

Quemar Press

PLAY

WITH

KNIVES

Jennifer Maiden



Play With Knives

© Jennifer Maiden, 1990

© Cover Design by Katharine Margot Toohey, using a © sketch by Jennifer Maiden.

© Quemar Press name and © Quemar Press Logo

Acknowledgements:

Play With Knives was first published by Allen&Unwin in a different edition in 1990.

The four poems by Jennifer Maiden first appeared in *The Trust* poetry collection (Black Lightning Press, 1988).

The two poems by Robert Frost are from his *Selected Poems*.

As with the first edition, no disparaging representation of real Western Suburbs venues or services is intended in this story, and no accurate portrayal of the Dept. Of Corrective Services.

As in the first edition, the term 'charges' has been used instead of the normal term 'clients', as being clearer in terms of the text.

PREFACE

Quemar's edition of *Play With Knives* was created in close collaboration with its author, Jennifer Maiden, to preserve the original novel's multifaceted plot, imagery and characterisation. In light of this, the text of the new edition is thoroughly revised, but focuses on expanding and clarifying narrative and diction.

A new edition of *Play With Knives* may be of particular interest now, as the original beautiful and striking, but insufficiently distributed, novel led to the George and Clare poems in Maiden's current prize winning Giramondo collections. The poems, in turn, illuminate those protagonists in *Play With Knives*.

Also in the up-dated edition, any social or cultural aspects that could be misinterpreted by a current readership are clarified, unless necessary to illustrate complex historical or social attitudes. The phrase 'a touch of the tar', for example, is kept to show one character's view of Australian indigenous heritage in the 1970s.

This edition also features a new cover sketched, at Quemar's

request, by Jennifer Maiden after she discussed her reservations about the cover of the original Allen&Unwin addition (a photo collage which was never designed for the novel), and that of the German DTV translation. The Quemar cover shows the psychic chiaroscuro proximity between Clare and George - an element that is central to the novel and continues throughout a prose sequel and the later poems.

After the publication of *Play With Knives*, the prose sequel, *Complicity*, requested by the innovative literary editor of the first edition of *Play With Knives*, was rejected by all publishers, but the unpublished, unedited manuscript became the object of great advocacy and also, predictably, great opposition. Because of this, it was the subject of an article in *Australian Book Review*, in which John Hanrahan reviewed the manuscript, and described the situation around it as Gulliver being attacked by Lilliputians. Quemar intends to publish *Complicity* as their next Jennifer Maiden novel online, and will be proud to be its first publisher.

Play With Knives, however, was written in the early 1980s, when its author was in her early thirties. Due to its discussion of violence, and the way it never becomes one particular genre (rather it remains as many different genres, intactly and simultaneously), publishers would not publish the work for almost eight years, until Allen&Unwin published an edited version in 1990. The manuscript itself was much larger, and Maiden has discussed how the editing took place under time constraints, as the literary editor who was supporting it was being replaced by a more conservative one. Even in the abridged form, the novel had many admirers, such as Dorothy Porter, Lyn Hughes, John Frow, and Stephen Knight. Judith Rodriguez wrote, 'I can't remember when a novel has so chilled and compelled me', whilst, in the *Telegraph*, Maria Preraur concluded that it was 'worthy of an Alfred Hitchcock'. As well as being worthy of Hitchcock, Quemar Press believes it is worthy of Clarence Darrow's speech at the Leopold and Loeb trial, in which he argued that the only way to achieve remorse was by survival.

Katharine Margot Toohey

QUEMAR PRESS



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

I will meditate simply, in Yeats's words, upon wounds and blood.

Earlier in my life, the gladbag murderer didn't exist. I was then a pessimistic probation officer. And Clare Forster might be released.

She had killed three small children. Two were girls and one was a boy. She paid most attention to him. The other two were witnesses.

She smothered them and knifed him. To be fair to her, I'll admit he died the quickest. She carved his throat and the blood ran so fast and so far that, by the time she had whittled the stars and flowers into every orifice, they were not obscured by liquid at all.

At that time she was nine and when we were introduced she was sixteen.

She didn't laugh during our introduction, so I didn't know why her laughter had disgusted Brian Harrison. Once I heard her laugh, I knew. Hers was an arrogant, youthful, guilty, rippling laugh. I said to Brian:

'It would attract men, though: the laugh.'

'A husband for the rest of her life?'

His question was pertinent, perhaps not for his reasons of revulsion. I thought it would probably take her the rest of her life to feel love for anyone. All the glamour for the prospective man would have been dulled, by then. The excitement of loving a murderess. The excitement of redeeming one. Even his illicit joy in



PLAY WITH KNIVES

the lethal details. I did think she'd tell her future man her details. I had enormous regard for her, but I was never sure to what that regard applied. Was it prettiness? Pale prettiness - in gestures, complexity, complexion, character - is not to be disregarded amongst the moral and tragic criteria. Particularly an estranged, pale prettiness such as hers. At first, before me was a transparent thing, even more unformed than in the police photographs.

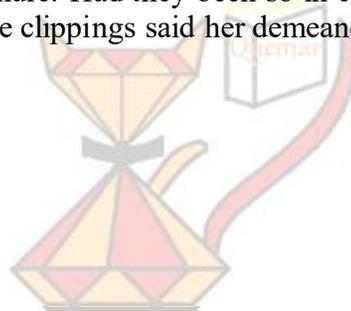
But, our introduction. I hadn't yet been given her formally by the Probation Department. Perhaps, they still feared that my prevalent misanthropy would mature and diminish. Or, perhaps, that a furtive anarchic bitterness in me would be attracted by her guilt. So, no doubt the first meeting was a test. And we both must have passed. They gave us to each other once they feared no complicity between us.

But, this first time:

My impressions were disjointed by the tension. She was thin and seemed drained of life. As I had expected, all her actions were reactions, even the movement of her eyes. The heavy hair was as silver-white as it was reputed to be, but the eyes surprised me. The files had said 'very blue', but I expected a vivid sky-colour or a pale azure purity. Clare's eyes were almost black, at least in that ill-lit office with its pastel walls and furnishings. The emphatic and natural darkness of the irises was offensive in a murderer. I could understand her trial judge's shock at them. At that moment they shocked me, too. But they were every bit as demure and empty as they should have been. *Its* eyes could become the extreme royal blue of an infant's before newborn transitions.

'*It...*' I've called her that once and may do it again. I had to say 'psychopath' to her once, without much emotion, in that first interview: to retain my officialdom. Later on in the years, her hair could be upswept and lacquered like a birchfrond. I already guessed, at this first interview, how they would dress her hair. And it couldn't have been hard for me, the father of an eleven-year-old daughter, to remember precisely what was killed.

But the eyes were every bit as demure. Had they been so in court those taming years ago? Yes. The clippings said her demeanour



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

there was 'subdued'. So she was subdued to perfection now.

At this first meeting, I didn't speak, just watched her. She looked at me often enough not to seem rude. She didn't seem disturbed by what was, in fact, my best quietly inquisitorial gaze. Her attention remained with the wardress, and awaited any prompting or command. My impulse was to ask the wardress to leave, but I decided I'd learn more about my animal from watching her interaction with her keeper than by any ingenious visual or verbal interrogation. I, therefore, let my attention become casual, sometimes watching Clare and the wardress, and sometimes watching air.

The apparent lapse in scrutiny proved rewarding. The wardress displayed more and more unobtrusive boredom, and Clare - therefore surmising that boredom, if not obtrusive, was permissible - allowed her own gaze to catalogue the objects (including myself) in the room. After a while, she must - unlike the wardress, who was reading the clock like a book - have concluded that I was the most interesting thing to inspect. Her eyes looked nearly easily into mine. It was then that I needed to say 'psychopath' aloud, to place us.

I had known in theory that something in that mannered, conditioned china-pixie might be capable of judging me, but I hadn't suspected that its eyes would suggest the accuracy they did. Like Conrad's Baron Heyst, they might have been damning - as I damned mine so often - their own fastidious soul.

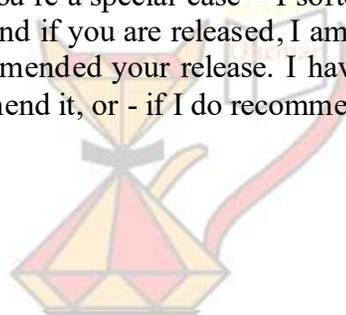
For a time it stared at me - after the sound 'psychopath' - and then her eyes relaxed. We studied each other without tension, while I formally introduced myself:

'I'm George Jeffreys.' Despite my ancestor, a namesake who was the Hanging Judge at the Monmouth Rebellion Assizes, I do regret the name 'George'. But I compensate with an impressive sibilant hiss on the last syllable of my surname when I choose. I chose.

I asked, 'Do you know why I'm here?'

A slight headshake.

'It's possible I may be your Probation Officer' - I pronounced it with capitals - 'if you're paroled. You're a special case' - I softened my voice, level and ingratiating - 'and if you are released, I am one of the people who will have recommended your release. I haven't the faintest idea yet if I will recommend it, or - if I do recommend



PLAY WITH KNIVES

it, whether my supervisors will still consider me a suitable probation officer for you. You will have a long series of interviews until your case is decided. You've met Miss' (I'd been instructed to pronounce it 'Ms' but then could never quite get my tongue around it) 'Kent?'

A nod of the head.

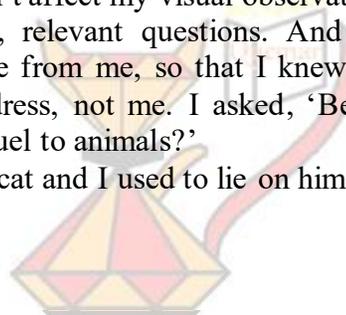
'As she'll have told you, she will also be interviewing you. Sometimes both of us will see you and sometimes only one. If you are released, Miss Kent will almost certainly be one of your officers.' Elinor was the only woman in the area with the qualifications and experience, so I wasn't taking a risk with that remark. The wardress - who was overweight and overtired and overtaxed - gave an indiscreet little snort when she heard Elinor's name.

Elinor had been particularly glamorous that morning, and also particularly confident, even for Elinor. I didn't doubt that she had asked the wardress to leave the room. It was an unnecessary slight, since the woman was not to be present at any of our future interviews. These would not be conducted in this institution but in one or other of the Probation Department buildings. If the parole were approved, the last interviews before her release would be conducted in camera, at night, at the main departmental offices in the city.

These interviews would be conducted in secret because the Authorities - right up to the top of the Public Service and the Government - were wary of Clare, and of the violent catalyst she might prove to be. They feared she carried the power of her murders with her, and might even use it in a political way. From the beginning, I knew they had chosen me to sound her out, as if they hoped I was the person in the department least likely to free her. Or, if she were free, the most likely to watch her.

Still, the first interview. With their relaxation, her eyes became lighter despite their inertness, since fear, or its chemical prevention had dilated her pupils more than any form of ease could have done. After a while, I knew that it wouldn't affect my visual observations if I asked her some accustomed, relevant questions. And she answered without averting her face from me, so that I knew she was still interacting with the wardress, not me. I asked, 'Before you killed the children, were you cruel to animals?'

'When I was about two, we had a cat and I used to lie on him and try to squash him.'



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

‘Unsuccessfully?’

‘Oh, yes. He was very healthy. He was eighteen when he died. Mum says he died. She wouldn’t tell me for a while. It’s funny. After all this, she might still think I’m tender-hearted.’ Clare was not being unpleasant. She was merely murmuring obligingly what she thought I must be feeling.

‘So, it isn’t illogical to need to kill children when you don’t really try to kill a cat?’

‘It seems - seemed - quite logical to me. Mum had told me not to go to the pictures. She hadn’t told me not to kill the children. I was, obviously, a moral coward. I was more afraid of disobeying, and of her punishing or disapproving of me, than I was of being arrested or taken away. I couldn’t really imagine being taken away. I just thought they locked you up and fed you. But it was really the same as before. I’ve never known how best to obey people. There’s something really important that other people know and I don’t.’

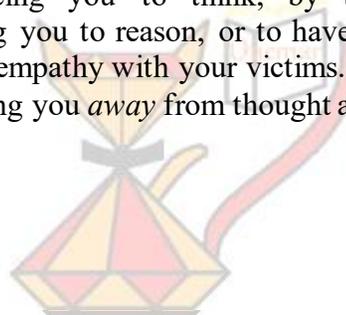
‘You seriously wish me to believe that you think this mysterious knowledge exists?’ I must have sounded genuinely exasperated. Her tone in that last speech did unnerve me. She wasn’t, I think, pretending any form of retardation. Her voice held a quiet, forlorn frustration - as if she thought she spoke truly.

I asked, ‘Are you still having electric shock conditioning?’ I knew she was, but I wanted her to describe it. I was both aroused and repelled by the idea. I was also becoming aware that she was much more intelligent than I had been told.

She said, ‘Yes’, politely, and then politely and unsalaciously added the salacious description: ‘They show me pictures of knives and blood and things - boy’s things and girl’s things, you know - and bodies, I mean dead ones, and tell me not to like it. They don’t always hurt me. It’s meant to be unexpected as well as expected, I understand?’

She added the question to safeguard my authority and to placate the implacably taciturn keeper. The wardress didn’t move. I obligingly safeguarded my authority.

I told Clare, ‘They keep forcing you to think, by their stimulus-response violence. Forcing you to reason, or to have the appearance of reason. To give you empathy with your victims. But on another level they are conditioning you *away* from thought and



PLAY WITH KNIVES

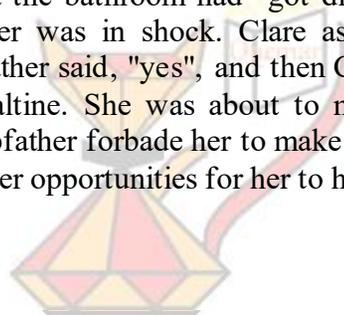
reason, because they don't know what evil your free will might involve.'

I hadn't intended to say 'they' and not 'we'. I wasn't her psychiatrist, just a public-service psychologist. I'd no intention, either, of winning her confidence. I added, 'These interviews with Elinor' - it was too late to retract the Christian name - 'and myself are probably designed to have the same function as the S-R, without any crude form of pain. And we have to gauge you, of course, and to write out reports.'

With that, the wardress indicated the clock and with relief we all obeyed.

In the afternoon, Elinor and I conferred, as arranged, about Clare. Elinor read aloud the summary of reports which our supervisor, Philip Antonelli, had ordered to be compiled about the murders. She read quickly and was provoking me to interrupt, but I didn't.

'Clare stayed all night in the house with the dead children. The two little girls, Janice and Tess, were killed in their pajamas about nine p.m. The boy's bed and floor were drenched by blood, but she had cleaned the mutilated body and carried it into the room to be with the other two. There were some traces of blood on their pillows due to smothering. The police opinion was that she had deliberately eliminated the two witnesses prior to the third killing. But she herself said she had been having a pillow fight with them during which she suggested they all kill the boy together, and they refused. They were younger children than she but not much smaller and the police expressed surprise that she had done it so easily, even though it was an old rented house, and she'd been able to lock all the interconnecting doors and the windows. When her mother and stepfather came home, around one a.m., they rang the ambulance and the police. Clare had been asleep on the couch, but took her mother directly into the room which held the bodies. She told her mother and stepfather that the bathroom had "got dirty", but she had cleaned it. Her mother was in shock. Clare asked, "Will I be taken away?" Her stepfather said, "yes", and then Clare said she would like a cup of Ovaltine. She was about to make Ovaltine in the kitchen, but her stepfather forbade her to make it in the kitchen - where there were further opportunities for her to harm



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

herself, or others. He said he would make the beverage. He did so, and they were sipping it when the police and ambulance arrived, the police before the ambulance. The knife had not been cleaned and still had Clare's fingerprints. She had left it in the boy's bedroom, where his pillow should have been. She seems to have taken his pillow into the other room with his body. Her stepfather stayed with her all night, at the police station, whilst she was questioned. She made a clear and non-contradictory statement. Her mother was in hospital, still in shock. Her stepfather did not appear to experience direct or delayed shock, as such, but sank into a mechanical depression, during which he spoke, watched TV, did his job and so on, and then, after a trivial disagreement with his employer, killed himself by carbon monoxide in the garage. Clare was sentenced to be detained at Her Majesty's pleasure, and the pleasure is still being enjoyed.' The last clause had been added by Elinor herself, in the same tone as she had recited the rest.

I asked, 'Did you read that to her?'

'Except about her stepfather's death being suicide.'

'When will she be told that?'

'When you decide to tell her.'

'Me?'

'It won't be me, George.'

'It should be Antonelli, or the psychiatrist, or her mother.'

'It won't be, though, will it?'

'If.'

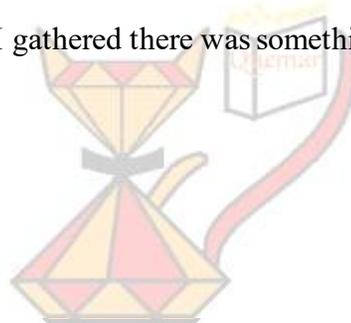
'If.'

Elinor tapped her fingernails on her desktop resonantly. I have to control my own mannerism of tapping my fingertips on the desk. I wondered why tapped fingertips sound tetchy and tapped fingernails sound brisk and commanding. No doubt it was the terse, thin, cool sound of the power of dead tissue, even if ornamental, when the human body builds it. The latter thought is histrionic, but so strong I will record it here.

Elinor's gesture had diverted me from criticising our varying attitudes to our subject. We were back to our subject itself.

I said, 'Have you met the mother?'

'I'm leaving Mrs. Forster to you.' I gathered there was something



PLAY WITH KNIVES

messy, illogical and totally-beneath-Elinor about Clare's mother.

William Forster was the stepfather's name. Clare had been born Clare Collins and, if she were released, she would need, for the sake of her safety, to become Clare Collins again.

Elinor asked, 'Are the medical reports collated?'

I said, 'No.' Some were in the western suburbs offices and some were in the city. 'But I've read them.'

'What do they say about her hair?'

'That it turned grey and then white, gradually, in the years after the trial. Her palms and foot soles also became wrinkled, but at that the aging process seems to have stopped. Apparently it's a normal psycho-biological self-protection device.'

'I asked her about her hair and she said it was hereditary', remarked Elinor. 'She says her mother went grey in late childhood, too. I didn't see much of her hands.' True, she had kept them palms downwards with me, as well. 'But her fingernails are pathetic. She bites them more than Antonelli does.'

'That's probably why he wants to save her. He's already discussing her release.'

'I doubt if the Board are so willing to gamble on it.'

'Neither am I', I said, 'Are you?'

She considered, 'I don't know'. She diverted her thoughts. 'She seemed even more unusual than you've suggested, physically. Almost as if a vitamin or pigmentation were missing. What do they say about that?'

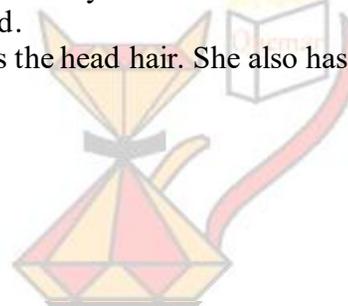
'The chief-examining psychiatrist has always been Patrick Roche. Haven't you asked Pat about her?'

'I haven't spoken to him for a while.' So he was no longer her lover. 'What was his opinion?'

'He's given her a physical check-up as well from time to time. Apart from the selective aging process - the hair and hands and feet - he suggests there are more unusual factors. Obviously she has intense physical responses to emotional stimuli. But there are indications of a physical age-retardation in some areas. The face, throat and the rest of the body are unusually smooth and hairless.'

'She has pubic hair?' Eleanor asked.

'Yes, and it is grey. Not as white as the head hair. She also has a



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

very low pain-threshold, and the scars of any small cuts or burns may take years to - or never - heal She isn't anemic but bleeds easily. Her blood structure appears normal in tests.' I remembered how transparent her skin was as I continued: 'Her fingernails are soft and frangible, when she allows them to grow. She has been subject to fainting spells, but they are infrequent and Pat considers them psychological in origin.'

'No doubt exacerbated by the stimulus-response sessions', Elinor interjected.

'He pronounced her fit for the electric shocks in S-R, but apparently she had passed out occasionally before. It was mentioned at the trial, but they couldn't make much use of it. Every schoolgirl faints.'

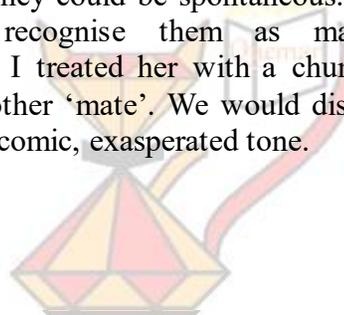
I thought of the physical 'age-retardation' and had an unprompted visual memory of her eyelashes. Of course, she wore no mascara, but the eyelashes still had a rich, clotted, separated effect, that added to her doll-like surface, and also to a perhaps unintended but irritating insolence, innocence, she had already begun to convey to me.

Brian Harrison had said something else about Clare and I recounted it to Elinor.

'Brian said he didn't know what to think, because she wasn't like any other murderer he'd met or read about. She didn't, for example talk at all about love.'

Brian had said this before I'd met Clare, or wanted to meet her (of course I didn't want to). She had been part of Brian's research for his Psychology Masters, before he joined us as a probation officer. Maybe he had been offered her before I was and, maybe, he had declined her. But, if so, I think Elinor would have said so. Elinor and Brian were usually intimate.

Elinor's union with Brian was consistent but not constant. I liked her - indeed fancied her - myself, but I feared the discontent which fucking her might introduce into my marriage. So I held her as it were, at arm's length. Not by my practised sarcasm or unpredictable chill, except in that they could be spontaneous. She was sophisticated enough to recognise them as mating preliminaries. But, when possible, I treated her with a chummy mateship. We did often call each other 'mate'. We would discuss work problems in a suitably weary, comic, exasperated tone.



PLAY WITH KNIVES

Elinor winked an emerald eye and tapped her fingernails again. Elinor had perfected a mischievous wink that could have made a saint her accomplice, and I was usually flattered enough to agree to her arrangements.

She said, 'I'm having a drink with Brian and Harry Terrence in the Mt Druitt Roundabout tonight. You will come, won't you? I said so. It's on your way.'

Elinor's fingernails were autumn-russet that day. She always painted her finger and toe-nails the same colour as her lipstick. Sometimes, Heather did it, too, but more when she was depressed. For Elinor, appearance and fashion were an aspect of self-definition. For Heather, no matter how flamboyant (never vulgar) her taste, I suspected that there was a much greater element of self-disguise involved.

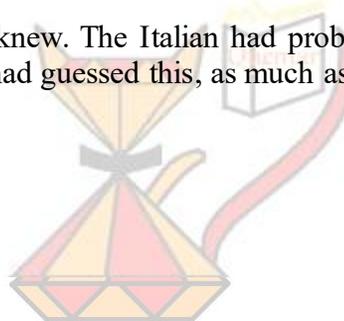
The Roundabout was a clean, efficient pub. Inside there were gigantic metal statues of square-buttocked, pear-breasted nudes to support the raftered roof. The staff was friendly. The meals were always acceptable, but they veered wildly between Chinese, U.S. take-away and creamy Viennese according to the cook the pub had currently captured. It was a wide, shiny, breezy and orderly pub, with vinyl barstools and laminex tables, and a huge congregation of patrons who came to drink and, sometimes, talk, and did so in a thorough, methodical, resigned way.

I won't pretend to dislike myself. Within my limits, I'm a good man, if bad enough to be interesting. But I do not like my limits and I find it hard but compulsive to admit to them. And I will sometimes - if I can without discrediting myself or hurting anyone - deliberately drink and gamble any limits away.

The assembly promised by Elinor were in the pub. Brian held Elinor. Brian was a methodical and tolerant person. Sometimes I would see him spiritually wince, as Antonelli did, without flickering one muscle, even in the eyes. Antonelli, though, was stronger and less kind.

Elinor asked me, 'What's wrong with Antonelli?' and I answered, 'He feels guilty. He ought to.'

This guilt was over an Italian he knew. The Italian had probably raped his elder daughter. Antonelli had guessed this, as much as I.



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

But the man, in some sort of family compromise, was arrested for beating his wife. Since supervising the case, Antonelli had been promoted and had delegated the case to Brian. Brian was skillful but Antonelli felt guilty. Because only Antonelli could influence the emotions of the Italian. And impersonal democracy obliged him to say he could not do so. And I had not said he should do so. So, Antonelli was angry with me most of all. I had judged his excuses and accepted them, to punish him.

To distract him, I began a conversation. During this I felt closer to him than I had ever done. I confessed to him my jealousy of Heather's vocation as a schoolteacher, and that I had become a probation officer because I feared the responsibility of becoming a teacher.

'I've no fear of teaching,' Antonelli said - he had taught for a while after leaving the priesthood - 'but the probation responsibility terrifies me.'

But I said: 'I expect neither bad nor good from this profession. I react to bad or good precisely in the degree to which they manifest themselves. I don't consider what they otherwise might have been.'

'In that sense,' Antonelli remarked, 'you assume absolute moral judgement.'

I looked at him clearly and suddenly: 'Yes.'

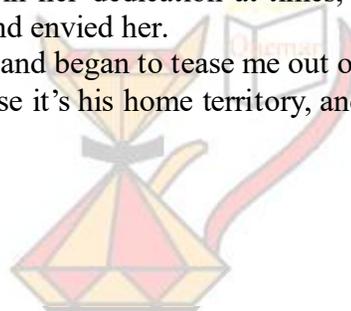
He continued to return my gaze, as I meant him to, and I continued to speak. 'Whilst we both know there are no truths but artificial truths, and I am, no doubt, the office Luther, like Luther, I may balance my own verdicts, but in the last resort: here I am and that's that. The criterion is too deep to be introspective. It is, at its best and worst, professionally necessary.'

Antonelli knew that, even in his own terms, I was describing myself too truthfully to be vulnerable.

At this instant, he disenthralled himself from his conscience for the first time that night and asked me where Heather was.

'At home, marking essays. She didn't want to come. She's happier working, but I must go soon.' I was thinking how I'd seen Heather, almost agonizingly, glory in her dedication at times, and of how I had, therefore, protected and envied her.

Elinor detected my unease at once and began to tease me out of it: 'Yes. I chose the Roundabout because it's his home territory, and



PLAY WITH KNIVES

there are poker machines’.

I feared sounding even more solemn, but I wanted to retort that poker machines were a practical cure for an impractical frustration. Harry Terrence, like the diplomatic police sergeant he is, was over-sensitive to my silence and interpreted it as self-consciousness at the mention of my second pet vice (the first was in the glass in my hand). He changed the subject spectacularly by asking: ‘And will they release Clare Forster?’

Silence. Then: ‘If you want my honest h-hopinion,’ Brian began.

He was terribly drunk. My reflexes decided to be drunkenly terrible and I interpolated: ‘By way of refreshment, yesss.’

But he enunciated clearly with a fear untypical of him, and a hint of how he must have dreaded her in sobriety: ‘I think she’s still dangerous.’

Antonelli said sharply, ‘You’re seeing the past not the future.’

Elinor said, ‘And, as yet, the Hanging Judge won’t speak. They’ve told her in class about that.’

‘That I won’t speak?’

‘About Judge Jeffreys. The class discussed the Monmouth and Cade Rebellions. They were doing Shakespeare. I discussed your ancestry with her.’

I said, ‘That’s alright. And so,’ my voice achieved some comic relish, ‘will I continue to warn her what’s in my blood?’

Antonelli sighed, ‘I don’t care how you test her if your report to the Board is fair.’

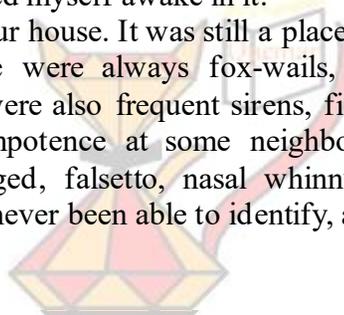
I said, ‘I don’t share your occasional preference for saving her soul more than saving her future victims. Elinor?’

She had discretely disengaged herself from Brian and stated, ‘My report will be as fair as yours is, George.’

We drank to that before I left them.

After pissing behind some gum trees, I settled myself in the car, adjusted the driving mirror and stared myself awake in it.

The pub was in the same area as our house. It was still a place full of hen-yards and foxes. So there were always fox-wails, and gun-shots in the night. And there were also frequent sirens, filling one with a prevalent sense of impotence at some neighbour’s distress. And there was a prolonged, falsetto, nasal whinnying sound that recurred and that I have never been able to identify, and



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

probably never will. I suspect some species of owl.

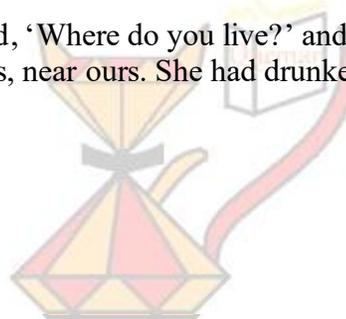
I had relaxed into the background noise for a minute. But, then, I alerted myself and checked out my appearance for Heather's benefit. Except for some sharper edges, I am an amorphous-looking man. Perhaps a little flabby, with that sulky rather bloodless type of skin in which blue pin-pricks of beard or moustache appear a little too late or too early. My eyes are hazel, lightly and scrutinisingly brown, but with flecks of callow green in them. My hair is dark brown and inclined to be droopy. I have an unruly lock over one temple. I tell people that so does James Bond. I discipline this lock with head, not hand, movements. I also have to discipline a habit of keeping my fists very tightly in my trouser pockets, as this can be indecorous if I'm at all sexually aroused. James Bond does not seem to have this problem.

I wear square-rimmed, brown spectacles which enlarge the eyes' pupils and obscure their whites. I purse my lips habitually. My mouth, therefore, appears smaller and better defined than it is.

So, altogether, you see, I possess an ideal visage, since it hardly changes at all when I've been drinking. Not that Heather was the rolling-pin type. If anything, the opposite. She accepted my drinking, but I was too proud and loved her too much, now, to allow myself to appear to her in any way disreputable from alcohol Or from anything.

I had to slow down as I drove onto Woodstock Avenue. There was an old woman reeling down the dark road in front of the traffic. She was old from drink more than years. Some drivers ahead swerved towards her. They divided evenly into three kinds. Those who were trying to run her down, those who were trying to fuck her, and those who seemed, by their yells, inclined to do both at once. I slowed the car again as she approached, but I didn't deviate from the straight line in which I drove. About the same time, she stopped, still on her feet, swaying and inertly despairing. There was nothing behind me. I eased the car to a halt and opened the door. She gripped the door and the roof and scrambled awkwardly into the seat beside me.

To avoid misunderstanding, I asked, 'Where do you live?' and she told me. It was a respectable address, near ours. She had drunken



PLAY WITH KNIVES

heavily and was snorting. After half a mile, I said, 'Will your husband be angry that you're so sick?'

'He knows. I do this all the time. He doesn't mind. At least I don't do it inside and make it a secret.'

'How often? Every night?' Of course not. I hadn't seen her.

'Not that often.'

'Once a week?'

'More than that.'

'Those drivers looked dangerous.'

'When they are, I can dodge them. If it's really bad, I piss off into the bush.'

'Why did you get into my car?'

'You didn't look as if you wanted me to.'

'So that makes me safe?'

'Aren't you?'

She was a bit more sober and a bit more anxious.

'Oh, yes. You're home.'

And she said, 'Yes, thank you.'

She got out and went into the garden of the house. She hadn't shut the door properly, and I had to tilt myself sideways and shut it as I drove. The other seat was wet from her. I didn't know with what, and didn't - wouldn't - at that moment mind.

I was already thinking of Heather. Of Heather's strength. I remembered the time when our daughter, Sheridan, was a toddler and Heather had let her play with knives. I had known that I, too, should permit this, but I was edgy.

'What if she cuts herself?'

'We're here to stop the bleeding. And she'll only do it once.'

I locked the garage and let myself into the house. I said to Heather again, 'I'll stop drinking if you want me to.'

I knew perfectly well she didn't want me to. During, or consequent upon, my drinking, we had been closer than at any other time. She said she had observed other, more sober marriages, and decided they couldn't compare to the alignment that we had achieved. And it did help keep me out of the way while she



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

was working. She, of course, drank too. But she used it, rather eerily, to help her work. This was the purpose of any drinking she did and not, as it was for me, just an added bonus from it.

Heather had grey eyes and her hair was short and chestnut-coloured. She had very beautiful contact lenses from which the grey took on, in most lights, a glossy, orchid-pearl spectrum. She was still wearing them tonight. She had just finished marking essays.

I sat down near her, and we were very close, before the old sound tensed us. As usual, the first notes of the siren were regular and unalarming. It was the long repetition, piercing through walls and windows to an ancient point somewhere in the spinal *pia mater*, like the night-long keen of a wolf (not a fox), that was terrible. We had lived close to the polyclinic for years, but neither Heather nor I ever became used to the emergency sirens. Even when we had no daughter out there, when we knew she was safe inside, we would sit upright and watch each other, wondering, as we did tonight.

I checked that Sheridan was in her bed and safe - at least from anything outside - in sleep. She, was however snorting in her breath, and this might indicate an asthma attack later. Heather and I glanced at each other when I returned from Sheridan's bedroom, but we didn't comment, and tried not to think on it further. Asthma is a telepathic thing.

I looked around for something to distract Heather from the siren and saw that Elinor, who was closer to Heather than to me, had given her a new indoor plant. Elinor bred and gave away gorgeous indoor plants. There was a rumour in the office that some of them ate insects and small animals, but this - unlike the rumour that she had a collection of antique dildos as ornaments on her walls, shelves and tables - was, to my knowledge, false. With pot-plants, she suited the gift to the recipient, to her concept of their character. The blossom on this present was an elegant purple and white. A decade ago, we had received our first sample of Elinor's flora, a gift to me, which flowered in dark blue and crimson. Heather remarked now:

'We have to make sure Elinor visits us regularly. When she didn't, the last one gave up.'
'It's not dead, though.'



PLAY WITH KNIVES

‘Oh, no.’

It was still on the laundry window-sill, but it hadn’t flowered in years.

The siren had stopped, and the dogs it had inspired would stop howling shortly. On the bed, I put both my hands in Heather’s hair and ran my lips over her face. Unlike Elinor and Clare, neither my wife nor daughter were the sort of woman in whom you notice the bones. Heather’s grey, clay-coloured eyes were now brighter than the contact lenses she had shed. Her body shape had rounded to that of Indian statues. Her skin had a glister about it, and the veins seemed green not blue. Both she and Sheridan had strong firm legs and squarish feet and hands. She put a square hand involuntarily on my hand now, as I stroked the top of her hip bones. Typically, she restrained my caresses with one hand and facilitated them with the other, by using it to ease her clothes away. I rubbed her clitoris up and down, not roughly but mechanically, and concentrated my sensitivity towards the circling, recircling of my tongue and lips on her breast. She came abruptly because she was tired, and again when I was in her and almost as I did. It was a relived, relaxing sequence, in which the climax was hardly separate from the whole.

I saw that her eyes were still open. She’d wedged some tissue between her thighs to save the sheets, but she was too comfortable to go to the bathroom yet. I remembered the old drunken woman on the road and told her about it. She seemed incongruously shocked and puzzled. Hadn’t I misunderstood the motivation of the other drivers?

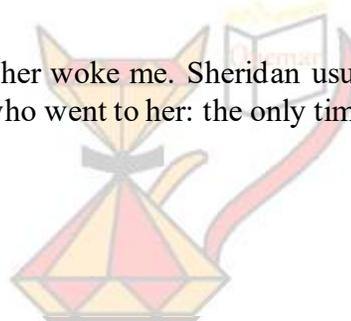
‘No, I don’t think that I did. I can quote them if you like.’

‘Does she often go home that way?’

‘It seems she does.’

I thought then that I should get up and clean the unmentioned car seat, before any stench sank in. But I didn’t. At dawn, I would spray everything away from the dead vinyl with disinfectant. Or Heather, now, might think me over-fastidious. And Heather, now, was utterly asleep.

I hadn’t heard Sheridan call. Heather woke me. Sheridan usually called ‘Mum’, but it was usually I who went to her: the only time,



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

then, in the choking pre-dawn or midnight, when it seemed I could be useful to Sheridan at all. Her days belonged to her mother, but Heather after days and nights of teaching and marking and class-planning couldn't have survived without the unpredicted, profound naps her insomnia mercifully allowed her. It was unusual, in fact, that it was she and not I who had heard Sheridan cough or call. The second time, I would have.

Even though the family doctor - Clem Dixon - must sometimes be phoned, it was I more than the doctor or her mother who could calm and convince Sheridan. When I went into her bedroom, she said she didn't want the doctor. I knew perfectly well that she hadn't done her chest-draining exercises that week, and that she felt guilty. But her pajama top was open, and I saw that her ribs and breast-bone were red and white with fingermarks. She'd been trying to squeeze the mucus loose in her lungs. She was leaning back and shutting her eyes giddily now, to breathe. I phoned Clem.

He would never accept any fee for these visits to Sheridan. No fee that is, except to share a bottle of my Chivas scotch or Bisquit cognac, and to watch with me all night. Tonight, we were fortunate. After Sheridan had taken her inhalation and injection, she precariously slept. Clem was a night-bird, as I am, and didn't really mind coming: in fact, he didn't have a regular morning surgery, and tended to be at his most convivial well after sunset. He liked my company and I liked his, and he liked to talk about Life and to sit up for the dawn. He liked to. I had to. And I appreciated his dislike of leaving an anxious man alone.

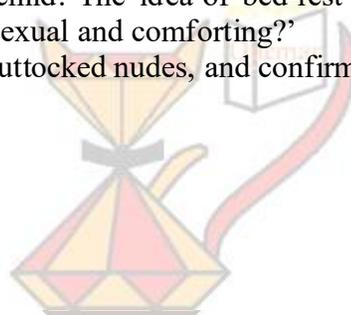
Tonight, after Clem had arrived promptly and treated Sheridan and we had sat back in our armchairs in the lounge, I said to him, 'When it's not this bad and you don't have to come, it takes longer for her to sleep, but before she sleeps I'm nearer to her than at any other time.'

He lit his pipe, as he must have thought all Socratic doctors should: 'Which is partly because you are asthmatic, too?'

'Not like she is.'

'Not now, but when you were a child. The idea of bed-rest and nursing people back to health is so sexual and comforting?'

I remembered those huge square-buttocked nudes, and confirmed:



PLAY WITH KNIVES

‘Probably the only safe form of physical intimacy we have.’

‘So Victorian. So close to death and such a defiance of it. My patients’ children love to tell macabre jokes about tortured babies.’

‘So do Sheridan and her friends.’

‘Does your little murderess?’

‘Clare? I don’t know yet. I doubt it. She’d be out of touch with those trends.’

‘The white-haired girl.’

I said, ‘I saw a version of the ballet “The White-haired Girl” on a holiday in Adelaide. No doubt you have seen it done authentically, in China.’

He said, ‘Yes. It was good propaganda.’

I was eighteen that year in Adelaide. The white-haired girl - or China - had leapt into the air of the stage, her slender arm and bare leg stiff in accusation of the wicked landlord. Her free hair was silver and sleek with vivacity. And she had been infinitely more than what - however vast and historic - she had been said to represent.

Unobscured by diurnal skateboards and rollerskates, the winds in our area provided their own counterpoint. There was a rhythmic, consistent, low-pitched roar, like a distant bloodstream, or a waterfall, inside their fretful, soft, meddling many-fingered surface.

I was relaxing at last - I don’t relax in sleep - with my scotch after the crowded day. The curtains were undrawn and Clem was caressing his glass, as his eyes caressed the starscape. He was the Orson Welles type, with velvety eyes, a strong, plump build, and a husky baritone. He was reputed to be a womaniser, but we had never discussed it, or our wives.

Remarkably now he asked:

‘Do you masturbate?’

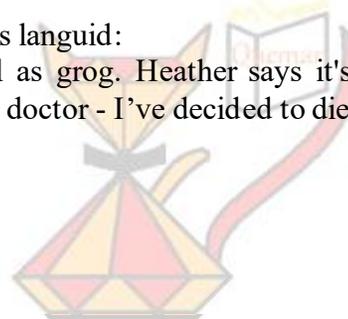
I wasn’t off-guard. I answered:

‘Occasionally. It saves more time than affairs. But Heather and I enjoy each other.’

‘What about your drinking?’

What about *his* drinking? But I was languid:

‘I drink too much coffee, as well as grog. Heather says it’s my own free will - and that, if - like my doctor - I’ve decided to die of



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

cirrhosis of the liver, it will probably be less painful than cancer or a heart attack.'

He sighed. 'I find it annoying that your blood pressure is always normal.'

'Heather's health worries me more.'

'Why?' He was quickly more alert, as became the subject.

'She works too long and hard, and it taxes her physically. She hasn't learned to rest or withhold any creativity, to rely on serviceable habits in her classes.'

'The problem there is love. You cure it at your peril.'

There was a sound from one of the bedrooms, and I called out, 'Shez?' softly - but she hadn't woken. Occasionally, when alarmed, I did call her 'Shez', although I'd sworn I never would and so had Heather.

I startled myself by telling Clem:

'When we talk, I feel as if we were survivors - it's the same as when Sheridan is sick and talks with me. And I felt the same thing with Clare yesterday.'

'So she intrigues you.'

'She's supposed to have a low-to-average IQ, but even now I can trick her into responding at a much higher level.'

He'd finished his drink and poured us both another.

'And at what level can she trick you into responding?'

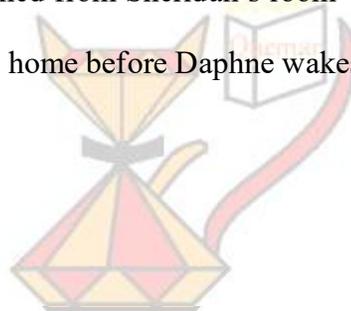
'My own. Just my own.'

The wind had risen and the curtains shook on the closed glass. There was a sapphire tint in the shadows. From now on, our conversation would be laconic, and our heads would loll on our chairs.

