machine and turned to tasty sludge. She'll get fit again. Some drugs she inhales, some per mouth. They play merry hell with her teeth, mucus membranes, and bones. In the day she holds her arm against the sun, looks through it at the light. Not a pretty sight. Still, she continues with the treatment program, on the recommendation of both Richard and the oncologist. She does everything she's told to do, she can tolerate the intrusion in her head, if only barely in her body. She begins seeing a therapist again, a specialist in grief, sees him every week without fail. But no amount of grief therapy can resolve your relationship to pain. Angela comes to know pain, and how it shrinks the world to the borders of your own body, how it makes words fail, how it reduces the voice to only *Oh*, or, *No*. She tests the limits of pain. There are none; all she can find are limits on the world, which folds in on her, into her, her body is hurting her, it is swallowing her up, it is causing her pain, it is her enemy.

It's not the end. It's another beginning, a different way of getting along in your life. Richard begins to reconstruct the living room to make space for the machines that he knows will need to come. She begins to reorganise her life, every bit of it, paying attention to how she does things, finding how she is best able to manage things now she can manage less. She begins to do her everyday tasks in incremental gestures, the way she has always tidied the house, the way she unpacks groceries: a bit at a time. Carry three of the five bags, the lighter ones, from car to house; put two on the kitchen bench, the third bag goes on the

floor. Unpack the first, the one with the chilled items – milk, cheese, orange juice. Look in the other bench-top bag; remove the tins of tomatoes and stack them at the back of the pantry. Put the kettle on, and grind the coffee beans. Look in the bag again; remove the bottle of bleach and place it on the counter top. There'll be other items to be taken down the hall, towards the bathroom and laundry – she remembers buying toothpaste and shower gel. Maybe laundry detergent too, she certainly meant to purchase some. Look at the clock; it's 5:57. That means Richard will be home soon, and he'll suggest they order in and spend a quiet evening watching telly together. She should tidy herself up a bit before he gets home, tidy the house too. Now she's not working she thinks of it as *my job*. She looks in the third grocery bag, the one on the kitchen floor, and takes out three bottles of mineral water. One goes in the fridge. One she opens, and she pours a glass of water, and finds the last two ice cubes in the freezer, and recaps the bottle, and like a good housewife, feeling like a good housewife, she rinses and then refills the ice tray and sets it back in the freezer. Tomorrow she and Richard can drink gin and tonic in the late afternoon, and sit together on the back verandah, reading the papers and sometimes looking out across the garden and smiling at the flowering shrubs. There's one more bottle of mineral water, now lying on its side on the floor. She stands it up, and then she stands up too, and drinks some of her water. The kettle has boiled, so she pushes aside the two half-emptied grocery bags, and swishes hot water through the coffee plunger, and shakes enough coffee grounds into the glass, and clicks the kettle switch to bring it back to the boil though didn't she read, she's sure she remembers reading, that if you boil and reboil water it breaks down and becomes oily and too tired to make good coffee. Still, never mind, it's only one extra reheating, and it's only coffee for her, and this evening she doesn't feel much like a connoisseur, or is it a gourmet when you're talking about drinks? Never mind; doesn't matter. She walks slowly downstairs, collects the other bags, locks the car, back upstairs where she kicks over that third bottle of water, and picks it up again, and feeling conscientious places it in the pantry, and then in a fit of enthusiasm unpacks the rest of the bags – tomato paste, a bag of flour, new coffee beans, filter papers, sugar, a packet of biscuits, some cheese that should have been in with the other fridge supplies but never mind, she tosses it in on a lower shelf and closes the fridge door, then remembers the milk for her coffee and opens it again, wondering about energy consumption and how efficient this fridge is compared with her sister's brand new slender iron-metal machine. Now the pantry is full, or fullish, and she crumples the two empty grocery bags that are on the bench top and forces them into the canvas sling that hangs on the back of the kitchen

door. Nearly slips on the bag that is still on the floor. Annoyed, she crumples it too, and pushes it into the rubbish bin. A bottle of shower gel, and the toothpaste, and laundry detergent, good, she remembered it, and bathroom cleaner and shampoo are all lined up along the bench top, beside the coffee plunger, and the grounds seem to have settled so she presses the plunger home, and pours a cup. Adds milk. Wipes up the spills. Puts the milk back in the fridge. Gathers up the armload of bleach and shampoo et cetera et cetera, and starts down the passage towards the ablution rooms. The phone rings, and she pours them out onto the dining room table, and takes the call.

'Hey Ang,' says Sophie, 'What you up to?'

And she says, 'Hang on a minute,' and fetches the coffee, and sits down on the floor beside the telephone to talk.

A woman at the clinic, someone she'd been chatting to over the months, told her about an alternative treatment, one that relied on alternative medicine, and it sounded a bit suss, Richard said, a bit new agey, but when there's nothing left to do, most of us will take our chances; will put our brains in a box and go with hope. The woman lent her a couple of books, told her about a coming seminar, and sold her a ticket.

The seminar was being held in Sydney. She flew down alone, refusing Richard's offer to come, ignoring his protests about voodoo medicine and exploitative quackery. She would stay in a little hotel in Glebe, a place she's often stayed before, just up from the market grounds, down from the church. It's cheap; it's comfortable; it's on several bus routes; it's near dozens of really good restaurants, though she has trouble eating, that is, trouble keeping food down.

She took a taxi to North Ryde for the seminar, it cost a bomb but she couldn't imagine being able to juggle buses and suburban trains and unfamiliar side streets. The taxi took her to a terrible Gold Coast glitz hotel, but the nearly a hundred women, all women, seemed excited, warm, enthusiastic, they caught her up in their passion, in their sweetness, secret women's business, she was back in a community, for now. Then the woman speaking, Sharon Weitz, American of course, took to the podium and cried, 'I'm excited to be here – are you all excited?' and 'Yes!', they called back, they were excited, they were here. Then: 'Does anyone have something to share?' she asked.

Share? Sounds remarkably like the language Angela had learned during her time at the Office, hanging out with their clients, spending time in institutions where the residents were herded together for prayers, for the chance to celebrate being alive. *Do you have any experiences of God's grace to share?* someone would ask. *Do you have any insights to share?* Or, *Let me share with you.* 'What I'm going to share with you,' said Sharon Weitz, 'is what I've had to learn while going on my life's journey. I've been on my quest to understand the root causes of cancer. Our hormones do not exist separate from our bodies, from how we feed it, how we use it, how we think. At 44 I had many symptoms that I came to realize were very profound. I was a workaholic. I wasn't eating properly. I wasn't sleeping properly. I enjoyed my life but it was only work. Our culture encourages that, rewards it. So my symptoms were about stress, and not looking after myself.' Her voice was lovely, light and

convincing. 'I'm blessed to have had some really wonderful teachers and mentors in the US, and in Australia too. And I've come to learn that cancer is a lie, that cancer is simply a bundle of symptoms we get when we don't look after ourselves. When we don't love ourselves.'

At which point Angela began to doubt what value, if any, she'd get out of this course. Though she perhaps had pushed herself too far; hadn't loved herself sufficiently. It seemed a leap from that to an organic infestation. She looked about the seminar room, at the about 100 women there, women of all ages, from a girl who was maybe sixteen to some elderly women. Nearly everyone was eating, though it was only ten a.m. They had opened packets of dried fruit, tins of nuts, they had produced pocket knives and were cutting up fruit, cutting up cheese, pouring tea from thermoses. Two young women sitting directly ahead of Angela turned to each other at each significant point Sharon Weitz made, raised their narrow arched eyebrows, and nodded.

'All degenerative diseases have an inflammatory component,' the speaker went on. 'Our bodies can regenerate. Look at all of us here: we've had lupus, we've had chronic fatigue, and we've been healed. The most important thing, women, is you have to be willing to love yourself so much that you'll give yourself all the good things to nourish your mind, body and spirit. What do you want? What's really important to you? We live in a magical universe. For some women coming here today, they're going to experience miracles. Don't sell yourself short. Your spirit can create miracles.' She turned, touched a CD player, and an Enya tune drifted across the room as she urged the women to write down what they wanted. *Life*, Angela wrote, *Health and life*.

'Think of it as a journey,' Sharon Weitz said. 'It opens up so many doors of perception. Cooperation. Equality. Tending to ... umm, ummm ... the earth. Umm. You know, living in peace and harmony. Matriarchal cultures thirty-eight *thousand* years ago; they've excavated them and found evidence of this. And found no one who had died due to injuries from war. Because matriarchal cultures didn't go to war. Because these were cultures that honoured, and both men and women lived together in harmony, and women were in positions of authority. The last five thousand years have been the darkest for women. But according to the great cosmic clock, we're coming to the end of that cycle.'

A woman in the audience called out, 'You'd never believe it!' and there was general low-level laughter, which Sharon quickly cut off. 'According to an orthodox rabbi I was talking to, we're emerging into the sixth millennium, the time of the feminine, and it's only two or three hundred years away.'

'Too long for us then,' called the heckler, but Sharon made a small gesture and two women moved up the aisle, towards the noisy delegate, and spoke to her quietly. Angela watched, saw her flush, saw her settle back in the stiff backed-chair. 'Patriarchal culture is wounding. I've been wounded by the patriarchy. Nine million women were killed during just thirty years of the Inquisition, and we all carry this memory in our bones. In a matriarchy we're all healed.' A murmur from the audience; Angela swiveled in her seat, trying to catch someone else's eye, to get some sense of someone else's view on this story. All other eyes were on Sharon. 'The medical profession is the most patriarchal of all, the most wounding. It leaves us all in pain because it disconnects us from reality, from that innate sense of connectedness you find in traditional cultures. You don't have to die. None of us have to die. I'm going to show you how to cheat death, how to avoid eating insulting foods, how to recognize the lies of the medical profession.'

Angela stayed, though all her intellect rebelled against it. Sharon Weitz, with her popsicle stick body and her parchment skin, with her talking, talking, barely stopping for the whole day, denying coffee, denying medical research, so convincing, she wanted to believe but by the end of the day, and \$150 poorer, the only information that was at all convincing was that coconut milk feeds the thyroid; and even then she wanted to check it against the advice of an authority. Angela left in the early evening, ahead of most of the delegates, and holding a bundle of papers most of which urged her to buy books, alternative medicines, tickets to forthcoming seminars; sadder than when she'd arrived, but knowing herself incapable of swallowing snake oil.