The name 'Angel Clare' began searching my mind mockingly. Since one of the victims was called Tess, I wondered if there was any connection between the family's names and Hardy's novel, then, as I woke up, I remembered they were stepsisters. And none of the parents seemed to be especially literary. Still: in conversation it would be a good decoy-topic, to study Clare better?

Clem wasn't in his chair. He returned from Sheridan's room with the comment:

'She's well over it now. I should get home before Daphne wakes up. I promised to go shopping.'



PLAY WITH KNIVES

I recalled that it was Saturday. 'So did I.'

But when he was gone, I returned to my chair with my glass. My sight was hazy, but my thoughts were now intensely clear.

I remembered that, when I was a boy, my father used to hypnotise himself into sleep by thinking, fixedly, of a 'platinum-haired sleeping princess'. That much-later image of the Chinese Resistance heroine - ageless, agile and noble - also survived in my mind.

Both of these memories frightened me, because I knew I must constantly convince myself that they had no connection with Clare, and that I must be wary of - indeed actively discourage - others making the comparison, too. And Clare herself. And how could she be given self-respect without self-romance?

But why had the Authorities chosen me to interrogate her, if they did not want to deny her self-respect?

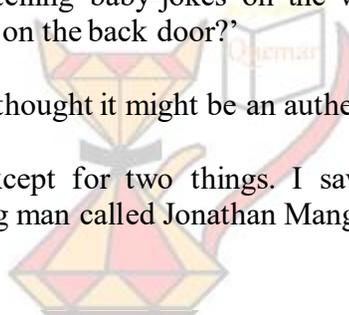
Certainly my other cases - despite my methods and manners - have sometimes become my friends, and most of them liked me. But the Authorities would know, from past records, that cases like Clare's would never be easy for me. How could I treat her in a warm or casual way, except as a means of ensnarement? My most generous judgement of them was that they thought I might accomplish for her the impossible: self-respect without self-romance. And my more exact verdict was that this was the only version of her that should be given its freedom. Should this fail, they knew I was too ruthless, or too honest, to deny that it had done so.

It was Saturday morning and I took my daughter to Great Western on a shopping trip. I pretended to her, 'I'd forgotten I promised you'. Of course, I not only took Sheridan, but half of the local junior mixed football team. Sheridan was front-row forward. Most of the local junior football teams were sexually assorted. They hadn't ever won unless the girls played, too. Sheridan and her friends entertained themselves by telling baby-jokes on the way: 'What's black and furry and knocks on the back door?'

'A baby covered in funnel webs.'

I hadn't heard this one before and thought it might be an authentic western suburbs version.

The shopping was uneventful except for two things. I saw a smilingly sinister and ethereal young man called Jonathan Manger,



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

who, at the time, I had no stomach to meet. He waved at us in the carpark, at peace with the world.

And later we met Silkie Roberts. She had twisted a muscle on the escalator. I untwisted it to everybody's groans of anguish and eventual satisfaction. The year before she had been one of Heather's pupils at the high school. Her family was not well-off and its one luxury and only pocket money had come from breeding Sydney silkie pups, about which Silkie herself was a devoted expert from birth. Hence her nickname, for she had been christened Sylvia. At school, she'd shown no aptitude for anything but typing and reading magazines about dogs. She was a silky, sweet-skinned, platinum-blond darling. Heather had adored Silkie and, after the girl turned sixteen and scraped through her school certificate, arranged a job for her as a typist in an office at the high school, where she typed and read dog magazines to her own and everybody else's heart's content.

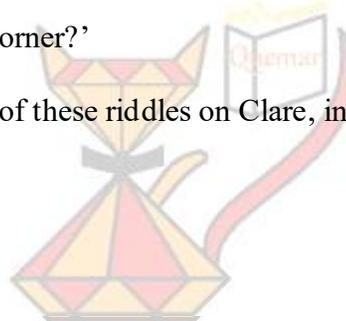
Despite her gaiety this morning, she did have a tiny or possibly a large problem. The latest breeding-bitch might have ventured over the wall and, if so, the pet shops were not as eager as usual to take any female pups. Their enthusiasm, unsurprisingly, was replaced by that of Sheridan and her friends. Knowing the parents of the volunteers rather better than they did, I suspected that mine would be the only hearth to house a female half-silkie should that young obstacle arise.

It was a pretty morning in a pretty neighbourhood, and after their shopping, I took the kids for a drive around it. The places and crescents in our area were set a little way apart from the housing commission and rented dwellings, and from the larger roads. But they formed a periphery between these and the small farms - the crisp blocks of five acres - and an edge, beyond which were still regions of wild bush. With these, the suburbs kept up a queasy communication. There were bushfire soot, rodents and insects from one habitat, and grotty, urban garbage, such as shell-cars, tyres, newspapers, and those eternal dark almost man-size plastic bags full of things, from the other.

'What's blue and sits quietly in a corner?'

'A baby with a plastic bag.'

I considered trying out one or two of these riddles on Clare, in our



PLAY WITH KNIVES

interviews and, no doubt, the experience would be valuable. And I certainly can't say that the spirit of the jokes was foreign to my nature, even though jokes as such are. But I think I felt that, in this case, the shock was being joked away, and I liked the shock to be potent in my humour. Humour has to be very clenched, very quiet, to hold itself erect.

Several of the kids, including mine, told a long, involved joke about a father viewing his first-born through glass at a hospital. As he watches, the nurse slowly dismembers the infant. He grows more and more frantic until he breaks the glass, whereupon the nurse retorts: 'It's alright. Your brat was dead anyhow.'

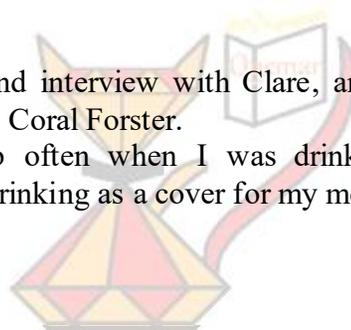
It is in our area, Evatt, that those housing commission warrens seem most miraculous. They wedge and entrench themselves in cracks and crannies where there has seemed no room for them. And in daylight they are pretty. But the earlier settled part of the area is prettier still. Jacaranda Place, where we lived, was the prettiest; allowing for, or perhaps assisted by, the house with the svelte nailed-on butterfly, and the house with the white-squared Tudor facade in fibro. The gardens were small and crammed with flowers, and even Heather and I had acquired an extravagance of eccentric roses. We had discovered early that those bushes thrive on neglect, providing that the lawn-mower doesn't sever them completely at the roots. The neighbours, like all neighbours, were more ambitious, and had farmed tiny, vivid rockeries under their windows. They defeated their no-fence covenants by replacing wire and timber with impenetrable aromatic shrubs. And even the most surly patch of rosemary-resisting clay could be covered by a glistening row of riverstones. The effect was saved from preciousness by the mandatory gum trees, sometimes in rough white blossom, which were spaced between every second house.

'What's the difference between unloading a truckload of babies and a truckload of table-tennis balls?'

'You can't use a pitchfork on table-tennis balls.'

On Monday, Elinor had her second interview with Clare, and I paid my first call on Clare's mother, Coral Forster.

Coral frequented the local Club often when I was drinking (although I mainly used my social drinking as a cover for my more



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

infrequent, but devout, secret drinking) and playing the pokies. We, therefore, already had the lasting affinity of people who have lost money together. She had met the men who fathered both Clare and Janice at the Club after prawn-and-spumante-nights.

Just after I arrived at her house, she commended me for always going home from the Club alone.

In point of fact those galas often tended to put me in the mood for sex with Heather, particularly if she were doing something aloof and schoolmistressy when I came home.

I explained none of this to Coral - although she was a charming, homey, friendly woman, as well as a vague one.

In her home there were many ornaments, a kero heater, a TV, and even, unusual in such a rented house, some books. These included, of all things, Palgrave's *Golden Treasury of English Verse*. Coral hadn't read it. Indeed, she thought Palgrave was the author of all the poems. But she said that Clare had known some of it by heart. I felt relieved. At least that would be something neutral to discuss with Clare tomorrow.

I asked Coral about Clare's father. Clare and Janice were her children by different fathers. The boy, Anthony, and the youngest girl, Tess, weren't Coral's but those of her husband, William Forster who was a widower when he married her. She had taken her earlier name, Collins - under which Clare and Janice were born - by commonlaw and not by marriage.

Clare didn't seem to have been interested in any of the other books, but there was a loved-to-bits comicbook version of *Jane Eyre* leftover from her childhood. A report which mentioned that a literary version of Jane was the first book she'd borrowed from the prison library took on significance. My *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* ploy would be well worth pursuing.

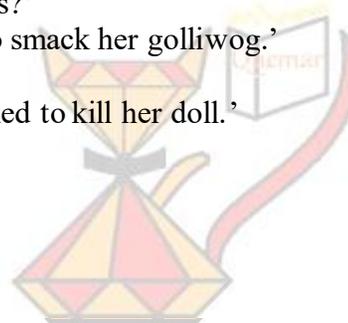
I returned to practicalities and told Coral - who had a wheaten rinse - that Clare had mentioned to Elinor that the white hair was inherited. Coral looked surprised, and said that her own hair only went grey after the children died.

I asked, 'Was Clare cruel to animals?'

'Not to anything alive. She used to smack her golliwog.'

'What for?'

'She said that it stole things and tried to kill her doll.'



PLAY WITH KNIVES

‘To *kill* it?’

‘Yes. At night. She wouldn’t have it in the room with her.’

I asked Coral to let me see the photographs of the children. The pictures were in a cupboard. Peter Banks, the salesman with whom she was now living, had asked her to shut them away, although William had always forced her to display them.

I shuffled through some of the photographs. Only some were on file in the city. Clare’s hair its first colour. Not plaits, let alone one neat one, but two loose ponytails. A pleasant face, but no smile. I asked Coral about this and she said that Clare, who was about four at the time, had explained that she ‘didn’t know how to smile’. Coral had thought this an accusation, or putting on side, but I remembered a similar problem in my own childhood. I could see what other people did with their faces, including smiling, but I didn’t know how to copy it. For instance, my smile was an opening of the mouth, but somehow the corners didn’t go in the right direction, and it looked like a ravenous scowl. At least the four-year-old Clare had the sense to keep her mouth shut.

Tess and Anthony were definitely blonde. Clare was fairer than dark, with light skin and brownish hair, but Janice was indelibly dark, with very wavy hair. Like all blurred photos, these conveyed character more tellingly than expert photography would have done. Coral had taken them. There were none of her or William.

Janice was so dark that it seemed fairly certain, despite her mother’s natural curls and olive skin, that her father was at least part-Indigenous.

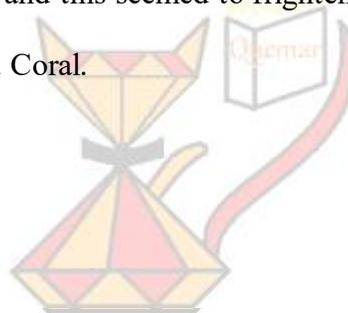
Coral said, unbidden: ‘Willy thought Jan had a touch of the tar in her, but I don’t know for sure. Before I met Willy, I always told Clare they were full sisters. They certainly acted that way.’

It occurred to me more forcibly that Clare’s eyes were that dark sort of indigo which normally and quickly turns to brown in infancy, and I asked Coral if she were surprised that they didn’t.

‘I prayed they’d stay as they were, and they did.’

There was no real evidence that Clare had earlier been spoiled or that she was ever badly beaten by anyone. Her mother and stepfather used to slap her at times, and this seemed to frighten her more than it did the other children.

‘She went - you know? - *still*,’ said Coral.



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

And she was usually very, literally, obedient. She never overtly offered to help with anything, but she was regarded as responsible. She often babysat the neighbours' children, and they liked her. They certainly weren't afraid of her, and sometimes, with other children, she apparently had a lively mood when she did invent games and tell them stories.

'Was she a leader in the games?'

'Not really. She made up a sort of leader: someone in the movies or TV, and said he was in charge.'

I had noticed that Clare's teeth seemed crumbly and weak - I suspected that all the calcium in her body was - and asked her mother what the milk teeth had been like.

She said: 'Always very good. She was always eating apples.'

Judging by the photos, I was fairly doubtful if Coral had seen much of Clare's teeth, but I agreed with her in courtesy, and left.

I would have been a good inquisitor, but interrogation as such wasn't my line. I wasn't good at the sincere, ingratiating bits. I got over them as best as I could by taking a stolid, commonsensical or casual tone, and lapsed back into my old, self-reassuring acid as soon as I could. I liked to think of my aggression as having a light, balletic grace about it. Indeed, I hoped that it was illusive enough to undermine and disquiet its victim without giving him or her enough provocation for a head-on confrontation. This also had the advantage of giving the aggression a lingering and, therefore, intimate effect which could often be converted easily into something amicable later - without obligating me to be reliably nice, even then. This was in normal, professional relationships, of course. Official interviews with abnormal charges naturally needed to be firmer and less subtle at times, although I'm fairly sure I've never manipulated anyone in too directly a brutal and bullying manner.

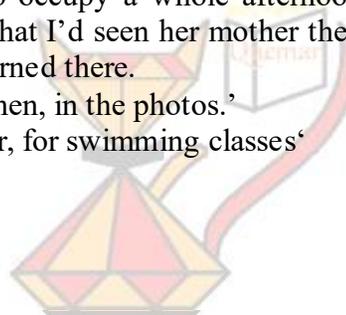
Each interview with Clare was to occupy a whole afternoon or morning. That morning, I told her that I'd seen her mother the day before, but not much of what I'd learned there.

I said, 'Your hair was still brown then, in the photos.'

'I'd just washed it. They cut it after, for swimming classes'

'Did you swim?'

'Only at school.'



PLAY WITH KNIVES

‘Were you a good swimmer?’

‘They never noticed that I was sinking, so I suppose so.’

‘That’s an achievement, when they don’t notice.’

‘Yes,’ she said, allowing me no reason to think her unserious, ‘it most certainly was.’

It was then easy for me to turn the discussion to the mechanical difficulties of smiling in infancy. Clare confirmed that I’d guessed the problem. At four, she wasn’t being bathetic about being unable to smile. She just honestly didn’t learn how until later.

As we spoke, I watched her nail-biting. It wasn’t nervous, but thorough, dutiful and oblivious, like a lamb on the tether cropping its yard. Idly watching her small bald fingers, I thought, yes, it is safer: it arouses no resentment, no jealousy, it is a gesture of inferiority, but not of a repentance strong enough to be obvious, and therefore to be obviously inadequate. And it is quite comforting, without arousing any horror by expressing the need for comfort. Oh, yes, I thought: unless I stop you, you will get away with that.

And why should I stop her? Partly because I did not want her to be able to comfort herself, and disarm others. Partly because any self-mutilation - however tiny - on her part had become painful for me, too.

I asked, ‘What is your room like?’

‘Nice.’

I awaited more particulars, so she supplied them: ‘There’s a bed. I made the quilt. It took me two years. It’s got seven colours in it. And there’s a radio. FM. The wallpaper’s quite nice, but it’s very bright and there are faces in the flowers.’

‘Real faces or made up ones?’

‘Real ones. They’re part of the design. They look like Victorian ladies, side on.’

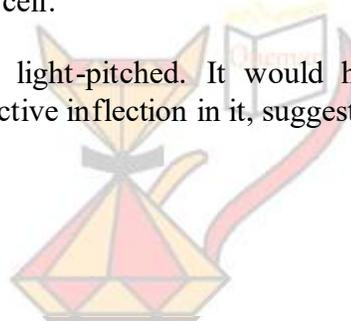
‘Cameos?’

‘Yes. Cameos. There’s a pink cover on the toilet. The mirror isn’t made out of glass. You know what cells are like.’

‘You aren’t describing an ordinary cell.’

‘No. I’m sorry.’

Her voice was soft, gentle and light-pitched. It would have sounded youthful, but for a retrospective inflection in it, suggesting



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

that, no matter what she said, she spoke cooperatively of something that had happened many years ago.

I began to set the rules for us: 'Since we'll be having frequent long interviews, I intend to relieve the pressure at times - only at times - by centering our conversations around books or topical issues. You seem to like Victorian books. I saw the copy of Palgrave at your mother's.'

'Palgrave?'

'The Treasury of English Verse.'

She thought. 'I can't remember it. I can't remember reading anything before I came to prison.'

'But you like *Jane Eyre*?'

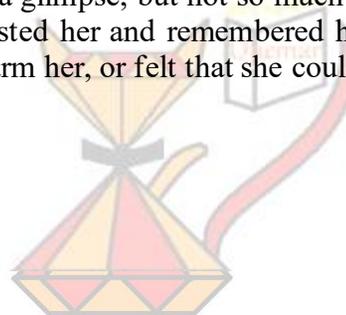
'Oh, yes. I've read all the Brontes, I think.'

'You'd know if you had.'

'Then I mustn't have.' She was tenaciously unprovoked and helpful.

But, despite it's deliberate, but not sullen, passivity, the set of the whole face was sure to engage or enrage an observer. The bone structure, despite its roundness, was icy sharp. The snowy wisps of eyebrows, above the wealth of blanched lashes, tried too hard to be neutral and succeeded only in being impeccable, impervious over the helplessly noticeable eyes. The sensitive, controlled repose of her lips and nostrils again imperilled her, for the reticence could have been arrogance. Fate had given her face, although wan, a shape which firmed the jaw and tilted the chin too much to suggest remorse. Not that I doubted a degree of authenticity in her repentance. The same degree which had changed her hair so effectively after her crimes. Nor did I think this psycho-physical self-protection particularly cunning or malicious, although guilt doesn't make the psychological and physical easily divisible.

And she also looked ordinary and, as I have said, unformed and palely pretty. So, would she have been merely ordinary and pretty without all that history behind her? No, I'd say not. The other sinister quality would have been there. I have a considered belief that had I just seen her - more than a glimpse, but not so much as a conversation - I would have mistrusted her and remembered her. I hope I would not have wanted to harm her, or felt that she could do harm to me.



PLAY WITH KNIVES

I set more rules: 'I've always wondered why people are more shocked by the murder of innocent, unaware children than by the murder of self-aware, death-aware adults. For that reason, I refuse to allow you any right to sentimentality, even the sentimentality involved in horror or curiosity. How can you even be frightening when your murders took no intelligence to commit, and you didn't try to escape?'

Her responding face, in so far as it did respond, seemed surprised. She could have been conjecturing about my purpose in saying these things. But it was obvious - I could recognise no dissembling in her here - that she had never claimed nor admitted that her murders involved intelligence. She said nothing, and I said nothing watching her hands.

She had a way of holding her hands. She was holding them now as if she contemplated the best method of holding them. Or rather, it was a way of not holding them, but of resting them, almost touching, on her knee. So they did not clasp pleadingly, anxiously, hostilely, or forlornly. They relaxed, but not frivolously. They expressed as much idleness and, therefore, innocence, as was possible, and, therefore, never enough. She knew I was watching her hands, but she did not change their position, just watched me for what I might want to pronounce.

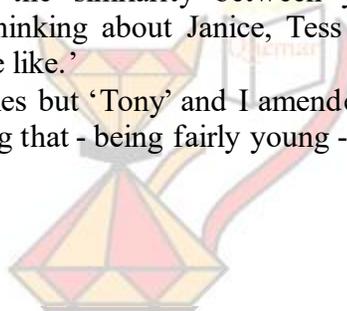
I said: 'I have a way of clasping my hands, myself. I've noticed my daughter do it, too. I cross my legs and fold my fingers tight over the upper knee. I understand from Elinor that this is a "feminine genital-protection posture", but I've become reassured by the statue of the Satyr who poses that way, in the Botanical Gardens. Granted that his motives, like a woman's, may be connected with discretion. He seems very gleeful, though. Have you been to the Botanical Gardens?'

'No.'

In this second interview, it was still her ankles she crossed, not her knees.

I said, 'Dr Roche has noticed the similarity between your mother's name and yours. I was thinking about Janice, Tess and Tony and wondering what they were like.'

She reacted slightly to all the names but 'Tony' and I amended it by the one word 'Anthony', guessing that - being fairly young - the



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

boy must have been called by his full name.

She confirmed this by: 'The baby was Anthony, yes - we had an Uncle Tony, who stayed with us sometimes. He was Dad's brother.' That is, he was William's brother.

Listening to my words, she had seemed to be having more problems thinking about Tess than about Janice. But, as she remembered any of her victims, the evasive, changing expressions in her eyes almost proved that she remembered them as people different to herself, not just as death-objects. She could still respond with a differing look for each, as she had for the wardress and then for myself. Yet the psychiatrist and everyone else who had observed her closely were convinced that she didn't fantasise about her victims, probably didn't think of them at all, when alone.

I pretended to make notes and said, 'Help me by saying something about Tess.'

'Tess was the prettiest, and had the prettiest name.'

'There's a Victorian novel by Thomas Hardy called *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Have you read it?'

'No.'

'I'd like you to. Would you like me to tell you some of the plot, or do you mind hearing the endings of stories before you read them? My daughter hates it.'

'No. I'm less frightened if I hear the ending first.'

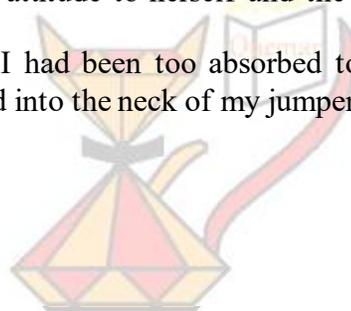
I told her about Tess loving Angel Clare, and killing the seducer, Alec d'Urberville, because of Angel's return, then of her running away with Angel to Stonehenge and being arrested there, and hanged in prison. And, of course, I added the famous quotation about the President of the Immortals having finished his sport with Tess. I concluded: 'It's beautifully written, but Hardy didn't invent credible plots.'

She said, 'Neither does the President of the Immortals. I'd like to read it.'

'I'd like to discuss it with you.'

True. And even beyond the likelihood that her attitude to the fictional Tess might illuminate her attitude to herself and the real Tess.

During this last part of our talk, I had been too absorbed to be self-conscious, and had put my hand into the neck of my jumper, to



PLAY WITH KNIVES

scratch my shoulder, enjoying the tired, curved warmth of my shoulder muscle, before I knew what I was doing. Even had I been drunk, it would have been an unusually forgetful thing for me to do I could see it produce a minute relaxation in Clare, though.

She had watched it with her chin on her hand, or rather with half her face hidden protectively in her palm. 'Protectively', yes, but with that head-on-hand posture which also communicates a powerful, patient lack of involvement in the scene that the head occupies. A lack of involvement, but also a concentration which is committing the scene to memory. She wasn't here now but she would be at some time in the future. I have noticed often that the things that affect my own consciousness immediately are not my strongest actual perceptions of the event.

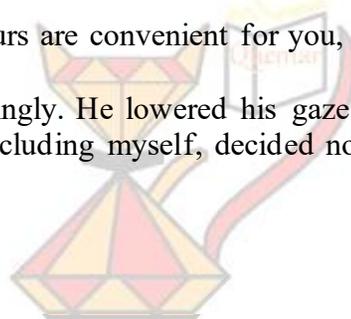
After the interview, in the corridor, I recalled her reply, 'Neither does the President of the Immortals'. After all, my murderess was clever.

I dawdled to an afternoon conference that Antonelli had called. As I entered, he was already discussing with the other officers the 'doubling up' problems caused by having some of our records here in the western suburbs office, and some at headquarters in Sydney. Although situated here, I travelled around a bit on field work and went to Sydney quite often. Main records - such as Clare's - were to remain in the city. I had lost most of my inspiration to revise routine clerical procedures about five years ago. The phrase 'doubling up' therefore held no terrors for me and indeed comfortingly reminded me of sex, or drunken vision. Not that the normal masculine terror of sex and chaos wasn't also rampant in me, and not that I wasn't gratified when I could streamline our office work .

Antonelli asked my opinion and I told him that, on this matter, I had none to offer. Photostating records was forbidden and headquarters profoundly mistrusted the security of our storage system.

He insinuated: 'The travelling hours are convenient for you, too, aren't they?'

Elinor glanced at him, disapprovingly. He lowered his gaze but didn't apologise. Everyone else, including myself, decided not to notice.



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

After our initial interaction, the conference that afternoon was long and sterile. Antonelli didn't speak to me, and I didn't speak. I left feeling disproportionately depressed about my clerical capacities. Elinor perceived that I needed reassurance.

'Antonelli was complaining that, as soon as you go on holidays, his 'Notes' in-tray is half empty until you come back.' Although Antonelli no longer supervised any individual charges, he had an overall responsibility for our section. She added, 'He says he only gives a room in his house to one of the charges because of what you'd say if he stopped.'

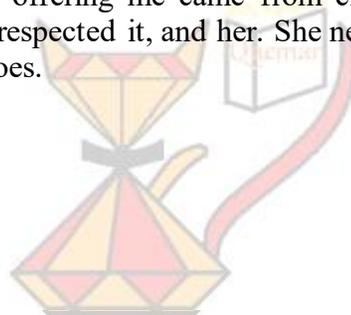
'I'd say he'd regained his sanity, you mean.' But I was flattered.

Elinor and I had never grown used to Antonelli's solemnity about working hours. We both felt that, despite ourselves, much of our life off the job - including our sleep - was spent working. At first, Antonelli's insistence that we put in the required public service hours in one office or other, writing reports, researching, or interviewing, was a joke to us. But Antonelli, despite his own field experience, had been stubborn in his demands.

Elinor began to spend more time in the office, and less time in actual work. I, too, reacted by trying to put in the required working hours, but thinking as little as I could about my charges. I have always regarded this as the Utopian ideal.

To his credit, Antonelli soon realised that a compromise was needed and hardly noticed when the needs of our charges forced us out of his offices and flexi-time, and back into our own and our charges' ill-timed and inflexible lives again. Brian, however, seemed to need to retain the Clock, to retain his ability to reason. And it was true that our treatment of working hours was cavalier enough to cost Antonelli his job, if some Public Service Board nark did a spot-check on his time-sheets. And, perhaps, some of his ambition was indeed a true ambition. Perhaps his taste for practical certainty was a genuine greed, and he wouldn't, as we callously supposed, have been more happy in a cell somewhere, would his good Lord but decree it.

And the support Elinor had been offering me came from clean respect and not dutiful humanity. I respected it, and her. She needs justice here, as much as Antonelli does.



PLAY WITH KNIVES

My father was dead, but not my mother. I visited her that night. She had a one bedroom home-unit at Parramatta. She wasn't senile but nearly, or perhaps not. She made me a cup of tea, and at once showed an interest in Clare, more so than in Sheridan, who favoured the North Shore grandparents.

'Is her hair quite white?'

'Whiter than yours. You know I can't talk about my charges.'

'She isn't yet.'

'She could be. Why are you so curious?'

I suspected that her concern was salacious. But she made sure I was attending to her words before she spoke:

'It's so easy to want to kill children. Or, at least, to sit and stare at them, or at a closed door, until they die. I remember being in a mood like that, with you. You were three months old, and you'd spent two days screaming. For a day and night, I didn't do anything - your father was on shift-work, and his hearing-aid was off. I just sat, and stared, and spoke to you: 'I can't help it. Can't help you. There's nothing I can do.'

I told her, 'I can't remember you ever hurting me or neglecting me.'

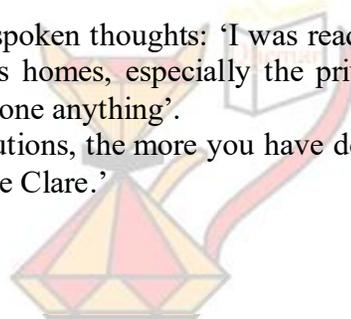
She seemed unconvinced.

Apart from school (where I did reasonably well, and was a scholarship boy, although rarely considered remarkable, except that I had at times a verbal audacity which led to memorable beatings), the worst moments I can remember are when my father thrashed me. This was usually for some incisive piece of insolence, although once it was stubbornness in refusing to sleep, just to see what would happen.

His whippings were inflicted with a thin belt, drawing blood. Not so that I bled, but so that the blood was there, along the tips of the welts, and I could make it come off with my fingers. At home or school, though, I wasn't beaten as badly or frequently as most of the boys I knew.

My mother commented on my unspoken thoughts: 'I was reading that they beat children in children's homes, especially the private ones, for the children who *haven't* done anything'.

I said, 'Yes. It's true that, in institutions, the more you have done, the better you fare physically - hence Clare.'



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

‘I know you don’t want me to pity her, but are you going to lie to me that she fared well?’

‘ Yes. I am going to lie about that.’

I usually visited my mother alone. Heather and my mother never expressed animosity towards each other, but they somehow contrived not to see each other often. Now my mother conventionally asked me how Heather was and I answered: ‘Good. She’s just bought a new rug. It’s very pretty.’

The rug wasn’t just very pretty. It was magnificent, expensive and Indian. I continued: ‘I’m elated that she bought it.’ Once, more than now, it was her nature to balance her austerity by buying some wicked and joyful extravagance. I explained: ‘At Uni, her favourite Oscar Wilde quote was, “Give us the luxuries and we shall do without the necessities.” I like to believe it’s still our ethical manifesto that we both be frivolous now and then.’

My mum said, ‘How much did it cost?’

‘ Enough to be worth celebrating.’

‘You should ask her out, then.’

‘ I will, but I don’t think she’ll come. She would think it too much in one week.’

She poured some more tea, and asked without warning: ‘Does Clare have nightmares?’

I said I didn’t know.

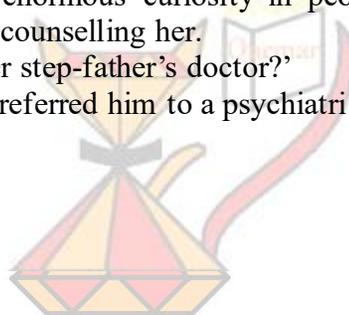
Would I have behaved to Clare differently, had I known that the first gladbagger murders were imminent? No. And to others? Why?

The next morning, I challengingly asked Antonelli’s permission to travel to Sydney for the day to study Clare’s files, and he challengingly granted it.

In the train, my travelling companion turned out to be Dick Allison. Our family doctor, Clem, had encouraged him to study Medicine, and he had started it this year. Dick wanted to talk about Clare, too. She seemed to arouse enormous curiosity in people. Clem must have told him that I was counselling her.

He asked, ‘You know Clem was her step-father’s doctor?’

‘He only saw him twice, and then referred him to a psychiatrist at Parramatta.’



PLAY WITH KNIVES

‘Dave Lucero, yes. Apparently, Clem diagnosed him as agoraphobic and not paranoid. Since Dave is a self-cured agoraphobe, he seemed to be the man for the job.’

I said, ‘The diagnosis still sounds reasonable. Are you perving on Clare?’

‘Aren’t you?’

‘I’m paid to.’

I began to write a report about a charge called Larry Nicholls, and Dick read a book beside me. On the other side of him, a young office girl was knitting. In an eye-corner glimpse, I had assumed his volume to be Francis Bacon’s paintings. Then I looked again, and saw that it was a textbook on forensic science. Murder victims, when and however discovered. All in colour.

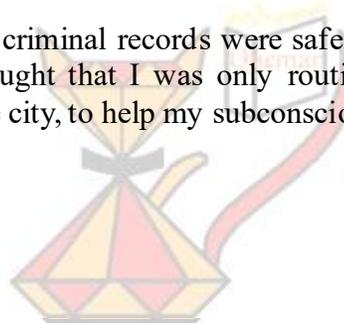
After glancing at his book, the poor girl started to faint and Dick said: ‘Can I help you? I’m a medical student.’

It was the usual toiletless and waterless western suburbs train. The girl was moaning, and really almost out. I had no choice but to offer her a tot of scotch from the flask in my briefcase. To Dick’s glee, this convinced the entire carriage that I was a secret alcoholic. The girl revived, and an old lady lent her a Mills&Boone: ‘To take your mind off it.’ All attempts by Dick to start a conversation with his victim were unsuccessful, so he convivially finished off my flask with me.

On this point: the flask was more of a security blanket than anything else, and I made a rule of not resorting to it habitually, and certainly only rarely before any interviews with charges, or luncheon. I did find it handy to offer a comradely swig to certain people - especially Elinor - at times of stress. And, anyway, I decided that it contributed to my image at work. Once, when I had an atrociously raw throat-virus, Heather suggested that I try the old trick of filling the flask with cold tea, and I refused indignantly. As far as interviews were concerned, I only let a chosen few of my old lags see and share in the whisky. And I was always as sober as a curate for my interviews with Clare.

I left the train at Central.

By this time, Clare’s medical and criminal records were safely in synopsis in our local office. I thought that I was only routinely checking and re-reading them in the city, to help my subconscious



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

work when I was asleep. But, almost at once, the unexpected occurred in the form of a thin folder which had been filed under 'Suicide', and no copy placed in Clare's file. It was allocated to William Forster - Clare's stepfather.

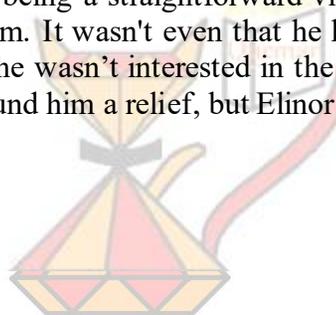
William's file held nothing new about the nature, or motive, of his life or life's end, except a photostat of his suicide note. I had not read this before, since it was unpublished, and seemed unprocurable. I'd been told that it was uselessly typical. I copied it at once.

'The walls and roof are growing closer as I call them and I can't stop calling them, because I feel my head turning into clouds, and leaving me forever if I go out into the sky. This is because I couldn't fix them in place and know about Clare. If I had known about Clare my children wouldn't die. I wouldn't listen to my own thoughts that Clare was evil, even though I could hear her heart beat and her breathing following me, even when she was at school or asleep. I'm sorry. I know it is my fault.'

I've never yet known a healthy man say 'Its my fault', when it's not, but my experience of the dying is not so extensive. I knew I would have to investigate William again, and that this must be through Dr. Lucero. No direct inquiry would penetrate into the ambiance that such a note suggested, but a social conversation might help. Perhaps Clem could arrange a dinner party? He loved uncomfortable dinner parties. I would phone him - or Heather would - that night.

In the meantime, my subconscious mind had enough to work on, and I went for a walk in the Gardens, to relieve the conscious one. I passed the Satyr, whose fine, bare leer and whose fine, bare hooves and cheekbones glinted, and I walked up to where I had sown the marijuana seeds. These had been given me by Larry Nicholls, one of my charges, and were verdantly profuse, but, as yet, unlabelled.

Larry, unlike many of our charges, was a professional crim. Small and wiry, with a greenish tinge about him. I think Elinor's antipathy to him was caused by his being a straightforward villain, and only a victim when it suited him. It wasn't even that he knew all lines before she did. It was that he wasn't interested in the lines at all. For this reason, I'd always found him a relief, but Elinor had



PLAY WITH KNIVES

grown bored with him early. Whilst he remained one of my charges she had made Antonelli transfer him from her files to Brian's.

Every now and again, Brian and I would compare files on him and decide that, yes, indeed he was still catching his business extensively from the back of trucks, and one of us would probably mention it over a schooner, occasionally with Larry present, to Sergeant Harry Terrence at the Roundabout.

Harry would say, yes, but the thing is *proof*. Can you give me some?'

Or one of us would say to Harry, 'Yes, but the thing is *proof*. Can you give us some?'

Or Larry, if he was present, might say, 'Yes, but the thing is *proof*. Have you got some?'

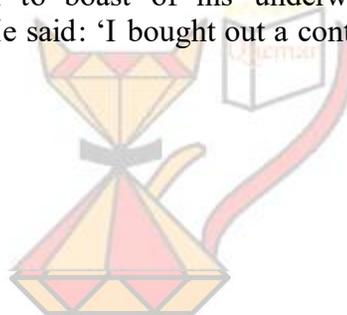
And there the matter would rest.

It was just such conversational tranquility that was interrupted by Jonathan Manger at the Roundabout, that night. Larry had made the last remark and savoured a sip of light ale, and Brian and Harry were designing a mansion with peanuts and potato chips. Jonathan arrived. He lounged next to our table, which was next to the bar. He lounged better standing than we, even Larry, did sitting down, although we began to try harder.

Manger's lucifer smile had, as usual, the radiance of a chorister who has suppressed an erection. I had to fight to remember Sam's face. Sam was the Maltese boy who was due to be released into the care of Elinor and myself. He was a pet of Elinor's already and I hoped she wouldn't arrive at the pub too soon. Sam was nineteen and gentle-hearted. He had worked for an insurance company and loved and kept Jonathan Manger in food and drugs, and whatever else Manger craved. Jonathan had, therefore, arranged a successful business in which cars were stolen, and Sam paid out the firm's money, even when the firm hadn't covered the vehicles. Both were arrested. On Jonathan's testimony, Sam - impotent with betrayal - let himself be sentenced for devising, instead of abetting, the offence. Jonathan exited on bond.

In the pub now, Manger began to boast of his underworld influence when he first met Sam. He said: 'I bought out a contract on myself.'

And I said, 'With Sam's money.'



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

Jonathan caught Harry's peaceable gaze and insisted, 'Sammy was useless. He slept around. He cracked it anywhere. And he was going to kill me.'

I scoffed into my grog, but Larry didn't, and the Sergeant listened, professionally quiet. Manger heard Elinor laugh outside, span on his shoetoe like a waltzer, and left before she entered.

I asked Larry, 'What's the matter with you?'

'Take it easy. He's on the way up,' he said seriously. 'It's just part of this whole decadent society.'

I said to Harry, 'Is he?'

'So I'm told. So I'm told.' So I was told, too.

Eleanor arrived with Patrick Roche and Antonelli. They had expected to see me, and were discussing Clare. Patrick was remarking on his sense - quite natural, not uncanny - of her presence: he was in some way aware of her breathing and heartbeat if she approached.

I remembered William Forster - Clare's stepfather - and his note after he became paranoid. I wondered if *I'd* ever be infected with the same feeling from her. I suspected that there was a perpetual panic in her: something to which she, herself, had grown too accustomed for her to notice.

Antonelli asked me, 'How are the conversations with Clare going?'

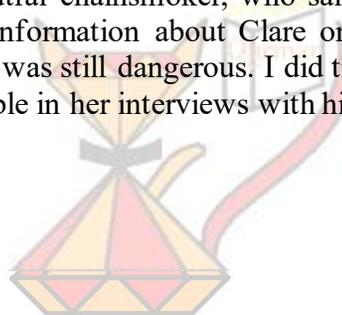
And I asked, 'Don't you mean conversions, Blessed Virgin?'

'No. What on earth would you believe in, to convert anyone to?'

'But that wasn't the intention, was it? There is indeed some plan involved.' I allowed myself to relax into paranoia. 'But, since it involves undermining both Clare and myself, by creating my allegiance to her, which I will then need to destroy, and destroy her it is probably not a thing of which you, Antonelli, can ever allow yourself to be fully aware?'

'I'm as aware as you are, George.' But then he bought the beers twice, breaking the usual code of shouting drinks, and spoiling his credibility for a while.

Dr. Patrick Roche was a thin, neutral chainsmoker, who said he didn't feel he could gain enough information about Clare or her circumstances to know whether she was still dangerous. I did try to find out if there was anything unstable in her interviews with him.



PLAY WITH KNIVES

Apart from some normal evasion, there didn't seem to be.

I asked him, 'Does she speak of me?'

'Occasionally. Nothing indicative.'

'Indicative of what?'

'Whether she has any fantasies about you, rejection of you, or whatever.'

'So she could regard our relationship as entirely professional?'

'She really could. Would that surprise you?'

'I've never known two people to share the same perspective.'

'But, as an idealist, you'll admit she might not fantasise about you.' Pat was prepared to admit that I was an idealist. He didn't respect them.

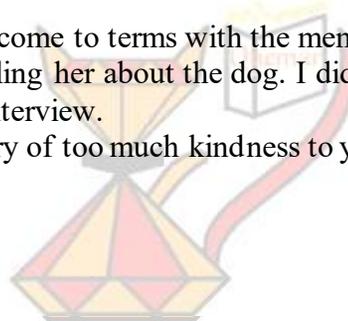
There was then some sexual innuendo about Clare, and I was a target. I had expected it, but why? Are sex, imprisonment and jealousy so primitively inextricable?

Third interview with Clare: She had just had shock-conditioning. When she walked in, I was reminded of a lost time and another sufferer. It took me a little while to remember it: one family dog to which I had taken an irrational dislike, when I was about eight. I would grip and shake its muzzle, until the animal growled and cringed when it saw me. It developed cancer. I forgot my repugnance while it was dying, and tried to take care of it. The odd fact was that, as soon as I was kind to it, the dog seemed to forget all my cruelty. It loved me more than anyone else. It was even quiet and trusting with me, as the vet destroyed it.

Before I knew it was so sick, however, I'd hated it being in my room. And once, after wandering the house irrationally with pain, the animal had settled itself exhausted at the foot of my bed. I ordered it out. I remembered the effort - slow and awkward, but practical, accepting - with which it had dragged itself away. The effort was quite beyond any mood, pathetic or otherwise in which dogs are usually adept. The word 'resignation' was too strong for its unbearable obedience.

Clare sat down. I felt I could only come to terms with the memory that her entrance had evoked by telling her about the dog. I did so, but related it to my attitude to our interview.

I said, 'Perhaps that's why I'm wary of too much kindness to you



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

now: wary of the psychological trick of sudden tenderness. It's too facile to be used on a person (I almost said 'human being', but that's rhetorical). Also, despite any of my actions and responses, I think the pivot of my feelings towards you is basically neutral, as unbiased as yours is to me.'

She said, 'Yes'. But she wasn't hoodwinked about the dog's importance, even beyond my parable. She added, 'But, practically, the dog was right. The goodness in your behaviour was consistent towards it afterwards, as consistent as your malice had been. You're not blaming it for stupidity, just for having no sense of justice - for not even having the power or the need to forgive you.'

I related the discussion firmly back to her: 'Isn't it cruel and useless for you to have *appointments* for the conditioning sessions? Especially since they're due to end so soon, anyway? Doesn't it build up your fear in advance?'

'No. I 'd be more frightened if I wasn't prepared for them.'

At the beginning of the interview, she had been obviously frightened, so soon after her conditioning session. But as she began to recover, she stopped showing her face, for fear of it provoking other people (don't be misled by any prior conversations: I'd say I still represented all other people, and was not a person, to her).