It's always easier to go towards a city than away. She took a chance, flagged down a bus that seemed to be headed for George Street, and settled back for the ride. It dropped her near Broadway, and she stood, clutching a lamppost for support, waiting at the corner of the multi-lane intersection for the next bus to Glebe. Not the one she had just missed, by being between stops, but the one after. First it was just her waiting, and a man asking for money from drivers of cars stopped by the traffic lights. Then someone else arrived; and

someone else; and soon there was a gaggle, semi-nonchalant semi-strained, stiffening to gaze down towards George Street for the next grumbling bus. A number 431 drew very slowly near. In heavy traffic, buses are only slightly faster than feet. But it was drizzling rain, and she was tired and ill, and this was not her home. She got on board, handed over the right change, took her ticket and rode the 5:40 p.m. bus up past the TAFE and UTS, going up to Glebe. The rain began to fall more heavily now, clattering on the roof of the bus, darkening the road where wet lights peered into the wet twilight. Most of the seats were full, the traffic was very heavy, it seemed to take a long time tonight to go that short distance and everyone on the bus looked identical, like aliens had finally landed, she thought. Every face faced forward, everyone sitting on the left tilted his or her head slightly to the left, and those on the right tilted to the right. Every face was blank, everyone had switched off until, she supposed, they'd open the door of their home and bend to stroke the cat, or greet a child. Every few minutes a mobile rang, sometimes several at once like a small, unconsidered orchestra, an orchestra of chirps, she imagined twenty tiny people playing different tunes on tiny piccolos.

There's a way people answer their mobiles. First they startle; then snatch the phone and stare into its face; then say, *Yes? Hello? This is Joe*, and then begin chatting as though they're home alone, so the bus was coloured by a chorus of disconnected conversations.

*-I think they're pretty rich. I think the story goes his dad inherited some money from some dead relative; and he runs his own business now, contracting for real estate companies, doing something...*

*-Mum, gotta go; my batteries are low...*

*-This girl, she loves good arms. On guys, but on herself too. So she's been doing all these workouts and now she's got huge muscles...*

*-No, the term is eye-vee-eff...*

*-I'm on the bus. I'll be home soon.*

*Almost at Glebe Point Road now. The driver had metallic eyes, and pedestrians leapt out of the way as he swung the heavy yellow vehicle around the corner against the lights. A small blue hatchback, reversing into a parallel park, swung hastily aside to avoid the bus's wing. Home. Hotel-home, at least, where she could skip dinner and go straight to bed, and watch television, and rest.*

She flew back to Brisbane the next morning, the plane was small and old and had trouble levitating, trouble getting off the ground, there seemed to be an imbalance of levitation and lift. Up came the nose, it hopped, touched one foot to the ground, tried again. It lumbered, it groaned, it rocked like a station wagon, the air was full of sudden steep hills and then dips, full of ridges, stones underfoot, the plane struggled to lift against the dense, coarse, unhelpful air. Then they were up, airborne, sky-drawn, heading north through the granulated, unwelcoming air, and from the sky, looking down towards earth, every cloudscape looked like a picture painted by an amateur, something unresolved about each image, something sentimental. Angela stared out through the porthole, longing for something truly solid, not this game of density the clouds play with our perspective, the game the sky plays with its cloudscape, making land out of confections of vapour. Longing for some solid information, some true way of fighting off her disease. The captain came on the intercom, introducing himself, chatting, and finally said, 'It's been a nice weekend so far, and I'm looking forward to what remains.'

What remains? And Angela pressed her forehead against the porthole, close to tears. They flew along a different route from usual, travelling for a time over the sea, and all along the coastline the water was turquoise, the foam staining it white in sneaky trails, and calm lagoons ate into the land on the edge of the continent. Closer to Brisbane she could see the convoluted blue of the bays, the mesa of houses filling the space. As they flew towards the city, the river emerged thick and green, the fields spotted and marred by patches of drought, patches of weed, dry stalks. Fire fodder. Then the first poor outskirts houses, and before they cruised over the wealthy green belt swimming pool suburbs the white clouds drifted across and they were snow-blind, flying down towards the town. The green ocean was turned to seersucker by the breeze, soft and low. Boats trailed slipstreams of white water, opal-crusted sandbars, mangrove beaches rimed by old salt in grey water, islands flat against the sea, any more global warming and they'll be reduced to sandbars too, she doesn't like it about herself but finds a pleasure in noticing decay – *I'm not in this alone, I'm not the only one*. As she stared out the window she saw, when they nosed in towards the land, a tiny shadow plane running below the true aeroplane, along the ground, and the river strolling below like a tourist heading for the bay; and then they were touching down.

She made her way to the baggage carousel, and rested against a rail, waiting for her bag, and then heard, 'Oh my god, oh my god, Angela!' Shelley again. About to leave for a

holiday in Adelaide. Shelley squeaked and hugged her and bounced, and showed her the engagement ring on the third finger of her left hand, and then got down to it. 'Well, you wouldn't believe how things have changed, since you left. Graeme's gone, of course. I'm still in the same building, but the new team, we work directly to Health, there's new management and everything, and they've done all this renovation. They've turned the old tearoom, remember it? They've turned it into a meditation room, a kind of reading room. They've painted it blue, it's called the Blue Room. It's quite nice really. They've hung some posters in there, and there's comfy chairs and big cushions, and we have motivation workshops there every two or three months, I'd say, just about everyone's been to one now. We have to go at lunchtimes and put in an hour a day, every day for a week, and then we're supposed to be motivated, wouldn't you know? But hey, Angela, I'm crapping on. What are you doing now? Why don't you drop in, see everyone, say hello, say what you've been doing?'

'I've been away,' Angela said, her voice flat. 'I won't be coming back.' And Shelley kissed and stroked her and left for her holiday, and then Richard arrived to drive her home.

In the past they'd always used taxis to come and go, but these days Richard collects her, drives her anywhere she needs to be. October, and the jacaranda early in bloom this year, maybe her last year. Down along the river, as they drove home from the airport, she watched the yachts tugging against the ropes that held them to the banks or their moorings, she watched the way the water moved gracefully around the ferry landings that colonised the river, she watched the way the strings of taxis swooped past them, heading into town. 'I did tell you I thought it sounded like voodoo,' Richard said when he told her about the seminar. 'Angela, if you are going to beat this thing you need to save your energy. You need to be as strong as possible if you're going to be able to cope with the operations, and reorient yourself.' She said nothing, just patted him on the knee as he drove towards the city skyline, and looked to the left and right at the thickening belts of trees, Mt Cootha on one side, the Botanic Gardens on the other. Richard swung the car down along the big concrete road, the underpass that turns into an overpass, down past the subindustrial suburbs around the Valley where etiolated palm trees struggle against traffic fumes, and past the dense hills to the right, and they'll be coming up near Red Hill very soon, then it's Hale Street and Given Terrace that becomes La Trobe Terrace, and they're almost home, driving down and up and down the narrow shop lined car lined street that leads to their

house. Squinting into the sun she memorised everything; silently, to herself alone, she chanted what she knows like a liturgy – the route through the city, the route home. The liturgy that will hold the night at armslength, for a little longer at least.

Outside the hospital the young people have moved away, she guesses, or have anyway fallen silent. She has a good sense of the rhythms and pulses of the place by now. Hospital has become her other home, the somewhere she'd rather not be. Sound is all upside down here. Though in the halls and corridors machines crash and chime, people call out, bells ring, trolleys rumble and lift doors hiss, still every bit of the cacophony seems muted, or localised. But in her ward, the smallest sounds burrow across and bite at her ears. The constant hushed stirring of fretful limbs in linen, someone's drip begins to bleep, even the distant neon hum as the lights adjust and readjust themselves. The fluoro luminescence is just low enough so you can't read, but eye achingly bright enough so that you can't sleep. She cries instead, then finds a tissue, blows her nose, and listens to her breath. From across this white room, from down the cluttered hall, come the sounds of other people coughing, snoring, grunting, weeping. Water rushes, a neighbour falls asleep without turning off his television so the constant blue flicker and the susurrations from the tiny speaker beckon her attention, banish her sleep. The old woman in the next-door bed suddenly snores thick in her throat; her machines cry out, and the staff come running.

The end is speeding up, getting closer, she can feel it drawing near, she is losing heart. She is beginning to think about death as someone she knows, as someone who has always been with her. After all, death might seem to come in a single moment, but it is a long slow process. The brain dies, the heart stutters, the body stops breathing. But long before that, each cell has its own death. Over and over, we are dying. She hasn't passed on the baton of her genetic matter, but she won't think about that now. She thinks about how long she has had, rather than what she might miss out on, rather than the unknown space that unrolls into the future. She is not resigned to it, but rather is willing to say hello. Richard is not. The doctor in him is certain that medicine will have its way, will make a way. He is willing to try anything, to put her to any test, to find any possible way out. Let's not linger over it.

It had grown worse as spring moved into summer and the days heated up, grew too hot to rest at night, too hot for comfort during the day. In the worst weeks through the middle of the season she kept moving, she couldn't-wouldn't stop, she kept her legs on the go, forcing the blood to run around her body carrying fuel to every remaining organ. She climbed the stairs of her tall house every time she returned from a walk, or after another trip to clinic or therapy, and rose into heat, every level hotter than the one below. Four

storeys they had in that pitched old Queenslander, each hotter than the last. She climbed from the basement garage to the living areas and up to the bedroom that would soon, too soon she feared, be no longer her room, going up like in Dante's inferno only inverted, rising into the last circle, heat building with each circle, and as she climbed from floor to floor, sitting now and then on a step to catch her breath, clinging to the banister, the temperature rose with her, and her own temperature soared. Maybe she should end it now, stop this run down towards the unknown.

After the last operation but this one the surgeon saw them all, Angela and Richard and Sophie, in Angela's hospital. 'It's a good cancer,' he said, meaning that it hadn't metastasised. Meaning that it had stayed out of her blood and liver, had left her brain alone. Sophie listened to him, wanting to hit him, watching Angela who gazed at the surgeon like a stone, this man who had cut out her insides, who knew everything that could be known about her. Except what remained in her memory; except her old affections and her thoughts. Sophie watched her sister, and felt her throat close down, the quick tears reach her eyes, and she crossed the room to sit on the bed beside Angela, to take her skeleton hand in her own, and gently massage the bones of her fingers. Richard stood up and left the room, and the surgeon smiled distantly and promised to return soon.

'Angela,' Sophie said, her voice small, and Angela lifted her tired eyes and looked up at her sister. Said, 'Sophie. I'm so. It's all so.'

'Yes,' said Sophie, and laid her hand on Angela's cheek, and stroked across her forehead, and ran her fingers through her hair, as silky and organised as it ever had been. 'Rub my head, Sophie, please,' said Angela, and she did, moving her hand across the skeleton bones, massaging her scalp, feeling the heat of her sister's shards of life rising from her. 'Oh Angela, I'm so sorry.'

'You have to stop saying that. You have to make this stop. I can't bear it. I can't bear this.'

'Just let's give it some time, Ang, okay? Get over the operation, then we'll see what the doctors suggest. Let's just give it a bit of time.'

Since the diagnosis Sophie had spent an hour a day, often more, at her sister's home, moving among the machines, adjusting the volume of the CD player, stacking it with CDs, buying new books, reading her bits from the newspapers, washing her hair, massaging her head or her feet, the only sensual pleasures left to her. The days became weeks, and then months, a dozen months, a dozen more, all those days and weeks and months of every day attending to her sister, bringing her fragments of her own life, holding on to all she could. They sat together as they had years ago, at ten and twelve, at sixteen and eighteen, sisters again watching Jerry Springer and Oprah, watching new movies and old ones, trying to recapture the abandon of all those years and lives ago, while Sophie refused in tears Angela's frequent request to help her to her end. 'Not yet, darling. Give it a bit more time.'