There was much less danger, socially, in her displaying 'pleasant' emotions, even though one might have expected people to be more resentful of them. Maybe people were less resentful, because the callousness involved in her smiling was more reassuring than her pain. Pain might suggest her frailty and therefore not only an empathy with her victims, but also that she had a right to guilt about their suffering. And also a right to genuine responsibility for the things she had done, and a genuine escape from them someday.

The dog had put me at a disadvantage and I needed to diffuse my own compassion.

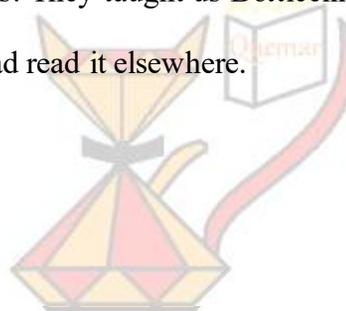
I asked, 'Have they told you that I'm a madman?'

'Yes. Elinor said Savonarola.'

'Did she tell you what that meant?'

'She didn't need to. I do art classes. They taught us Botticelli and his era.'

'In paperback, no doubt.' As if I had read it elsewhere.



PLAY WITH KNIVES

‘How else? They say revolutions aren’t palace revolutions now, they’re paperback revolutions.’

I asked, ‘Do they or is that one of your own axioms?’

‘I thought it might be, but it sounds too orthodox to be original, doesn’t it?’

‘So you’re a revolutionary, are you?’ The Board’s key question this, and so terribly irrelevant.

‘No, I’m nothing. Savonarola was the revolutionary.’

‘Did Elinor make that demarcation?’

‘Yes, but she wouldn’t pursue it, would she? Really *she* likes be the tame rebel in the office?’

Did she? Did I? Because of her isolation, there were often to be these occasions when our conversation had a weird theatrical tinge.

Clare continued: ‘No, I’ve no ideas. That’s true. But Elinor is right. Style is good. She says you’ve got a stylish invisible swagger I might as well copy it as not.’

‘Just so it’s always invisible?’

‘No. Elinor has noticed it. She says your dominant genes are from the Hanging Judge.’

‘I don’t know what genes are dominant in this department. But Elinor really regards me as obstructively orthodox. Do you always call her “Elinor”?’

‘She said that it was best. What will I call you?’

‘You can call me “George”. It’s my name, and it’s just as meaningless as anything else. I take it that she’s psyched you up a bit more for me?’

‘“The Ogre of the Office”. Yes. She likes you.’

‘She’d have to, wouldn’t she? It makes it more effective if you say you like someone personally before you attack them professionally. Didn’t he cry?’

‘Cry?’

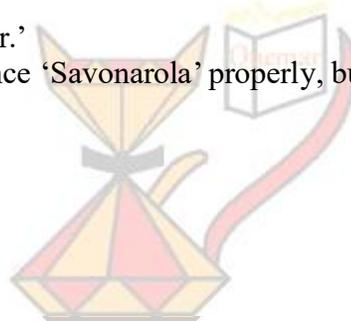
‘Anthony, while you killed him?’

‘No. Not once.’

‘That’s not a question of it being better for you, it’s a question of it having been easier.’

‘It was better, Savonarola, and easier.’

She’d had the sense not to pronounce ‘Savonarola’ properly, but I



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

glared at her, anyway: 'It's not only how you did it. It's the time you took.'

'It didn't hurt. He was already dead. I was only convincing myself.'

'Of his death.'

'Of my murder of him.'

She might at that moment of private arrogance have been saying 'my work of art'. At last I was shocked, because I knew fully what she was feeling. I didn't think she'd pick up the reference, but I said, 'We authors, ma'am,' thinking of Disraeli flattering Queen Victoria.

She did understand it - what sort of IQ tests could they have done - and that I was flattering her: 'But what use is there in flattering me? I've looked in your eyes and seen myself hanging.'

'Not literally. Not yet. Are you grateful for that? Or do you agree with the Greeks? The best is not to have been born?'

She said: 'George Jeffreys, 1648-89. First Baron. Held the Bloody Assize after Monmouth's abortive rebellion. Died in the Tower after being sent there in 1688.'

'In the Tower. Not of it. He was old. Forty-one was old then. Have you been reading Hardy?'

'Yes.' Our morning was over.

I said, 'My descent from His Honour is not direct enough to have any practical significance. I could never even make out from my mother whether "George" was deliberate or not.'

'Can we talk about them next time?'

'The Judge and Hardy? Yes.'

The pizza shop experience started when I rang home from the station - it was Thursday night - to find out what Heather wanted from the shops.

Sheridan answered: 'Mum can't come to the phone. She's crying too much.' She sounded frightened. Neither of us had seen her mother cry much.

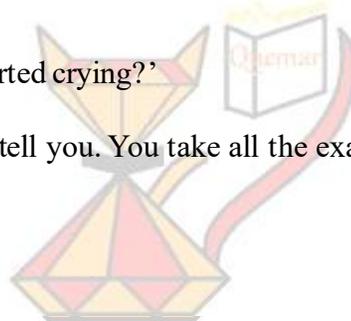
I said, 'Has anything happened?'

'No.'

'What was she doing when she started crying?'

'Marking essays.'

'Okay. Now you go and do what I tell you. You take all the exam



PLAY WITH KNIVES

papers and the pens and the pencils and the rulers and lock them in her desk, and hide the key. Then ask what sort of sparkling grog she wants and what topping she wants on the pizzas that I'm going to bring home.'

Sheridan accomplished all this, effortlessly, while her mother wept on, pausing only to sob out, 'Ground beef and onion'.

I found a shop which I knew sold good thick mushy Italian pizzas with two inches of tomato and mozzarella slowly sinking through them. I waited for my pizza outside the shop, where a group of drunken kids tried to bargain with me for pizzas and money. They were all barefoot or in thongs, and all wore stained jeans and incongruously white T-shirts. They smelled of grog, vomit, sweat and sex (not necessarily fucking) and all had shoulder-length blond hair. This hair was surprisingly tatless, even combed and parted. They were all skilled in controlling the unsteadiness of their feet on the ground, and would sometimes glide their arms out, wildly, as if the pavement was a skateboard. I don't think they just wanted the money for drink. They were hungry because they were drunk.

They were of the under-developed variety of Anglo-Saxon child (most of the neighbourhood children took on a protective Anglo-Saxon build and colouring, regardless of the nationality and complexion of their parents), but didn't seem malnourished. The eldest would have been twelve, and the youngest would have been seven. I think there were more girls than boys. One of the older girls had an aggressive and accusing, but attractively deep and teasing voice. She asked me for a pizza. I told her I didn't have enough money on me - the truth.

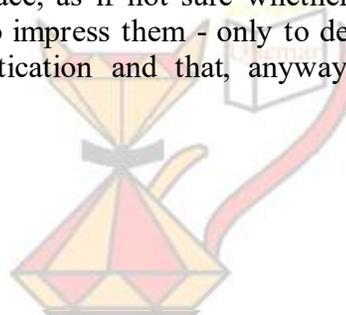
'Give us one of yours, then. You ordered two.'

'Two small ones. Get your parents to buy them. What have you been drinking?'

'Only beer. Do you want a trade?'

'I can buy my own beer.' I was pretending not to understand that the satirical item of barter was one of the little girls, about nine. She was cleaner and plumper than the rest and had an anxious, wistful look on her lively round face, as if not sure whether her friends were joking, but wanting to impress them - only to decide she couldn't achieve such sophistication and that, anyway, all prospects were unlikely with me.

I went inside the shop again.



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

The shopkeeper was cooking and cleaning, obviously, and I asked him, 'Are they always here now?'

'Not always. But they're hard to get rid of. I don't like calling the cops.'

'Do they get any takers?'

'Sometimes they get pizzas. I don't know. Sometimes some drunk tells me he's going to see one of them gets home safe. Saturday night is the worst. And maybe tonight later.'

I told him that I was going down to the drive-in bottle-shop, and would collect the pizzas on my return.

He said, 'If you walk, they'll follow you.'

Some of them did, including the nine-year-old. She confirmed her age, when I asked her.

They all said, 'Buy us some soft drink' in a mocking, discordant chorus. The pub accepted credit cards. The kids took some bottles of Coke, packets of chips and chocolates that I gave them. Then they scuttled back to the shadow of the shop. It was almost like a starving cat bolting back under something, with any food you give it.

I sighed to the publican, 'They're pissed as farts, the lot of them.'

'They didn't buy it here.'

I bought a magnum of spumante and replenished my Chivas supply (Clem was calling in with Daphne tomorrow night) and returned for my pizzas.

The nine-year-old was on her back on the pavement, rolling and giggling in an intentional parody of sex. I had to step over her. Even before this, I had often wondered how one of my charges, however drunk at the time, could have taken on the physical conundrum of penetrating a nine-year-old virgin.

The older girl said, 'You don't want her.'

I shook my head: 'No, but she's very pretty,' and took the pizzas from the shopkeeper. He shrugged with his hands and his eyes. I carried my parcels of food and grog to the car. Surprisingly, the car was undamaged, and the children didn't follow me towards it.



PLAY WITH KNIVES

When I arrived home, Heather had become mellowly philosophical, after her tears. She explained to me why the essays weren't that bad, and neither were the kids who wrote them. She reassured me that my tempters at the shop had been exceptional - or that their behaviour tonight had been. Sheridan reinforced her mother's opinions. After a diplomatic interval, Sheridan retrieved the desk-key from the nasturtium patch. I looked at the essays (on the Australian Constitution) and agreed that they were not *that* bad. As usual, Heather was just trying to mark too many too quickly. Her written comments were as long as the essays sometimes.

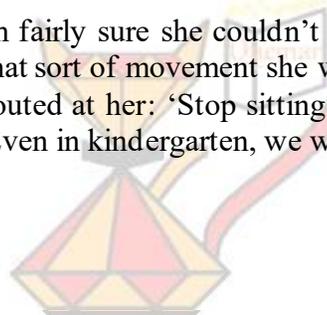
But I remained unsure about the pizza children. I suspected that there was something about those particular kids that existed outside Heather's experience or, despite her sympathy and intelligence, outside her ability to experience. It was as if returning to them with more food might do them good. Although, as Sheridan pointed out, 'They can all go back home and get more food from their parents. They just can't all go home together, smashed.' I understood, too, that theirs was a communal not an individual appetite. And, anyway, my distaste was too fierce for me to return there. So it all stayed on in my mind, and in my next talk to Clare.

Clare held her usual stilly posture when I told her of the pizza children, but she remarked, 'They were probably doing less harm out on the street than they might have done at home,' and added, 'Were any of them pretty?'

She didn't actually accentuate it as if asking if I'd fancied one of them. But it was the first time she'd asked me a simply sexual question. I thought about that, but said: 'Yes. I can understand people fancying one or two of the girls, if everyone was drunk enough.' Then I tried to increase the outrageousness: 'VD would be a problem, though. Perhaps someone should suggest we put penicillin in the pizzas, like vitamin B in beer?'

'Perhaps.'

She gave a small smile, which I'm fairly sure she couldn't resist. Nothing else moved. I wondered what sort of movement she would make if she didn't sit so still. I shouted at her: 'Stop sitting still!' She continued to sit still but said, 'Even in kindergarten, we were



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

taught not to fidget. I'm not displaying anything pathological.'

'You're not displaying anything. And I've got an empty notepad. Do something.'

She did what I would have. She stood up and walked to the window. She pressed her forehead on the pane. I thought of Heather and wondered if, in all the time since the murders, Clare had had any opportunity to emotionally, bitterly cry. I'd never heard of her doing so, and, in fact, it was hard to imagine this opportunity not provoking an intolerable resentment against her. All tears have an element - necessary to their catharsis - of hypocrisy and drama, and what right, set against the rights of her victims, had she to such a release?

I said, 'The window will open.'

She opened it. It was heavy and she had to use both hands. She looked at the wet sky and wet buildings. I think she had meant to close it at once, as I would have, but she lingered, and breathed a bit: 'Have you noticed that I'm breathing?'

I remembered: *I've looked in your eyes and seen myself hanging.*

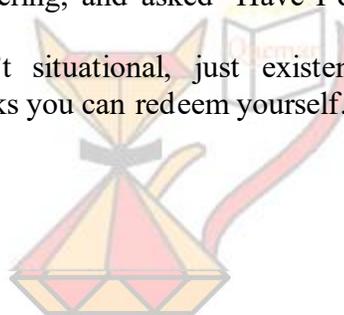
'Yes, I've noted that you're breathing.' For some reason I had done so, on my notepad.

She asked, 'Do you think I should be breathing?'

The honest answer was, 'I don't know' but I sensed it to be wrong to say that. I lied tritely for the sake of truth, and weightlessly used the last syllable: 'No'. An average, imprisoned girl might have bolted out and strangled herself on her stockings, at that reply. But an average imprisoned girl wasn't staring out my window. Her head jerked. With her body in a palsied, but controlled, contortion, she managed to shut the window. When she sat down again, she had suppressed a weeping fit, and out of it came an average, well-mannered tone: 'Thank you.'

I've seen such potentially convulsive tears in a woman make a man - particularly a man in authority, such as Antonelli - self-conscious and helpless. But why should they? The woman isn't watching you, and there is no third person. And Clare's tears *were* only potential. She ruthlessly evaporated them into herself, and with them any physical shuddering, and asked 'Have I done enough?'

I pretended her question wasn't situational, just existential: 'Antonelli doesn't think so. He thinks you can redeem yourself.'



PLAY WITH KNIVES

‘By doing what?’ The query showed anger.

‘Well, by entering into a state of repentant grace.’ I felt I should do that man justice again.

She asked, ‘Is that all he trusts me to do?’

‘It’s all I’d trust you to do. Perhaps he thinks of Good Works, as well.’

She said, ‘I don’t.’

And I said, ‘Glad to hear it.’

She said, ‘But you do believe in Good Works, don’t you?’

‘Oh yes; from the right people in some pre-judged circumstances. Antonelli has more faith than I do in accidents.’

She said, ‘When Elinor knocked the coffee over, she said that Freud said there were no such things as accidents.’

‘He never met Elinor. What did she knock the coffee over?’

‘My lap. It was scalding.’

The back of my scalp prickled. ‘And no doubt she apologised for her bit of erudition. And asked you to pour the next coffee?’

‘No doubt.’

The two syllables seemed to have no meaning in her. She was weary. Just in case the incredible suicidal stockings were somehow possible, I said soothingly, ‘Clare’, when she was at the door. And when she looked back, like Orpheus, I said, ‘I need to see you on Friday. We forgot about Hardy and the Judge.’

‘They’re no concern of mine.’

‘Aren’t I a concern of yours?’

‘Don’t be patronising.’

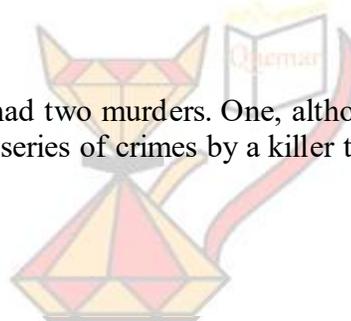
‘I can afford to be. You can’t.’

I’d wanted liveliness like this from her, but it still exasperated me. I added: ‘I don’t know whose conscience I’d least like to have, yours or Antonelli’s.’

She gave me an indulgent smile: ‘Mine. You’d understand it better.’

We thanked each other ceremoniously for the conversation. After she’d left, I felt certain of her safety, even if it was only from herself for the next three days.

During those next three days, we had two murders. One, although we didn’t know it, was the first in a series of crimes by a killer the



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

press called 'the gladbagger'. A pretty Eurasian girl with the improbable name of Concepcion da Costella was bludgeoned to death, untidily dismembered and neatly stacked in two, over-lapping green garbage bags in a local creek.

The other victim was Antonelli's ex-charge, who was stabbed by his own wife and elder daughter. He was found half-alive under a river bridge. He had attempted to rape his younger daughter, too. He was admitted to Casualty at two p.m. and did not die until nine a.m.

During this time, Elinor and I were both in the office with Antonelli. Antonelli must have been quite deeply in shock. Almost all night, he acted out his emotions, without yielding to them. Unlike myself, Antonelli didn't drink too much, or pretend to, but when he smoked - once a month, at most - he smoked packet after packet, and savoured the smoke greedily. He smoked as a hunted animal goes lax and pumps in air when it knows it has either shaken off pursuit, or been caught inescapably. Watching him smoke for hours that night made me quote from Thompson's *The Hound of Heaven*: 'I fled Him down the nights and down the days' almost to myself, to taunt him. I meant my murmur to sound cruel and affectionate and, yes, I'd say it did.

He sat up and asked 'Do you want my job?' as if really offering it.

I said: 'No. You have a clumsy way of changing the subject.'

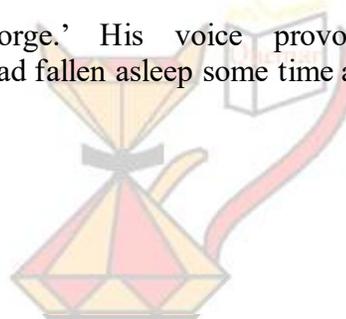
He lent back again, drew in his smoke more firmly, and said drowsily, 'I keep seeing that poor man trying to scramble up the river bank, in his own blood, and those poor women.'

Elinor and I had taken turns at sleep. She awoke as he was speaking and said, 'The man's not dead yet.'

But we were misogynists and pessimists and the 'whore of hope' was not going to tempt us.

Elinor said, without wryness, 'Mary, pity women.' She would always find Antonelli attractive, of course, but only in a sensible, vicarious way. She wouldn't have wanted to love him more than she did, I believe. For who could live with Antonelli? Not even the charges remained with him long.

'Tell me about revenge, George.' His voice provoked, unexpectedly. We both thought he had fallen asleep some time ago.



PLAY WITH KNIVES

Temporising, I parodied the earlier Francis Bacon (not the painter): “‘Revenge is civilised justice’,’ but then I spontaneously quoted Clare’s stepfather’s note, and speculated: ‘I can understand him wanting more and more to destroy her when it was too late. There’s no sense of time in grief or revenge, especially as they intensify. To try afterwards to kill and save is almost the same as prevention.’

He didn’t reply. He was so tired that he began to struggle furiously against sleep by striding around the room, examining ornaments, anything. But the sleep was overcoming him and his eyelids were shutting owlshly for longer and longer, for seconds which must have been unconscious, as his body rested, swaying where it stood. We had a sick-room of sorts: a cubbyhole with a stretcher and a blanket. I told him to go in there and lie down: ‘I’ll man the phones for you.’

‘What about me?’ asked Elinor.

I answered, ‘You person them.’

Antonelli managed a mandatory feeble groan at my sexism and then did as bid. The stretcher creaked when he flung his weight onto it.

I told Elinor: ‘Sheridan *always* lies down like that. She’s broken all the legs on her bed, in her time.’

‘Expensive.’

‘No, we’ve replaced them with old phone books.’

‘I find that old bricks are very useful for holding up boards in bookcases.’

‘Do you paint them white?’

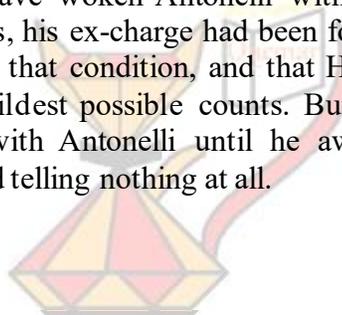
‘Of course not. Too kitsch.’

‘You’re very kitschy, though. It’s a genuine art with you.’

‘Compliment?’

‘Sheer envy.’

I slept again, in drifts. The two phones rang together. Each us answered one. One phone was from the hospital and the other was from Harry Terrence. We could have woken Antonelli with the news that, contrary to earlier reports, his ex-charge had been found comatose and had just died that in that condition, and that Harry had charged the women on the mildest possible counts. But we went into the sick bay and sat with Antonelli until he awoke naturally and intuitively, and needed telling nothing at all.



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

The night before, a casual visit by Clem and Daphne had turned into dinner and then supper and more supper. We had all become enthralled in recounting horrible secrets, and making final arrangements for our shared holiday-weekend at the snow. Except for some sleet at Katoomba, this long weekend would be the first time I had seen snow. I was born and grew up in Parramatta. Clem and Daphne had seen real snow in America. They said the Snowy Mountains here, even when classed as ‘a very good fall’, were nothing like the immensity of American snow, where you could take a wrong step and drown.

I was irritated that night with Daphne and Clem because Sheridan was not go to the snow. Through Heather, the grandparents had learned of our proposed holiday and offered, instead, to take Sheridan to Bali with them. She preferred that. The grandparents, of course, favoured Sheridan and to a lesser extent their daughter, but they were cool towards me.

I felt the impotent’s urge to smash things. It was therefore natural for me to discuss Clare.

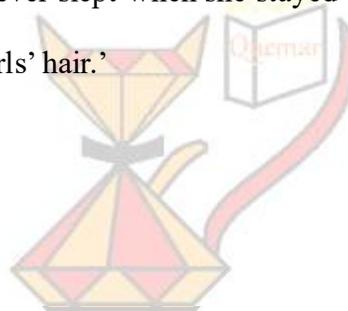
Over dinner, I said blandly, ‘Since my contact with Clare, other people - prompted and unprompted - have remembered bullying at school. And to small brothers and sisters, and that the same things weren’t just practised by them but towards them by their teachers and parents. And then once again *by* them as teachers and parents.’

I had thought I’d have to volunteer some private, youthful cruelty first but Daphne began by quoting Elinor: ‘She said she used to keep garden snails in her doll’s house, and when she was tired of them, she poured perfume on them, and crooned love songs to them as they withered to death.’

I said, ‘Brian is the only person who’s told me he wasn’t cruel as a child. I myself used to drown two ants at a time to see which would survive longest. There were the usual wings pulled off flies and so on.’ The complications of the dog were beyond this conversation.

Heather said, ‘I tormented my younger cousin. I told her ghosts would haunt her at night, and she never slept when she stayed with us.’

Daphne then ventured, ‘I pulled girls’ hair.’



PLAY WITH KNIVES

Daphne was a small, shy person, very beautiful in a classical, inanimate way. Dark red lips, finely formed, perfect bones, and lucent black eyes and hair. It was hard to converse with her, except on her personal pleasures: reading poetry and china-painting. She excelled at china-painting. And so her tiny confession was the most shocking of all.

Clem kept his urbanity for the last, sipping bitter coffee: 'I grew up on a farm, and I'm still excited by the memory of two cocks fighting to the death. Overseas, in the Philippines, I made a point of going to the cockfights, and to the bullfights in Spain. Daphne enjoyed them, too, although she won't admit it.'

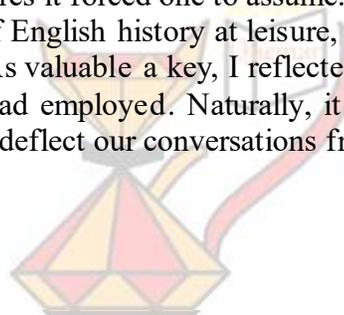
Daphne objected - for her, strongly: 'I liked the bull-fights. I like men in tight pants with swords. And I hoped the bull would win. I couldn't see the enjoyment in cockfighting, though. Just a heap of screeching shit and feathers. Why?'

Long after, we bade goodnight, cheerfully. But after too much revelation from too many complacent sources, I only managed to sleep by methodically listing all the animals and small children I had never in my youth victimised, or had hardly the smallest urge to harm.

Friday's interview with Clare. Because I waited, she spoke first: 'Jeffreys was for James II but, in 1673, the Test Act deprived English Catholics and nonconformists of public office. So we have the paradox of James being supplanted by William of Orange, 1688 and of Jeffreys supporting a Catholic.'

But I told her not: 'He represented the State and the King. His vengeance wasn't religious. But, yes, it had an element of rebellion in it.'

I myself had never been brought up in any religion, although my mother had me baptised C. of E.. Clare had been baptised C. of E., too, and had attended church in prison. But like me, or because of me, her main interest in the Jeffreys subject seemed to be in the strange pro- and anti-agnostic postures it forced one to assume. Did she ponder the later 17th century of English history at leisure, as if in it lay the key to my character? As valuable a key, I reflected, as anyone else - including myself - had employed. Naturally, it was also a godsend to her - in that it did deflect our conversations from



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

herself. Although - since her interpretations of rebellions and establishments were still her own character speaking - she was, as far as I was concerned, betraying herself more and more. I was careful to talk more than she did - another standard interrogation technique - and I enjoyed all the purposeful historical fabrications that our conversations wove.

Clare and I discussed the sexuality of hanging, as a result of discussing my ancestor. I told her about Thomas Hardy - she'd read *Tess* properly - and the girl whom he'd seen executed by hanging, when he was a young man, and who partly suggested Tess to him: 'The excitement of watching a healthy and pretty young girl struggle at the end of a rope.' I also told Clare 'The old euphemisms for fucking were to kill (masculine) and to die (feminine) and those for hanging were to swing and to dance.'

I knew I must not minimise what she'd done, must not pretend that filthily torturing animals and insects, as we all have done, was the same as expertly killing people, as she had done. Because that would be to minimise her own morality and I no longer - however devoutly she wished me to - doubted that. As far as I was concerned, she would never escape her own morality again: *We authors, ma'am*.

Clare had spoken with Elinor but, like us, she seemed to be practising a silent reverence for Antonelli's silence about his dead ex-charge.

So that left Concepcion's death, and I began to compare it with that of the two girls Clare had murdered.

I said, 'This week's girl was battered, but you smothered yours. It seems nicer, different.'

She didn't reply or reject, so I said, 'It's very like mothering, isn't it? Like giving someone the breast? It must have hurt them when they died, though?'

'Didn't seem to. Janice coughed a bit: not as bad as her bronchitis. They never thought I wasn't playing with them.'

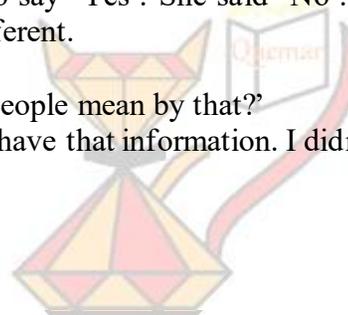
'Were you?'

She knew it was in her interest to say 'Yes'. She said 'No'. But she didn't sound histrionic, or indifferent.

I said, 'Did you love them?'

'I don't know. I don't know what people mean by that?'

She looked up at me, as if I might have that information. I didn't,



PLAY WITH KNIVES

except that, whatever love is, it seems not always to be an emotion that desires its object alive.

I asked her - it wasn't the first time she'd been asked - how she knew to do the knife job so quickly and cleanly.

'I felt where the pulse was and stabbed. A series of thrusts, not cutting or slicing.'

I asked her to describe to me how she went through the cutlery drawer.

'I didn't want the knives with the serrated edges. I chose a pointed one. It was really sharp.'

'How did you know it was sharp enough?'

'You know that. It went into the kitchen table.'

'A wooden table?'

'What else?'

'How could you get it out of the table?'

'It wasn't in deep, just by the tip. It doesn't need to be deep, you know. Before he died it barely went into him at all.'

'That's why you pretended it didn't hurt him?'

'He pretended that it didn't hurt him.'

I'd never heard of her saying that before, and she seemed be remembering. Had he thought she was testing him? Had she been? Something in this seemed true to my own childhood. I insisted pedantically, 'But you meant to kill him?'

'Of course.'

Something that might not have been pedantic in me added, 'And he may have meant to die?'

'Children their age have no conception of death.'

'Ergo they may have meant to die?'

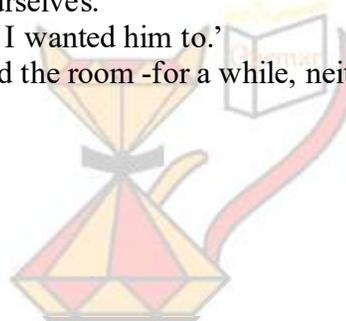
She wouldn't answer that. It was upsetting a self-definition she had formed. I persisted: 'Did he know that nobody wanted him?'

She was usually too afraid of my sarcasm to feed me too many clichés, but she resorted to one: 'We all know that no wants us.'

I felt a quiet, but authentic, wrath: 'Bullshit. If anything, most of us feel embarrassed by how much other people want us, when we know how little we actually want ourselves.'

'He felt that he should die because I wanted him to.'

We looked at each other - or around the room - for a while, neither



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

of us being able to rouse in ourselves a recognisable thought or emotion.

I said, 'You can go' - to maintain some possible advantage - before she asked me if she could go.

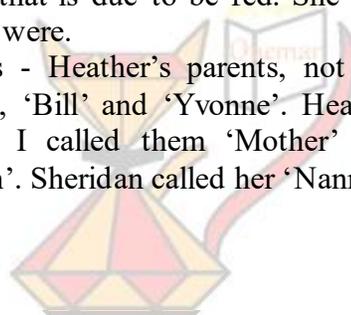
Whilst I had always felt all the appropriate moral reactions to her crime, I had never really been able to imagine the victims - because they were such young victims - as people. Before and in the seconds after she had closed the door, I found that I could even imagine myself having a conversation with Anthony, speaking with him as I had spoken with Clare. The effect was not to make the criminal seem any more reprehensible, but to soften a fear of her that I discovered I had let harden in me. I felt that in future my conversations with her would be more natural and more humane. Uneasily, I also felt, for no reason, that there might abide in her some ability, which I neither want nor need from many people, to be usefully humane to me.

Sheridan at Caves Beach. The hollow rocks and outstretching cliffs. Knowing that a week before a man had drowned under those rocks, probably that flat rock itself, instantly. Only ten minutes after he disappeared, the fishermen had dragged out his body. They had told us that it was flayed of every particle of flesh. And yet Sheridan was sunbaking there, studying and sleeping on what was probably the same, no longer slippery, platform while the airless sea grumbled beneath it. And I was watching over her, reading.

I felt that I should categorise her as an innocent, and oblivious to horror, but I couldn't bring myself to do so. I tried to doze off there myself, but couldn't, although the hot clean crystals in the rocks that propped me seemed to me to be pervading me, and changing me to oblivious mineral, too.

Heather and her parents were in Belmont, shopping. In an hour or two, we met them there. I heard them before I saw them. Heather's mother's voice had a well-spaced but rounded and rising, reminding tone, like that of a cat that is due to be fed. She was already telling Heather how late we were.

Sheridan called her grandparents - Heather's parents, not my mother - by their Christian names, 'Bill' and 'Yvonne'. Heather called them 'Mother' and 'Bill'. I called them 'Mother' and 'Father', and my own mother 'Mum'. Sheridan called her 'Nanna'.



PLAY WITH KNIVES

They'd been buying Sheridan clothes for Bali, and she showed an untypical haste to try them on at the weekender. Heather became uncomfortable, seeking to divert the topic, but this was due to diplomacy, and not to any fear of my criticism. If I had a pious or religious element, Heather and Sheridan constituted it. They were my Sunday family, holy and fragile, but strong enough to bear me, and people like Sam and Clare, as lightly as they would have borne a cross. I didn't use real sarcasm on Heather or Sheridan. In neither case, was the relationship one which involved many disagreements Or in fact much sober conversation. But this didn't make us unhappy. I was, as I have said, very solicitous of Heather's sensitivity and strain in teaching. It wasn't any caustic display that had attracted her to me. We had met at university, doing Psychology and both of us had wanted to do Dip. Eds.. Heather did one. Yes, but I supported her emotionally and financially. That was my first year at work in the Department.

Before she received her Dip. Ed., we rented half a house in the inner city. Then we moved to the Mt Druitt area - early for middle-class people to do so. We married when we moved for the sake, yes, of the location and the low mortgage. And then, almost as if the transaction had sanctioned her, Sheridan was born. We preferred the new area to the one we'd lived in. We didn't find it as difficult to visit some of our old friends as they'd predicted, or as Heather's parents had prophesied.

Standing there near the expansive, expensive sea, I had a sudden, lover's image of the Blue Mountains cussing the western horizon, grape-indigo in the last, mouth-pink sun.

I noticed that Heather was chewing gum. This was something she rarely did with strangers, unless with someone who was smoking. We had given up that habit together, years ago. Yvonne was smoking king-size now, and about to justify the topic of Bali - which, God knew, was already settled in her favour. Heather urgently remembered the distraction she had sought: 'I met Silkie Roberts' mother yesterday and she was saying she's managed to give away all the cross-breed pups, but the two bitches. I said we might take one. George?'



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

‘Yes. Only one, though. Where is Silkie?’ I knew she’d left her job at the high school.

‘She’s gone to live with some shady fellow in the city.’

‘Do we know him?’

‘No. Her mother’s worried, but she can’t interfere. I thought someone at your work might want the other one.’

‘I doubt it, but Elinor might be able to organise something.’
Knowing that Elinor would.

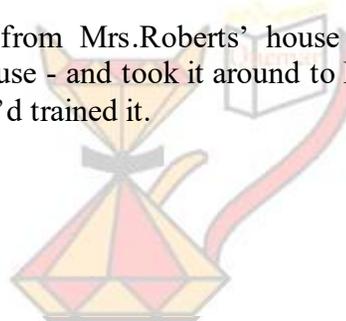
The prospect of the pup idyllically and gratifyingly distracted my daughter from any further thought of clothes or suntans for the rest of the weekend. I bought us both thick milkshakes to celebrate. Sometimes I have a sweet tooth. Sometimes I have to resist it more than I do alcohol.

Sheridan and pop groups. Although still devoted to the garish and ghastly musicians, Kiss, my daughter also retained a passion for the men and women of Abba. One Abba couple had a baby. Because of this, she would studiously peruse textbooks on clinical obstetrics filched from Dirty Dick, and also books on the sociology of divorce filched from Elinor, whose only regret, as she’d explain, at remaining single was that she’d never been able to enjoy a juicy and bloody divorce herself.

Sheridan was in a dissident mood and called the puppy ‘Kiss’. But, with perversely accurate semantics, it remained a gentle, domestic creature - except with paperboys and postmen - and in no way disgusting or extroverted. It disdainfully toilet-trained itself at such an early age that I wondered if it had any bowels or bladder, and it simply refused to be watched by anyone at all whilst eating or drinking.

Elinor, of course, did find a home for Kiss’s sister. It was with Clare’s mother. It transpired that Mrs Forster had kept a succession of pets, almost obsessively, after the death of her children, but she’d had no luck - this was her only analysis of it - with them. Hence the empty birdcage breezing in her house. She craved pets, none the less. Clare was unusually animated about trying to satisfy this, and recounted it to Elinor.

So, I collected the little bitch from Mrs.Roberts’ house - a fascinatingly pastel, immaculate house - and took it around to Mrs. Forster after a week or so, when we’d trained it.



PLAY WITH KNIVES

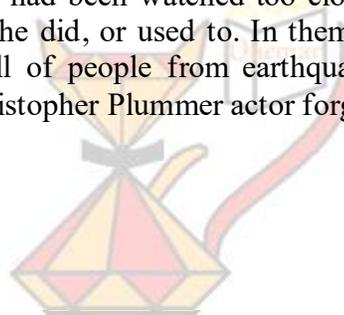
She held it too tightly - there was no question of her letting it go, letting it grow accustomed - all the time we spoke. She assured me that she'd call it 'Hug', when I mentioned ours was called 'Kiss', and was thriving. To all practical purposes, I decided as I left, Elinor must know more about Clare than I did, if Clare had confided so much about her mother to her.

Once, I saw Brian looking perplexedly through the two-way mirror and saw that, inside, Elinor and Clare were in a paroxysm of laughter together. Both women seemed uneasy to have been seen. Elinor avoided Brian and myself for a while afterwards, although her conduct was perfectly logical as part of an interrogation. When she at last stopped in a corridor to converse with me, I said something facetious about 'all girls together' and she said: 'Clare isn't really a girl or boy in that sense'. I suppose she thought that Clare was androgynous.

I joked - so that we could both revert to the oblique professional - 'She's always been unusual among child murderesses in that she had no female accomplice...at least until now.'

I had always known I was much too solemn in my childhood and in the self-creating, or at least self-revising, bouts of adolescence, I had determined to do something about it. But after disastrous experiments at telling jokes and grinning sociably - I have the most menacing grin in the western suburbs - I almost abandoned jokes and chose a quieter, and at first unintentionally more pessimistic, sense of humour. The effect on innocents often reminds me of that old cartoon of the small child gazing up at Matthew Arnold - who is propped wanly against, I think, his mantelpiece and attaining a truly ghastly smile. The child asks, 'Uncle Matthew, why can you never be wholly serious?'

I told Clare a lot of random anecdotes like this. After their first intensity, our interviews must have been like a verbal commonplace book. I had by then determined to let them glide over the top of me, and for a time they did. It was as part of this superficiality that I forced myself to seriously wonder if she had any fantasies at all, or whether she had been watched too closely. Once, when I asked her, she said she did, or used to. In them, she saved whole burning buildings full of people from earthquakes, and then died as some sensitive Christopher Plummer actor forgave



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

her. It sounded like a daydream designed to charm the Authorities, but, after checking, I found that I was, as she'd said, the only Authority to whom she'd told it. Her verb here was 'tell' and not 'confess', as if no guilt were involved. No doubt this was because she did completely accept the view that her crimes had taken away not only her right to protest at pain, but also her right to privacy.

When Dr. Patrick Roche questioned her about her sexual fantasies she couldn't answer him at all, because he was really fishing for a black, violent netherworld, furtive and nonverbal inside her. I don't know if this netherworld existed. I did know, however, that I had asked her an answerable question about her imagination, and that she had, therefore, answered it. Not of course that she had, or could have, told all, or that I would have wanted all to be told to me.

Once, she may have been thinking of her earlier judgement of me, and amending a concept carefully: 'You're unusual for a cynic. You're not sententious very often.'

I said, 'I don't aspire to be a cynic very often.'

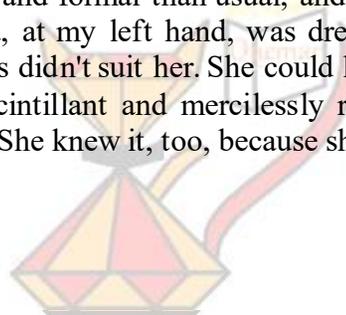
Then I changed the subject, by sticking to the subject. I asked if she'd read Ambrose Bierce's *Devil's Dictionary*, as I suggested.

'You mean the bit about the cynic's sight being weak, and hence the Scythian's custom of plucking out his eyes to improve his vision?'

Being chronically uneasy in the past and present, we both had annoyingly accurate impersonal memories and a taste for quotation. Quotation, or the request for it, is also an agreeably obvious way of achieving a truce, or at least a stasis, in conversation. For all our edginess, indifference or stolid resentment, stasis was our heaven, Clare and I.

I said, 'Yes, I think that's what I wanted you to read.'

Two nights before the snow, Heather, Sheridan and I were invited to an Italian wedding - one of my ex-charges - at which Antonelli was also an honoured guest. Nothing exceptional, except that the banquet was even more sumptuous and formal than usual, and that the haughty, beautiful girl, Isabella, at my left hand, was dressed more simply than was the cake. This didn't suit her. She could have been a Turandot among women, scintillant and mercilessly royal even slight and wistful, as she was. She knew it, too, because she



PLAY WITH KNIVES

at once lamented that, at her own wedding recently, she couldn't wear her wonderful white wedding-gown.

'Why ever not?' asked Heather. But I knew why not. Antonelli had been watching our conversation, with a gentle, defeated expression. I realised that Isabella was the younger daughter of our last *crime passionel*.

'My father died,' said the girl, and Heather asked no further.

There was something else exceptional: I danced with Heather there. Because of my gauchery, this was unusual, although Heather was a tolerant dancer. Antonelli danced with her, too, later on. And Sheridan danced with everyone. Dancing seemed important to everyone that night.

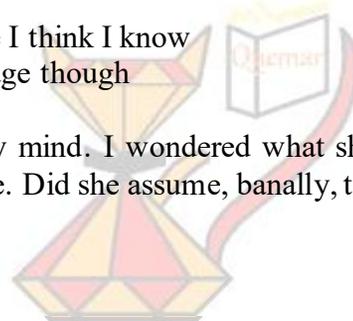
The day before the snow, I had a class with Clare. There should be some demarcation between 'class' and 'interview' here. I'd begun some ingeniously department-arranged hours of coaching her for exams, as well as our more interrogative encounters. I was thinking of snow, anyway, and as she was studying Frost's *Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening*, we'd already planned to consider that poem this time.

And there was another thing. Clare and I were both more sensitive to cold than is usual. During our last interview, after an unproductive - or productive - silence in which neither of us could think of anything to say, I started to discuss the weather, artificially and she smiled slightly with one corner of her mouth, a mannerism she knew I detested. She joined in my conversation, ever courteous but the discussion ended on a note of unmannered agreement when we admitted that we both suffered the cold so much that we feared it. I wear warm clothes when others don't, but she had to appear normal and couldn't dress comfortably. Please note my permutations of the word 'normal'.

Today: Frost's *Woods*. When I thought about the poem, before discussing it with her, even though I hated using it as a test, the lines

Whose woods these are I think I know
His house is in the village though

were catching over and over in my mind. I wondered what she'd make of the ownership of that house. Did she assume, banally, that



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

the line was true, literally (or would she pretend she did?), or would she think the woods were the Devil's, and the house a pub or brothel, or God's, and the house a church? Or just assume that the owner was mystically the poet, who saw himself as a spiritual villager? And what would she make of the deep, ironic drifts of 'He will not see me stopping here' and 'the darkest evening of the year...'?

At first she did say she saw nothing in it, and then she said the house might be a church and that, therefore, as a dwelling place, its owner would be Death. It was a clear assumption, but not part of my own. She seemed to be assuming it intelligently and analytically, without self-reference. I responded 'Yes', with enthusiasm, and her gratification seemed real.

I continued: 'I'd seen Death in the last resort as *being* the woods, but their owner...'

She was groping for a context and arrived at, 'The thing is probably not that an easeful death isn't possible there' - she'd been set Keats' poems for the exam, too - 'but it reminds me of Cathy, you know: "No, not that way", when she sees Heathcliff in the future uncover her body in the graveyard.'