'All you have to do is mix up the stuff, Soph, it's not like it'd be hard. It's not like you'd be hurting me.' But Sophie couldn't do it. They'd talked about that years ago, she and Sophie, when Sophie's daughter was a baby and her husband was away on one of the first of his many and eventually, final desertions; when Sophie couldn't sleep and couldn't eat and couldn't stop crying and finally Angela took her out for a drink to console her, to be close. And Sophie had said, 'It's Nat, you know.' Speaking of her daughter. 'If it wasn't for Nat, I wouldn't bother to carry on. But parents don't have the right to take their own lives. It's too hard on the kids. They owe it to them to stick around.'

'Oh what? Is that reasonable?' Angela had said. Not trying to get into a fight, but still, you can't let something like that go by. 'Is that fair? I mean, you're writing off huge chunks of the population just because they aren't like you, they aren't breeders. What about me? How would Mum feel and Dad if I just gave up?'

'I know what you mean, but I don't agree with you. When you've got kids; when you've made a decision to have kids and to raise them, it's like there's a contract and you have to stay alive, you have to stay well, you owe them that.'

'Oh Sophie, sorry but that's bullshit. Don't you think we have just as much responsibility to our friends, or our parents, or our partners, or our siblings?'

'No I don't. Well yes, I do, in a way. But. The thing is, I always think, children expect to outlive their parents, and parents expect to be outlived by them. And what that means, I

think, is that it's the duty of parents to do all they can to thwart expectations, to stay alive, to keep their children children, to be that permanent point in their lives. And children have the duty to take risks, to live dangerously, to keep their parents on the edge of terror. Because they can.'

'Sophie, you're nuts, you know that?' And Angela pushed the bowl of nuts across to her, and took another swig of her Chardonnay, and changed the subject.

Now she sat down again on the stairs to catch her breath, she couldn't manage to go all the way up in one go. Suicide. *Sui* – self. *Cide* – killing. Self-killing. Why not? All it would mean was hastening the inevitable. But how do you do it? Gas, a hosepipe from exhaust to front seat? She's heard you vomit, you wake up before death feeling like death and there's nothing you can do. Too awful. And they don't have a gun, and a knife is too uncertain and too scary. There's the dive from a building, but that's risky to others. There's a dive into traffic, but how cruel, how cruel to the hapless driver. Goethe, wasn't it, said you only have three weeks of happiness in a lifetime; she's well beaten the numbers on that one. 'I've done better than that,' she said out loud, and reached up for the banister, hauled herself to her feet, and continued her hot slow climb upstairs.

That night she lay as always beside Richard, who as always had fallen instantly into a stunned sleep and breathed thickly, and every half hour or so, as regular in sleep as in wakefulness, flexed a foot or moved an arm. Richard, confident even in his sleep. The air quivered and breathed with him, almost black, just a tracing of gold from the night light she kept burning in the bathroom and from the street lamp two doors down that sent the faintest tendrils of light through the heavy curtains. She cannot sleep reliably. She wakes, often, during the night, lets her pain do what it will, waits for it to fade. Richard sleeps beside her, he lies she thinks beautifully asleep. She thinks; there is beauty only in sleep; there is only beauty in sleep. That is becoming a conundrum which will be for her a sort of koan, something to think about when next the pain takes control. She lies down, lets her pain have its way.

'I didn't think it would happen to me. Not this way,' she had told her therapist. 'I know that's what the body does, of course I'd read about it, but somehow I never expected it to be that way for me.'

‘Yes,’ he said, and paused, then went on. ‘That’s typical thinking, of course. The belief that things only happen to other people is basic narcissism. Think of Narcissus, fascinated by himself, dissolving into a flower, so even though he had thought he was special, somehow, different, his body still ruled the roost.’

Angela had lifted her head, irritated. ‘Seems to me that someone turning into a flower is by anyone’s standards a pretty special, or anyway unusual, event.’ He didn’t reply.

This night she lay still, trying to breathe steadily. Her heart was running too quickly, she observed it coolly, as calm as though it were only the engine of her car and due for servicing. She could feel the blood running under her skin, the soles of her feet restless as always, her eyes swollen with sleep but still shuffling back and forth below the lids. She counted Richard’s breathing: in, out, in, out; and then checked the bedside clock. 2:05. Five more hours before the alarm would ring and it would be another today. Outside like on every night she heard heavy feet crossing the lawn, they came every night, and she no longer looked out cautiously to see nothing there but her fears. Outside were cars and fast bikes, outside was the wind, outside the possums ran across her roof like someone else’s dream. Angela, the only person awake in all the world, Angela waiting for the disaster that had almost arrived. She opened her eyes and stared into the thick almost-black air, and every night it parted, and through the rip in its fabric came shrieks and horror, and then it gathered itself up again, and sealed itself up, and all was silent. 2:57. A little more than four hours, and then tomorrow would be today.

What alternative does she have? Every death must begin somewhere. Each of us must die. It’s not that she expects to escape death as such, perfectly and for always. She’d just wanted a little bit more time. The oncologist won’t give her a deadline. Still, it seems to her that the treatment is failing her, or she it; that she is running out of time. Every death begins at its beginning, at *Once upon a time*, and takes its time, the individual cells dying one by one as body moves towards the last movement of its long journey. She knows she’s not alone, that this is the journey we all take, that every death begins at birth; but she isn’t ready for the final act. She wishes she had more time. She wishes she had a child to leave behind. She wishes she’d had a small daughter to chant with her *Wash* the dishes/*Dry* the dishes/*Turn* the dishes/*Over*.

Richard makes one suggestion after another, he has a genius for alternatives, he talks them up, while her pain shuts out all the world but his voice, talking, talking, persuading. Everything about pain, she has discovered, is negation. It is not-me; not-now; not-like-this. The pain is not-hers, but her, not-remembered but only ever present; not-known but the only true thing she has ever experienced. She can't bear it, but it more than bears her, it clings around her shoulders and it rolls in her gut, hot and steady as the sun. She can't get outside it, she can't escape. Yes, she says finally, and Richard moves across the room to hold her, and the pain nods its head.

For some time after the last operation but one, although her surgeon seemed quite confident, every doorbell, every telephone ring seemed to, what's that old word? – *portend*. Seemed filled with portent. And though she scrubbed and showered, though she slaked out her sorry flesh in the pristine sun, when she sniffed at it she could smell death in every pore. Gradually it turned to one more story of who she is. Gradually it grew its own shell. Leaving her unsafe, and only just alive. Ready to make amends where she could.

She had hunted out Hinde months earlier, but the time they'd spent apart and the embarrassment of how they'd parted left a shadow between them. Oh, they'd managed a few laughs, kept the phone calls going for a while, but they had lost the pattern of friendship, there was no time now to build any true ground between them again, and anyway Hinde had her difficult children now, and the ongoing legal battle with her ex-husband, and there was that word between them, undiscussed: whistle blower.

A writer, Theodore Sturgeon, is supposed to have said to a critic who complained about the quality of science fiction that in fact ninety per cent of everything is crud. But then he added his own principle, a variation of the Pareto Principle. He is supposed to have said, 'the rest is worth dying for'. But how do you know which is crud, and which is worth your life? Angela has decided it's all worth dying for, and that means it is all worthwhile. Now she wants to straighten things out. So when Sophie tells her that Peter has called, wanting to visit, she says yes. She says Sophie can bring him around. She is back in hospital recovering from what may be her final operation. She is unwell. But will find the energy to see him.

'You can get used to anything,' Sophie had told Peter as they drove together to the hospital. 'Already none of us can really remember how things used to be.' Peter said nothing. Sophie wasn't the sister he wanted to see. 'Come on then,' she said, and led the way up to the ward.

Angela needed to see Peter. She wants to make her peace. Had she after all manipulated him, slipped him back into her bed so she'd have someone on side as she set about bringing the Office down? That is what St John had suggested, in his careful caring way. That is what Graeme had asked, the last time he'd seen her: *Did you just want to wreck my life?*

*Did you just want to bring me down?* Charlie was long gone, of course; no reason for him to hang about, and every reason for him to get the hell out of there, and Stuart and Maria close behind him. Angela had brought them all down, and it had set a wall between them, her and Peter, after a lifetime together the name ‘whistle blower’ worked like a crowbar on them, bringing with it as it did all the investigations, the allegations, the accusations, the effects, the material impact on Peter, on Graeme and even on Shelley, on all the Office staff. On Angela herself too, of course. How do you craft a path forward when you’ve smashed up the concrete?

‘Don’t call me any more,’ Angela had said to Peter back then, before the Tribunal and after the early enquiries, thinking of the sideways glances from all her colleagues, from their masters. Thinking of the way Peter had lifted his head when St John had made that suggestion and had looked at her, but not as a friend. No one loves a whistle blower. No one wants to know about the things that have gone wrong. She remembers the playground curses: *Tattletale! Dobber!* And the rhymes that go with it: *Telltale tit, your tongue shall be split, and all the little puppy dogs will have a little bit.* She wants to go back to where things started to go wrong. She wants to pick up the pieces from the catastrophe that is the past. She wants to make it better, make it all all right.

*Sophie put her head around the door of the ward, and called out her hellos, then stood back to let Peter go past. She didn’t like Peter any more than she liked Richard. She had very little trust in him. Little confidence that he wouldn’t distress Angela, wouldn’t maybe fall apart, shout, weep. He wouldn’t. He wouldn’t weep, not where Angela or Sophie could see. He was pretty good, most of the time, about staying in control, even when he had watched his child being born, even when he had watched that child fall down in convulsions some years later, he managed to keep his cool. He rarely weeps, and has never fainted. Of course people don’t in fact faint when they’re shocked; only if they’re maybe forced to observe something that is their own phobia, blood, for instance, in a delivery suite. Otherwise they only faint if they’re very ill or if they’re characters in a nineteenth century novel, and even then it was probably because they were intoxicated, or because they were women and wore inappropriate clothes so they couldn’t breathe properly, or hyperventilated and put themselves into a giddy state; or else because they were poor, and desperately hungry; or because it just seemed like the right thing, the polite thing, to do, in the circumstances.*

Whatever Peter might have done when he left the ward, and waited for Sophie in the waiting room; whatever he did that night in the privacy of his backyard, or the next

morning when he woke up with that image of Angela in his eyes, while he was in the hospital room he stayed impressively calm. Which didn't endear him to Sophie, who had said to him, as she travelled up with him in the lift, 'You'd better keep a grip, mate. I'm not going to let you upset Angela. You've done more than enough of that for one lifetime.'

'Oh get off it, Sophie. There's no call for that. Angela has always been my dearest friend.' Peter tried to put his hand on her shoulder, but she swerved out of his way, and snapped back, 'Yes; except that you stayed carefully married the whole time, even though you know she'd have left Richard in a breath if you'd just asked her. Except that you spent two decades chewing up her heart, and keeping her on a – oh look, forget it.'