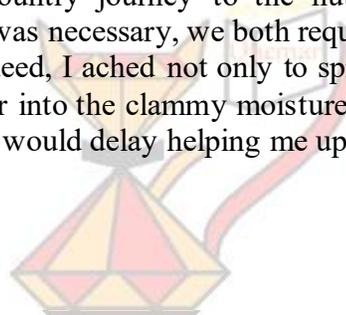
Wuthering Heights wasn't set that year, and I supposed she'd read it early, like *Jane Eyre*. She was still interlocking the strange-edged ideas: 'The only way to be seen by Death is to be in the village through society, or industry or customs, and the only place he can be seen and human is at the house'.

'Whether the ground is hallowed or not?'

'Whether or not.'

She had assembled a philosophy so like my protestant attitudes that I must kindle to it. But she gave some of her expressions such a naive force that I couldn't convict her of any cunning, except that cunning which was her whole, intrinsic, innocent nature.

At the snow, Daphne and I just watched the skiing, except when it was necessary, as on the cross-country journey to the hut, to participate for sociability. When it was necessary, we both required help. Not that I minded falling. Indeed, I ached not only to sprawl there, but to turn and burrow deeper into the clammy moisture and the dungy earth inside it. And Clem would delay helping me up, as



PLAY WITH KNIVES

if he knew and approved of the need. Heather, and Clem, despite his bulk, could ski with great skill and exhilaration. They raced against each other, and Heather often won. Heather was only athletic on holiday, but then she seemed to relish her own dexterity and physicality. Hers was never just exercise out of duty.

We four spent Friday night in the hut in the mountains. There was a rich fire in the hearth. Heather had been teaching her class the Frost poem, too. She began to recite from it lazily, as if reading it on the steam in her brandy balloon:

‘Whose woods these are I think I know
His house is in the village, though,
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow...
My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year...
The woods are lovely, dark and deep
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep
And miles to go before I sleep.’

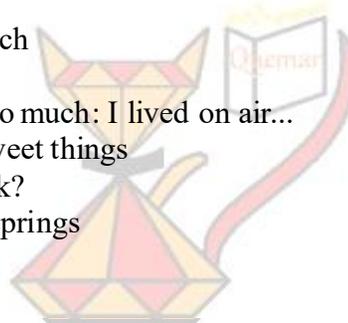
Before Clem could pass judgement, Daphne said irrelevantly and thoughtfully: ‘That was Nehru’s favourite poem.’

I wondered why at that instant Daphne reminded me of Clare. It must have been her ability to excel - and the impotent fear she had of excelling.

‘Of course’, Clem chided, ‘it’s an anthology piece.’

I challenged him to recite Frost’s *To Earthward*, as it wasn’t in anthologies. It seemed to be my direction that weekend, and our wives hadn’t read it. He must have loved the poem, for he began to place its words at once, and spoke them subtly, without dramatisation:

‘Love at the lips was touch
As sweet as I could bear;
And once that seemed too much: I lived on air...
That crossed me from sweet things
The flow of - was it musk?
From hidden grapevine springs



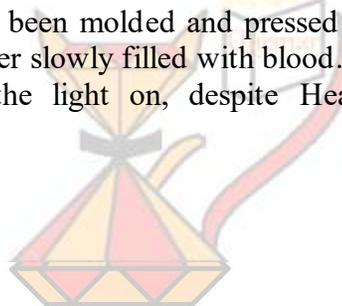
THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

Down hill at dusk?...
I had the swirl and ache
From sprays of honeysuckle,
That when they're gathered shake
Dew on the knuckle...
I craved strong sweets, but those
Seemed strong when I was young;
The petal of the rose
It was that stung...
Now no joy but lacks salt
That is not dashed with pain
And weariness and fault;
I crave the stain...
Of tears, the bitter bark
And burning clove...
When stiff and sore and scarred
I take away my hand
From leaning on it hard
In grass and sand...
The hurt is not enough:
I long for weight and strength
To feel the earth as rough
To all my length.'

It might have been too applicable. The women watched my face before they laughed with us.

I couldn't sleep for the cold in the hut that night, and Heather had found sleep difficult. We slept at the motel the next afternoon. There were electric blankets but I found that I needed to clutch with my hand between Heather's thighs to find warmth. I dreamt morbidly. In the snow, I had thought of Clare's white hair. Now, in my dream, she was lying on the snow, in white bridal lace. I was trying to lift her and Antonelli was telling me not to, that she was part of the snow and couldn't be broken off. But I didn't listen, and ripped one of her arms up from the whiteness. This felt as if I was crumpling some marzipan that had been molded and pressed into white icing. The hollow left under her slowly filled with blood.

When I woke, I had to turn the light on, despite Heather grumbling in her sleep.



PLAY WITH KNIVES

The walls of the motel room were very white. It took a while for me not to see the welling redness my woken mind superimposed on the wall.

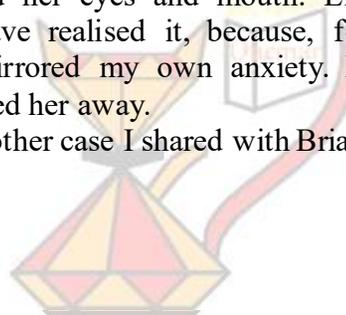
I wondered if Sheridan was all right, but I fought off the urge to find out, or confide the dream to Heather. The sacredness of commonsense and holidays prevailed.

It was at the the snow that Clem and Daphne mentioned that Dr. David Lucero had returned from what I'd previously considered to be an interminable conference in Toronto. They said he would be delighted to attend a dinner party at our house one Saturday afternoon soon. The dinner party was held three weeks after. Due to perverse curiosity, it was not as small as would have suited my investigations. Apart from Dr. and Mrs. Lucero, Elinor and Brian were attending, as well as Antonelli, Clem and Daphne. And, with his usual notorious tact, Dick Allison had invited himself - and a pickled human foot that terrified Sheridan.

Elinor had learned of the guest list and was helping preparations at our house in the afternoon. She did wonders for the indoor plants but skidded on stiletto heels and tripped Heather up in the kitchen. Since she had skidded on my dropped potato-peel, I accepted full responsibility and removed myself and Elinor, as briskly and politely as I could. One of the fanatical traits Heather and I shared was that there was nothing in the world we abhorred more than cooking, unless it was somebody else watching us cook. I had promised to check a Mt Druitt charge, called Ruth, that afternoon. I suggested Elinor might accompany Kiss, Sheridan and myself on our route there.

For a moment, Heather stood beside Elinor in the doorway - 'Give my love to Ruth' - and the difference between them worried me. Heather's hair was still burnished copper and worn in shortish soft curls (Elinor's was fashionably dark with springy curls) but Heather's bright, alive complexion was sensitive to her overwork, and there were night-lines around her eyes and mouth. Elinor looked far younger, and must have realised it, because, for a second, her glance at Heather mirrored my own anxiety. Kiss yapped on the leash, and we followed her away.

Ruth was a Darug woman, and another case I shared with Brian.



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

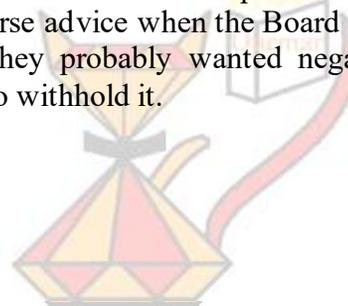
Elinor had wanted her as a charge, but Ruth disliked Elinor - especially Elinor's careful curls. Ruth didn't like me, either, but at least it wasn't looks that was the irritant. I think she was in love with Brian. So did Brian and, when possible, he avoided seeing her I conducted most of the surveillance.

Ruth was a shoplifter with five children. She'd been given a suspended sentence, partly because of the Aboriginal Aid Service, who also asked why there weren't any Aboriginal probation officers in the area. I wondered this, myself, but thought it was probably for the same reason that - despite the phrase in nineteenth-century *Bulletin* poetry - one never really met 'Black police'.

Ruth had a quality that I have observed in female shoplifters before. She was over-dependent on her husband in social situations even friendly ones. This was why her independent friendship with Heather was so unusual, and so good. She would often visit Heather and shop with her, and Heather lunched at Ruth's house whilst Sheridan played with Ruth's children.

We meandered to Ruth's house along crescents and up and down places. All the streets were full of angry dogs and aloof, agile cats. In one crescent, there was a particular white cat that often elongated itself halfway up a gum tree: to dig its claws into the bole and sleep. It had blue eyes and a delicacy that always reminded me of Clare, although her facial features had no feline compression. I directed our paths to that pretty crescent again, because it was pretty, and because I wanted to see if the Clare-cat had relodged itself on the tree-trunk. But the labrador across the road was off the chain and all I could see was a white tail as the cat snoozed on a windowsill at the back of the house, behind a lattice. But the real reason for our meander there was conversation.

The Authorities were soon to decide on Clare's release - which would, as I'd told her, take months to eventuate, even if approved. Clare was seventeen now. Elinor and I were to give our separate cumulative reports and recommendations to Antonelli next week. I knew Elinor was recommending release. Antonelli hoped I would, too, but he would recount any adverse advice when the Board held their conference with him. And they probably wanted negative persuasion too much to allow him to withhold it.



PLAY WITH KNIVES

Elinor asked, 'Do you think she could do it again?'

'As we all could, under the right circumstances.'

'In her case, surely, they're especially unlikely to occur?'

I didn't respond. I strolled on and thought of a huge cast of characters, some well-intentioned, some ill-intentioned, some neutral, who would know just enough about Clare to provoke her in some situation whereby she could easily, and without any new or peculiar manifestation of evil, kill again.

That odd coincident concentration on Frost's poetry that I have recounted had prodded a corner of my brain. It was the atavistic, mnemonic corner concerned with rhymes. I found that grim, original little rhymes - not poetry - would often now wake me in the morning. I would find myself singing them under my breath during the day. I was humming one, inaudibly, now:

I only want the bitter one
bitterer than I.

The desert as a whole
lives simpler than the sky,
dies bitterer than soil
and simpler than I.

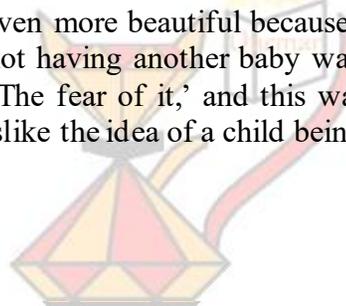
The thing that meets a thing head-on
allows its blood to dry.

At this time of the day, many women were outside, mowing their lawns, washing the car, gardening, and I said to Elinor, 'Some of these ladies have already said they'll kill her.'

'I'm not afraid of that. It's not really a personal revenge. And her mother isn't living in the suburb in which the murders took place. And she won't even be living with her mother. *And* as "Clare Collins"? No, I'm sure she's safe enough. The press won't publish the new name, or tell where her mother is.'

'The new old name? No, I'm sure they won't publish it.' If only because it didn't have the horrific aura of her step-name.

Sheridan had bounded ahead with Kiss, allowing us to talk, but I was still paying more attention to Sheridan than I was to Elinor. It occurred to me that the child was even more beautiful because she was unique. Heather's reason for not having another baby was an explicit one: 'Pain. Physical pain. The fear of it,' and this was to me undeniably reasonable. I also dislike the idea of a child being at



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

all like myself, and, except for a few inescapable resemblances, like big teeth and double joints, Sheridan had so entirely inherited her mother's genes as not to cause me a single moment of distaste when I was with her. She did have one fortunate legacy from me, however: her eyesight. I was reminded of this when Elinor, watching her, too, asked me, 'Will she ever need glasses?'

'No. Her eyes are much stronger than Heather's. I only need specs because of a freak defect in focus. It could have been corrected if my parents had noticed it when I was a child.'

I hoped I hadn't sounded bitter. It was the first time I'd mentioned my parents to Elinor. I talked about Heather at once, to cover: 'You know, Heather's classes are always so delighted when she wears anything new. They were terribly upset when she wore her old glasses and not the contact lenses last week.'

'They really are lovely lenses.'

'Heather has a constant stream of unstamped love-letters in the mailbox from little boys and girls. Kiss doesn't bark at them at all. For some reason, she can differentiate between them and the postman.'

I found that I'd begun to bite the inside of my mouth to stop the internal rhyming jingles. Heather would have noticed my nibbling and scolded. But Elinor was ambling on ahead, her hands swinging in her pockets, to joke with the girl and the dog. In wayward moods, I enjoyed this small taste of flesh and blood in my mouth. I sympathised as well as condemned when I saw the stripped side of Antonelli's fingers.

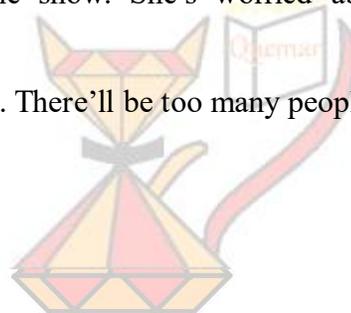
Sheridan and I did call at Ruth's to say hello (professionally, I had to tick Ruth on a progress list) and Ruth was friendly to us. Elinor wisely stayed outside with Kiss, for those few minutes, and didn't remark on the fact that she hadn't been asked in. She had waved to Ruth and Ruth had not waved back.

As we walked away, Elinor went on defining Heather: 'She looks very tired, though.'

I answered as if I were defending myself: 'A lot of that is day to day. She looked marvellous at the snow. She's worried about tonight.'

'Aren't you?'

'No. Not of any drastic revelations. There'll be too many people.'



PLAY WITH KNIVES

They've all read the suicide note. Dr. Lucero made a copy from memory for Clem, and now Dick Allison has snaffled it.'

I said, 'I've never thanked you for telling Clare that her stepfather's death was suicide.'

She shrugged, 'You were right. It was my job, not yours or Pat's. It had to be a woman. And from what you say the mother probably hadn't registered that it was suicide herself. She told Clare about that old cat dying before she told her about her father!' Elinor was following the local custom of referring to stepfathers as 'fathers', even if they were *de facto* and of a few days' duration.

'Clare would have known?'

'I think she did know about the suicide. But I'm certain she hasn't guessed about that note. I hope she never does. You don't think anyone tonight will tell her later?'

'That would require authentic evil, surely? I doubt if anyone tonight will possess that.' And, indeed, that night the evil did not progress beyond normal discursive dinner-party limits, although the topic of Clare once more called forth our wicked childhoods.

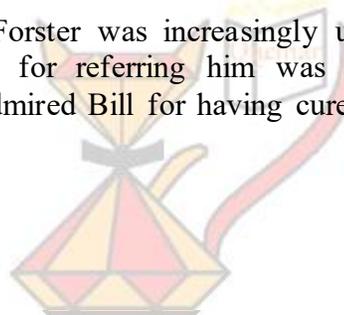
After other infant sins, I spoke of mine. Villain and victim. When I was an adolescent, games were played in the creek which involved the younger ones being held underwater for a long time - you'd often feel yourself losing consciousness before they'd let you surface. It was an ordinary game. I told the dinner-party that I attributed as many as maybe a quarter of the backyard swimming-pool deaths to this game. Probably with the parents unaware, or covering up for it, or not daring to know.

Elinor used her teasing drawl against me: 'It's a miracle any of us survive.'

But I wouldn't bite. 'Some of us don't', I said.

Then I caught the wandering subject: 'I found the note later, by accident. It was a photostat in a supplementary file on William Forster. It was not mentioned in Clare's file - so much for our clerical method! I only opened it casually to see if it were related to the case.' I then asked Clem: 'Why did you refer William Forster to Dr Lucero?'

Clem considered. 'I knew Mr. Forster was increasingly upset about Clare, but my real reason for referring him was mild agoraphobia, which I've always admired Bill for having cured in himself.'



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

Mrs. Lucero asked: 'And why is Clare so articulate?'

Good question, madam. Because she is more human and more inhuman and or dangerous than the average in the species. Because her version of normalcy leaves us shifty-eyed and pondering in our beds at night. Because she isn't clever or scholastic enough not to explain...in spite, or because of, all the teaching... just follow the dots and show Clare.

I answered, 'She's been trained to be. She spent so much of her prison life being made to read and talk and, paramount, to listen. Her written intelligence is well below her verbal one.'

Well, yes, indeed, I said that, no doubt rightly, and Antonelli nodded.

And Brian added, 'After a lot of observation, I decided she is one of those little girls who use a lot of long words and concepts facilely but don't understand their meaning.'

'It's not confined to little girls', said Clem, who disliked Brian.

I didn't dislike Brian. But after I began regular interviews and coaching with Clare, Brian had begun to leave a few schoolgirl-porn magazines around the office, teasingly. Right then, I couldn't think of any relaxing riposte that wouldn't also touch too tenderly and seriously on a taste I guessed Brian himself had for them - the magazines, not the schoolgirls. I jabbed at peaches in red wine with a minute fork and remembered one illustration, which one of his mags had reprinted from a Victorian erotic anthology: a dozen big, smooth bare-bummed smiling 'schoolgirls' bent over a long desk as a fully clad 'schoolmistress' no older than they prepares to punish them with a small rattan cane.

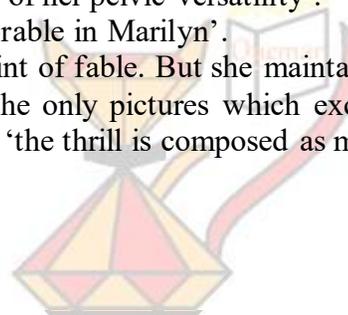
Enough of that. It embarrassed me that I remembered it so clearly. On other sexual matters: I can have a quick, pouncy way of walking - due to high arches - which bounces my weight forward onto the balls of my feet.

Elinor remarked to the company that she had noticed it this afternoon.

'Marilyn Monroe,' as I explained to her again, 'had the same problem, which accounted for some of her pelvic versatility'.

Elinor said, 'I found it more memorable in Marilyn'.

Elinor was heterosexual to the point of fable. But she maintained that, despite her dildo collection, the only pictures which excited her were of naked women, and that 'the thrill is composed as much of genuine desire as of narcissism.'



PLAY WITH KNIVES

Heather agreed that this was probably so, but Daphne said, 'It's not true to my own experience.' Despite her warmth, Daphne created the effect of a duenna on Clem. His bawdiness did not actually cease but became antiseptic when she was present. So he didn't continue her words, but I did: 'The body represents our most private physical reality and as such our imagination is going to wish to have intercourse, not masturbation, with it, and in both genders the real "otherness" has to be feminine because our very first physical otherness is our mother.'

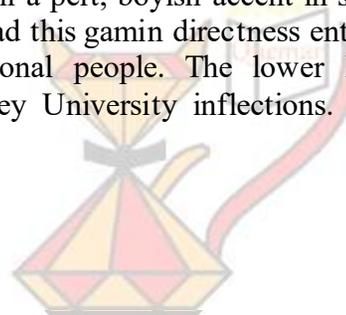
I knew that I had said something drunken or boring, but I did not wish to retract it. I only wished that I had said it better. But the boredom may have been functional, because, unexpectedly, Lucero began to discuss his verdict on William and Clare.

'Apart from a few childhood cruelties, the stepfather's revulsion - which seemed to have only grown, and then slowly, after the deaths - was due to a feeling of nemesis he felt in Clare, coupled with her ambivalent relationship to him - she was so close to her mother - and to her resemblance to her mother. This, at last, seemed to him to be also sinister. It was at first not Clare but the mother, Coral, whom he resented as the cause of the situation which killed his own children. Coral was the focus of many social obligations that he felt increasingly difficult to meet. At the time of the murders, he seems to have been calm and supportive of Clare: although he also co-operated with the policemen. It must have been plain in their interrogation that they regarded Clare as fully culpable and responsible for the crime. Her mother reacted to it more as if it were an Act of God, or a mistake that an explanation might expunge.'

I interpolated: 'Clare's mother has never seemed to me to be waiting for an explanation.'

After that, Dick contributed an outrageous question - predictable, I suppose. 'What is Clare's accent like?'

There followed a chat between all of us about the regional western suburbs accents. The city of Penrith had a characterful and respectable voice, but there was still a pert, boyish accent in some of the women. Mt Druitt perhaps had this gamin directness entirely except for migrants and professional people. The lower Blue Mountains had virtually all Sydney University inflections. And Clare?



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

I decided that, 'Her vocal inflection really belongs nowhere, despite its gentility. But there is a subdued, inner-Sydney, informal quality in it. And a dull precision which suggests something not only mechanical but processed.' My last word sounded so inapplicable that no one queried it. Sometime later, Dr. Lucero said goodnight pleasantly and rounded off his subject: 'William's thoughts were only developing slowly. It's unlikely that he had any tangible form and expression of them, certainly not towards Clare, until just after she committed her murders'.

No one else had again referred to the note. I no longer felt the need that night to do so.

With Antonelli, I had argued against any hope of Clare being more than harmless - against any hope of her being good. I felt that any attempt to 'be good' would entangle her in perilous, provocative coils. On my final report about her release, I brought with me a photograph of Anthony naked after his murder. I put it on Antonelli's desk first. Antonelli picked it up and contrived to remain expressionless, while I mocked him softly by quoting Saint Augustine: '*O felix culpa*'. O fortunate sin.

I will make it clear here that I myself hoped - indeed, prayed - that she would do nothing more. But I felt mistrustful while Antonelli did look for something more from her, if that something involved acknowledgement and attrition. And the Authorities above Antonelli might want to gaoil her again as soon as possible, even if she were released.

He said, 'So this report will be unfavourable.' He was still interpreting my attitude as an ultimatum, not a challenge.

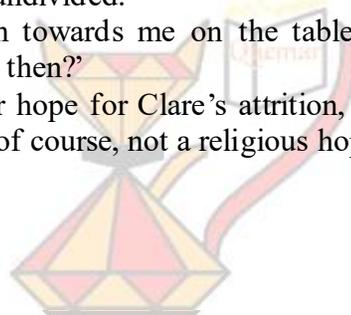
'Not necessarily. Anyway, you can use your seniority to contradict it. Will you?'

'What good will it do?'

'You've forgotten Elinor. Her opinion is one of the reasons that I have written a favourable report. I won't advise against Clare's release. We may as well be seen as undivided.'

He slid the barbarous photograph towards me on the tabletop: 'Why did you torment me with this, then?'

I met him head-on: 'Because your hope for Clare's attrition, and for the attrition of others (which is, of course, not a religious hope;



PLAY WITH KNIVES

you never discuss your religion) only highlight your permeating sense of failure and your own lack of hope. These contribute to make you a good administrator, I'll admit that - they make you tough and practical. And you've had some brilliant successes in field-work, too. But they were marred by your desperate and successful strategies for promotion. I think your promotion was due less to ambition than to your inability to bear the pain of the cases you couldn't help. And - more - the ones you could. I, therefore, respect and resent you. And I fear your grand, defeatist delusions of salvation and their effect on people like Clare.' I had to say this for the sake of sanity - Clare's and mine. Our progress had to be step by step - small, careful, factual.

'And their effect on people like you?'

'Of course.'

He had listened carefully and his answer was careful: 'I respect and resent you, too, George, but I don't fear you. And I'll try not to have any delusions of grandeur about any of your charges.'

'Good.'

I pocketed the photo and he, too, said, 'Good', as I took out a manilla folder and gave him Clare's freedom.

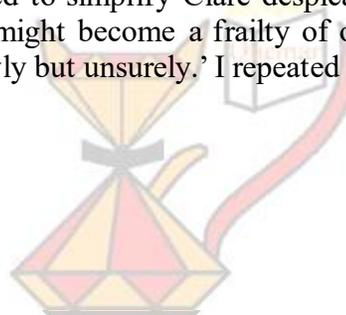
Our interview spread like salts through the building.

Elinor: 'I gather you threw one of your laconic tantrums up there. Do you practise in front of a mirror? It would account for the shaving cuts.'

I thought the last line more clever than she had intended, because of the image of revenge as a mirror. I told her so.

'That was the idea', she said. Perhaps it had been. We had developed some nasty reflexive verbal muscles in each other, over the years. My chest, however, ached from a week of tension before delivering the report to Antonelli, and some of my sentences only unjumbled themselves on the third day.

I have always disliked the taste for simplicity that all drugs, including alcohol and natural adrenalin, produce, even more than I have craved for simplicity or satisfied that craving. I found both Antonelli's and the Authorities' need to simplify Clare despicable. The more so, since at any time it might become a frailty of own. My policy for today had been 'Slowly but unsurely.' I repeated the



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

phrase to myself as if it were a verbal talisman, made potent by its secrecy. But the words, I reassured myself, had meaning enough to be publicly defended. Certainly to Antonelli and, if necessary, to the Board itself. Again, too, there was no mercy in these words for Clare. She would wait longer at her new Assizes. She would see many others hanged or whipped or cautioned or exonerated. And always in routine ways and by accepted methods, that she would never dare beg for herself.

Months after, Elinor and I went to a pornographic film together. I had spent the morning helping rationalise files in the city again (Antonelli had been naturally alarmed by the separation of Clare's data from William's) and, at lunchtime, I went for my usual stroll through the Gardens. Larry's pot plants were lush. After lunch, I met Elinor by accident. She stood outside the cinema, talking to one of her ex-charges: a girl called Glory, who was obviously working again, if not on the old western suburbs beat. When I stopped, the girl (who recognised me) left, pretending to be window-shopping.

Elinor said, 'I think I should go to this movie, for field research.'

'In that case, I should too.'

'Don't be patronising. You don't have to go in if you're scared I might get groped by a macintosh.' From the size of the attendance, the groper would have to have been the manager.

'Don't be silly. Where else can we be alone?' I asked.

She giggled. She did have a splendid, mad giggle, not your normal high-pitched or husky shriek of laughter.

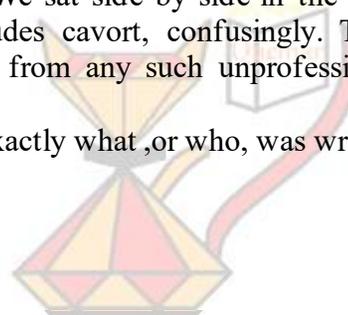
'It looks more private than the Department, anyway.'

'Good, We can talk about Sam. And blame Jonathan Manger. Just because Sam may be a natural homosexual, doesn't mean he's a natural embezzler.'

'One of the movies is Australian. He's probably in it,' she said.

Inside, we were completely alone. There was no usherette and the tickets seemed merely a courtesy. We sat side by side in the dark and watched teams of rouged nudes cavort, confusingly. They verified our wisdom in refraining from any such unprofessional and unmature conduct together.

It was an opportunity to analyse exactly what, or who, was wrong



PLAY WITH KNIVES

with Sam, and we made a useful decision about Clare - I remember that now - as well.

Sam wasn't in the skin flick (Manger had directed a few), although we thought we recognised other familiar faces. As Elinor remarked: 'It really *is* odd how faces and bodies never match. I'm sure that woman was one of my hookers about four years ago - called Valma - and I'd never have imagined tits like that. They looked as if they'd touch her navel at the time. Still, perhaps she's had some silicon. No, I don't think a female flatmate would help Sam.'

'I meant just to get him used to women, not to change his preferences.'

'His problem...yes, can you see the joins a bit...is that he's already too used to women. Imagine having to compete with a sister like Sandy,' she said.

'I like Sandy...I can't see any joins and Valma would still be quite scarred that close-up...you only object to Sandy because she's so normal', I said.

'But she's not *just* normal. She knows it and likes it. I've never known anybody to be so likable and yet flaunt their normality like that.'

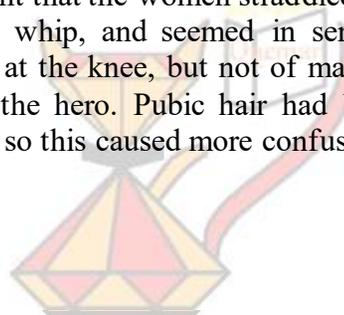
'But she's kind-hearted and not stupid', I objected.

'And everyone likes her, even you. Poor Sam', said Elinor.

I gave up the idea of Sam living with his sister and suggested Sandy as a flatmate for Clare, on Clare's release. Elinor didn't object to that. We studied the main movie no less conversationally.

Like most pornography I'd seen, it was unselective, but it wasn't violent (violent porn is a special taste and available from special sources), except for some 'spanked' frilly knickers and one cunnilingus temporarily denied a climax. It was more anti-feminine in that some of the women, although not actually subjected to bondage, were forced to be quite passive. They all received their sexual reward eventually, however, and no one was strangled, stabbed, shot or badly beaten.

Also, it was post-Greer to the extent that the women straddled the men. One of them frisked with a whip, and seemed in serious danger of severing one of her legs at the knee, but not of making more than contusion-contact with the hero. Pubic hair had been emancipated from 1960s discretion, so this caused more confusion,



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

since there were also six small dark cats and dogs intimately involved in the story. None of them were hurt, although two appeared lethargic.

I asked Elinor if she found it objectionable.

‘Not from a libertarian point of view. From a Feminist viewpoint, it is reactionary, but not worth reacting to. I suppose that leaves us with Animal Lib?’

I joked mechanically, ‘This film may show how they achieve it?’

I watched again. One lissom poodle did appear to know what was going on. It would occasionally give a most grotesquely ‘old-fashioned’ (as mother would have put it) wink at the lens, whilst abreast a laughing nude. The histrionic diplomacy of dogs always amazed me.

I asked, ‘Do you think Sandy would like to flat with Clare?’

‘I think we should introduce them, but I don’t know how Sandy would react to anyone that abnormal.’

‘Normalise her.’

A big wink and a burst of joyful yapping from the screen.

‘We have normalised Clare,’ Elinor whispered, ‘but she’s still not normal.’

‘In what way?’

‘If you or I could answer that, I wouldn’t be so worried.’

She was worried and would have done something, anything, to help Clare more, if she could.

The Whip Lady seemed to have flicked herself on one buttock by accident, but they retained the incident on film. She said ‘Fuck’, and I realised that no one else on the screen had said it all afternoon.

I said, ‘I think you’ll find Sandy won’t be as worried by Clare as we are.’ Perhaps I meant, ‘as *you* are’. I had moods and methods of worry about Clare, in the same way as I had them about life, death, justice and the unknown elements of the universe, but I never felt, as Elinor did, that there was something left undone.

The film plot now involved a naked, cuckolded husband, who was destroying a feather mattress instead of his naked wife and her lover (on the roof). I mentioned to Elinor that, contrary to Feminist legend, most of the men were now taking all their clothes off. She leaned back. ‘It wasn’t worth it’, and sighed.

Allowing for inescapable lack of muscle now and then, I thought the men weren’t too bad and I objected: “Heather says men’s bodies really are part of it - part of our attraction to women. It’s not

PLAY WITH KNIVES

just mind and emotion.’

‘Not bodies abstracted on film like that. And Heather is Heather. She’s more romantic than I am. She hasn’t so much experience, and no sexual ambition left.’

‘Because I’ve fulfilled it.’

She ignored that: ‘I’ll ask Sam about Sandy. It would be really good if he does the introducing. There’s that debating thing with Clare on Sunday. Sandy could go to that if she likes.’

I assented: ‘Make Sam think he thought of it.’

‘Oh, of course...that axe is nasty.’

The husband had discovered an axe, but used it on the manhole in the ceiling. It became embedded there at once and he struggled to withdraw it, apparently forever, as the elopers reached the street.

I said, ‘That’s a magnificent symbol. Ultimate impotence in its own violent coitus.’

The lovers then met a policeman on the street.

I asked, ‘What are you doing about Glory?’

‘Nothing. They’ve already got my report that she’s absconded. She’s living out of my area now.’

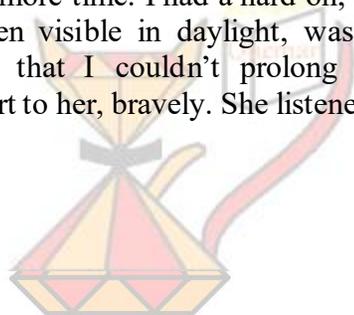
Under the credits, the benign policeman was now naked and the lovers were wearing various items of his uniform, but not in the usual order. There was a poodle on the policeman, laughing.

I said, ‘We seem to have sorted more people out more easily than usual. You could invite Antonelli here. Find some nice, Catholic girl...’

From time to time, Elinor did concentrate her efforts on a hobby she had of trying to find some good, pretty, virginal (at least in the mind) Catholic girl for Antonelli. Antonelli had actually humoured her to the extent of escorting several of these creatures out, but to Elinor’s knowledge none of them had seen even the inside of his front gate, let alone his mother or his bedroom.

She wouldn’t bite now, though: ‘I won’t do this field-study twice. Someone might find out and ask for a report.’

My teasing her had been a bid for more time. I had a hard on, and its seepage, which might have been visible in daylight, was on my inner-trouser thigh. Knowing that I couldn’t prolong my deception, I explained my discomfort to her, bravely. She listened



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

intellectually, being careful not to grin and commented that the process could be an accidental one related to conditioning.

'In which case,' I asked her, as I slowly dried out and subsided, 'what object do you think triggered me off in relation to the pornography: yourself, myself, Clare, Glory, Sandy or Sam?'

'What do you remember most?'

'Sam's name and your voice: an impossible combination.'

'Not necessarily. I'm turned on by his walls myself.'

Sam had vividly hued girly pin-ups all over his walls. Not in self-defence, but because he liked to look at them best, just as Elinor did, even though, like Sam, she preferred to be physically intimate with the masculine gender. I told her: 'It wasn't Sam's walls.'

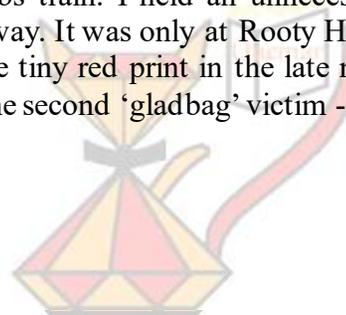
This was true. Black-and-white photos have always seemed to me much more enticing than colour pin-ups. Probably this was why Clare's blanched hair and the illusive wispieness of her whole structure were highly sexual to me. She had a negative quality, not in relation to the will (quite the reverse, and no pun on penis intended), but in a photographic sense, as such.

I articulated for Elinor: 'My erection was caused by an indistinct undercurrent of ideas about Heather, Sandy, Glory, Clare, yourself and the movie, despite its silliness. Okay?'

'Quite okay.'

We parted smiling in the doorway. I was more or less unstained. Reflected in some shop windows, I was a middle-heighted, middle-minded man in his early thirties, with mundane fantasies. I needed a shave, too. In other shop windows, I seemed to be imperviously and confidently absorbed - rather than escapist or timid - in my fantasies. Indeed, it seemed that they might encompass and control the real world, enough to make the real world feel a little threatened. In fact, by then, I was tired and hardly thinking at all, except of how to file an unexpectedly demanded report, so that it would be unnoticed for the greatest possible time. I would aid its subject, my favourite crim, Larry, to what extent I could.

I boarded the next western suburbs train. I held an unnecessary newspaper open on my lap all the way. It was only at Rooty Hill, a stop before home, that I noticed the tiny red print in the late news at the back. Mrs. Jane Waterman - the second 'gladbag' victim - had



PLAY WITH KNIVES

been discovered by police in nearby bush. She had probably been killed and wrapped up the day before. There was no further information on the page. But I caught a taxi home and naturally the driver (it was another cabbie who saw the doubled bag and called the police) could tell me more about the murder and the victim.

‘She was right next to the road. I saw her myself ten minutes earlier and thought she *was* garbage. You couldn’t see anything but the bags and what with all the strikes, you know...’

‘Where was her husband?’

‘Well, you know, he let her go a bit. He was a bit punchy, you know. Good fighter once. And the jobs aren’t there.’

‘Was she a pro?’

‘No. She was easy, you know, she was easy.’ His reference to the ease had a tolerance in it, a kindness that he suggested easily had been hers as well. It was almost my job to press: ‘And she was easily paid?’

‘Bits and pieces, yes. No standard fee, sometimes no fee.’

‘So she had got hurt before?’

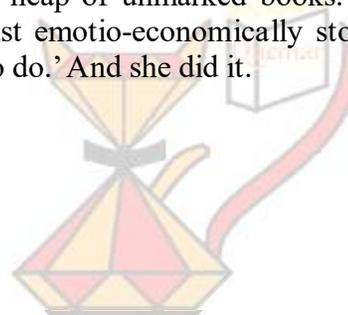
‘Not that we know of. She was easy.’

If it wasn’t for the thin, sanguine, back-page appearance of the news item, daring you to find it or blame it for its lateness, I doubt if I’d have questioned him so long.

When I’d tipped him and Heather let me in, the crime didn’t touch me anymore. I looked at myself in the hall mirror. It had been a gala day for looking at myself. This time, I was taller and had skipped a generation, my swollen, glittering eyes suggested my farmer-grandfather to me. I remembered that my mother said he whipped her with a riding crop. I wondered, if I threw myself fully dressed into bed, I might by a miracle be able to sleep. Or if I drank spirits and plonk with enough dedication, I’d have, say, a fifty-fifty chance of an alcoholic stupour until morning. Because there was no doubt at all that the Hanging Judge was up on the circuit tonight. So tonight was the thing to be put out of its misery.

I said to Heather: ‘Stay clear of me.’

She was crosslegged as usual in a heap of unmarked books. She sounded only formally injured - just emotio-economically storing up a debt: ‘Why not? I have work to do.’ And she did it.



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

Sheridan was alone in her room, playing records. I said, 'Goodnight,' to her.

The second time she heard me. She said, 'Hello, Dad.' Then she tried hard to think of something else to say. Her eyes were lighter and richer than her mother's: marmalade. At last she added, 'Goodnight'. She meant it, however, and I blew her a kiss on my hand. Then I quickly and inoffensively shut her door. She'd been writing an essay throughout.

That night, I had safeguarded my two most loved and likely victims. And I will not believe a man can be his own. I did what better men have done. I put on my coat and, locking myself out the back with a bottle of scotch, lost the house key in the nasturtiums until dawn. I sat down on the back-step with the twice-fed dog, and tranquilly studied the stars. In a few hours, every ancient constellation was in its place, and I was pleased I'd invented several more. Heather waved goodnight through the kitchen window, before she went to bed.

The next morning, I'd an interview with Clare. I said unemotionally, 'I'm sorry I'm late, but I was drunk all night.'

She said, with polite curiosity, 'I've never been drunk.'

And I considered, 'You wouldn't like it. It makes you too ripe for the plucking. By pain or by joy, inadvertently.'

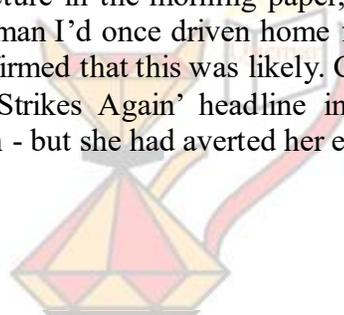
Her sedateness didn't change, as she asked, 'Which plucked you?', but something at her lip corner asked, 'And was it good?'

And I answered that thing, 'I think it was pain, but I liked it.'

'Even though it was pain. That makes alcohol sound terribly nice. And imagine being plucked by joy. Inadvertently.'

I said again, factually, dismissively and unpleasantly: 'You wouldn't like it.' When did Clare argue for very long, especially with me? I told her, 'I was drunk last night, but the reason I'm late is that I met Sergeant Terrence downstairs. and he gave me some juicy details about the new gladbagger murder.'

I had seen the second victim's picture in the morning paper, and she appeared to be the drunken woman I'd once driven home from Woodstock Avenue. Harry had confirmed that this was likely. Clare had been reading a 'Gladbagger Strikes Again' headline in the same morning paper when I came in - but she had averted her eyes



PLAY WITH KNIVES

to *Peanuts*. The morning paper didn't have any juicy details, anyway. What I knew was close to the marrow.

She asked, 'How do they know it's the same man?'

'Apart from the plastic bags? He bludgeons his victims, crushes the jugular artery and hacks off whatever flesh he can before he forces any jewellery or ornaments she's wearing into her vagina. Mrs. Waterman was wearing a heavy bracelet and he had to stab her vulva open to fit it in. All this is, needles to say, confidential.'

'Yes.'

Her voice was too loud and I saw that she was passing out. She hadn't had such a response to our discussion of her own murders or Concepcion's death and I wasn't ready for her reaction now. She slumped, head on knees, and her chair swivelled round. Her head jerked back fully, and crashed against the desktop. She murmured something, but I couldn't tell what it was. I helped her to the armchair. Her pulse was okay. She murmured again, 'Don't call anyone' and, as she began to recover - 'I can't see yet.'

'Yes, you can. What can you see?'

'The light is too cold and white to see. It will come back.' Her jumper was icily sodden with sweat. For some reason, her disorientation also disorientated me briefly. After her words, I couldn't think of anything but my dream of the cake and the blood in the snow. I in no way lost consciousness, but I had to concentrate to dismiss the dream - and the cold it made me feel - before I could attend to Clare again.

I opened the window. Her first second of consciousness was a look of unpremeditated terror, and I said, 'It's only me.' It did reassure her. After hearing me and near-enough seeing me, she closed her hand in a fist around the end of the armchair and bent her forehead to it. I held the base of the back of her skull firmly, not tentatively or symbolically, in the palm of my right hand, until she could raise her head again. Her eyes were wide open but the pupils were dilated. I asked her if there were any other reason for all this, and she heard me and whispered some answers, almost as unintelligible - except that I knew what to listen for - as her first utterance had been at the desk.



THE WHITE -HAired GIRL

I ascertained that she hadn't taken any illicit drugs, hadn't fainted recently and that she wasn't secretly diabetic or epileptic. So there was nothing I could have done. I told her that her medical reports had mentioned fainting - fits but had minimised their importance because 'Even she herself seemed in no way distressed by them except at the time they occurred'. I put satire into this quotation and added, 'I've been writing reports too long myself to trust them with my - or anybody else's - life, though. Are you sure you're all right?'

By then, I had knelt before her and held her arms in my hands, until she had rocked herself fully awake. There was a lump on her head, but no bleeding. I brought her some water and she asked me to put salt in it. She was on diuretics because of her period cramps, and because it was thought that diuretics might ease any psychiatric problems by decreasing water-pressure in the body. I found some salt in the fridge in the corridor outside my office door. She drank the water. It was very saline, but showed no signs of making her ill.

'Where did you get the salt?' she asked.

I told her, and that Elinor had made a joke about the new fridge being situated there. That they must have known where all the fridgidity and alcohol in the building belonged: near me.

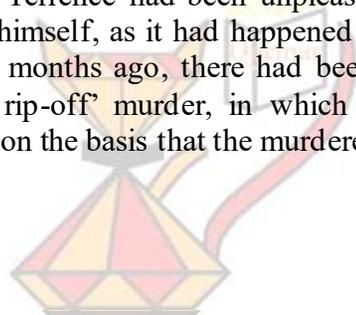
She asked, 'Does Elinor really think you're icy?'

I reflected. 'Probably not. Perhaps more mischievous and bothersome, but no doubt with a snowy edge.'

I hadn't expected Clare to pick up the sexual reference in that 'edge', but she gave an unexpected chuckle and explained wryly, 'I've started reading *Hamlet*.'

I told her that, when she was released, I'd take her to a live performance of it, to which I was taking Sheridan. She didn't answer, not wanting it to seem important to her, and I made a mental note not to disappoint her, or forget to book her ticket.

The rest of my news from Harry Terrence had been unpleasant, too. He had only just learned of it himself, as it had happened out of our area and in the city. A few months ago, there had been a newspaper story about a 'double rip-off' murder, in which the victim and the murderer had liased, on the basis that the murderer



PLAY WITH KNIVES

would supply drugs and the former would pay for them. At the meeting, it transpired that the pusher had no drugs and the customer no money. During the ensuing conversation, the topic of blackmail arose and the buyer was gunned to death. The murderer then took refuge in the flat of a young unmarried couple, both of whom were heavily addicted customers. Neighbours testified that the couple had been in the flat all day before his arrival, and that he had bloodstained clothes. They heard the girl express surprise at seeing him, but agree to shelter him for the night.

Neighbours called the police, who surrounded the flat. But, somehow, he escaped them, in the early hours of the morning. The girl and her boyfriend were arrested as accessories after the fact, and had received a sentence of two years each in prison. These they were serving, after rejected appeals. Harry had just heard that the girl was Silkie Roberts. He didn't know anything about her boyfriend, except that his name was Len Hill, but there was no doubt in his mind that the murderer, whose name the couple refused to disclose, was Jonathan Manger.

I asked, 'Where is Manger now?'

'I heard that it was Queensland. I hope that's where he stays.'

Silkie was in Silverwater prison and the only pretext that I could think of to see her was that she'd once been a friend of Sam's, which was obviously how she'd met Jonathan, and that as he was my charge, I was seeking information on him. It was a thin cover, but the Authorities kindly accepted it, and I was allowed to talk with her alone in a cell.

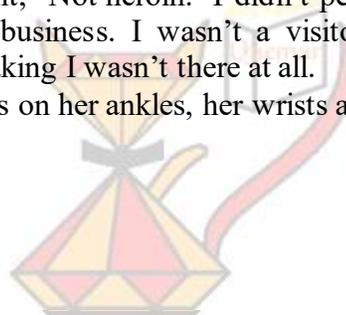
The only thing she asked me for was insect spray. She showed me flea and mosquito bites, but I had to tell her that I couldn't help: 'I'd like to, but they think you might swallow it.'

I would have liked to bring it, and if I could I have smuggled it in, I would have .

But I was grateful I couldn't, because looking at the forlornness in her wet, chafed face, I considered their fears justifiable.

I asked if anyone inside had tried to sell her heroin yet, and she answered, 'No', in a tone that meant, 'Not heroin.' I didn't persist with the topic, which wasn't my business. I wasn't a visitor, a doctor, or a solicitor, so strictly speaking I wasn't there at all.

She had scabbed welts and pustules on her ankles, her wrists and



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

her throat, from boredom and the insects. But her hair was heroically tidy and clean, and as attractive as ever, its pale moon-colour dissuading me from thinking that Clare's hair, however healthy, was in any way platinum-blonde, was anything but white, unless an unusual light distorted it.

For form's sake, we did chat a little about Sam. I told her that, after his release, he'd had casual encounters, but couldn't find anyone to live with him reliably. And he still felt insecure and depressed, of course, by Jonathan's betrayal of him. She was careful not to show any feelings at Jonathan's name.

She asked, 'What will happen to Sam now?'

I said, 'I don't like the idea of rebirth, but I think that people like Sam do have something unpredictable and fertile in their continuity - of life, I mean. As you do. I can't credit you losing your happiness forever.'

I think this did enliven her, because she asked me what Kiss and Hug were doing. 'They're both thriving. But, of course, they're badly spoiled.'

She solemnly recommended a book by someone called Davenport on training puppies, and I thanked her and said I would find it. Just before the wardress came back and I left, she asked, 'Did they tell you anything about how Len is?'

They had told me he was okay, and I told her so.

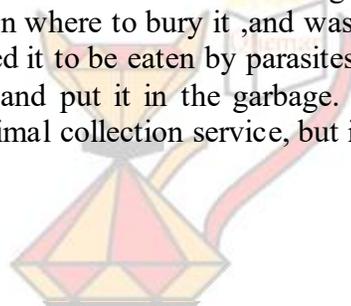
She said, 'It will be harder for him, than for me.'

I said, 'Yes.'

When we heard the returning footsteps, I reached down and stroked her hair.

I had told Silkie the truth about Kiss, but poor Hug was dead.

Clare had told me so recently, and had asked me to visit her mother, and find out how she was taking it. I discovered that Hug had conceived at about nine months, and developed milk fever from her first litter: only three, and all dead. Peter Banks had shot the dog before he left on a sales trip interstate. Coral seemed guilty and confessed that she hadn't known where to bury it, and was too weak to dig a pit. She hadn't wanted it to be eaten by parasites, so she had just wrapped it in plastic and put it in the garbage. The local council actually had a dead animal collection service, but it



PLAY WITH KNIVES

seemed too painful to mention that to her. Instead, I asked, 'Didn't they object?'

'No.'

'Obviously the gladbagger doesn't live in your area, then. In our area, the garboes won't even take the wrapped-up dogshit when we can't flush it.'

'How is Kiss?' How is Clare?, I thought, but she didn't ask that question.

'She's good.' I was going to add that we'd had Kiss desexed at the first sight of blood, but it seemed tactless. Coral Forster wasn't negligent, but, at that time, still dim and conventional. She believed it necessary for a bitch to have its first litter in case it became stupid, just as it had been good for Clare's moral character to babysit on a night when there was emptiness in her face and her friends were at the pictures.

I asked, 'Have you had any trouble with the fires?'

'There's been none in this street.'

Recently, an arsonist had begun to practise in the neighbourhood, so far only scoring bushes and shrubbery, particularly near bedroom windows, but using just enough kerosene to give citizens cause for alarm. After the lanterns a few doors down had vanished in smoke, Heather demanded that we buy a fire-extinguisher. We had done so (wholesale from Larry), but I doubted if that sort of fire would result from the mischief.

I mentioned, 'The neighbours had one, but I'd say it's just schoolboys.'

Coral said, 'It could be a motorcycle gang.'

She seemed to have an unbalanced fear of motorcycle gangs. To my knowledge, there had only been one dangerous local one, and, apart from scarring each other and toms from other territories, their main activity had been screeching down crescents and around corners just before the milkman. This activity was stopped by one of our more homicidal neighbours. He oiled the road just a minute before they arrived and hosed the oil, and them, off it as they carried the bits of their bikes home from the nature reserve into which they had skidded. I explained this to Coral, and perhaps she was relieved.

She asked, 'How did you know about the dog?'



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

‘Clare told me you’d told her. She thought you might be fretting.’
Coral reverted to the bikies: ‘There were some outside the supermarket on Thursday. I can’t repeat the vocabulary that they used.’

So Clare must still have been tailoring her vocabulary to suit her mother. She and I now employed most words freely and mostly accurately in our conversations.

But in my presence, Elinor, whilst snipping her curly split-ends and disassociating herself from wowserism, did warn Clare against such swear words ‘even though George and I use them so often and so aptly ourselves.’

And Clare had said, ‘It’s okay, I’m used to that from my mother’s visits. Once when she was complaining about Peter, I accidentally said, “Fuck the bloody man”, and she looked really shocked and said, “Clare, I’ve told you never to say “bloody” .’

Now Coral was suddenly troubled, ‘When will Clare be let out?’

‘We don’t have a certain date - it is better to delay that. But I’d say within months. Our next interview is in the city offices, and that’s a sure sign that it won’t be too long.’

‘Will I visit her in the city?’

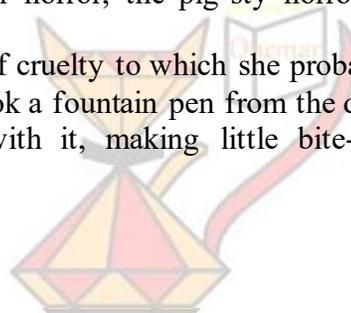
‘No. Still at the Centre, but she won’t be living there.’

I ‘can’t imagine being able to talk to her, not a visit. I think it will always be like a visit.’ Her mind was delving too deep for her own comfort, and she added quickly, ‘Tell her I’m not fretting.’

I told Clare: ‘I was very patient with your mother - I think because I’m furious with you.’

She didn’t react or ask why, and I grew angrier, but I continued to be careful to show no rage, only a cold, knowing displeasure. I told her about my visit to Silkie and the conditions of ‘normal’ prisoners, ‘while you, Clare Collins, sit where you are in a comfortable office, with no poison in your blood and no vermin on your skin. I am incensed that, because of your special treatment, you have missed out on the small horror, the pig-sty horror to which Silkie is subjected.’

I saw that I had attained a pitch of cruelty to which she probably couldn’t respond rationally. She took a fountain pen from the desk and began to pierce her arms with it, making little bite-like wounds.



PLAY WITH KNIVES

I don't think it was a parody, but it had the effect of one. I at once strode from the room, without shutting the door. Outside, there was no one but an elderly typist I knew, who was working back. I asked her how she was, and received a detailed description of a person in chronic depression. I decided I should kick the habit of asking people how they were.

When I went back into the office, Clare was unusually calm, rolling the pen in her hand, absently, and no longer jabbing at herself. Despite her bitten nails, she had never been a self-scabber in prison.

I said, 'I'm sorry for the SS innuendo.'

She spoke as if tired but entertained: 'No, I can really understand why you do it. You must know how mundane you are without it.'

I didn't feel that any accuracy could be gained by denying that, so I suggested: 'It isn't only evil that's mundane. Would you rather I was mundane for the rest of this interview?'

'Yes'. Her voice was gentle.

'This morning I told Philip Antonelli to stop biting his nails at once and never to do it again. I think that it's time that you stopped too.'

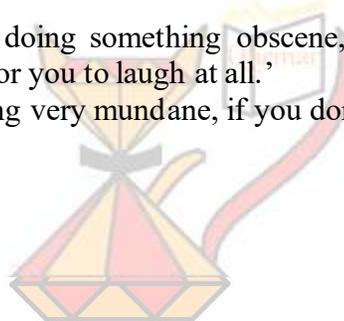
She looked startled and then laughed, for the first time, aloud at me. The 'arrogant, youthful, guilty, rippling laugh', which I was sure Brian hadn't heard so revealingly, but which made me know why she had unnerved him. Although the laugh was not insane. Experience and court attendances have taught me that psychopaths are likely to have a zany, infectious sense of humour, but Clare's humour was not as warm as that. It was controlled, but there was enough irony and hysteria in it to make me judge her to be reachable, even if only by hysteria or irony from me.

I told her, 'You've always surprised me by being the only person I've ever met who will admit, quite freely, that they have absolutely no commonsense. For that reason, I do suspect you of having a little. You should be careful in whose company you laugh like that. It's as Elinor said about the swearing.'

'Is that how I laugh?'

'You don't laugh as if you were doing something obscene, but some people would think it wrong for you to laugh at all.'

She averted her eyes: 'You are being very mundane, if you don't



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

think I can judge a thing like that.'

Perhaps because Clare's essential nature was evasive, she displayed little of the rather patronising day-to-day evasiveness of speech that, despite all her directness and idealism, was present in Heather, and often irked me. Perhaps, though, all I'm revealing is an incongruous taste for the dramatic - since there was drama in Clare's laugh and her soft, indifferent candour - that Heather may have been too wise to exploit in me.

The Widow in the Water Tower was what the press called the gladbagger's third victim. She was discovered the night before what was to be my last interview with Clare before her release. Mrs. Frances Miller was indeed a widow and a respectable one (but, then, Concepcion had been a respectable shop assistant) and the nation took a posthumous fancy to her case, in a way which it had not to Mrs. Waterman's. There was, for example, the possibility of a link between the last victim's name and the site of this victim's discovery. There is a huge water tower in the street behind our house, and Mrs. Miller, neatly encased in the customary two bags, was sighted afloat in it, after the finding of much ostentatious blood and hair in the bush nearby.

I had taken Heather to dinner in the city that night. We hadn't bought ourselves a present for a month and so her conscience seemed squared for that luxury. We saw the police searching the bush as we left home. We hadn't spoken of it in the car, but once we began the wine and the creamed entrees, and to feel safe and comforted, Heather asked, 'Do you think that was a gladbagger?'

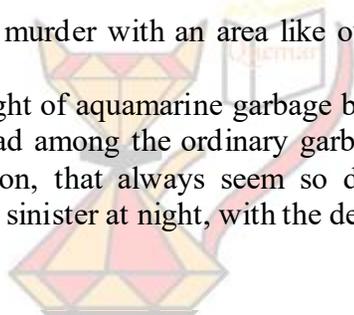
'I hope not. Perhaps just a clue.'

She said, 'It's strange that I often hear the neighbours, and my school kids - and Sheridan and her friends - talk about Clare, but never about the gladbagger.'

'Too close, as they say, to home. One hopes the same will apply to Clare when she's local.'

'I can never associate any sort of murder with an area like ours. We all help each other so much.'

'God bless you', I thought. I thought of aquamarine garbage bags bulging, just a little in from the road among the ordinary garbage bags, old mattresses, tins and so on, that always seem so drab during the day - and so suggestively sinister at night, with the dew



PLAY WITH KNIVES

upon them. The close-together alleys between little autistic flats with their house phones, and lisping, obscene whisperings in the lobbies. But she was right: it was too true for actual murder.

She continued: 'I had a childhood terror of the Blue Mountains and of bush walking, because of all the murderers who buried their victims there.'

I nodded. I agreed it seemed more suitable in that picturesque, elevated bush. One already smelled tragedy in its bell-bird haunted trails and waterfalls and florid autumn gullies: not in the dry and scaly patches of nature that remained in areas like ours. Despite our contrived gummery and roses, or the farmland and the pastures through which Sheridan rode horses.

I hadn't let Heather know of the gladbagger details that I told Clare. Over coffee, I said, 'If this is another gladbagger murder' - by then, we had accepted that it was - 'I won't discuss it with Clare tomorrow.'

Heather sipped. 'It's policy that you don't, anyway, isn't it?'

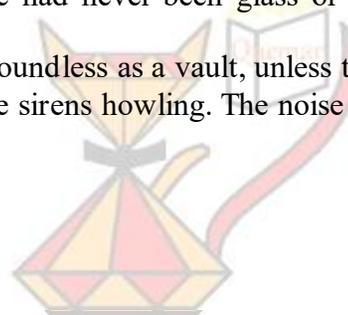
Against my advice, they had begun withholding the newspapers from Clare, in case she read anything retrospective to shake her confidence before her release.

I sipped. 'Yes, but that isn't the reason.'

All my interviews with Clare in what she and I came to call The Night Building were quite late - between eight and nine p.m.. They had transferred her to a special detention centre near the city. She was brought to the central offices. She only glimpsed the city through the unopened windows of the car, or The Night Building. Our interview room was twelve stories up. Elinor visited her in a new 'cell-bedroom'. Our room and the suite were plush, woody, carpeted and empty, and the windows shone out on the lights from other windows.

When I had told her formally about her forthcoming release, she asked: 'What will we do without our windows?' She was referring to them as stage back-drops. There had never been glass or bars between us.

Here, the bright office air was as soundless as a vault, unless there was a braking car or a pack of police sirens howling. The noise of



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

these disturbed us. We would both wait in silence for it to stop, listening. Although she still wouldn't provoke anyone, even me by being tasteless enough to be afraid, it was here that I thought for the first time I might be hearing what her stepfather had claimed to be an intangible intimation of her heart and lungs working.

Feeling an unfocused anxiety, I went out to check that the fire escape would open. When I was sure that it unlocked easily, I returned to her. It was a maze of offices, and I didn't know this floor of the building, nor had I taken any bearings from the anonymous furniture and plants. Yet I found the room we'd both been in at once, from unconscious memory or from following sonar pulses, say, her psychic energy, or my concentration on it. I had no intention of keeping this sense mystical and described it to her, without mentioning her stepfather.

She said, 'I can't hear my heart. If you mean by "sonar pulses" what sea mammals do, then I guess we can all train a sense.'

She viewed the whole topic with distaste and suspicion and I think I still agree with that. But neither did we deny it might exist.

There did not seem to me to be a point in these last incarcerated interviews, unless it was one of crystallisation. So I had asked her of her murders, tritely: 'Did you enjoy them?'

And she answered, 'Only in retrospect. Isn't all memory a form of sex?'

I wished Elinor hadn't lent her so much Freud. Clare had more time to read than I did. She also watched far too much TV. I asked, 'Is memory a form of sex for you?'

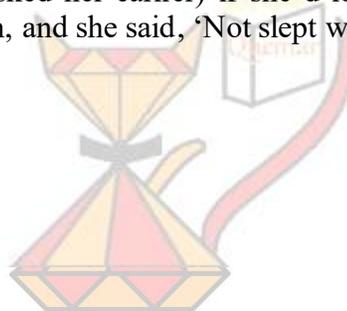
We'd been discussing Socratic techniques, and she said, 'You told me not to answer a question with a question.'

I accepted the rebuke, in part because I was curious myself as to what my answer would be. But she broke the rule at once: 'Why has my killing method appealed to you so much?'

'Interest, not appeal. Don't you think "appeal" is a tendentious word?'

'Yes.' She was voluntarily back on the rails, no matter what.

I, at last, asked her (Elinor had asked her earlier) if she'd loved anyone, or slept with them, in prison, and she said, 'Not slept with.'



PLAY WITH KNIVES

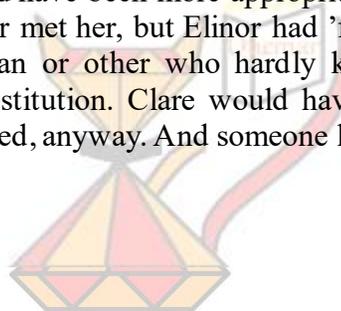
And not loved enough to mind leaving them, or to want to see them again.' And then (in case that sounded too heartless to be strategic?) she added, 'I don't think I could cope if the prison world became too confused with my return to "normal life".'

According to Elinor, Clare hadn't had many homosexual encounters, as far as could be ascertained. Although exposed to some test situations - outside-work, dances, debates and sheltered classrooms - she'd been extremely isolated, and the other girls had usually felt too much horror or too much pity to interact with her in love.

I rarely attempted the mateship attitude - such as I have described between myself and Elinor - with Clare. Partly because it wasn't my natural behaviour, and partly because pseudo-sex had to be part of my relationship with Clare, particularly if she were to be judged 'socially unsound'. Part of this was cruelty, but part of it was also mercy in that 'instability' is so much more acceptable in sex than elsewhere. I said to her once, 'My feelings for you are obscenely professional, and that can involve any action except fucking and any emotion except friendship.'

Yet I relented sometimes in my thoughts of her, because her attitude to me seemed to be quite naturally friendly and sympathetic. But we both knew that my job was to try to condemn her if I could. At least at first, but I almost lost that inkling after a while. Not because of her, but because I discerned that Antonelli did not have the inclination (as I did sometimes), and the Authorities might not have the energy, to condemn her. Perhaps my report had decided it. We were to be tried again by her freedom, that was all.

Although not unusually tall, I'm not a small man, and I look, as I have said, amorphous from some angles. So did the shadow I cast on the steps. I felt incongruous and bulky, waiting there in too many clothes in the early spring sunlight, at the foot of the steps, until she came out. The scene would have been more appropriately sophisticated and assured had Elinor met her, but Elinor had 'flu. I could have nominated some woman or other who hardly knew Clare, but it seemed a useless substitution. Clare would have to become used to me uninstitutionalised, anyway. And someone had



THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

gratuitously asked Clare about it. She'd said I was probably the best initiator, if Elinor were ill. Clare was always demure and political about me to others. 'Initiator' was Antonelli's word, and I wondered if Clare had actually heard it, and if I would, therefore, have to defend myself against her mockery, as well as Elinor's.

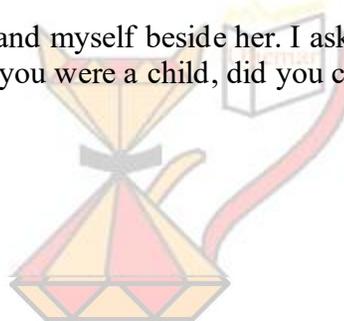
I looked down fixedly on a book on advanced income-tax evasion trying to work out exactly what it was that another of my charges had done, and if a refined version might not be suitable for an impoverished probation officer. When I looked up, my murderess stood waiting for me at the top of the high flight of steps, and she had been garbed to suggest respectable timidity. There was a glossy black handbag with a thin strap twisting again and again around her thin thumb and index finger, and a calf-length tartan skirt and not-too-ambitious brown sandals. And stockings and short fingernails (not, as usual, obscenely bitten) and her cloud-hair was left down loose, but with two brown clips to guard it. Her make-up was so clumsy and so pink that the adjectives became synonymous. And I recognised again how perverse the passivity was, to stand and submit to all that. Her blouse was creamy, only transparent enough to disclose bra ridges, and suggested something virginal and breezy, like the day.

I walked up the steps - the middle of the steps, firmly - to meet her. She had rested her thin, soft suitcase by her feet and I stooped and lifted it - to save me from touching her, as I ushered her down to the street. It was probably then that I understood painfully how insubstantial she looked. It wasn't just her relative lack of height and weight, but her whole frame, which seemed to shiver and gather shadows into itself, obscurely, if she so much as stood still beside me in the sun.

As we strolled, she looked conventionally at the shop windows, as she would have done with Elinor, and I was content to let her. I thought that on the bus later I might torment her by demanding she recount for me one thing she remembered having seen. She was very self-conscious on the bus.

I said, 'That was the worst part.'

I'd seated her next to the window and myself beside her. I asked - I'd never asked her before - 'When you were a child, did you come to Sydney much?'



PLAY WITH KNIVES

She said, 'Never, that I remember.'

I wondered why they'd chosen to release her outside her own area. I knew the official reasons: more paperwork involved for her than for others; here, and so early, her release was unexpected by the press. But, as usual, I suspected the Powers of something metaphysical, as well. Perhaps, like Elinor, the city was meant to represent the glamour in respectability to Clare.

Perhaps the Powers were right, because before the bus stopped, she surprised me by starting to enthuse about the goods she'd seen. True, it sounded like a school essay, and she knew it, but she knew I would respond with as little angst as possible on that level. And there was nothing trivial about this refuge she was taking in fashionable, material things. Hadn't I watched Heather take similar refuge, youthfully and recklessly?

Clare gained what appeared to be composure, even confidence (I feared that others would interpret it as confidence) quickly, as she spoke to me. She had definitely attained calmness by the time we disembarked from the bus at Central Station, so the bus ride was important. She had some money for clothes, but said she didn't want to buy them yet. I told her all I could remember about the dress shops at Mt Druitt, as we boarded the train for home.

On the Western Suburbs train, I told her, 'I didn't think you were really seeing what was in all those shop windows.'

By now, she had rested her head far back on the seat top, and ignored the window. But she did laugh, exhausted. As I cushioned her head with my folded coat, I began to laugh back at her. Then, I inadvertently remembered Brian Harrison saying, 'Still dangerous' and I stopped.



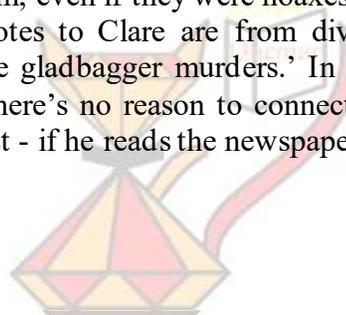
TO EARTHWARD

There were no suggestions of anal or cardiac preoccupations in the gladbagger. His one sign of real expertise was that he did know how to knock someone unconscious, instantly. I forced myself to be honest and to admit that, if I did have the inclination to commit the crimes, I would probably have shown much more curiosity about the individual anus and heart than the killer did. To me, attacking or drawing attention to a woman's sexual organs does not cause her to be especially impure or vulnerable, as a killer must be supposed to desire his victim to be. I wondered why I found the heart - the slimy, fleshy reality (not the ♥ valentine of it) - to be obscene.

Harry Terrence was part of pub discussions we had on the killings. The gladbagger was still inserting ornaments, especially the victim's rings into the body, but, as he seemed to grow more practised in disembowelment, he now thrust the trinkets not into the vagina, but into the womb.

'But they're not expert, or medical,' said Harry, 'we've even checked out the local garbos. But the deaths are unusual, in that the gladbagger doesn't advertise himself. We haven't any notes or tapes that could possibly be from him, even if they were hoaxes.'

I said, 'And those threatening notes to Clare are from diverse people, and started long before the gladbagger murders.' In fact, when she was still a child. 'And there's no reason to connect the murderer with her. Although he must - if he reads the newspapers -



PLAY WITH KNIVES

know something about her, even have seen her, if he lives in this area.'

Clare and Sandy were staying in a new block of flats opposite the police station. This was also close to the college where Clare was studying her Business Management at night, so safety should never have been far away.

Sandy had wanted Clare to rinse her hair a different colour, but the department, especially Elinor, decided against it for PR reasons. I privately considered the soft, elegant frost about the wan, bone-sharp face too flamboyant to change. The Authorities had thought the change would be too flamboyant.

Clare had been taught shorthand and typing as well as her school subjects, but Sandy had left school and worked as a salesgirl before studying to matriculate at the Tech. She was a year older than Clare. Clare's Management Course was at night. She did temporary secretarial jobs by day.

Following advice from Elinor and myself, the Authorities had chosen Sandy as someone more mature and solid in family character (despite Sam) to room with Clare. Not that I considered Clare's to be the 'leadership' type of murders, or that Clare was likely to develop any power over unbalanced people. Unless, perhaps, me.

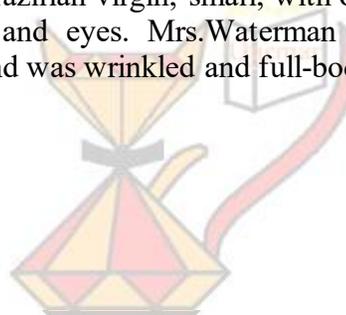
In the pub, Brian asked the obvious question: 'Have you noticed that people in this area seem more alarmed by the arsonist than by the gladbagger?'

I objected, 'They would be in any area.' But it only made him indignant: 'Even though the arsonist hasn't done any personal harm yet!'

'That's exactly why,' parodoxed Dick, with a beery profundity, 'He hasn't done any personal harm yet, so the best is yet to come.'

Harry continued: 'As you'd expect, there seems to have been no prior contact between the victims, and no one the families knew in common. And we all know how different the women were in appearance and character.'

We did. Concepcion had been a Brazilian virgin, small, with olive skin, rosebud cheeks, black hair and eyes. Mrs. Waterman was medium-sized, had four children, and was wrinkled and full-bodied



TO EARTHWARD

and quite strong, with tinted auburn hair and blue eyes. Mrs. Miller was angular and elderly, with upswept salt-and-pepper hair and spectacles, but she was elegant and had a taste for vivid and stylish clothing. Perhaps it was her bulbous dress rings which had incited her killer to bury her own jewellery so deep inside her.

But the next victim would receive her own wristwatch, for she wore no rings at all.

The above pub-chat took place in the week of Clare's release and of Mrs. Miller's murder. It was a Saturday night and I was still recuperating from having spent the morning with Elinor, Sheridan and Heather at Great Western Shopping Complex, where we took Clare for clothes. Great Western, of course, was much against Elinor's taste in shopping complexes, but we'd agreed, in committee, to re-adjust Clare to the local suburbs. I explained to Elinor that the goods and prices here were no different to elsewhere. Once there, I asked if I wasn't right and she agreed conditionally: 'Elsewhere as cheap as this.'

As far as Clare's welfare was concerned, I thought that ordinariness was a good thing. This or 'elsewhere' sensible like it, was the most security Clare could be given. Indeed, it was only as we climbed the steps that I saw a plain-clothes policeman and remembered the gun. I was given the gun just before Clare was released. There had been death-threats against us officers as well as our charge. I had been called into Antonelli's office. Antonelli, Elinor and Sergeant Terrence were there, and Antonelli asked me: 'Ever shot anything?'

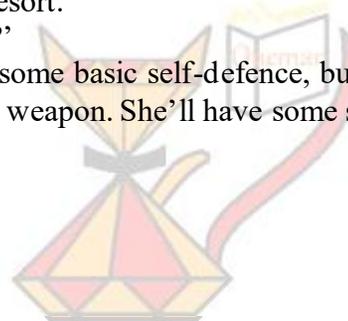
'Rabbits when I was ten.' Strange that I'd forgotten *that* in my memoirs of childhood torture. Perhaps because it had been with a group of other boys, and I hadn't been as good a shot as they were.

Harry said, 'We'll give you both a bit of re-training.' Obviously, it was sexist to assume that Elinor couldn't shoot.

Antonelli said, 'It's only as a last resort.'

Elinor asked, 'Does Clare get one?'

Antonelli said, 'She's been taught some basic self-defence, but we can't in all sanity issue Clare with a weapon. She'll have some sort



PLAY WITH KNIVES

of aerosol device to aim at an attacker's eyes, and a pocket sonic alarm.'

Bugger that, I thought. I could hardly buy her a gun, but I'd make sure that she had an adequate knife.

When I spoke to her the day after her release, I found that she'd already bought one. It was necessarily small, but I suspected she'd picked it out like an expert - *as* an expert? Except for a gun, it was the best thing for what I thought she might need.

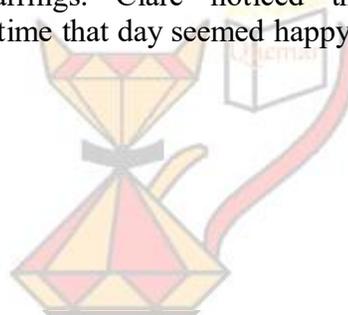
On the first Saturday morning, Clare's hair had seemed tinted in the jaundiced fluorescence. She had lost some of the hesitant prisoner's walk and patient, sideways-swaying stance.

Heather and Elinor had agreed on white and aquamarine for her normal disguise: a long, glossy, aquamarine blouse with white buttons (which did look white, although the yellow-green now made her hair a bone colour) to go over the standard pre-bleached blue jeans (which made her eyes look hollow since her eyes' blue was deeper), and an aquamarine dress with a white fleck, a high collar and sleeves which stopped slimly between her wrists and elbows. She managed her pointed white high-heels with an obedient ease. I thought she could also have simulated it on a tightrope, had we bought her one. The women then fitted her with plain sandals to match her jeans.

As a man, my function there was to witness all this and admire it, and I managed to do so. But Clare hadn't learned - or didn't wish - to copy the mannerisms of preening and self-parody for my reaction. So neither did my support need to be exaggerated.

There is a makeshift amphitheatre in the centre of Great Western, and, this morning, it reverberated with a rock band. Elinor, Clare and Sheridan were as eager to approach it as Heather and I were to escape it. We agreed to meet them later, and to fill in time by shopping for our own groceries.

Helping buy all this for Clare had made me guilty, and I desperately wanted to purchase something memorable for Heather. To my surprise, she agreed, and when we returned she was wearing new red-bronze, tulip-shaped earrings. Clare noticed them, wordlessly, at once and for the first time that day seemed happy.



TO EARTHWARD

Elinor was still elated by the music, and I teased her that the shops had really been named after the champagne, so they were fit for her, after all.

Clare said, ‘They should have called it “Minchinbury” after the local one.’

I didn’t know she knew about that. There had been silly development moves to call the place ‘Minchin Hills’. I was pleased that she was glancing at the local press. I had always found involvement in the district salving, and I hoped that she might, too.

But Clare was now restless. I knew if she had been distraught enough to comment, as she just had, unspoken to, that she might become really distraught. I stationed myself beside, and not four paces behind her, and asked if she’d tasted the Minchinbury wine.

She didn’t hurry to answer me. We all walked, as a party, past glassed delicacies - tinned food, jewellery, clothes, toys, sleek chocolates, whose freshness melted into your saliva from the air, and past plastic seats, where people ate, rested, talked, for a spell and spiritually evaded their parcels, parents or children. The doors opened automatically. Elinor exited first, and I remember how the quick wind curled back her thick hair, and shimmered on its dark edges.

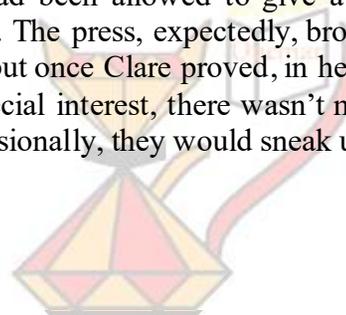
Then, Clare answered me: ‘I drank it once, at my mother’s engagement party. I can’t say which engagement, except that it wasn’t the last. Despite that, I can assure you that nothing has spoiled its taste for me.’

During those three sentences, there was an obedient, skipping rhythm in her speech, an absent-minded mockery too powerful to be conscious.

Elinor said to me, ‘She sounds like you.’

If she did, I was much more formidable, even to myself, than I had ever suspected.

Once outside the prison, Clare had been allowed to give a few press interviews, under supervision. The press, expectedly, brought the whole case out again in detail, but once Clare proved, in herself and her way of life, to be of no special interest, there wasn’t much more they could do about her. Occasionally, they would sneak up,



PLAY WITH KNIVES

to photograph her at the college. They respected the secrecy of her address. Basically, they were waiting for something to happen. They seemed to sense, to hope - like the Authorities? - that it might.

Sometime after our shopping trip, and only in the deafening course of duty, I was at a local disco. Clare was wearing her white, high-heeled sandals, but now with a tight, slit white skirt and silver buckles, bracelets and earrings. Her skirt was satin. Her cool silver hair - not so much now the colour of metal, as of a clean stream of thawed snow - was wound in a big plait on her head, and thin, white, satin ribbons threaded through the strands. I always wondered why she never wore royal blue. Perhaps enhancing the innocence of her eyes disturbed her, or seemed too provocative. I thought I'd discuss the possibility of us buying Clare something in royal blue with Heather. Perhaps an enamel brooch, for Christmas or birthday? It was unusual to buy small gifts for charges on special occasions, but it seemed unlikely that anyone else would do so.

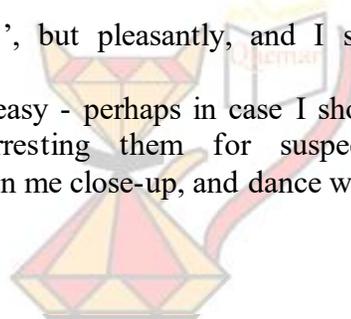
Her dress there was terribly nubile, and the full white was still a bit risky, but she didn't seem self-conscious. Watching her at first, I thought the clothes were too daring, but they probably weren't all that noticeable. Many of the other girls were blandly wearing much more carnal things. She'd perhaps chosen wisely, in order to blend with the environment.

It was the illusive, ineradicable strangeness in her appearance - apart from that venerable hair, that she would always refuse to colour - which was still distracting and unnerving. But only at moments. Most of the time, she blended, she blended.

I don't have the posture or the sobriety for barstools, and I'd managed to find a streamlined chair in the corner, delightfully distant from the band, but still suitable for easy observation. I was also blending, but she saw me after a while and came over with Greg, her boyfriend.

She asked, 'Why are *you* here?', but pleasantly, and I said, 'Spying on you,' also pleasantly.

She asked (since Greg looked uneasy - perhaps in case I should carry some private warrant arresting them for suspected fornication?), 'Why don't you spy on me close-up, and dance with



TO EARTHWARD

me, then? You don't need to know the steps. And Greg can get us some beer.'

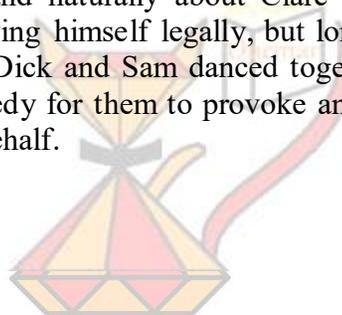
It wouldn't have been entirely out of my character to refuse her invitation, especially since I do so rarely dance, but the floor was crowded and I'd only need to stand respectfully separated from Clare, and swivel a bit on the heels and toes of my shoes. They were new and could use it. And I wanted to reassure Greg. And I wanted to dance with her.

And Greg, therefore, fetched us all beer.

The band was merciless and the singer was roaring about how good his girl looked when sopping wet with all her clothes off in the garden, but I was used to Sheridan's records and didn't feel incongruous on the floor. Clare danced for herself, not watching me, as she had Greg, but I peculiarly believed that she was more relaxed with me. Her movements were less in tune with the music and more tuned to her own nerves and muscles, and she made tiny, aimless, graceful, shuffling patterns with her hands and feet, whilst the centre of motion was now her waist - not her head or knees - and it writhed slowly, rhythmically and gently. The thin throat had become completely still and her eyes were focused, intelligently, not hypnotically, on her body and her arms. I felt one of those unbearable, almost vocal, rushes of joy and horror that I supposed Antonelli often felt: at the enormity and fragility of something I had so far helped to save.

When the music stopped, we both paused, as if considering waiting for it to resume. But then we both looked at Greg and his three clumsy schooners. We returned to the chair, appropriating a little glass table and three metal chairs on the way.

Sandy, Dick and Sam arrived before we'd really mellowed into the conversation. And Clare became more absorbed in Greg's company after they came. I sat at the table and conversed with Sandy, Dick and Sam. Dick was still spending much of his time with old schoolfriends, despite his medical studies. Perhaps he wasn't fitting in as well with the university push as his cockiness suggested. Sandy talked happily and naturally about Clare as a flat-mate. Sam seemed to be behaving himself legally, but lonely. At a certain stage of the evening, Dick and Sam danced together, but with too much self-aware comedy for them to provoke any of the onlookers. I felt sad on Sam's behalf.



PLAY WITH KNIVES

I danced once with Sandy. She must have decided that I was inhibited and, as often as possible, she swung my hands in hers, and touched me companionably with her body. I didn't dance with Clare again that night.

I was paid for all this as over-time. I reported that Clare was socialising well.

As you would expect, the non-disco Clare was another person, but despite Elinor, I don't think the other Clare was modelled dangerously on me, even though Clare had the ability to speak my language as if it were her own. In fact, she was so fluent in it that I wondered if it were not her own.

At one point she said to me: 'You're normally abnormal. Sandy is normally normal. And I'm abnormally normal.'

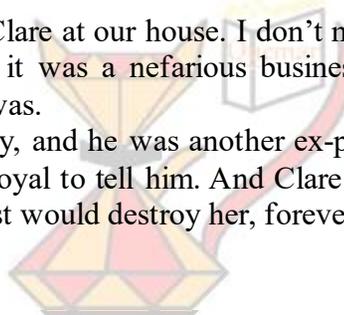
She wasn't being playful, although I wouldn't have cared if she were.

The context of this self-analysis, in the fortnight after her release, was that she had dined at our place, and that she and Sheridan were washing up. There was, naturally, much giggling, sud-skating and carelessness with cutlery. When I glanced into the kitchen, the girls were wrestling wildly for possession of a soapy knife and a sodden teatowel. Sheridan, at that time, was an old thirteen, and Clare a young nineteen. I did not intend to suggest any censure, but I must have paused too long in the doorway, because Clare became suddenly quiet. She enunciated quietly, holding the knife: 'It's all right. I don't stab little girls'.

Sheridan, tired of the game and tired of the washing up, began, unusually, to cry. I shepherded them both into the lounge room, and it was then that Clare made her observations on normalcy - impromptu, but perhaps as a means of resisting Sheridan's sleepy, but contagious, tears.

Greg was formally introduced to Clare at our house. I don't mean that they hadn't met, but, at first, it was a nefarious business. I mean that he didn't know who she was.

He was a friend of Sam and Sandy, and he was another ex-pupil of Heather's, but they were all too loyal to tell him. And Clare was afraid that any knowledge of her past would destroy her, forever, in



TO EARTHWARD

his opinion. And so it should have, but it didn't; of course. Why didn't he know? He wasn't stupid. I think I would have known.

Greg was an electrician. He did the electrical work at our house. Sam and Sandra informally introduced him to Clare at the club. At first, from Greg's conversation, even Heather didn't know that the 'pretty girl' was Clare. He can't have described her looks, or perhaps he was embarrassed by their strangeness - for example, her hair and her eyes. But Clare, naturally - naturally? no, it took nerve - asked Heather and I to tell him of her history. We did, when she was absent. And she wondered if he'd call her again. And he did. So romantic, so classical. But I had liked the fact that Sandy wouldn't tell, even when Clare had said she must.

In the next few months, Clare's relationship with Greg was steady but not an engagement. 'He's not a planner,' she said.

And, in one of those instances in which I awakened the profundity of her loss, I asked if she were a planner, and she answered: 'It's not that I have nothing to plan for, it's that I have nothing to plan with.'

I didn't want her to plan for anything normal, although that had been at least the Board's ostensible design. Normalcy seemed at once too good and too bad for her. They had picked me, I suppose, because I wasn't a romantic. Except in the matter of retribution. Even though at first I'd thought that the life of a Mt Druitt housewife was an even worse fate than the perpetual and convenient incarceration my employers, both the department ones and the general public, seemed to favour for her.

Why didn't Greg object to her? I don't know, but I'd testify that his reasons weren't obscene. But you know a little of me now, and that mine aren't, either?

There was an occasion, very early, after the mess-up with the dishes, when Clare and I sat by the fireplace - our house had a real fireplace. Sheridan was asleep. I asked Clare about Greg, and she said, 'He isn't a man yet. I'd love him, if he were.'