'No I won't,' Peter said. 'Forget it, what! There's absolutely no reason for you to be so bloody insulting, Soph, that's bloody unfair.'

'So just piss off now, and be done with it.'

'Sophie, you promised I could see her, and you said she was okay about that. The only reason I've not seen her earlier is that she told me to keep off, and I've done it, but now I really have to see her and say –'

'Sorry?'

'Maybe. Yes. Look, Sophie, I want to see her, and you said I could.'

'Oh Christ, you're such a child. Okay, what the fuck. Peter, I've always thought you were a total dickhead, but she is prepared to see you, so okay. But just don't upset her. She's low on resources right now.'

Peter raised his eyebrows, spread his hands, waited for more, and Sophie went on, 'She's had so much cut out of her. She is truly fucked, Peter, and she doesn't need to be hassled. She needs to get well again. She needs to get strong.'

This he knew. This had been dogging him since he'd seen the photograph on the front of the tabloid, just a week before, and had thought for a moment it was Angela. He had dug

out of his old shoe box that he kept at the office twenty years of photographs of her, sometimes with him, sometimes alone, sometimes even with Richard, and laid them beside the tabloid snap. Close, but no cigar. Yet he had dreamt it was her reduced to a head in a jar, and woken during the night shouting, waking his wife.

He needed to see her. Sophie had tried to blow him off, she'd never wanted him around, never seen what Angela saw in him, always wanted him gone. Not that she had a lot of time for Richard either, but at least he was authorized. Still, Angela had agreed to see him; had in fact wanted him there. Despite everything, despite the speed with which it seemed she was running down, there were still things she wanted to say. Sophie thought, at times, that it was Angela who had all the energy. She watched Angela contrive to keep on with her life. Watched her as her pain took hold and put her down on the ground, watched as Angela breathed into and through and around it, all those yoga classes coming good, could it be? Sophie was the one who wept, the one who couldn't fight back against the sorrow that woke with her every day and twined around her spine, that was stripping away her strength. A sister's death – that anyone can deal with, however painful it is. We all know we are going to have to say goodbye. But this: this day in day out wretchedness and wrenching as the cancer sprinted through Angela's body, the treatment like a vain rampart thrown up and as quickly overrun, and Angela with the world closing in on her, closing her out, was nothing for which she could have prepared.

Angela barely noticed, of course. All her attention was turned inward. In the last nights before this last operation, her body seemed to know that sleep was the last thing it wanted, *the last thing we're going to get*, and it was indeed the last thing she got. She lay alert each night feeling the pain just below the surface of the drugs, listening to sounds inside and without, waiting, and waiting. *So come on, now, move it won't you, quit tossing, get up, get walking, you can still walk a little, still mop the floor, still tidy the files, you haven't got long to go, get it done, dammit, get it done*. She can't walk very well, but with sticks she can manage, a short slow walk. Tonight the air is full of wisteria with traces here and there of that rancid scent that someone once told her is snake shit. She hauls herself up to La Trobe, collapses on the concrete couch at Trammies Corner. The deep scent of jasmine mixes with jacaranda and frangipani, and traces lines of perfume through the summery air, underneath it the Brisbane scent of rotting garbage, and above everything else is the strong smell of nutmeg, she doesn't know what plant produces that aroma, she should look it up, she needs to go back home, back to

bed. But warm light lies behind the smoked glass of front doors, and streets away, and all around, she hears the sound of young people's parties. School's out. For summer. Lightning way over in the distance splashes the ground and trees with something white, or beyond white, and as hard and flat as the stale coffee on anyone's morning breath. Through one window she sees a green computer screen with solitaire laid out across the monitor. She is three doors from home now. Used to be she'd walk four kilometres in 35 minutes, her long strong legs pistoning her down the pavement. Now in 35 minutes she can only hobble to the top of the road, and wait, leaning against a lamppost, till Richard comes in the car to collect her. *I want to go back.* Out of the sombre dark of that last night, where the stars are heavy, and so sad, with barely the energy to keep themselves afloat in the sky. What could a star have done to be so freighted with loss? The sky is hot and low, the stars are strung so carefully across the sky, and she's going to lose all this, and she's not ready, *I'm not I'm not I'm not.* Someone make it stop.

And finally it was *today*, her last day perhaps, perhaps the last morning and afternoon and evening before this last operation, this make or break move, this last chance. She was due to arrive at hospital by nine; they would prep her and put her to bed and take her first thing in the morning down to the theatre where the performance was scheduled to happen. Where again, for the last time, the bright scalpels would do what they could to carve away all that didn't belong. Richard had planned what he called an operation for the early evening, before he would drive her to town. He prepared a tiny meal of delicate morsels, he poured her a thimble of luscious wine, and then before they moved hand in hand down to the basement garage, he took her first and last to their bedroom.

Angela had said, 'I'm not ready for this', and Richard said, 'No one's ever ready'. Give him his due. It was the only option he could imagine. Intervention, and intervention, and another intervention. He carried her across the threshold to their bedroom, knowing it could well be their last time, and then 'Look,' Richard said to Angela, 'Look at the television, look over there – look, look – over there, look – there, there, look.' Look over there. Boom bah boom, the home video of New Year a year ago, and the fireworks bursting like happiness, and the chemicals flooded through her veins, and he held her on their bed, skin to skin, and then finally took her back to hospital, and yesterday slid sanguinously into tomorrow.



To think that it comes to this. A machine body living a machine life. She cannot exist without machines. She cannot live without morphine.