I contradicted her a little. Contradictions never hurt a healthy courtship: 'But it's too late now. You won't recognise it, when he is one.'



PLAY WITH KNIVES

Then she said to me that she and Greg had made love together and I said, 'That's good'.

And she: 'It was the first time for me with a boy', in a way that led me to believe, as had Elinor, that her first sexual encounters with women had only been mutual masturbation.

I asked, 'Did it hurt with Greg?'

'No. I lied to Elinor when I said that I'd never been penetrated before.'

'Really. Who was it?'

'No one. By myself. I used a hairbrush handle.'

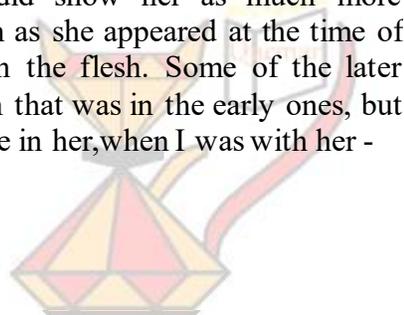
I have always steered myself against fables about vaginal toughness. I had read at an early age of how Japanese men used wooden contraceptive sheaths, and had observed Elinor's amazingly sharp collection of ornamental dildos. But Clare's information shook me. Enough to make me laugh, with feeble levity and ask: 'Which was better, Greg or the brush?'

'I don't know. It was two different things.'

I wondered if it wasn't too late for me to buy Sheridan an internal vibrator before she risked septicemia. But, as Heather also shook me when she then pointed out, Sheridan was not in an environment where she need ever substitute artifice for the living thing. An abundance of which, even in her pre-pubescent world, seemed to be available. Although Heather, laughing cautiously, affirmed Sheridan to be a virgin yet.

Once, apropos of sex: There was a disco where Elinor was on duty. Clare had skidded on very, very high heels, which Elinor had given her. The shoes didn't fit and, in them, she was as tall as Greg. Greg caught Clare's neck in the crook of his arm and pretended to choke her, so strongly that she wheezed for a moment in pain. Elinor protested and nothing else happened. I will accept this incident as apropos only of sex.

At the beginning of her freedom, many people, like Greg, had not yet connected Clare Collins with Clare Forster. Perhaps they still thought of that murderer as a child. And, for some reason, photos, especially film, TV and video, did show her as much more filled-out and childlike - very much as she appeared at the time of the killings - than she appeared in the flesh. Some of the later photographs gave her an expression that was in the early ones, but which I'd never been able to observe in her, when I was with her -



TO EARTHWARD

although Elinor said she had seen it several times. But who *wouldn't* see whatever they chose in that consummately passive little face? Little, little? Yes, for the sinister is little, like the past.

We will now salute Greg. Greg is a good man.

Sport. Greg is interested in sport.

So much for Greg. I am interested in sport, not only as an excuse for interesting conversational contradictions (I won't say the word 'gambits'), undermining and strategic, but for the games themselves.

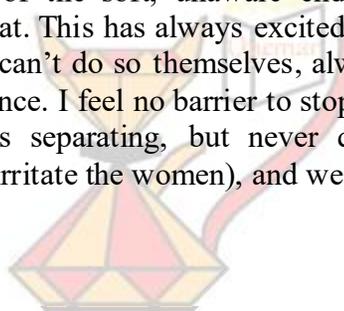
Antonelli took a dutiful, but rather conventional, attitude to sport, as if it still represented some long-ago, long-legged substitute for masturbation. I, myself, was too impatient to enjoy chess, the only nonsexual sport my adult women friends would tolerate in me, but I applied the rules of chess to less bloody sports, like football.

Talking to someone like Sam, who was not only interested but rapt in sport, I restrained my cynicism, and allowed what I was surprised to find in myself to be an enthusiasm have its head. In our sporting discussions, Clare listened to Sam and me as if she was not-being-hypocritical, or as if I was being totally hypocritical, and she was totally unsurprised.

As to sport, Heather's only concern, naturally, was that her team of juveniles win. Apart from that, her opinion of sport raised blisters. Needless to say, I can rarely remember Heather's and Sheridan's teams losing matches. But when they did, we spent a week saturating ourselves in pizza and spumante, and I proved to myself forever what a consummate psychologist I am.

The train. People edging through corridors with small, black attache cases or briefcases in front of them, angled with evenness at crutch level, and all the time (I do it myself) not positioned for aggression, but protection: of themselves, but also of companions. I noticed this, again, in the train, when Clare was released.

I am always particularly aware of the soft, unaware ends of women's hair settled on the train seat. This has always excited me. To see it and admire it, when they can't do so themselves, always gives me a small sense of omnipotence. I feel no barrier to stop me from lifting the attracting, always separating, but never quite separating strands (how that would irritate the women), and weigh



PLAY WITH KNIVES

the hair lightly in my hands, then let it slide softly between my fingers. And, before that, hold it just a fraction too long, so that the owner felt a painless tug on the scalp, and was aware of me.

I particularly felt like this when I was in an abstract, even displaced mood, such as that in which I scribbled drafts of my probation reports. And particularly on that first train journey with Clare.

I don't write this to tease, or seem unsettling, but to reveal the practical limits of my temptations at the time.

Once out of the prison, and seemingly within weeks, Clare did grow her fingernails. She painted them silver. Not glittering, but more like the duco on a car: metallic gloss that helped to harden them.

When I visited the girls' flat, Sandy always told me that she thought Dick might be the gladbagger. He certainly did have that memorable collection of pickled, articulated hands and feet. But she went out with him, none the less. Some substance was added to her suspicions later, when he knew the last victims - who didn't? - but we all rested easy about him until then.

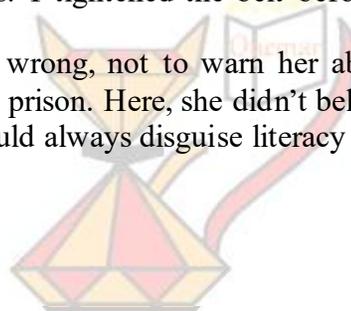
Clare fancied Dick at first, but not in any serious way. She liked redheads, but not enough to tolerate his formaldehyde pets. Leaning back on a flat beanbag (the flat was full of flat beanbags), she explained to me: 'The difference between them is that Greg has what he has, and can't lose it. Dick only has what he aspires to, and I can cost him that easily.'

I wasn't a paid monster for nothing, and I suggested: 'Greg's legs are better, too.'

She responded with equal gravity: 'But Dick has a very attractive waist and bum. Until I met him, I never even thought of men having waists at all.'

She looked where mine should have been. She had given me a wide and elaborately carved belt for Christmas. I always gave her respectable trinkets and paperbacks. I tightened the belt before I knew I had.

I thought that they'd done Clare wrong, not to warn her about reading books when she was first in prison. Here, she didn't belong to a literary generation. Still, she could always disguise literacy as



TO EARTHWARD

social affectation. I often dreaded that she might become socially affected in her attitude to murders - anyone's but I doubt if she did, ever. And that, to do her unfair justice, may have been because she belonged unfairly to an inarticulately murderous generation.

During the first weeks of her release, I discussed 'baby jokes' with her, and after dismissing - I don't know if correctly - their pornographic function, we discussed their 'dubious denial of cruelty by means of exaggeration.'

She said that, and I asked, 'When is cruelty exaggeration?'

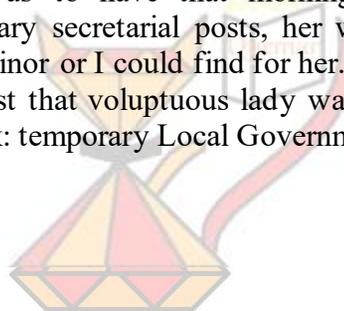
And she smiled, 'When you do it.'

But we culminated in that: baby jokes were word-of-mouth arrangements, either indicating pseudo, and therefore safe, originality, or an acquaintance, safely distant, with the originator. This ostensibly eliminated printed 'trend' jokes of the kind which influenced the 60s, and my own early adolescence - such as elephants and Tom Swifities. After and during Clare's imprisonment, or even before it, therefore, murder might have become, or again become, a more private and gossipy matter than it had been in the decade before.

Later, on the night when she was truly hysterical, she became calmer by discussing the Baader-Meinhof group and Vietnam, the P.L.O. and Mossad, which were history to her. But this did not alter the sense I had that at some future date, maybe decades away, my non-literary juniors were capable of making - indeed of welcoming - a ghastly and amorphous mayhem which their jokes could only suggest.

So: her hysteria. It interests me. Once she almost became hysterical on Mt Druitt railway station, and once she did become hysterical, in her flat.

The station: we were there fifteen minutes early for our 7.35 a.m. train. I had arranged this earliness so as to have time to chat with Clare (I had learned to chat with Clare), and to relax her and alert her for the job interview she was to have that morning in Blacktown. As well as the temporary secretarial posts, her work now consisted of anything Brian, Elinor or I could find for her. She had been Clem's receptionist, whilst that voluptuous lady was on leave, and had done piecemeal work: temporary Local Government



PLAY WITH KNIVES

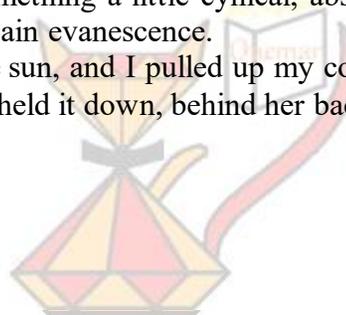
clerk (we were after that one again), some more ordinary secretary-receptionist and also some job experience connected with the administration and management course she still took at the local college. Before today's job interview, Clare had an appointment with Pat Roche - bad timing, but we couldn't help it. And, since it was customary for me to accompany her to these, I was to wait supportively during the job interview as well.

Clare had suffered insomnia lately and Clem treated it with reasonable amounts of grog rather than downers. Her body chemistry was always odd. Caffeine made her drowsy and, whilst large quantities of Mogadon did knock her out, smaller quantities could put her into an angry, candid trance, or make her frenetic and irritable. I have in my own experience, too, found grog infinitely easier, if sicklier, to awake from than dope. The night before I had been at Clare's flat, with her and Greg, Sam and Sandy, and we had all partaken of that same medicine. Clare had finally curled up snoring on the beanbag before I went home. Now, despite my plotted conviviality, neither of us paid each other much attention, as we sat stiffly on the railway station bench, wondering if the wetness were fresh paint or dew. I was also trying to remember a piece of doggerel my subconscious had invented the night before:

After I drink my grog and sleep,
I'll drink your sleep in play.
The slops will drop
into the Angels' Arms,
which are the best
chain of bars on earth to try.
I'll sell you your own
steel franchise, a cross
arched across a lying way.
A later saint, you too can buy
not just the bridge but the bay.

The last rhyme was peculiarly familiar - 'somebody bet on the bay' - and I began to ponder what influence Stephen Foster had had on my childhood subconscious. Something a little cynical, absurd, despairing, mournful perhaps, a certain evanescence.

A sour wind began to rise with the sun, and I pulled up my collar, and picked up Clare's cardigan. I'd held it down, behind her back,



TO EARTHWARD

so that she could shrug into it, before I saw that her body was tilting sideways, shaking. Her voice was shrill and unlike itself: 'I think the flat is on fire. I've left the gas alight. The window's open a bit. The curtains will catch.'

There was no time to return before the train came. Her hands clawed together, bloodless. I doubted if she had left the stove on, but I'd have to reassure her, somehow. She harshed, 'That old couple next door'll still be asleep.'

I said, 'I'll ring Harry Terrence.' The police had keys to her flat, for protective reasons, and could easily sprint across the road and check. I thought the fire brigade would be a spectacular over-reaction, and no quicker than one of Harry's coppers. I used my probation pass to dazzle a railway official (it shouldn't have: he outranked me) and, within minutes, Harry phoned back to say that his constable had confirmed that the gas had already been switched off. I went back to Clare. There was a wet streak on her cheek, and her eyes had filmed over.

I said, 'You look like a personified scream. You should have eaten your breakfast.'

'I had orange juice for blood sugar.'

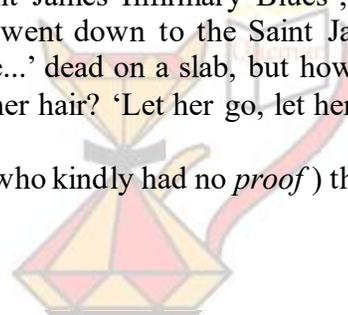
'It's not that, but Harry's constable has wolfed all your scrambled eggs. The stove was definitely off.' I hadn't told her at once, because I was afraid that her relief might result in a wild crying fit. Had something so small broken her at last?

No. She glanced leftward for the train, donned her cardigan unaided and stood up, steadily. But when I held her arm, the fine tremor was so electric that it sent my fingers numb.

She was given the temporary council job. Pat reported her 'unchanged'.

When she did really become hysterical, in her flat a few weeks afterwards, the fault - if I am to consider it one, and even though the incident was again fire-connected - was largely mine. At the start, I was humming the old 'Saint James Infirmary Blues', and trying to remember the words: 'I went down to the Saint James Infirmary, and I saw my baby there...' dead on a slab, but how did the rhyme work, something about her hair? 'Let her go, let her go, God bless her...'

I'd just been tipped off by Harry (who kindly had no *proof*) that



PLAY WITH KNIVES

she'd been with a group of kids sniffing cocaine, on the banks of the Nepean, the night before. LSD was involved, but it was mainly a 'White Lady' party. They were calling cocaine 'White Lady' in the western suburbs then. Sam had been there, sniffing - apparently he had taken Clare to it, and she had charitably paid for his share - but I gathered that Greg and Sandra weren't there.

I didn't care what Clare smoked, swallowed or sniffed, but the slightest hint that she had broken her parole would give the Authorities all the excuse they ever wanted to imprison her again. Even in that pre-Crack decade, the word 'cocaine' had all the decadent connotations that 'whiskey' once had for the Temperance Union.

When I arrived at the flat, I could hear the TV inside, and didn't knock first, just tried the knob. I then knocked very loudly. The TV stopped. No one opened the door. My knock had actually shaken the door, almost splintering its edge. I realised my anger wasn't just theatrical.

'It's only me,' I spoke clearly, in a voice not meant to reassure. Still, no one opened the door. I opened it with my emergency key. Greg wasn't there. Sam and Sandy were uneasily 'watching' the mute TV. Clare was standing impassively in front of her bedroom door, watching me.

I said to the others, 'Go.'

Sandra started to explain on Clare's behalf, but Clare said quietly, 'Don't. It's no use. He's just doing his job.'

Sam and Sandy started to leave. Sam looked sullen. I said, 'Come back late.'

He said, 'Sandy can spend the night at my place.' He was now shackled up with a pleasant male midwife, from Blacktown.

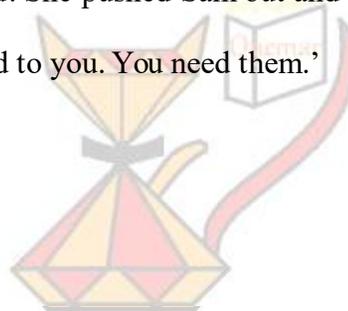
As they walked out, I said to Sandy, 'About the cocaine: your brother is an imbecile, like Clare.'

Clare said, 'It was my fault.'

'He was already one, obviously,' I tried awkwardly to maintain my awfulness, 'before Clare helped it along.'

Sandy glanced at Clare, and advised me, 'Be cool', and I let her see softness in my eyes for a second. She pushed Sam out and shut the door behind her.

I said to Clare, 'She's a good friend to you. You need them.'



TO EARTHWARD

She still stood upright, silently, the palms of her hands cupping her hip-bones, as if she had some feminine pain to ease. But she held her body softly, and there was no hurting, swaying movement about it. It was more as if the posture were to protect some thought or feeling.

There: I've made the dichotomy again, when I've never believed in the difference. The psyche and body are separate, surely, but intellect and emotion are not of a different order, or nature, or origin to each other. This creed makes guilt and justice possible, not retribution, but goodness. Nor, of course, am I justifying my ancestor. Indeed, I'm preserving my justified adolescent reaction against him, for despite a mask or two - fewer than you or my colleagues might suspect - I have never lent in his favour, except where my leniency or negligence might otherwise prove him right.

There were times when the slant of the bones in Clare's face gave her an elfinly over-attentive look, not quite ironic, but as if she studied you for some very arcane and serious purpose, only dubiously connected with humanity. This expression on her face now riled me further. I sang snatches of the 'Saint James Infirmary' to myself, as I tidied up her clothes - she was in her dressing-gown - that were strewn on the floor. I was trying to provoke her. I did.

She whispered, 'Next time, I'll remember your impertinence and bar the door.'

I didn't raise my voice, either: 'Next time, I'll probably break my shoulder trying to break the bar. Will there be a next time?'

She wasn't willing to concede a thing: 'I am going to sniff cocaine again.'

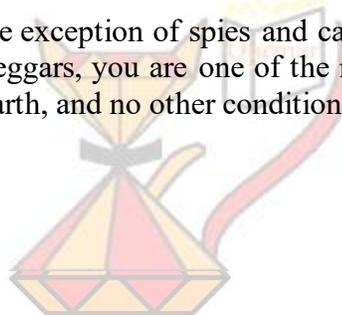
I threw her clothes through the bedroom door onto the bed, stood close to her in the bedroom doorway, asked, 'Why?', and added, 'You sound happy about it.'

'Yes, I've fully realised that, whatever happens, I will spend the rest of my life in some or other sheltered workshop, and I've decided to accept that and be pleased.'

'Would that make me one of the shelterers?'

'I know you not to be.'

I succeeded in not being: 'With the exception of spies and cancer victims and soldiers and starving beggars, you are one of the most exposed and imperilled people on earth, and no other condition is



PLAY WITH KNIVES

fit for you.’ She seemed coolly exhilarated by this, and I continued: ‘Moreover, if I thought, for a second, that I had provided you with an inch of gratuitous safety, I would resign tomorrow.’

‘Easily said.’

‘Not for me. I’ve never threatened to resign in my life, and I never will. When I resign, I’ll simply walk in there and do it.’

‘Because of me?’ Her question was a parody now, a self-flirtatious contempt.

‘Because of me.’ But, then, what would I do? Some clerical job, some retraining, perhaps in law, or a Dip.Ed.? No, it was too close to my soul, that one. I would never allow them a chance to hit me there. I asked, ‘So, are you “too abnormally normal” to live outside prison?’

‘No, but I feel that it’s spiritually and socially wrong that I should Even if your employers hadn’t already decided.’ Had they? Perhaps I knew they were probably using me, but did they know, themselves, what the use was?

‘So, to provoke the social abnormality of prison, you’ve chosen the perceptual abnormality of drugs?’

‘A drug. You mean an unprescribed drug. All the others, before, didn’t seem to worry you.’

‘Don’t be trite.’

‘The way you said “drugs” was trite. Anyway, I have to be trite, or no one, but you, will trust me.’

‘So you do know I trust you.’

‘Not to do good.’

Why had I assumed that I trusted her? I’d never assumed it, before. ‘I’ve tried to trust you to do nothing. Goodness and badness weren’t concerned’, I said.

‘Are they concerned now, concerning a drug?’

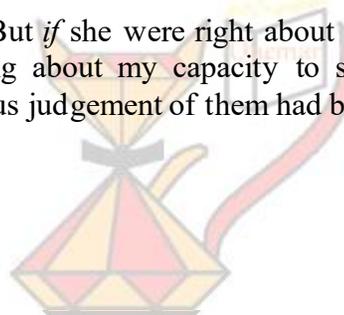
‘Only in that you are doing a bad thing to me, by wasting the work I’ve done’, I said too quickly.

Our words weren’t louder, but more and more rapid.

‘They won’t think of it that way,’ she objected.

‘Who are “They”?’ You’re paranoid. You can’t mean Elinor, or Antonelli or the Board?’

Of course, she meant the Board. But *if* she were right about their intentions, was she possibly wrong about my capacity to serve them? And, as I’ve said, my generous judgement of them had been



that they might allow her the impossible: self-respect without self-romance. And my more exact verdict was that, although this was the only version of her they could give its freedom, they did, as she herself now believed, intend it to fail, and that they thought that I would be too ruthless to deny that it had. It was her level way of expressing this dilemma that was beginning to explode my anger I was past believing those things to be true, but now I must consider them again.

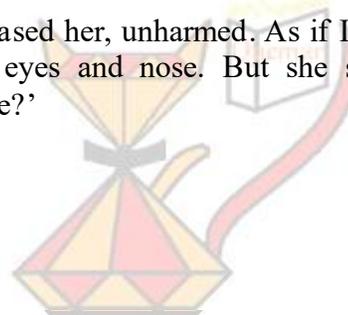
She said, 'I'm helping the inevitable to happen, but with less suspense and pain. And, anyway, it isn't justice that I should be free.'

And I: 'Why should you be in prison when you suffer less there? And why should you break the law? And sniffing cocaine, so very sociably and vulnerably, with your friends by the river need not be a bad mark against you. If I want, I can explain you needed something to drug away your remorse. But I won't. I won't even report it. This first time. In fact, it is the sort of silliness which Elinor, whom I won't tell either, would consider to be hopeful. You are a truly clever little bitch.'

She responded, at last, with indignation. 'We both know the whole thing is hopeless and contrived. You've tried to tell me that you were more reliable and less corrupt than any of the others.'

My rage now became a little harder to fuel, but I could feel, delving aridly in my mind, as I paused, none of my usual insidious, vitriolic reserves. Her soft-voiced, but jerkily physical, anger seemed a more enduring condensation of my own. Not that mine had previously had the freedom of real physical expression, even in a small symbolic fashion. And if I was going to hit her, it would have to be soon. Part of my mind relaxed into wistful fantasy. If I hit her, it must be humiliating for her: painful but with none of the glamour risked by a blow on the cheek. Her dressing-gown was short-sleeved. I caught her by her right arm and raised my hand to slap her viciously on her left upper-arm. There was enough flesh there to cushion her against real damage but the stinging noise would be explosive.

Then reality interposed, and I released her, unharmed. As if I had really struck her, she wiped her eyes and nose. But she said, steadily, 'Is that supposed to stop me?'



PLAY WITH KNIVES

‘No It was pure self-expression. You insulted my professional integrity.’

‘You’ve never claimed to have any professional integrity’, she reiterated sadly.

‘There was supposed to be integrity in my claiming not to have it. There isn’t any conspiracy to re-incarcerate you. It is still a feeble idea in a few feeble brains. But, now you’re out, they’re just as happy not to pay your keep, providing you don’t draw silly attention to yourself.’

Whilst listening to me, she had been rubbing her arm, absently, as if I had really caused it pain. My anger was drying into exasperation, until she screamed.

She screamed once, in what seemed to me a contrived way. I saw that she was looking towards the window, and I went to it. There was a reddish flicker reflected in the corner, and I could see, through an angle of the locked insect screen, that a building down the street was on fire. It was a small fire. As I saw it, I could hear the sirens, and then the first fire-engine arrived. The building was an empty block of flats, and the fire was extinguished within minutes.

Clare, however, had sat down tensely on the couch and was whimpering to herself. I was seriously annoyed again.

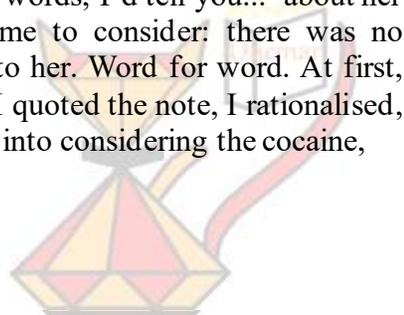
It was as if the Pathetic Fallacy itself, the metaphor to suggest humanity in inhuman events, had materialised, in the fire outside, to mock us. I felt Clare was using it, and me. I ordered, ‘Stop that!’

Her reaction was astonishing. She flung her arms up and screamed - screamed - every word: ‘You’re cruel. You’re a bastard. You’re just as cruel as you boasted you were, when you were a child. You’re worse than me!’

Astonishingly, too, I had to defend myself: ‘No. I’ve changed. I feel I’ve channelled my cruelty into humane things.’

‘No. You kill people with words. You murder me!’

‘If I really wanted to kill you with words, I’d tell you...’ about her stepfather’s suicide note. I had time to consider: there was no excuse for what I did. I quoted it to her. Word for word. At first, she seemed less distraught. Whilst I quoted the note, I rationalised, dishonestly, that I was shocking her into considering the cocaine,



TO EARTHWARD

warning her of her precarious freedom and the deadliness of life. And I thought she must have had an inkling of the note from Elinor.

Then I saw from her face: no. No. She began to prow! around the room, crisscrossing it and keeping up an incoherent flow of mordant insults, that parodied my own in the past.

Then her laughter came. It was deep, not high-pitched, and I felt my mouth twitch with that innate urge one does feel to join in hysterical mirth.

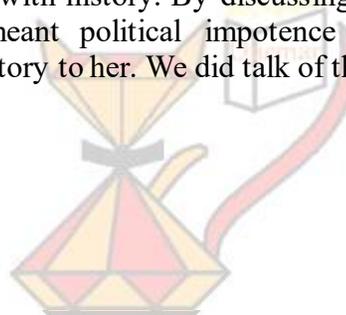
Then silence again.

She beat her hand against her lips. Before I could move, her teeth had snapped a piece of skin from between her thumb and forefinger. There was a rush of light, veinous - not arterial - blood. She looked surprised at her own accuracy, and I pushed her into the kitchen. I held her hand under the tap and plastered on bandaids.

I led her back into the loungeroom. I tried my charming, ironic smile. For a second, she made her own face successfully charming and ironic, and then she was kneeling on the floor, clutching me, crying and accusing in rapid words, now senselessly rapid, and I had knelt before her, so that I was holding her, shaking my head, soothing her, but also responding in a confused, hurt way. My face was wet. We were clasped together like frightened children. And remembered another scene vividly. I had taken her and Sheridan to see Jacoby's *Hamlet*. He had upbraided and clung to his Ophelia, just so, on the floor of the castle. I had been struck by its verity, at the time, by the truth of the posture. It wasn't that I thought the experience with Clare was histrionic; only that it was ineluctable, and, therefore, that it was proving the actor's art to be true.

I rocker her until until she was still, and when she looked at me, her mouth gaping, her face swollen and streaked with saliva, I said, 'It's only me,' as kindly as I could.

She sat on the couch decorously and tightened her thick dressing-gown over her knees. She was humming some grisly bits from 'The Saint James Infirmary', I think without awareness. It was then that I began to calm her with history. By discussing the bitter guerrilla campaigns that meant political impotence and voyeurism to me, but distracting history to her. We did talk of the



PLAY WITH KNIVES

Baader-Meinhof group, yes, and were agreed that Ulrike Meinhof had been strangled in prison, to make her hanging look like suicide.

I asked Clare: 'Do you admire her?'

'No. The campaign had no balance. Nothing long-term to attract the people.'

On Vietnam, we discussed the magnificent patience and industry, the exquisite commonsense, of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. I said, 'It's the tunnels at the end that attract me most, how they penetrate to Saigon'.

She murmured, 'When I was a child, I always wanted to live underground. Dad lived in a dug-out, when he was young. His father was a miner.' Her mention of William - I knew she meant William - had been natural and relaxed.

Peacefully, I remembered the quote, 'to all my length', from *To Earthward*, but didn't tell her.

The P.L.O. attracted both our sympathies, but we admired the intellect of Mossad, if not its awful allies. I was becoming cynical with lack of sleep, and quoted to her an Israeli politician who said that his colleagues had died for the Land of Milk and Honey, and it was rotting the teeth of their children. She was cuddled comfortably against the chair arm and had to wake up to smile.

Then she looked startled, and I reassured: 'It will be daylight soon. The birds will be singing. My father used to say that to me when he sat with me while I had asthma.'

'Thanks for not calling Clem when I was screaming.'

'I didn't want any more witnesses.'

'And the cocaine?'

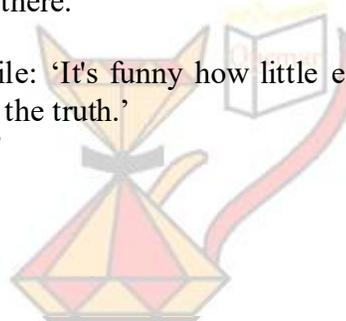
'My judgement has to be fair. If I still pronounce you unsuitable for civilisation, it must be because of something more profound, or innate, or logical. Not anything as adolescent as the cocaine.'

She shrugged, 'I won't sniff it again', since it was no longer an issue. She made coffee. As she gave me my cup and saucer she said casually, 'By the way, it isn't true that I suffered less in prison than I do out. I suffered much more there.'

'I know that. I was lying to you.'

She gave a shy, but confident smile: 'It's funny how little either of us have really cared about telling the truth.'

'We've always been too sure of it.'



TO EARTHWARD

She was speculative: 'And we are both such honest people: that is assuming that murder and dishonesty are quite separate things.'

'And that the basic deceit in your soul has nothing to do with moral choice.'

'Do you mean my soul, or are you generalising?'

I said, 'I mean your soul.'

'Yes, but the deceit is in your soul, too. That's why you can lie to me so well.'

'I can't be doing it too well, if you can recognise it so easily.'

'It doesn't matter. I'll act as if I believe you.'

I scoffed: 'And so will I.'

Before I left, I squeezed her unhurt hand.

Two days later, I was at a table in the cafeteria of the College (soon to become a University), eating yoghurt with Richard, and waiting for Clare. He began to sing, parodying a pop song: 'White Lady for a White Lady...'

Damning the grapevine (or was he there at the river?), I lied: 'She's lucky it wasn't White Lady.'

He was interested, 'Have you tried White Lady?'

'Do you mean cocaine, or methylated-spirits-and-milk?'

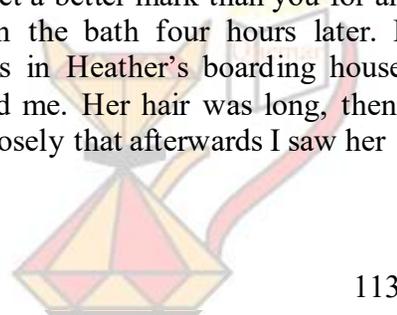
'Either.'

'Both. There weren't any ill effects in either case, but I can't recommend them as aids to digestion. And everybody's liver isn't as leathery as mine. I'll also admit that I was at Uni, at the time, and, in the matter of the liquor, there was a little meths and a helluva lot of milk. And that I won twenty bucks and a night with the barmaid for drinking it.'

'Was the barmaid worth it?'

'Oh, yes. She was doing the same philosophy and psychology courses I was, and waitressing in the local pub at night. She only stayed with me because she thought I was going to die of what I'd drunk. When I didn't, she married me, a few years later.'

It was all true enough. And maybe you do have a special affection for someone, if you've seen them get a better mark than you for an essay on Mill, and then vomit in the bath four hours later. I remembered crouching on the tiles in Heather's boarding house and retching, with her arms around me. Her hair was long, then, and very soft, and she held me so closely that afterwards I saw her



PLAY WITH KNIVES

discreetly rinse some foul vomit from the ends of it. All the while, I had tried to achieve what bravado I could by discoursing hoarsely on Mill, and exactly why her essay had really been much better than mine. She had pinpointed the essence, that in Mill's view everything immoral should also be illegal, and that if it were socially ridiculous to make it illegal, then there was no point in regarding the act as immoral, only in judging its social and personal worth. After a few more false alarms of agonising dry retching, I had managed to stand up and prop my arm around her shoulders, so that she could stagger down the corridor with me and arrange me on her bed. When I was half asleep, I had heard her go back out, sluice the bath and disinfect it. Then, she came back and sat reading beside me, until I awoke. She had said, 'You're not supposed to be here.' I had become practical with convalescence: 'Then we'll have to find somewhere else.'

She sponged me a bit with water and cologne, but I still had the stink of the night before, and I apologised for not being a likely sex object. She disagreed. I suppose in those days a man describing himself as a possible sex object was a reasonably hopeful nonsexist sign. She had slid her hand under the back of my head, and squeezed my own hands together over her breasts, and our marriage, regardless of how much later it was formalised, had begun.

I had settled comfortably and silently into my memory, and Richard was becoming impatient for the girls to arrive - Clare was at a class with Amanda O'Neill and Cait Fleming. When they did arrive, they were laughing in that way a group of girls have - with a wild joy that arouses suspicion and jealousy in men. But Clare's laugh here was a controlled and inoffensive one.

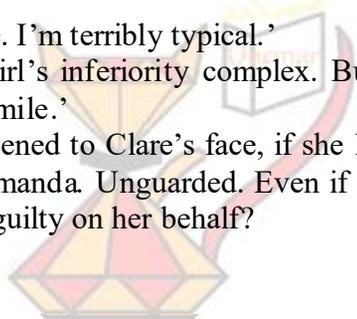
Beautiful, wriggly Cait had an unopened newspaper and cudgelled Richard with it. He tugged her easily down onto his lap. I felt my lap tighten under the table. Amanda sat beside me, and Clare opposite, with a book.

I addressed Amanda: 'I've seen you with Clare, but not met you before.'

'You've met me but not noticed me. I'm terribly typical.'

Typically terrible, in her young girl's inferiority complex. But I contradicted: 'No, I remember the smile.'

I wondered what would have happened to Clare's face, if she had dared to smile, wonderfully, like Amanda. Unguarded. Even if she hadn't felt guilty, would I have felt guilty on her behalf?



TO EARTHWARD

Amanda smiled again. She was terribly typical in looks: long hair between brown and blonde, eyes between grey and blue, medium height and build, good skin, but a bit spotty. She was also unmarried, with a pregnancy starting to show. Far from being guilty, she delighted in discussing this. That was what we did for a while, even Dick showing sensitive support and encouragement.

Then she asked Clare, 'How many children do you and Greg want?'

Clare said, 'I won't marry. And I've had my children.'

It was the first reference I'd heard her make, oblique or otherwise, to her killings in a group like that, and her friends were all openly nonplussed, wondering if she could possibly have meant what she did mean.

I said slowly and publicly, 'That was tasteless.'

Her self-defence was terse: Catharsis.'

I did approve of that reason, and the others nodded, numbly, but I suspected her of a squalid, sensational grain of self-mortification. My mouth felt hollow, then tasted sour.

Clare asked, with dignity, 'What's in the paper?'

What was in Cait's newspaper was more tasteless still. I hadn't heard it on the news that morning, because Heather and I had switched if off for a tender and spontaneous fuck before work - we had been careful to use the verb 'fuck' correctly, as one did in that D.H. Lawrence-conscious era. And I'd been writing reports all day. There were water-slides in this area, then. They had swimming pools under closed water tunnels, down which kids slid on rubber mats. One of those shoots had been blocked early this morning. When they sluiced it, a gladbagger victim popped out. She had been a tiny fifteen-year-old called Donna Falano. When they removed the garbage bag - she'd only needed one - her wristwatch surged from her womb in clotted blood. She had been in school uniform, with no ornaments.

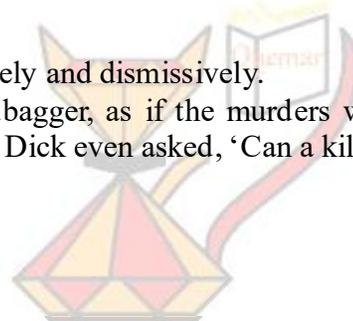
Clare said, 'I didn't know.' She had the absent-minded look of oncoming shock.

I said, 'You weren't to know. I'm sorry. You should be able to mention your past.'

She calmed and looked alert.

'This is the present', Dick said sanely and dismissively.

For an hour, we debated the gladbagger, as if the murders were merely a fictional game, or therapy. Dick even asked, 'Can a killer



PLAY WITH KNIVES

like the gladbagger murder, someone he knows, or does it have to be a stranger?’

‘Most of us,’ I remarked, ‘can only kill people we know rather well. So people who murder strangers exonerate us.’

Clare listened and contributed in a quiet, decent way. She knew that, from my point of view, this discussion would test her.

I had asked, ‘Do you want to go home?’

She’d said, ‘No.’

She’d stayed, for my test: perhaps she passed.

A golden-russet field of grain. Thick, dense, impenetrable and a ripe, blended colour, clustered easily to meet the clean scythe, and the scythe cutting cleanly through it, in tight blocks, as the single strands cluster-fall dryly, functionally and necessarily. And this as a comforting, reassuring evocation of death, a comfortable one, although, in my dream, I knew the actual picture of the stalks, before the harvest, was just an overly popular Van Gogh painting, and one I didn’t, or hadn’t, particularly cared about.

My adult asthma was usually just an irritable cough-and-three-pillows affliction, but it woke me then. Heather was awake. I could feel my sense of being merge with hers and Sheridan’s. I told Heather about my dream. The conviction of not fearing my own mortality lingered so powerfully that I had to express it.

Heather said, ‘We shouldn’t have watched that Boston Strangler movie last night.’

‘You wanted to.’

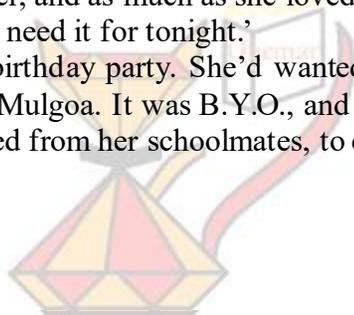
‘I needed to. It helped me unwind.’

Before watching it, she’d been typing her resignation. Her favourite pupil had failed an exam. After the movie, she’d torn up the letter: ‘Well, maybe after seeing that much suffering, I didn’t need to hurt myself, anymore.’

You may have observed that I was in love with her work as much as she. That is, as much as I loved her, and as much as she loved it.

I kissed her: ‘Get some rest. You’ll need it for tonight.’

Tonight was Sheridan’s fifteenth birthday party. She’d wanted to dance, so we’d hired a little hall at Mulgoa. It was B.Y.O., and - at Sheridan’s request - the guests ranged from her schoolmates, to old



TO EARTHWARD

family friends, and even some of my charges. The social possibilities were infinite and disturbing. I heard myself groan as I sank back to sleep.

Of course, my anxiety proved unnecessary. Except about Dick. I just managed to confiscate his present for Sheridan in time. From the flat, large nature of his parcel, I assumed rightly that it was his favourite coffee-table volume: the illustrated forensic textbook. He grinned and produced another packet from his pocket. It was transparent and contained an elegant, orange orchid. With narrowed eyes, I let him pass.

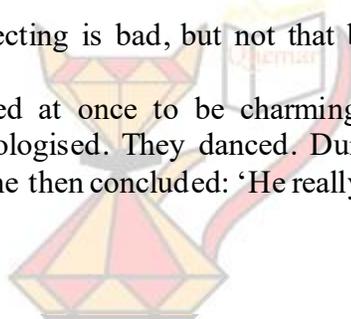
I carried the bestseller off into the toilet, for further inspection. Apart from sightings on the train, I'd already read sections of it in a Criminology course. I wondered if any of Clare's victims were in it. I was not quite able to gauge the extent of Dick's morbidity. Except for some undeveloped specimens of abortion and infanticide, all the subjects were adult, in so far as some were recognisably human and animal, not vegetable or mineral. I wondered what inhibition or rectitude had prompted the editor's omission of children. Then I wondered at my own ethics in looking there for another portrait of Clare's victims. Was it a delusion that Richard might have played gruesome games with a book that contained his friend's personal horror? Would it have excited me to see pictures of the children again? Certainly, I'd guessed at once what my family - and Clare? - were meant to see. Apart from Sheridan's reaction - and she may have proved unshockable - neither I, nor anyone else in charge of Clare, would have known how to deal with it.

I locked the book in my car boot and explained to Heather. She shuddered. 'He's always made me nervous.' She wasn't usually ruffled about youthful aberrations.

Clem had arrived and we cross-questioned him about his future colleague. Heather said, 'Sandy still thinks he could be the gladbagger.'

Clem scratched his ear. 'His dissecting is bad, but not that bad. I'll have a word with him.'

He did. Dick must have promised at once to be charming to Heather. He held her hand and apologised. They danced. During her first dance with me that night, she then concluded: 'He really is



PLAY WITH KNIVES

idealistic about his Medicine.'

After an initial dance with Sheridan, I had danced with Heather, and then Clare. It seemed to me that, for all my cynicism, there were many premeditated acts of kindness that I could perform for Clare, and of which no one else would understand the value. I knew, for example, the importance of her dancing so early, and with me. The Board - and I - had been testing her too much lately, and too often, and she was taking self-imprisoning revenge. She wouldn't dance, even with Greg.

She had a remarkable, and on this occasion vindictive, ability to sit with her spine straight, her hands composed on her lap, and her uncrossed legs together, as she stared - blinking and refocusing her gaze often enough not to be bizarrely trancelike - into impersonal air. Forever. She had practised this to such a perfection that her discretion made it effectively imperceptible, unless you knew her, or - since Greg was already unnerved by it - thought you knew her.

Comforting her, I declared, 'I'm testing you again.'

'How?'

'Now we should tunnel each other out. I'm guilty about all this testing. Will you dance with me, please?'

We did dance together: very well, since we could, at this new time let our ease grow and turn to energy, and we became, at times, nimble and inventive on our small space of floor.

She said, 'I like to dance with you best.'

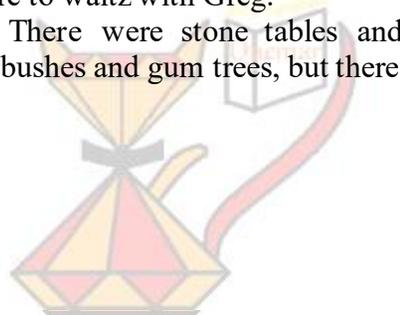
'Because I don't touch you.'

'Yes, but that's not a form of frigidity, you know.' She was analysing, not speaking suggestively.

I wheezed, 'I see what you mean. In formal dancing, the man's arm exercises sexual control.'

'Can sex be anything but mutual control?' asked Dick. He had just unwelded himself from Sandy, who'd done all her dancing with her eyes. She had an odd affection, I thought, for this suspected mass murderer, but perhaps her buoyancy wouldn't be enough for her to float outside with him. But she did lead him outside, and I followed, leaving Clare to waltz with Greg.

Outside was cold, but pleasant. There were stone tables and benches, squat log fences, aromatic bushes and gum trees, but there



TO EARTHWARD

seemed to be no clouds or moon, and the stars were arctic in their splendour. Clem was sitting at a bench with my daughter and a dark wine bottle.

He said, 'Despite intelligent exceptions like my companion here, I'm pleased I do not have children.'

I remembered all those sudden departures for the labour ward from various clubs, pubs, dinners, lectures and parties, and pronounced: 'Your problem is that you've had too many. Not that it's been a problem for them.' I felt too mentally tired and too physically vibrant not to praise him a little, and I was hoping alcohol would excuse the sentiment.

Sheridan hinted, 'The music isn't too loud once you're actually dancing.' Our physician escorted her inside, with a mellow bow.

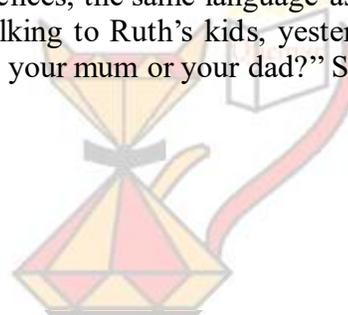
Arm-in-arm with Brian, Elinor was strolling through the trees. 'Isn't it amazing what people can grow out of?' She called out cheerfully, with a meaningful glance inside that was meant to indicate Clare.

I said, 'Yes', noncommittally, and Elinor looked disappointed. But my tone hadn't been meant for her. I have seen too many people grow out of things: eagerness, devotion, and in time, life itself.

Clem returned from dancing with Sheridan, and sat at his bench again. I had found it hard to relax with Sheridan, lately. I lingered outside the window for a time, watching my daughter waltz in Sam's arms. She had a convenient crush on the unattainable Sam. Clem poured me some red: 'The best thing life can give you is a helpless love, and the best thing to be done with it is to describe it.' The wine turned out to be Chateau Neuf du Pape.

I said, 'I never realised that I loved my daughter so much.'

I drank his ambrosia functionally, not catching it behind the teeth on the tongue, but pouring it straight along my teeth - my large, square teeth - and letting it flow, almost freely, down my throat. I didn't cough, but I had to wipe my lips. I went on: 'When I was a kid, I always felt too absorbed in my parents' life. I didn't have many friends. I was frightened that would happen to Sheridan. I wanted her to have the same experiences, the same language as her friends, not me. I overheard her talking to Ruth's kids, yesterday. They asked: "Who's your favourite, your mum or your dad?"' She



PLAY WITH KNIVES

said, “Depends whose pay week it is”.’

Clem exhaled pipe smoke, ‘She was joking.’

‘Yes, but it’s the sort of joke I would have made. Then they asked, “Who’s the boss, your mum or dad?”, and she said, “I don’t know.” They said, “Who do you ask how to spell things?” She replied, “My mother”, and they said, “Then she’s the boss”.’

‘Of course, she is’, said Clem, ‘That doesn’t mean you can’t spell for Sheridan, if you have to.’

‘She doesn’t ask me.’

‘And you know, for Heather’s sake, that she shouldn’t?’

‘Yes.’

On this note of respectable loss, I went back to host the party. Inside, I used an eye signal to direct Clare over to Ruth and Heather. Months ago, when Ruth first met Clare at our house, Ruth hardly said a word, but was not unfriendly. She just seemed to sense, quite peacefully, that there was something inappropriate for her in a long conversation with Clare, as if the room held Clare as a phantom that had to be addressed: included every now and then in the company, out of courtesy, or habitual superstition. But Clare was one of the few people I knew who did not seem to make Ruth nervous, which was why I liked to bring them together, when I could. Clare hadn’t previously objected to this, but, today, before the party, when I rang and asked her to be sure to socialise with Ruth, she’d said, ‘Of course, but she frightens me.’

‘Why?’

She considered so long that she might have invented the reply: ‘Because you are using us, and she knows that, and wants to stop you. She’s like Greg taking all the electricity out of something.’

‘Personally or professionally?’

‘Both. He can do it personally.’

‘Out of you?’

‘Yes.’

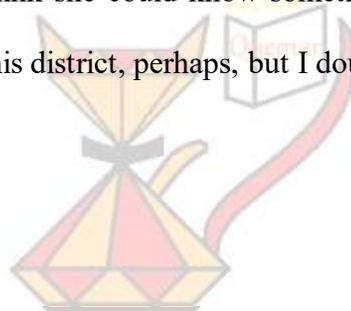
‘Do I take it, too?’

‘Not like that.’

‘You’re frightened of her because she reminds you of Janice.’

Her voice was scared: ‘Do you think she could know something about Janice? Be related to her?’

I took the question seriously. ‘In this district, perhaps, but I doubt



TO EARTHWARD

if she'd know it. Or care. She just feels a sort of vague affinity with you. It's you who are draining yourself when you're with her. Are you still afraid?

She simulated coolness. 'No. I didn't say I wouldn't talk to her, did I?'

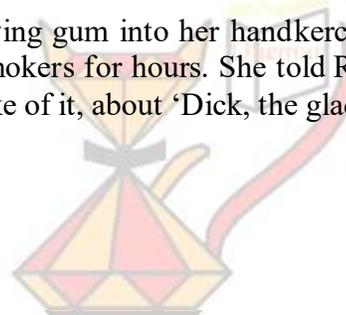
I'd deliberately said nothing for a few seconds and then breathed, 'See you', trying hard at my best exasperated sigh.

Now Heather and Ruth were discussing the adjustment problems of one of Ruth's boys, who was overly shy and couldn't tell Heather when he was having learning difficulties. Ruth was usually calm with Heather, but appeared uneasy now. Her domestic problems embarrassed her. And despite the presence of her boisterous children, she was nervous without her husband, who was on shift work that night. Clare's company did 'earth' her. Her hands unclenched at once.

I came over, too. I respected Ruth and felt warm towards her. She had shoplifted expensive and pretty children's clothing, most of it too small for her family. She kept it folded away. She didn't know why she liked it. She, Clare, Heather and I all had an inexplicable, but no doubt voyeuristic, delight in strolling past other people's houses in the hot dusk, when their windows were open. We would look at their lighted rooms full of many coloured, styled and arranged furniture, which would be made mouth-watering by its inaccessibility. This pleasure could be marred if there were people in the rooms. The people always looked about two sizes too large for their furniture.

Sheridan didn't share this taste, perhaps because she had never really wanted dolls, or had a fancy for a doll's house, even though we tried to encourage her, as well as towards unsexist 'boys' toys, of course. If anything, she preferred toy animals and farms, but really, from babyhood, she'd always liked games and sporting equipment, where the rules were clearly set out, and you could just as clearly win, if you wanted to and tried. Her fixation on Sam seemed out of character, unless her character had altered, radically. At least, she still played football.

Heather privately spat some chewing gum into her handkerchief. She'd been surrounded by chain-smokers for hours. She told Ruth, now that she was able to make a joke of it, about 'Dick, the glad-



PLAY WITH KNIVES

bagger.' Ruth reminisced about one of the gladbagger victims, Mrs. Miller. Ruth's husband (Ruth always liked to mention him) had worked in a warehouse which supplied the jeweller's for which Mrs. Miller did the accounting. She shared a losing lottery ticket with him and the head storeman once, when some crystal arrived undamaged from the wharf. The detail disquieted me, made the victim seem too human. It obviously keyed Clare, too. She, stopped following our talk with her face, and too intensely averted her attention to the band.

Clem perceived her disquiet and approached. What I thought of professionally as 'the chain of reassurance' was amazing tonight. He gave Clare a long, unself-conscious hug. I was grateful, seeing how animated Clare seemed by his tall, pullovered, plump, physical proximity, and that terrible, welcome stench of grog and pipe tobacco.

Clem danced with Daphne. Daphne had literally danced every dance, her immaculate tiny feet never missing a note, and not a hint of sweat beneath her sleeves.

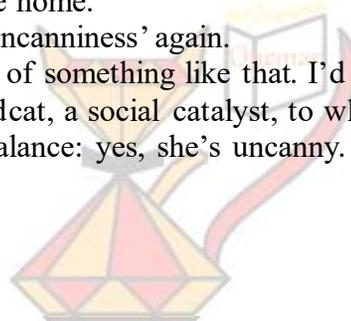
At the party's end, Sheridan and I stacked and dismantled tables while Daphne, Heather and Clem gossiped and laughed outside. In the car, as Sheridan slept, Heather accused me, lightly, of not being as communicative as Clem. I explained, 'Doctors have to talk. It's their trade, like common whores. Probation officers are like decent whores. We force ourselves to listen, then forget all that we've heard.'

In the next holidays, Sheridan stayed more than a week at her grandparents. She didn't want to come home. Heather was impatient, made curt replies to my objections, but accepted the absence, better than I.

On the second Monday, Daphne was out china-painting, and Clem came around for drinks, after tea. He laughed about Sheridan 'Leave them alone, and they'll come home.'

We'd been talking about Clare's 'uncanniness' again.

Clem considered, 'Yes. I'm aware of something like that. I'd say, though, that she's a subliminal wildcat, a social catalyst, to whom people become sensitised. In the balance: yes, she's uncanny. But why should it worry one now?'



TO EARTHWARD

I said, 'It doesn't worry me. It seems odd, though, as you've always suggested, in regard to the theory that she's a sort of genetic mutation.'

'Oh, and the hair, you mean?'

I shook my head. 'That happens to people often. Like the palms of her hands and her footsoles. Nothing else about her - they've done some tests - is aging prematurely now.'

'Perhaps a remission?'

'All of Life,' I parodied our old, contented fireside philosophising 'is a remission.'

He continued this tone, 'And she has all her life before her.'

I curtailed the irony with, 'And I, unfortunately, have all the rest of mine.'

He said, 'Perhaps Sheridan *should* come home.'

'She doesn't want to.' He was going to say something, but I curtailed that, too: 'I've come as near as I can to pleading, but she won't.'

'She will sometime.'

'I know that.' I don't know why I added: 'Right now, anyway, I don't really want her to come back.' It surprised me, but it may have been the truth, since my motive for saying it certainly wasn't pride. He didn't seem surprised, and that, too, was unusual. He was a man who had more than enough confidence to express surprise easily.

He admitted, 'If time would stop, I'd remain here near the fire, with a sip of scotch almost at my lips, and the taste of the last one still inside them. And contemplate the sound of our voices.'

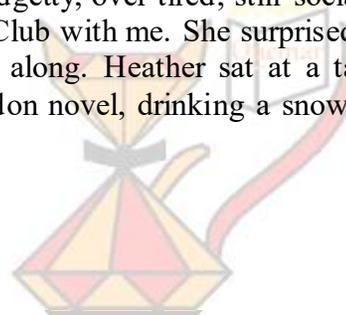
'Just the sound, not the semantics?'

'Just the sound.'

Suddenly, I was reminded of Clare on her night of hysteria, and knew that he needed my sympathy.

He let his head loll, and then nod back, and he sighed, 'The sound...the sound...the sound.' I knew that he would sleep for an hour. I took the scotch from his chairside, so that he wouldn't upset it with his hand.

After he'd slept and left, I was fidgetty, over-tired, still sociable, and asked Heather to come to the Club with me. She surprised me by agreeing, but she took a book along. Heather sat at a table, contentedly reading her Fay Wheldon novel, drinking a snowball, and watching me play the pokies.



PLAY WITH KNIVES

Maybe the timing was coincidence, but, on that same night, we saw two old acquaintances. Silkie, after Silverwater Prison, had lived with her mother, and then, I'd heard, moved up north, and married Len. But, tonight, she sat - her bright hair short and spiky - at a table, amid loud, garish machines, with her loud, defensive girlfriends, and a beer, a wedding ring and a closed, waiting, married face.

I smiled tentatively. She ignored me, and I accepted that, thankfully. I wanted no more close-ups of waste and deterioration. When I returned to our table, I told Heather about Silkie. Heather said, 'I know. I said "hello" to her.'

We conversed about school. Silkie and her friends tottered upstairs on stilettos to watch *The Hungry Dead*. Heather asked me: 'Don't those girls frighten you more than Clare does?'

'Yes. For different reasons.'

'Maybe', said Heather, with unusual aggression, 'for the same reasons?'

I was saved from self-defence by the entrance of Jonathan Manger. Jonathan was immaculately casual. The oblivious, unchanged, confident, infant's smile. At us all, at all, at nothing. He strode, slenderly, upstairs into darkness. I drained a full double vodka.

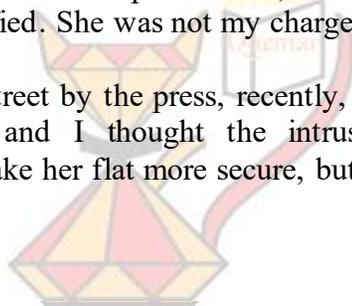
'Let's go home', begged Heather.

Brian accused me: 'Despite all your puritanism, you do have a romantic streak, and you are vulnerable to Clare!'

'Bull. Fear is the most romantic emotion and you are afraid of her I'm not.'

We were having an unofficial seminar in Antonelli's office. I had the sensation that I experience when I know entirely what I am doing, and what I should do. I was an expert. Despite - or because of - my scepticism, I was an expert on Clare. Because of all the money the departments of Prisons, Social Welfare and Probation - not to mention the commercial media - had spent on her, she was no small issue in which to be qualified. She was not my charge, so much as my subject now.

She'd been photographed in the street by the press, recently, and Elinor was indignant. Antonelli and I thought the intrusion insignificant. He stated, 'We can make her flat more secure, but we can never protect her physically.'



TO EARTHWARD

I shifted the topic to psychology. Elinor and I agreed that Clare had assumed a parental role towards her mother. Peter Banks thought himself a kind man, but direct and tough, hence his killing of the sick Hug. Coral had a yearning for a warm pet of some kind, but it was ineffectual then, unless someone like Clare helped her to look after it. Coral, however, wasn't classically simple-minded, or feeble-spirited. She'd had a hysterectomy after Janice, and was lonely. This was one reason that Clare was so devoted to finding whatever pet her mother needed, even though Coral, at that time, had suffered bad luck with animals. The dog bought after Hug had been run over, and another canary had died when the cage broke.

I recounted a conversation Clare and I had shared while we walked Kiss one night: I'd asked her what she thought of Peter.

'What do *you* think of him?' She was obviously going to resort to Socratic evasion.

'He shot the bitch. Does he shoot other things?'

'Foxes, rabbits and kangaroos.'

'Does that excite you?'

She was too interested to be secretive. 'Guns don't excite me. Anyway, I always feel sorry for animals. You know we sadists are sentimental.'

'You mean me, too?'

She had half-smiled, ignored my question, and then stooped to fondle Kiss.

When Elinor and Brian left the office, Antonelli and I settled to some self-indulgent metaphysics. My contention was that there are people who make others into death-objects, just as there are people who make others into sex-objects.

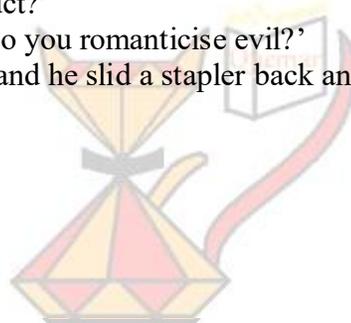
Antonelli said, 'So you believe that a union in death, like Clare's with Anthony, involves no real passion - only a greed for someone, as if he were a thing?'

I had believed that once, but, at present, I didn't know: 'The passion you mean is more like true pathos: it has grief and self-sacrifice, like the passion on the cross. I have to make myself scorn it, because it's really a glib perversion.'

'Does your view affect your conduct?'

'No. How could it? Does yours? Do you romanticise evil?'

His own voice was less emphatic, and he slid a stapler back and



PLAY WITH KNIVES

forth on his desk: 'No, George. I don't think I could.'

Sheridan was still away. They rang me about 11.30 p.m. - that early. They spoke to me, it wasn't an interrogation. Harry was there for an hour, before I viewed Heather's body. It was the result of three hour's work, after photography, but the resurrection that they had accomplished was minimal, just making her less grotesque, and giving her a milder expression.

I couldn't leave her. I didn't know the pathologist, and I asked if I could be present, with our own family doctor. They agreed, and Clem came. He told me not to stay, and I stayed, without discussing it. I asked him where he'd been, and he said, 'In bed', which was obvious. Overcoat on gold silk pajamas.

I said absurdly, 'I hope Daphne isn't too upset.'

He said, 'She is. I wasn't with her. And I told her the phone number was a restaurant.'

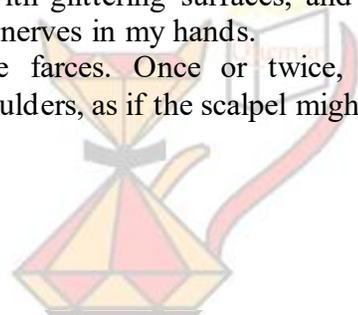
The words might have sounded cheap, there in that room with my dead, but Clem was incapable of cheapness. Even his farces had a tenderness, one hand steadying, while the other teased you. He explained, 'I didn't tell Daphne why Harry rang.'

I was looking down at Heather. The gladbagger had made a mess of her, but that's all it was: just a mess. There's nothing intensely physical that one person can do to another, except for degrees of mess, or frightened pleasure. I mean, from the point of view of appearances. This killer was a shock-monger, who concentrated, as Clare once had, on the looks of the victim. This means that torture is usually not involved.

In clinical terms, neither Clare, nor this killer, was a sadist. But the corpse was the messiest, least human set of remains that I have ever seen. I realised, as I stared at the amorphous mummy on the table, that I was capable of a singular, ineradicable love for it.

I knew the mistake I was making in fighting my shock, but I had to. There were no sounds in my ears - they were packed with ice, and my heartbeat was slithering around at the back of my nose. The whole room was mesmeric with glittering surfaces, and yet there was no blood in my body, nor nerves in my hands.

The autopsy had its own little farces. Once or twice, the pathologist held Heather's rigid shoulders, as if the scalpel might



TO EARTHWARD

harm her, and once he looked instinctively and anxiously at her face, to make sure she wasn't shocked by a heap of mince and tripes that he had lifted out onto the tray.

Sometime, daylight had come. I prepared myself for her relaxation from *rigor mortis*, but, when it began to happen, I found it hard to endure. The fingers unclenched, but there was nothing in them, and her feet, that had arched into balletic precision, went lax and pointed slowly outwards and upwards. But it was her mouth that horrified me. When she was found, it hadn't, like Donna's, been distorted by a scream. It was shut quite firmly and naturally. Now, the corners began to loosen and the jaw to fall, and, as this happened, something like a white worm began to be visible between her lips. I moaned once with shock, but Clem, standing behind me, whispered, 'It's all right. It's only chewing gum.'

Her lips slipped further, and the pathologist explored her mouth further with his gloved thumb and forefinger.

She'd been found by a bicycle path near the station. Had people been smoking on the train? Had she chewed gum to compensate for losing that old habit? She'd read her book on the train. Its marker was at the end. ('Why didn't she ring you from the station?' 'It was dusk. She liked to walk.') The book and her handbag were tied in the garbage bags with her.

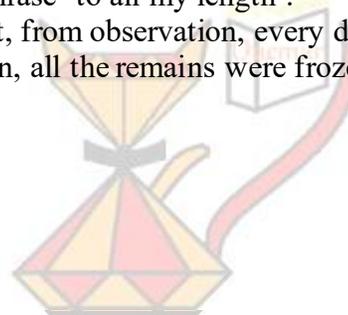
Involuntarily, my muscles were relaxing as hers did. I kept thinking of the chewing gum...the weather was dull, she hadn't had dinner, and it was the gloaming time of day. She was drowsy. She'd been to visit a sick Vietnamese kid, at Westmead Hospital.

I saw that her contact lenses had been removed from her eyes (which the killer had closed). Her wristwatch, wedding and engagement rings had been placed in her open womb. No, the killer can't have closed her eyes - I remember guessing slowly: they are staying closed, so she closed them.

Then I could sense that she knew - had been told? - to close them on the inevitable. Fear attacked, and I fought it. I was Heather, who wanted terribly just to go home and rest.

I thought, over and over, Frost's phrase 'to all my length'.

I may have slept, but I can recount, from observation, every detail of the autopsy until, in late afternoon, all the remains were frozen



PLAY WITH KNIVES

in plastic, the police photographer went home, and there was nothing more of her there to guard.

I have never afterwards spoken her name and been capable of relating it to the person. There was something there: a system of answers and questions, emotions, the outgoing of our child, a marriage - her mind - but I can't force the two breaths 'Heather' to relate to it, now. I can feel finely the smooth inner thighs that took me, the involuntary fluid on receiving me, hear the delicate sounds of content, power and relief, and there is nothing to convince me that these were as intimate as death.

At first, I didn't need to drink. I found that I could still work and socialise. I could act and think, since I no longer cared about consequences, with greater competence than I'd ever achieved before.

On the afternoon after the autopsy, I rang Heather's parents. I'd done so, the night before, and asked them not to tell Sheridan, and to keep her away from the news. The second time I rang, they said they'd told her. They were impatient. I was angry. I'd have rather they waited for me to tell her myself. When I arrived at their home that night, Sheridan was furious about my attempt at mercy, in not telling her at once. But she came home with me.

For about twenty-four hours, she cried, bit her mouth bloody, and hardly released my arm. Then she grew enraged again - for a week - with a shrill, neighbourhood-loud pitch of accusation: 'You should have protected my mother. You should have been waiting at the station. You should have told me sooner. You should have...'

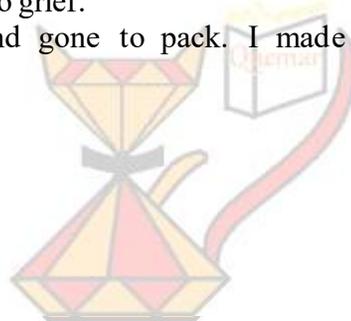
'What else?' My tone accepted that she was right.

She didn't know what else, either. I hugged her. She asked to see Clem, and, when he came, she told him she needed a psychiatrist. He suggested that she go back, and stay with Irene and Bill. He suggested a sympathetic woman pediatrician whom he knew on the North Shore.

Privately, I balked: 'I hope she doesn't dabble in psychiatry?'

'No. She's simply kind, and used to grief.'

Sheridan had already agreed, and gone to pack. I made the arrangements, but didn't approve.



TO EARTHWARD

Harry Terrence called at our house, to confirm my part of the police interviews. He left a carton of good Queensland beer in the fridge. It stayed there for weeks, untouched. I began to take Kiss for long, long walks. Sometimes, friends or colleagues joined me. I was keeping the house very clean, but I hardly ever cared to ask them in.

During my sleeping (I still curved around her smooth body in my sleep), and also during those walks, I discovered that my doggerel-subconscious was again tormenting me:

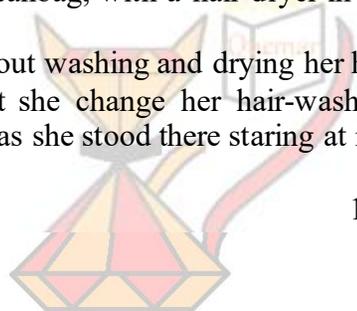
If you touch the sunken lily, you
will feel fingers close on yours.
Her fingers are still dry.
It is the ghost of a lady, who
sang the moon and carried the sky.
The moon sings on the water floor:
This is a clear-eyed pool where I -
too free to burn or crumble - liquefy.

Soon Antonelli insisted on visiting me. There were no metaphysics. With brutal compassion, he swiped most of Heather's clothing for his sainted charities.

I worked, so that I wouldn't think. As part of my work, one long walk with Kiss took me to Clare's flat. I saw her at the top window, drying her newly washed hair. The sun gave the thick, wet bits a pewter depth, and the longer, just-dried clusters glittered like platinum. And her sun-narrowed eyes seemed black, with blue sheens on them, like coal. Kiss barked so ecstatically and abruptly that Clare turned and dropped her brush to the ground. I tethered Kiss to the letterbox, retrieved the brush, and went upstairs.

When she opened the door, I said, 'You dropped your handkerchief', in a soft and condemnatory tone. I handed her the brush. Actually, if she had done it on purpose, she was wasted off the stage. But, then, wasn't she? No, it had been accidental, because Gregory was sitting in a beanbag, with a hair-dryer in his lap.

He'd always had a minor fetish about washing and drying her hair, and I'd heard him insist once that she change her hair-washing time to suit his working hours. And as she stood there staring at me



PLAY WITH KNIVES

crossly, with the brush in her hand, and barefoot in a cyclamen kimino, I could see the advantages in having a fetish like that. She sat, cross-legged, on the couch. They'd washed her hair in the shower, and the always-lined soles of her feet were wrinkled, as if crushed.

I began: 'I'd have phoned you, but I have to read you a lecture.'

'I deny everything, except the carnal knowledge charge.'

Greg smiled at her remark, and sat, glaring why-doesn't-he-say-it-and-go at the window.

I admonished: 'You've been walking to your mother's house, alone, at night. Sandy told me.'

'Sandy is a pathological liar.'

'So it's true?'

'Yes. But I'm alright. I thought I was supposed to be leading a normal life?'

'It isn't normal to walk a mile in the dark in an area where you've received death threats, and five women have been murdered.'

She was distressed, and I knew I'd reminded her of Heather.

We had all been trying to behave 'normally' so far, but there was the brisk casualness of shock about our behaviour.

She asked, 'How is Sheridan?'

'With Heather's parents.' I was determined to say her name easily.

'Upset?'

'Yes. Upset.'

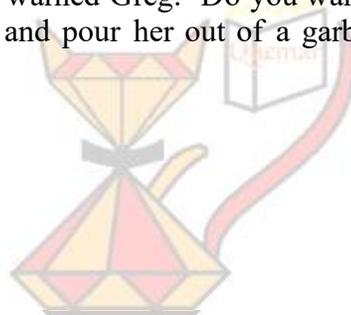
'They should use me as a decoy. They'd probably catch him. I suggested it to Sergeant Terrence, when he checked round here, last night, but he thought I was being too melodramatic.'

'He's probably the killer', muttered Greg, uncoiling effortlessly (how do they do it?) from the bowels of the beanbag.

I said, 'It's not impossible.'

She laughed - decorously - and I added: 'Alright. It's not likely. Anyway, don't let your ego run riot. Your danger, as far as I'm concerned, is just that you'll be a silly girl out alone at night. Don't do it again.'

She had a trick of looking obedient, without answering, at times. I had learned to be suspicious of it. I warned Greg: 'Do you want to identify your lover, when they cut and pour her out of a garbage bag?'



Clare flinched: Heather.

Greg looked at me, reproachfully.

I wouldn't flinch: 'Then keep an eye on her.'

'Yes. Spy on me, like Sandy does. It's for my own good. I do have an own good, in spite of everything. It's better to ask Mr Antonelli, than Mr. Jeffreys, about it, though.'

The rest of her hair was dry enough, and Greg reached for the hairbrush. She refused to give it to him, and thrust it at me. I took it and she sat with her back to me. I brushed her hair. Just in case Greg didn't watch her enough out of worry, I'd decided that he'd do so out of jealousy. He smiled, and shrugged, and strode out of the room.

Downstairs, we heard Kiss whine with joy at the sight of him. He must have ignored her, since she gave three sharp, staccato barks for attention. Perhaps he patted her, because she stopped.

I finished brushing Clare's hair, which tickled like swansdown through my fingers. I tapped her on the shoulder with the brush.

'If the gladbagger doesn't kill you, I will, if I find you out alone. Anyway, how do you know he's not me?'

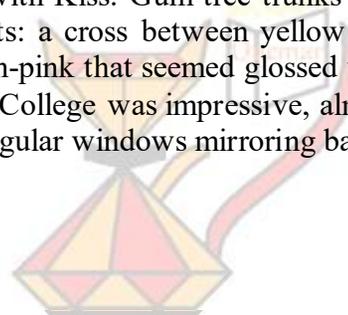
She said, 'I've always thought it was you. Don't change my mind.' She retrieved her brush and shut it, safely, in the dressing table.

I said, 'Watch yourself, as I shut the door behind me.'

Kiss must have been patted. She was lounging on her back, with a smug leer on her face. I unhitched her, and we continued our favourite walk alone.

The gladbagger had definitely lost interest in water, because he killed Amanda O'Neill in the grounds of the college. Her death was caused by a single blow to the occiput. The murder site was in full view of the railway line, and he either had to work too quickly, or was interrupted somehow. But the job was efficient. The knife work on Heather had been more skillful than on the earlier victims, and he seemed to be developing technique.

I walked there a few days later, with Kiss. Gum-tree trunks take on a certain colour in some sunsets: a cross between yellow and red, which isn't orange, but a brown-pink that seemed glossed with honey. Through boles that hue, the College was impressive, almost perfect in geometry - with its rectangular windows mirroring back,



PLAY WITH KNIVES

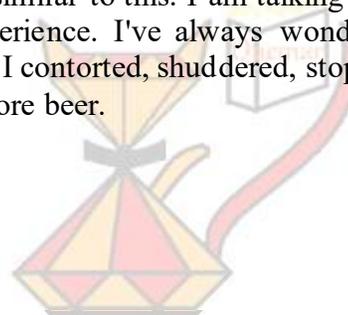
gorgeously, the now-invisible sun. There were no traces of death there. I have never seen anything which appertains to death uniquely, even those shrieking, stinking, bloating, green effigies in Dick's textbook.

For years before he died, my father slept with his mouth agape, and his flesh livid. I often feared he had died and woke him, pretending afterwards that I'd thought he was locked in a nightmare. Often he was.

As seen by an amateur, not one of the injuries to Heather would have necessitated her death, although maybe the doctors knew better. It was the combination of so many injuries that was observably lethal. To me, their combination was impossible, since I couldn't visually assemble a sequence for her dying. I saw Heather with a butchered womb, or Heather with facial scars, or concussion and I gave my imagination small toys, little interior scenes, in which I nursed and cheered her about one wound or another, and knew that we'd compensate for this or that loss together.

I wandered the campus grounds with the dog. Throughout the suburb, bored kids had often expressed their devilry by leaving anthropoid shapes, in plastic bags, in conspicuous places. There'd been one at the College, before the real thing, but there was nothing like that there now.

Back at home, I became inexplicably cold, and needed alcohol. The craving genuinely surprised me. I knew Antonelli and others had been awaiting it, but I'd convinced myself, absolutely, that they were wrong. I drank two cans of Harry's beer, and drove the car out to distract myself. By now, the inner chill was so vitriolic that my teeth chattered uncontrollably. I parked and watched a tree swaying its branches, like a frenzied dance troupe, each movement distinct, synchronised and original, but uncontrollable, and every leaf-tip still quite alone. The physical agony in the cold, and the epiphany of the tree merged, so that I could still force my sight to hover, watching the leaves at the car door. There was a quality in my pain which was not pleasurable, but which was the same as the intensity - exquisite is too weak a word - in pleasure, and I wondered if a female orgasm was similar to this. I am talking of a purely physical, not spiritual, experience. I've always wondered what women feel when they come. I contorted, shuddered, stopped shivering, drove home and drank more beer.



TO EARTHWARD

The latest murder had broken one inhibition. People were willing to discuss the gladbagger's identity in front of me again.

The night before in the Roundabout, Pat Roche had suggested that the gladbagger's habit of hiding things inside the victim, and of hiding the victims in bags, indicated that the killer might be an agoraphobic. He could need to make his victims 'safe' - to protect them and their belongings, and to deny his action, as well as conceal it.

Clem replied that the only interesting male agoraphobic he'd known since William Forster (who was probably more paranoiac, anyway) died, was Dr. Lucero, who was an unlikely murderer.

Antonelli had listened carefully to Pat's theory, and agreed: 'Yes, if I were the killer, I think I might reason like that.'

I didn't participate much, and it wasn't expected. I concentrated on drinking mineral water, which the rest of the crew considered a full-time job.

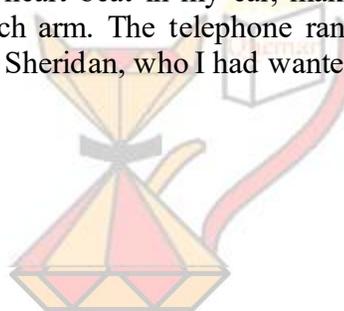
Harry Terrence told us that Dick Allison had been taken in and interrogated for five hours, before the police were satisfied. Although usually single and female, his alibis seemed okay, and there was no evidence against him. There was some suspicion, including his, that he'd fathered Amanda's fetus. Forensics did prove that untrue.

Later, I'd asked Harry, privately: 'Where did Dick go, when he left the station?' I'd been looking for him in the pub.

'Home to his mother,' Harry's rasp was off-key, nearly guilty: 'in tears.'

Perhaps they thought I'd recovered too soon, but I've thought enough about grief now to know that the searing split-second, when the mind strikes its loss and shudders away from it, is perfectly adequate, a perfect compression of large numbers of searing, unbearable hours.

The next night, I didn't sleep. I devoted it to writing a positive report on Ruth. The night after that, I was tired and drunk, and leaning sideways. I could hear my heart beat in my ear, make its electric noises on the bristling couch arm. The telephone rang. It was my mother. I'd been hoping for Sheridan, who I had wanted to



PLAY WITH KNIVES

ring, but felt I shouldn't seem over-possessive. Sheridan and I rang each other punctually every three days.

My mother asked: 'What are you doing?'

'Drinking. Just tonight. I miss Heather.'

'Naturally. I'll always miss your father. Is Sheridan there?'

'No. She's still with Irene.'

'She should be with you. You'd pull yourself together.'

'I am pulled together, Mum. I'll ring you tomorrow.'

'Goodnight', she said, 'God bless.'

For a minute, I sobered contritely: 'God bless, too.'

Eventually, the beer gave me the guts to open the last of the Penfolds Grange Bin 95 Hermitage, bottled in 1970, which Heather and I were saving for our anniversary. I didn't want it in the house, anymore. I didn't decant it, and I savoured its power all the more for the acrid red bracken at the bottom of my glass.

The telephone rang again. It was Irene, sounding reluctant: 'Sheridan wants you to come, if you can. She's having an asthma attack.'

'Have you called a doctor?'

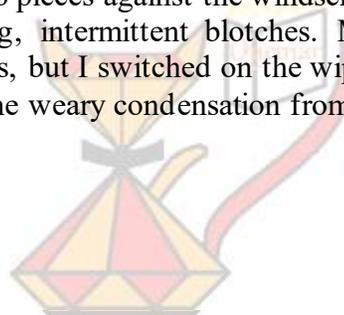
'Obviously.'

'I'm on my way.' I made sure my diction didn't slur.

I had a fast cold shower, which left my heart jumping. Every time it jumped, I coughed for breath. I found this an aid to concentration. I noticed that the towel I used was thick and rough from grime, not fashion, and I wondered if my housekeeping had been as meticulous as I'd thought. I put my glasses back on. The grog-sweat on them obliterated my eyesight, except for colours, movement and a few disproportionate things going on at the bottom of my face in the mirror. The outlines of my lips, which were so often pedantic, blurred blubbery as those of a toad, or Charles Laughton. I'd always revered Charles Laughton.

Black coffee. Sugar, but separate from it. I was too nauseated for sweet coffee.

There was chiaroscuro on my drive to Sheridan. Light and darkness seemed to be breaking into pieces against the windscreen. There was only a token rain: big, intermittent blotches. Most missed the car, and filled the gutters, but I switched on the wipers. I think I hoped that they'd sweep the weary condensation from my glasses, or even from my eyes.



TO EARTHWARD

I had no sense of speeding, but the seventy-minute drive took thirty-five. Bill let me in, and left me. Irene had at last gone to bed. The doctor had visited, and given Sheridan a needle. She was inhaling more easily, but her lungs were still noisy. She remained deliberately awake, until the morning. I plumped her lavender pillows, and sat with her. We played lilting music: her grandparents' Mozart cassettes, Elgar, pops from James Galway, not Kiss. The mood was extremely quiet. Whatever panic had prompted the call, she carefully hid it from me now.

I held her hand. She looked sick, and like me, not especially like Heather. She'd managed to limit the choking to spasms, between which she used an inhaler. She told me, 'I'm really very well.'

'So I see.' My voice was mild and obedient, not sarcastic.

'I still want to stay here.'

My face consented.

She nodded, reassuringly, towards her grandparents bedroom:

'You know I'm really on my own here.'

'Ah, yes. I'm not worried about you being corrupted by any capitalist influences.'

I had pretended to misunderstand, and she was irked: 'You know I mean that it isn't because of you, or them, that I'm here.'

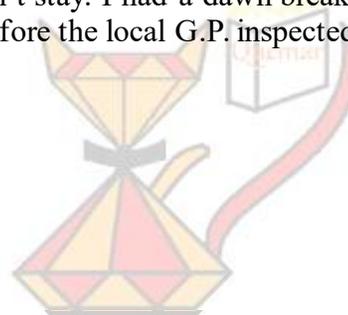
'Yes, I know that.' I tried to make my voice sound normal, one tone that was beginning to rust a little. But the rust may have helped me with her.

'I feel better, knowing that you'll come, if I want you.'

'Did you think I might not?'

'No, but I don't really mean just drive here and sit' - she searched for the word, and found it on a cassette case, as she shuffled the heap of them on the quilt, near her chest - 'I mean *accompany* me where I'm going, like you are doing now.'

The idea that she might be going anywhere, but to her new, girls' highschool and dedicated life (she wanted to be a progressive teacher) had vanished with the moon's vapour, and the bird wings on the curtains, and I knew that wherever, and on whatever, I had accompanied her, I certainly couldn't stay. I had a dawn breakfast, cordially, with the three of them, before the local G.P. inspected her again.



PLAY WITH KNIVES

‘See you’ was the only farewell permissible here, and ‘See you’ was uttered, with superlative casualness, by both of us as we waved, and I left her at her school gate that morning.

Driving to Mt Druitt, I took a corner too fast, and skidded. I turned my head, and gasped, ‘Sorry’, to Heather’s place beside me. I undermined myself further, by stopping off at home to wash before work. I was cold again. I sat at the end of the bed, in front of a radiator. I was in a towel, and wet from the shower. Squeezing Heather’s pillow, as if I were an insecure child, I shuffled my feet in and out of my cloth slippers, and wondered how the hell I was going to shave.

I’d avoided the TV, regarding it as an essentially communal experience, which would only inflame my loneliness, but now I watched part of a programme on a space shuttle. A blindfolded owl in a straightjacket was being rocked by a benevolent astrophysicist, as an experiment in balance. I realised that I was in a paroxysm of sane laughter, and took advantage of it to move.

At work, I met Elinor outside my office. She accused: ‘You haven’t slept, and you’ve been drinking. Don’t defend yourself.’

I didn’t.

She went on: ‘There’s a rumour that Clare was smoking marijuana, or worse.’ She meant: she knew about all that.

I smiled, and lied: ‘There’s a rumour that it wasn’t a drug, just a noxious little weed that someone gave her. I wouldn’t worry. If it were true, it would have made her too ill for it to be tempting.’

‘Talking of noxious little weeds, Larry is in your office.’

‘Good.’ I meant it. Men such as Larry seemed, at present, to be a healthy marrow in my work.

Elinor called, ‘I’ve brought a real pot-plant for Clare: non-addictive. I’ll show it to you later.’

Larry sat inside, sideways, on a chair with his legs crossed, staring out the window. So many people did that in my company. The sun was a thin, cold, gleaming infusion in the sky. As if to contradict his devious posture, he said promptly, ‘I’ve heard that it’s Jonathan Manger.’

‘It?’ I sat, too.

‘Killed your wife. Jonathan.’ The cigarette butt between his lips was flat with pressure.



TO EARTHWARD

I reasoned with him: 'Jonathan's a professional crim. They don't do that sort of gladbagging. Have you told Harry?'

A short, ironic grimace.

I reasoned, again: 'It would be the best cover. Okay. But, why take the risk, even if he did enjoy it as a hobby?'

'Would it be a risk?'

'What's happening with Manger?'

He told me what I already knew. Manger had become an established member of a huge, invulnerable Sydney syndicate. He was the lover of one of its Directors, but he had the reputation of being efficient, and emotionally disinterested. He was concerned, mainly, with the western suburbs.

'Where did this gladbagger rumour come from?'

Useless question, so he asked: 'Did you file your second report about me?' My first report on Larry had recommended a second.

'Not in an easy spot to find. I took it into the city, and stamped it myself, like the first one. But, I didn't understate your activities.'

'What will you do?'

'About Manger? Philosophise. Not mention you.'

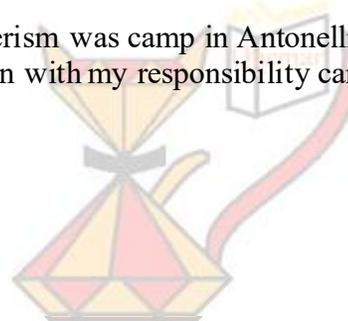
'If you do, I'm a dead man.'

The last sentence was muttered frailly, and I saw he'd soon grow old. I raked my own greying hair with my hand. I knew how to arrange for a man - even Manger - to disappear. I mightn't survive his disappearance. But the hatred numbing me then made death a consolation. Of course, my escape might be bought. I shook my head, suddenly. Larry left, watching my expression until he turned his back in the corridor.

I imagined Harry Terrence drawling, 'But, of course, we have no proof', and mysteriously hated him, too. I then enunciated aloud, reasonably, 'But there isn't any proof.' And yearned, obsessively, to see Elinor's pot-plant.

She had left the plant on Antonelli's desk, as they gossiped. It was purple, like Heather's, but not rich, festive cyclamen. It was deep, glossy indigo, interspersed by pinker veins. Like Heather's, this colour was mixed with clear white. Elinor was saying to Antonelli, 'Your nails are growing.'

'Yes,' he winked at me - no mannerism was camp in Antonelli - 'I listened to the judge's verdict. A man with my responsibility can't



PLAY WITH KNIVES

afford to appear anxious.'

I said, 'You've taken a light sentence too seriously.'

'Have you come to pronounce a heavier one?'

They'd seen that I'd come in to resign. He was looking at his nails. I was kind, as a judge would be to someone who hasn't expected his release: 'You are free now, Philip.'

Elinor said with convincing authority: 'You've just said it yourself. You are a person who can give freedom, but not receive it. And freedom is mercy.'