Back in the room now, Peter squatted beside the bed, and looked closely into her face. She opened her eyes wearily. There's still pain, all the morphine in the world can't hold the pain away, the old tumours still ache in their absence, some phantom claiming space in her body, and despite it all she looks back at Peter and feels her toes wanting to dance, feels the familiar turn in her gut, feels her heart padding along lub-dub, lub-da-dub. She wants to touch her own cheek; she wants to stretch out her hand and turn it, and watch how the tendons wire the arm under the skin. She wants to touch Peter's face. She is too tired, she is too flattened out, she needs to breathe.

Her head on a platter. Not her head. Just someone who looks like her. Peter takes her hand and it is there, he lays his head gently against her side, he can hear her heart beating too fast, he can smell the chemicals on her skin. She rests under a cool sheet and around her rise the tubes and wires that are keeping her alive. Thin tubes carry water and food and air to her body, and sedatives to her blood.

Peter stood up again, and looked down at her, she who'd always met him eye to eye. 'You've forgiven me, haven't you? Haven't you forgiven me?' Not sure if he'd said it or thought it.

We're all born flawed, broken, ready for death, labelled *Return To Sender* and hopeless. 'I do not presume,' chants the congregation, 'I do not presume, oh Lord,' and Angela, does she presume? I presume this, she thought, that I'll remember, if not myself, then the scent of evening air hanging on my hand, the taste of salt and slime, the moment you touched me – when you touched me, and I shifted in my seat. Her eyes rolled, her breathing became more laboured, she began to weep. 'Go away, Peter,' said Sophie, and bundled him outside.

But he came back the next day, and again, often, after that. Sophie was sometimes there, sometimes it was Richard sitting in a chair, reading the newspaper to Angela. Try as she might she can't keep up with the news. Sometimes she was alone. If Sophie or Richard or her mum or another visitor was there Peter nodded hello and stayed only long enough to

leave the flowers and pass a few sentences around. But when she was alone, he settled in for the duration. He sat with her through long afternoons, holding her hand, sometimes helping her lean across to vomit. She lay shackled by her body, bound, immobilized. He stroked her forehead and her shoulders, gently kneaded her fingers. Remembered the small games of thrill they used to play. One stocking binds her hands loosely behind her back, a bondage only in their shared desire where bondage equals bandage; the other stocking blindfolds her. She doesn't know precisely where he is or what he's doing. Small human sounds reach her unbound ears; breathing, blinking, tiny movements, the sound of his gaze moving across her skin. He is looking at her intently, she can tell by his stillness, his eyes move up and down the fist of her body (clenched, prepared), stroking her with his gaze, drawing her towards him, the beam of his vision conveying her in miniature, as imago, to him, drawing her up the beam of light-sight to his eyes. He is drawing her, illicit or elicited she chooses not to know, she leans into the space she cannot see, that she has chosen not to see. He moves. She hears the floor boards creak, feels a compression of the air between their bodies, hears the shift of weight on the bed, feels the sudden warmth of his skin near hers, his head is against her breast, his hand at her hip. Then at her waist, lifting her, her feet on the floor, off the floor, back against the chill wall and he slides his knee and then his walled cock between her thighs.

What is the smell of sex? That, definitely. Hot salt. Involved with the penance of stubble on tender skin, the burn that lingers long after the act. She wouldn't let him kiss her, his beard is two days old and mediterranean-hard, it will lift the blood to just below the skin on her cheeks and chin, she can't afford the stigmata – the stigma – it will bring. She doesn't mind if he abrades her throat and chest but no more in either direction. The convoluted lacing of smells, the uncomplicated sounds, and every move not choreographed is edited en route. She wouldn't let him kiss her; she could taste the stale coffee and cigarettes on his tongue, could smell it faintly even from across the conference table they left only half an hour ago, and now he has pushed her still blindfolded across the bed, she wriggles to free her hands from their subtle bondage/bandage, his weight presses her hands, still trapped, against the softness of her hips, and presses her hard pelvic line into him, her spine twists away from her fists, she wrenches her hands free, wraps herself about him, and he corkscrews against her tapping up against her cervix, filling every gap of her with the ridged muscle of his prick.

Now she is full only of pain. She catches a scent of jonquils, and opens her eyes, and sees Peter sitting in the chair beside her, holding her hands. He remembers who they were, and how they were together, off and on, all along their lives. But now all he can do is massage her hands, hold his breath, he will not cry in front of her. And then it's time to go. He has to go back to work, he has to go back home, he has no rights any more, no claims to make on her, he never did have, really. 'Look at me, Angel,' he said, and she looked up at him, her eyes so empty and so tired. 'Angela,' he said, as he had said years ago, when he bumped into her on the street. 'I've known you all my life; I've loved you all my life.'

'I know,' she said, 'It's okay,' and she closed her eyes again.

*Okay it's not okay, can't recall, should have nipped it in the bud, should have shoved it left it fled it, but she's here now and now there's no coming back, no buds to nip, no time left anymore, there's only place. Something hums at her ear, there's always sound, and if the air is chill there's still the hair on her scalp still smooth, still her, she's curdled in the cold, no, curled, now the nurse arrives, turns, a dial, smiles.*

What was left then as the tubes and wires twitched and the machines coughed and whined and settled to a drone with the bass line behind, boom, bah boom, bah bah boom against the thud of her heart lub-dub, lub-dub. Nothing has turned out quite as she'd planned, and now she's here, here in this quiet room, just the hum and throb of her life wired along the walls, will I get better, won't I, press the button for the pain, there is goes, now who's that there, Richard, a touch on her cheek she can barely feel, a little news from the outside, he's gone again and she can slide back into sleep. Goodnight, bah bah boom, good night.