'And change is part of mercy', finished Antonelli, looking up at me.

'You're right', but I was still determined to needle him: 'I accept that I can't change.'

So I didn't resign. If they'd openly persuaded me - called me indispensable - I certainly would have gone.

Still sleepless, I went around to Clare's that night, to deliver Elinor's pot-plant. It was a night ripe for the Pathetic Fallacy. A weird, soft but relentless breeze visited the area, in the mid-evening, and kept approaching, encircling, pausing, fingering facades and fixtures, as if one were negligent in not studying it, in not paying full attention to what was disturbing it, too.

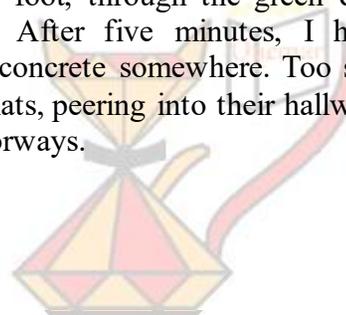
Sandy was at home, but Clare wasn't. Clare had gone for a walk alone to her mother's, before Sandy came home. Sandy slapped a teatowel onto a chairback, and showed me the note that Clare had left. She didn't demur or defend Clare. In her cheerful, younger way, Sandy was almost as furious as I was about this.

While she rang Clare's mother, I waited in the kitchen, and hid a small carving knife in my briefcase. It also held the Department's gun, unloaded. The bullets were in a separate package, in the front.

Sandy returned. 'She hasn't got there yet. I said Greg was with her, because her mum sounded shaky.'

I took my briefcase: 'Call Harry.'

On the stairway, I heard Sandy bolt the door. I drove my car the full distance to her mother's house, but couldn't see Clare. She hadn't arrived. I hurried back, on foot, through the green dark, listened and searched constantly. After five minutes, I heard footsteps. Slow, unechoing on the concrete somewhere. Too solid for Clare's. I went past blocks of flats, peering into their hallways, then started checking their back doorways.



TO EARTHWARD

I shone her mother's torch into one of them, and found her.

The wide, dead doll's eyes stared at me. She was standing, her shoulders pressed against the alcove. She tried to speak, moistening her lips: 'I heard footsteps.'

'You heard me. Are you hurt?'

'No. It's only tonight I was scared. I thought you were the gladbagger.'

'I am.'

She stayed inert. I opened my briefcase, and removed the knife. I touched her windpipe with the tip, and then let the blade trail down firmly to just below her left ribs. At least two layers of clothing impeded it. She still looked at me. The blue irises were as dead as their pupils. I pushed the hilt again.

Clare's voice was at its most personal here. She whispered, with a courteous, hard defiance, which was quite as strong as mine: 'So you killed your wife?'

'Yes.' Before I nodded this, I turned the knifepoint a little, to give me time to strengthen my confidence. My eyes must have been as fanatically wide as hers, but I had to blink more. Although my gaze was dry and certainly unlowered. I excelled myself: 'Yes. I killed Heather.'

She repeated, 'Heather' for me, giving it full value, testing. It was the richest, softest, most emotive (not emotional) word I'd ever heard from her. Then, careful not to sound doubtful, she asked, 'How?'

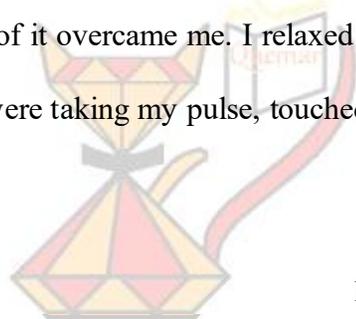
Her gaze didn't flicker, as the knifetip pressed straighter, further. I controlled a palsy in my back, thought of truly-killed eyes, and wondered if hers would differ, when dead. She pressed against the knife, with an equal, small, firm force. I would not draw the knife back, or relax my grip on it.

We heard a police siren turn the corner near us, then recede.

I tried to convince: 'I knocked her unconscious. I cut into the groin, and put her rings into her womb, where they'd be safe. Then I...'

A fierce mental picture of the rest of it overcame me. I relaxed my hand, the knife still between us.

Clare grasped my wrist, as if she were taking my pulse, touched



PLAY WITH KNIVES

my loosened fingers, and removed the knife from my hand by the hilt. She replaced it in the briefcase. I picked up the briefcase.

We walked in the direction of the flat. We saw no police.

I sighed. 'We have to ring the police, and your mother.'

She sighed. 'I'm sorry.' I think she was.

In her loungeroom, she said, 'I'll phone them.' She did, respectful and impersonal, like a good receptionist. Sandy had left us and gone to bed after opening the door.

I went to the kitchen cupboard, and opened a respectable bottle of Medoc that I had given to them.

It was news time. There was a photo of Jonathan Manger on the TV screen. I pushed the sound knob. Jonathan had just been found, and had died less than three hours ago. I wondered why this was broadcast so soon, and then I understood. Jonathan was the gladbagger's seventh victim.

'My God,' I laughed, 'we'll have the police around here now!'

And his syndicate? No - too many suspects. They'd wait, and observe.

I rang Harry Terrence. He sounded glad. 'They want us both,' I told her, 'for routine interviews tomorrow.'

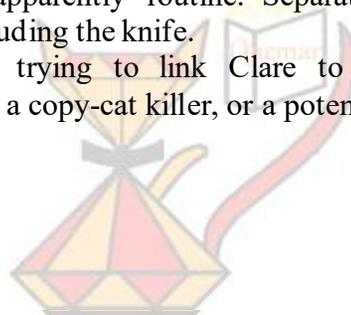
She was watching me now, her face pallid and urgent. I comforted 'They'll be doing routine interviews with everyone in the district.'

I went home with the rest of the Medoc, but had lost the taste for it.

In the last year of our relationship, I had sometimes wanted to encircle Clare, as if in a sacred fire, or to draw her into me and hide her completely, to absolve what she had done. But sometimes I would turn to kiss her on the forehead, and not be able to do so, thinking of dead children, as if to touch her abstractly would make me an accessory after the fact. Before I slept, I thought of requesting a transfer, but the rejection might have harmed her, and, anyway, they wouldn't have replaced me properly. Anyone else might trust her too much.

The police appointments were apparently routine. Separately, Clare and I told them the truth, excluding the knife.

The press were more insistent, trying to link Clare to the gladbagger in varied ways, either as a copy-cat killer, or a potential



victim. The Department provided a solicitor when she was interviewed by the press, and he threatened libel suits to protect her from too much publicity.

The press had cornered me after Heather's death, and misconceived me to be 'under sedation', but there was nothing likely to connect me with Jonathan Manger. I did wonder about the syndicate. Harry Terrence had studied me once or twice for no reason, but I hadn't raised the subject of Larry. Whatever the source of Larry's rumour, it wasn't pervasive enough to intrigue the journalists. And I believe Harry would have warned me of serious danger.

The next day was Saturday, and Clare spent it at my house. So - uninvited, and as if by telepathy - did my mother. She hobbled to the front door, while we were watching a morning documentary about the gladbagger. Clare made her a cup of tea, and Mum watched the documentary with us, after accusing me of being morbid.

'I'm not! It's one of the Department's fruity theories. I have to report on Clare's reactions.'

In truth, that job had been assigned to Elinor, who had asked me to do it for her. And asked Clare to tell her what my reactions to the programme were.

'She's trying to prove,' Clare explained helpfully, 'that you're not killer.'

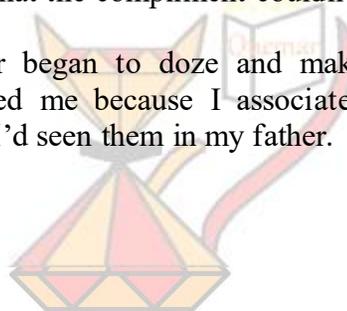
'What should I do, then? Faint when I see Heather's picture?'

I was pacing the room, when they showed her face smiling. I was at once too dizzy to stand. My mother put more sugar in my cup. Clare put her arm around me.

I turned off the TV: 'We can now tell those concerned that we both enjoyed it all hugely.'

Clare made more tea. I was still uneasy about my mother's interest in her, which I did think might be prurient. They both, however, behaved very well. Clare took the precaution of developing a lively interest in my mother, and of asking her so many questions, mostly about me, that the compliment couldn't be returned.

As the day matured, my mother began to doze and make a lip-smacking noise, which unnerved me because I associated it with involuntary senile reflexes, as I'd seen them in my father.



PLAY WITH KNIVES

Clare noticed my unease, and narrowed her eyes at once, in an aggressive, but supportive way.

She improvised: 'You know, the documentary was effective. Those gum trees and water shoots were wonderfully eerie, with the moon on them.'

Mum giggled, but turned out have a reason. 'There's a joke your father used to tell me. I think it's from Steele Rudd. Dad and Dave? There's a father and his son, the artist - would-be artist. The wheat field burns down, and the old bloke's foaming and swearing, but the son leans against the fence, and looks at it in a dream. "Yes, Dad," he says, "but isn't it a beautiful sight?"'

Clare slid to the floor, weak with laughter - many kinds of laughter, including her sinister one, which didn't sound so sinister now.

Clare and my mother made salad. Towards the end of the meal, Mum began to yawn, and explained, 'Cucumber.' She believed cucumber to be soporific.

When she left, I drove her to the station. I tried to drive her home, but she wouldn't waste her ticket.

Sitting in the car, before the train came, she observed: 'Clare is like you.'

'She hasn't had much choice.'

'I meant you are like her.'

'I don't know if I've become unusually dense, lately, but people are continually telling me what they mean.'

She respected my sidestep, and reached into her purse, out of habit.

'I'm not a taxi, Mum.'

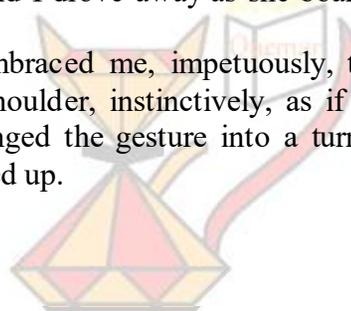
'How is Sheridan?'

She hadn't asked that in the house.

'She's like me, too.'

'Don't fret. There's all the time in the world.' She held both my hands tightly, and I returned her grasp, and bowed my head. I didn't look up until she was on the platform. We smiled at each other, across the secure distance, and I drove away as she boarded her train.

When I returned home, Clare embraced me, impetuously, then drew back and looked over her shoulder, instinctively, as if she remembered her shadow. She changed the gesture into a turning movement to the kitchen. We washed up.



TO EARTHWARD

She was genuinely puzzled: 'It's odd. Your mother looks like you, but you don't look like her. Why did she visit?'

'I don't know. She hasn't visited like that, before. At least she didn't do the washing up, or dust anything. I guess, to see if there was a woman here.'

'Did you tell her about me in prison?'

'Nothing dreadful. She liked to hear about things like that. I just told her what you looked like.'

'Did she approve?'

'Oh, she's always approved of you, I believe.'

'Dare I ask why?'

'You won't get an honest answer, because I don't know one. It could be that I've always judged her, and it frightened her.'

'And she knows I can't judge anyone, but that she can judge me?'

'That's logical, but I don't know if it fits.'

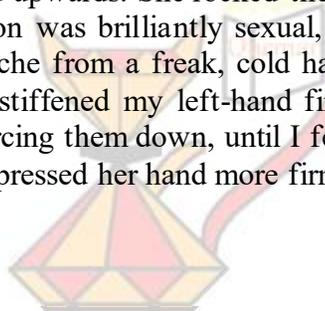
Clare must have dried the table knives and vegetable knives, unself-consciously and put them away, without either of us noticing.

The room, the house, the hope, the time all felt normal. There was all the time in the world.

Months earlier, I had bought tickets to take Sheridan and Clare to a matinee of *The Magic Flute* at the Opera House. To my surprise, Sheridan still wanted to hear it. Clare and I waited for her on the steps, as she walked around Circular Quay. The sapphire harbour sang. Sheridan moved with a young girl's sway, and an erect quickness in her head and shoulders. Boys whistled and called to her. She had Heather's ability to answer teasing - however clumsily insulting - with spontaneous confidence and a gift for retaliatory phrases that disarmed without wounding.

I bought them both icecream and champagne.

During the first act, when the stalls were at their darkest, Clare stiffened the fingers of her left hand so tautly that the tendons were like sticks, and her fingertips parted upwards. She rocked the palm of her hand on my knee. Her action was brilliantly sexual, but I think it was prompted, too by an ache from a freak, cold harbour wind. My own hands also hurt. I stiffened my left-hand fingers, and inserted them between hers, forcing them down, until I felt the joints at the bones of her hand. She pressed her hand more firmly



PLAY WITH KNIVES

towards mine. The pressure on her fingers must have been fierce, and she kept on pressing deeper, until there was no doubt that she was reminding me of our encounter in the doorway.

Colours. That night, I called in on Elinor. I admired some more pot-plants, and Japanese dildos, and a new lounge-suite in Elinor-eye-green.

Brian had been there, but he left instantaneously with a quiet 'Excuse me', majestically managing to gather all his books and papers into a straight-edged heap.

I asked, 'What's wrong with him?', and did want an answer.

'He thinks you're flirting with Clare.'

'Do you?'

'I've always wished you had been flirting with Clare. What you always subjected her to was much more dangerous.'

'And now?'

We heard Brian rev his car like a lawnmower.

'There's a rumour it's not so dangerous. More normal.'

'I'm sorry about Brian.'

'I'm not. He likes us both too much to worry about this. He'll be back.'

She had a radiant love, like Heather's, for her work, and Brian was increasingly part of it. More and more, he answered the phone at her home.

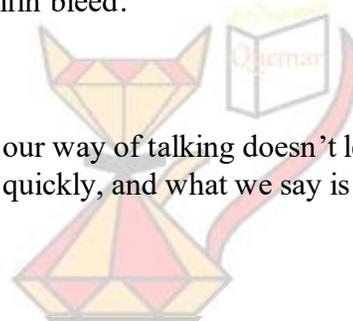
On the Sunday of that weekend, I went to the makeshift tin letterbox, labelled 'Junk Mail'. It was next to the handsome, unlabelled wooden letterbox that the Home Contents Insurance Policy people had refused to re-insure. Clare, knowing that I read the junk mail in detail - I have the sick child's lingering delight in catalogues of coloured pictures - had left a letter in the tin box for me.

At that time, a letter from Clare seemed strange, almost miraculous: like seeing a stone gremlin bleed.

She had written:

'My dear George,

I need to write this, because our way of talking doesn't let me say it. I mean, we speak so quickly, and what we say is so



TO EARTHWARD

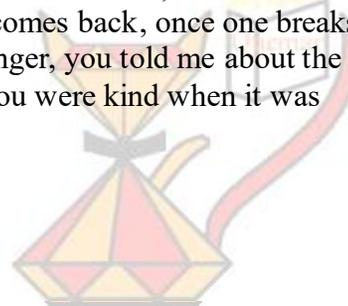
close to what we do, that the things I want to think about here are too slow for you, but I need to show you them. I want to say something else about killing my brother and sisters. It isn't much: I've probably said it before (I forget a lot of what I've told you, there's so much of it). But what I remember most is feeling that they simply belonged to me, that I had a right to judge them, even if cruelly. I think this is a feeling that very young children and old-fashioned royalty and parents have, and no one is surprised by it. What surprises me is that I had the strength in my knife to do it, and that nothing in the reality of the time stopped me. Maybe it's like reassuring yourself that you won't jump in front of a train, that it's just nerves, and then somebody next to you really does it. There's a barrier that isn't really there.

If I had said this much to you in the flesh, you'd have already stopped me with some remark that would have been affectionate, and true, and impatient, and would have braced me and kept me going, but kept me away from you.

When you played with the knife that night, when I was out alone, I really knew you'd been living my murders with me, and that of your wife. I can't think about those things as much as you have. I'm always afraid the barrier won't be there again, but I think *you* always have it with you.

It seems funny - strange - to me: for a long time, almost ever since I first met you in prison, I've forgotten my guilt (my famous guilt), sometimes, by pretending I was you. I'd pretend I was you, or just tell myself that you existed (so it didn't matter if I existed or not), but I didn't realise how much you were not separate from the things I'd done. I am sorry for them. If they hadn't happened, I'd have a brother and sisters now. And perhaps I'd have a husband and children, without thinking I might kill them. And I might. Maybe you pretended to kill me because you thought I might kill you. I can hear you laugh at that, but I don't know, I don't know. I don't know if the barrier ever comes back, once one breaks it.

I remember, when I was younger, you told me about the dog you had tormented, and how you were kind when it was



PLAY WITH KNIVES

dying, and how bad you felt when it trusted your kindness - as if the dog felt that it, not you, had been wrong when you hurt it. You said I reminded you of it, I can't remember why. But I thought of it when you pretended to stab me - I remembered that you had been capable of that cruelty. You are a cruel person, and don't know what to do about it. That has always frightened me. That you think I did what you could have done, or just that you like what I did.

Antonelli has some cliché about loving the sinner, not the sin, but I don't believe that's possible. So you terrify me. And I terrify you. Before Heather died, I had a dream that I had stabbed her, and, afterwards, I wondered if I really did kill her. But I didn't, and I could never want Heather to really die.

I think this is a love-letter.

Clare'

I found a biro, and some paper, thought for over an hour, and then discarded them, and phoned her. She answered. I said, 'Yes. I think it was a love-letter.' She was starting to apologise. I continued: 'I'm sorry that you had to write, and not say it, but, anyway, I needed to listen to you. And most of the time I have been cruel to you. I haven't been affectionate and bracing. I've almost never done anything for your own good, only for mine.'

She didn't say anything, and it was hard for me to speak into the silence. I forced myself: 'I know what you mean about the barrier. I don't know if I have one, either, or of what destruction either of us are capable. But, if that was a love letter, I'm willing to take the risk.'

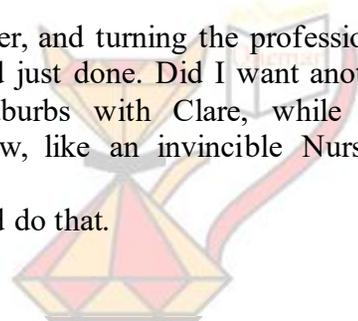
She asked, after thirty (I counted) seconds: 'What if I'm not willing to take the risk?'

'Stay in prison, then.' But my reply was trapped too much in our old way of speaking, and she responded in kind: 'Could you love me, if I wasn't in prison?'

I just said, 'Yes', quickly and sharply, and hung up the phone.

I lay in the dark, holding her letter, and turning the professional part of my brain loose on what I'd just done. Did I want another twenty years in the western suburbs with Clare, while the gladbagger hovered at the window, like an invincible Nursery Terror?

I decided: yes, if necessary, I could do that.



TO EARTHWARD

Then Elinor was in my mind, gasping: 'By all means, George, fuck your clients, if you must. You still don't have to marry them!' But Elinor had no concept of inadvertent marriage.

Either way, I knew, maybe hoped, that my career might never recover.

Clare arrived at my house an hour or so later. She said, 'I called a taxi.'

I kissed her, as conventionally as you do kiss a young woman - a flurry of hard, quick kisses with closed lips. No wetness from which her face might squirm away.

I cared for Clare infinitely. I wanted to sleep without Heather's ghost beside me. But I was afraid. There is only one split instant between the vision of a body staring up in surrender to death, and a body staring up in surrender to love and sleep.

I said, 'Lets talk about something unusual, like your macabre childhood.'

She responded to my flippancy by talking about her childhood, but in a new way: 'I can't remember what it felt like, never to have killed anyone.'

Always, before the letter, her facts had been stone-hard, or Socratic.

I shrugged. 'Probably no different.'

She contradicted me, accurately: 'That's gratuitous. Of course it was different. I could feel injured and resentful then. When they told me I loved someone, I believed them.'

She was sucking the end of her cool, silver plait. I took it, and stroked her face with it. I asked, 'Was it nice, then, to feel injured and resentful?'

'You always seem to enjoy it.'

'And I enjoy loving the people I'm told to.'

'And losing them?'

We were both good at questions like that.

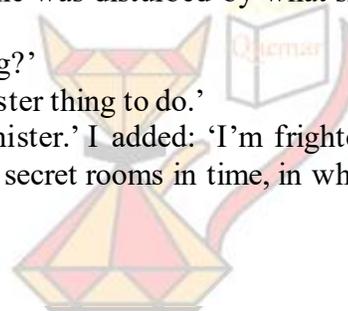
I said, crisply, 'No. I don't enjoy losing them.'

'I only meant me, not Heather.' She was disturbed by what she'd accidentally said.

'How might I lose you? By fucking?'

She nodded, 'It's not always a sinister thing to do.'

I said, 'I don't need you to be sinister.' I added: 'I'm frightened that this whole night is one of those secret rooms in time, in which



PLAY WITH KNIVES

one steps in and out of lunacy unaware.'

She nodded. She walked into the bedroom, and we lay down.

I tasted her ineradicably before I entered her. Her mouth and vaginal waters had strange, varied tastes in them, apart from the basic acidic musks that I'd known from other women. Hers suggested tin, vinegar and honey, and a salt that was different from the salt in urine: like rock salt, perhaps, that has been sweetened by bubbling, invisible life-forms, vulnerably swirled in on the tide.

There was a moment in penetration - not just the coming and the spasms - containing a psychic knife-edge, like the light beyond dark at life's limits.

When she had dressed, I asked, 'What did you think of Jonathan Manger?'

'I didn't like him. He was devious.'

'But, darling, you are devious', I laughed.

Again, the solemn puzzle: 'I know, but I don't know *how*.'

'Haven't you lost hope that I can explain?'

'Don't try to explain any of this yet, please. It's too soon. We can explain it to each other, later.'

At her request, I took her back to her flat.

As I drove home, the midnight shadows seemed more treacherous than ever, and I feared that if I lost her I would lose the living tissue of the world.



THE HANGING JUDGE

‘Whose woods these are, I think I know’ was rapid, reasonless in my mind, as I climbed the stairs to Clare’s flat. It was the night after the night we had made love. Clare wasn’t at her flat.

Sandy grinned. ‘It’s okay. She’s gone to look at kittens.’

‘What kittens?’

‘There was a phone call. About some stray kittens, just a few blocks away. The new building in Lawson Crescent. She knew whoever was calling. I thought it was you. She went to look at the kittens, for her mother.’

‘Did she phone her mother?’

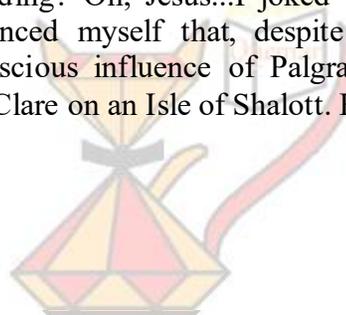
‘No, in case she was disappointed. I’m sure it’s okay.’ By this time, she sounded very unsure. ‘She phoned Sergeant Terrence at home, and he said it was okay. He phoned someone else, first, for her. She really knew the person she’d been talking to. She said she’d meet them there.’

‘Who was it? Why didn’t they come here?’

She scowled, close to tears. ‘I don’t know.’

I phoned Harry, but he’d gone out to the vet, with a hamster. His six-year-old didn’t know which vet.

Had she really gone to that building? Oh, Jesus...I joked with Sandy about hamsters, and convinced myself that, despite my passion, paranoia, and the subconscious influence of Palgrave’s Golden Treasury, I couldn’t isolate Clare on an Isle of Shalott. But



PLAY WITH KNIVES

I didn't stay long at the flat.

On my way downstairs, I heard myself recite: 'Whose woods these are, I think I know.' I tried to eradicate it with my new dream-rhyme:

Clean houses, no books, and the children play
oblivious in their thin straight clay.
Now they are a real prince, a real princess.
Now whatever they were becomes too real, too royal
For correction or condescension. They are final.
In my thin red house, that has
no books and no pets and no crowns and no clay,
I play with the children all day.

I stopped my car at the nearest phone booth. 'His house is in the village, though...' There was, suddenly, no house in the village which wasn't dreadful, for I suspected whose land I was on. I rang the child again. 'Who did your Dad ring before?'

'A lady. He called her "Daphne".'

I was thinking of Heather, and that rich pipe-smoke. Of course it had made her chew gum.

The car skidded around every corner to Lawson Crescent. The only new building there was the closed skeleton of a block of flats, unfurnished and unpainted, but nearly ready to be occupied. It already looked dead, and was starting to decay. There was a vacant lot next door, and scattered scrub and gum trees. I scanned the dark with my headlights, looking for Clem, Clare, kittens...there was someone. Clare's mother. I relaxed.

Mrs. Forster was huddled over some shapes in the grass. I assumed that they were cats and walked over to her, hoping that they were alive. When I reached her, I saw that they were bunched rags, and I smelt kerosene. Coral had a box of matches and a tin. I didn't say anything, just watched her. I was respectful and interested.

She looked up at me: 'The doctor said they'd be here.'

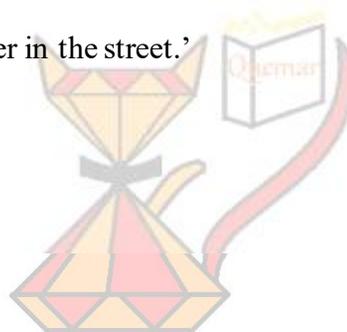
'The kittens?'

'Yes, but they're not.'

'Did he tell her to tell you?'

'No, he told her not to, but I met her in the street.'

'Where is she now?'



THE HANGING JUDGE

‘The doctor’s taking her home. They went in there.’ She pointed to the stillborn flats.

I saw one, then two, silhouettes at third-storey level. Their activity was stealthy and erratic. I asked: ‘How did they get in?’

‘The doctor had a key. He owns this land.’

I murmured, ‘Yes, I thought he might.’

The gun was in my glove box. I loaded it, and searched the car for my heavy screw-driver. I prized open the catch on a downstairs window. The front door had been locked again. I tried to make no noise.

The hall I’d entered was locked. The doors must have locked at ground floor, and on each landing. I clambered back through the window, and climbed the fire escape. I broke another window catch. They weren’t on the third floor anymore.

Back on the fire escape, I listened. I smelt smoke. Clare’s mother’s blaze was kindling well, and had caught some scrub and a gum tree. It was going to reach this building soon. Good. I heard their voices. Which floor? I thought: above me.

They were on the fourth floor, but not in a windowed room. In the corridor. Clare’s back was turned. I couldn’t see Clem properly for Clare, and the wall, although I could see his knife plainly. It wasn’t like the handknife that she should be carrying. His knife was honed fine, and almost the size of a surgical saw. If I shot and missed, he’d have her: snap.

I hid outside, at an angle to the window. I could hear them talk. Why hadn’t he knocked her out? It was probable that he intended this to be his last murder...unless he meant to kill her mother, too? I glanced towards the ground, but Coral, satisfied by the flames, had left.

Clare was asking, ‘Why didn’t you kill me before tonight?’

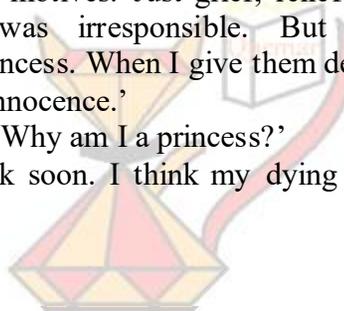
‘I was going to take you next, after Jonathan. I heard your heart, you know, in that doorway, on the night that Jonathan died. Then I glimpsed you playing a less creative game with George.’

‘Less creative, because he didn’t kill me?’

‘And less creative because of his motives. Just grief, relief and some utilitarian pleasure. He was irresponsible. But I’m responsible for my victims, little princess. When I give them death, it feels as if I give them back their innocence.’

‘What about your own innocence? Why am I a princess?’

‘I’ll have my own innocence back soon. I think my dying will make me feel innocent.’



PLAY WITH KNIVES

His voice was portentous, playful, furious. 'Guilt is life, haven't you found? I've always envied you. You began by defining yourself as one of the spiritual royalty. The only thing you didn't enjoy was secrecy. But I did. My guilt was perfect, enormous - enormously, enormously enjoyable. It was as huge as heaven and as small as Heather's wedding ring in her cervix. So safe. Doctors are anonymous, particularly very good ones, such as myself, even to themselves. But a murderer knows who he is. I think guilt is the only true intimacy possible with God. It requires His complete attention. And it makes the world so irrelevant. The world only offers cheap justice. Take out your knife.'

She didn't stir.

'Take it out, or I'll cut your throat.'

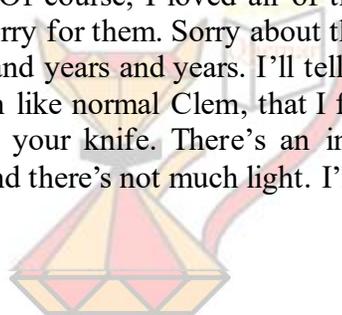
She lifted the side of her thick plaid skirt, and removed her knife, slowly, from its sheath.

She asked: 'Why don't you just cut my throat now?' Her fingers involuntarily touched her neck. 'Are we going to make some rules?'

'In your case, why not? Don't you think you could provide me with some enjoyable opposition? You should, unless your guilt has made you impotent. But I don't think it has yet: not quite. The Devil uses guilt to tame guilt: he makes guilt survive by its becoming self-indulgent and theatrical. But, at that point, the guilt and the power of the soul are weakened. You've not had the chance to become that worldly yet.'

Her mind groped at an obvious psychology for him. She asked, gingerly: 'Was Heather possessed by the Devil?'

He obliged: 'She was a fanatic, yes. Fanatically worldly. She was a child who destroyed children, by making them compete. They all succeeded, they all tried to excel, even Sheridan. Heather had no sense of the truth - our guilt - of the furnace that creates us. I fucked her once. All she cared about afterwards was not worrying George. She said he'd get it out of proportion. Poor bloody George, out drunk in the nasturtiums. He'd have said it was her business, anyway. Of course, I did love her. Of course, I loved all of them. It's not just selfish guilt. I feel so sorry for them. Sorry about them. I believe I've adored *you* for years and years and years. I'll tell you what...' he sounded cheery, so much like normal Clem, that I felt a crazy optimism, 'I'll let you keep your knife. There's an inside lock on that door down from this, and there's not much light. I'll



THE HANGING JUDGE

hear if you break any windows. But you have free access to this, and to the three floors above. And I'll give you a two minute start.'

She stood there. Clem had become so empowered that the prospect of eternal life in his greedy conscience might have soothed her.

My emotions were fused to Clare, in that building, but I thought, scrupulously, about Heather. It didn't worry me that I had never known her. There was some relief in it, as if I could no longer be quite responsible for her memory. Her life and death were frozen in a cube inside me, but her spirit was free of me now.

Clare stood there. Outside, a wind had arisen, driving her mother's fire against the side of the first floor. The windowsills weren't metal. They ignited. Some gyprock inside the brick veneer began to pop and singe. The building was on a concrete slab, but the wood in the floors was soft, and very dry.

I was terrified that Clare wouldn't defend herself. Her conditioning to be passive terrified me.

Clem began to whistle, stopped, laughed at her immobility, and began quoting *To Earthward* at random:

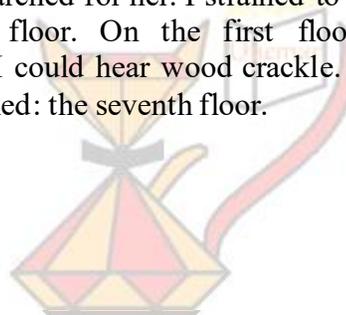
'Now no joy but that lacks salt
That is not dashed with pain
And weariness and fault;
I crave the stain

Of tears, the aftermark
Of almost too much love...'

He stepped back, and must have shut his eyes. Sixty seconds...I still couldn't aim, because of the corridor wall. At last, she brushed past him, and ran up to the fifth floor.

So did I. Outside, I willed her: to the window, the window. But there was no sign. Two minutes. She must be on the stairs. Sixth? Seventh? And Clem followed surely his sense of her breathing. He followed the drum in her heart.

I hadn't heard it on that night I searched for her. I strained to hear it now. I thought: the seventh floor. On the first floor, a window-pane exploded with heat. I could hear wood crackle. The fire escape scorched my hand. I willed: the seventh floor.



PLAY WITH KNIVES

There was a sixth floor platform on the ladder. As I balanced on it - my shoesoles sticking to the metal - she reached the window on the floor above. She called out soundlessly to me. The ladder between us swayed, broken, in smoky gusts.

I yelled, 'Break the window. Throw the knife at it. Then jump. I'll take your weight!'

The window broke, and her knife hurtled to the fiery ground somewhere. She smashed more glass out with her fist in her lifted skirt. In the pause before she jumped, I checked the safety catch, pocketed the gun and closed my eyes. Her weight could force us both off the edge.

My dream of death returned. The unbroken, yet-to-be-cut slabs of grain were molten in my darkness. I felt no fear, only the strength to control strength. The balcony shook. I moved into the corner, and held out my arms for her. I could say and do nothing but send some image from my mind to hers: the ripe, rustling grain field, like a solid sunset...beautiful...searing.

I caught her. The force, as she fell, pushed me against the rail, and it gave. I threw her forward. She slithered three storeys down the fire escape. I half fell, clung on, then I was on my hands and knees, and they were scorching. I stood up, painfully, on the platform, and followed Clare down.

Below the third floor, the air was on fire.

She had entered the third-floor window, where I'd earlier broken the catch. Clem was waiting.

This time, he waited in an open room. I slipped the safety catch. His knife was in his hand, and Clare was close to him, facing him. I stood at the window.

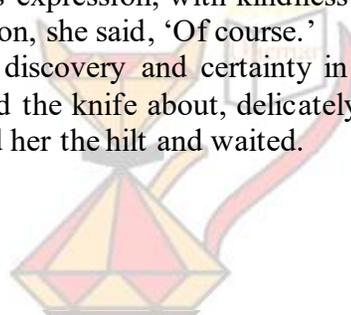
He saw me: 'Come in, George. It's hot.'

I stepped in over the ledge, without the gun wavering. I didn't approach further.

To impede the flames, I told Clare to shut the door to the corridor and stairs. She did.

Clem's eyes were studying Clare's expression, with kindness and a question. understanding the question, she said, 'Of course.'

There was sadness, flat triumph, discovery and certainty in her tone. Clem smiled at me. He turned the knife about, delicately, as in a nursery etiquette lesson, offered her the hilt and waited.



THE HANGING JUDGE

‘May I beg you both for mercy?’

I said, ‘No’, and Clare said, ‘Yes’.

I didn't try to stop her. The situation was too precarious. I didn't trust that my aim could completely incapacitate him at once, and I knew that, if she frustrated his demand, he would suddenly try to retake power over her for the purpose of revenge. And I sensed the cut childhood of confinement and torture pleading for his persuasive wish in her mind, and her conditioning to obey authority to survive it. I didn't wonder what she would do, but only how she would do it. And what verdict I, or the world, would ever pronounce on her. Incredibly, we heard a fire siren.

Clare grasped the knife hilt quickly. She pointed the blade upwards and touched him once, gently, with it under the sternum. When she did that, I - and perhaps, from his face, Clem - doubted her resolution, but then I recalled how she had described tracing the knife blow on her brother lightly first, to ensure accuracy.

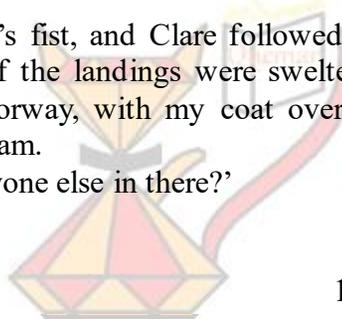
Clem may have thought of this prologue, too, for his face became relieved and expectant again. Just in case she faltered, his lips began to open in command. She was more merciful than the alternative of my unpractised gun would have been. She stabbed him directly upwards from beneath the ribs, through the lungs to the ventricle. It seemed as smooth as if the blade met water. His heart and lungs emptied in two minutes. In that time, Clem managed to shut his eyes. He had immaculate eyelids, like eggshells, there on the slippery floor.

There came the hiss of sand and water spraying around the block. I secured the safety catch and put my gun away. Without agitating the knife - it was a huge knife - in Clem's body, I wiped Clare's prints from it and gripped the hilt firmly in my own fingers.

Clare had stepped over the window ledge. She stood on the fire escape, offering herself to something: the height, death, fate, or me. ‘If you do jump, so will I.’ The sentence sounded ridiculous to me, but sometime, as I was saying it, its emotion became true. She must have recognised this. She stepped back beyond the bounds of falling.

I took the master key from Clem's fist, and Clare followed me, politely, downstairs. The centres of the landings were sweltering but not alight. We ran out the doorway, with my coat over our heads. A fireman sprayed us with foam.

‘Oh, hell,’ he pleaded, ‘is there anyone else in there?’



PLAY WITH KNIVES

‘There’s a dead man on the third floor,’ I said. ‘He’s not a fire victim. He’s the gladbagger. He attacked us. I’m calling the police.’

Firemen crowded upstairs and I radioed the police from the fire truck, gave them the same facts, included Clem’s identity, and asked them to contact Harry Terrence. He arrived promptly, I was strategically aggressive: ‘How’s the hamster?’

‘Pregnant.’

I asked him, ‘Why did you ring Daphne?’

‘To verify Clare’s call. Daph said he was out with some kittens for Clare. That’s all.’

‘And you didn’t suspect Clem?’

‘No. Did you?’

‘Once. Him, plus a hundred. But only to amuse myself. I didn’t suspect him when I was with him. That’s why he got so close. He’d locked Clare up in there and made her throw her knife away. Then he said that he wanted to show me the building, because he owned it. When we fought, I grabbed his knife. I *had* to use it He was still attacking, and I didn’t have time for my gun. Clare and I tried to get out by the fire escape’ - if there were any witnesses, we’d all disagree fortuitously and realistically on timing and floor levels - ‘but it was too hot, and we had to climb down back inside.’

I gave him Clem’s master key.

Harry asked Clare: ‘Do you confirm this?’

‘All I could hear and see.’

‘Who started that fire?’

I told him, ‘We don’t know.’ Coral must have taken her tin of kero home with her.

‘We’ll get statements from both of you, later.’ He touched my arm and her hand: ‘Take ease.’

He shouted after us: ‘Did he tell you why he did it?’

I tried to paraphrase, but Clare spoke clearly: ‘He thought they were all guilty.’

Harry didn’t ask of what. She whispered, ‘They’ll understand that.’ I agreed

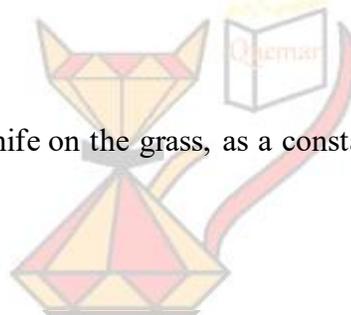
She said ‘I’ll ask Mum to stop.’

‘Will she?’

‘I think so. I’ll find her a kitten.’

‘I thought you’d let him kill you.’

‘So did I.’ We stepped over her knife on the grass, as a constable hurried to it.



THE HANGING JUDGE

Now, and when she'd killed Clem, I'd watched her for that 'murderess' expression, the one from the early press photographs. It wasn't there. At present, she appeared as she had at the top of the steps on her first release: insecure, insubstantial, not malign. We walked to a corner, away from the voices and ash stench. We averted our faces to those broken, moon-filled windows. It seemed no more possible to cut oneself on them than on the jagged night sky. We started noticing each other's burns and bruises. Her feet skidded on smooth mud. So did mine beside her. We steadied each other simultaneously. I held her upper arms, felt even the sides of her bones in their thinness, and the implacable muscles that tethered them.

She deliberated, 'He willed all that to increase his guilt, to father it on me, in me...' In the surreal suggestiveness of the evening, her verb 'father' produced in my mind two caricatures: Clem and Coral Clem and Heather fucking. I dismissed the former as a scrap from Clare's unconscious, not mine. Mine was ghastly enough. At last, I considered Daphne. Had she protected Clem? Or, to some extent, had Clem protected her? If so, to what extent?

Clare continued: 'It was self-defence, but I also killed him deliberately. Not to be guilty.' She was sardonic, scrupulous and harshly anxious. 'Am I a recidivist?'

'Yes, and this won't have been my own first offence.' I was able to laugh.

Then she said, 'I think Dr. Dixon wasn't telling the truth. He wasn't the only gladbagger.'

'But that's destabilising shit. I saw him. I heard him. He would have killed you.'

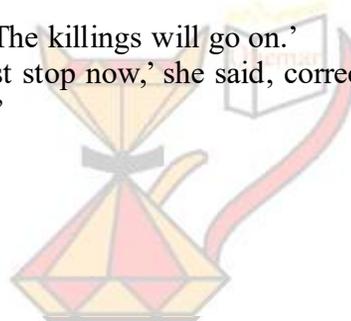
'Yes, he would have killed me, and he did kill Jonathan Manger. But he didn't kill the first ones. Couldn't you tell that: all those smaltzy cliches he made up about love?'

I thought she was wrong about him, but I asked her: 'Who do you think he was protecting - his wife?'

'His wife, or your wife, or Sam - he loved Sam - or Elinor, or any one of many.'

I said, 'Then it can't be left there. The killings will go on.'

'I don't think so. I think they'll just stop now,' she said, correctly, 'now someone has taken the blame.'



PLAY WITH KNIVES

In the distance, an ambulance left with Clem's body.

And Clare and I both calmed, exhausted by our abdication. It was not that we had lost guilt, but that guilt had lost its power and slowly regained some more minor function in the truth. As if spawned by that function, a wind like a wet, black foal sprang up close to us, and faltered safely across the deep ashes, broken clay and pointing shadows. The stars thickened. Our shadows shook on their anchorage. I wondered which of my childhood elations the new air could be recalling, to quicken me like this. I realised that this wasn't kindled by a memory, that ecstasy is an adult emotion. I felt freed by Clare's gaze, which now had a merciful equality with my gaze.

A recidivist nerve skipped in her arm and subsided, under control. She half yawned, half sighed, 'I *am* sorry.'

I continued to judge fairly what her sentence would still be. 'You may never show them that you're sorry, Clare. Somehow that breaks the barrier. It will always seem obscene.'

With that caution, I released her once again.

