

Play With Knives: Three:

Quemar Press

George and Clare and the Grey Hat Hacker

Jennifer Maiden



Play With Knives: Three: George and Clare and the Grey Hat Hacker

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Other Books by Jennifer Maiden currently published online by Quemar Press:

Play With Knives

Play With Knives: Two: Complicity

The Metronome (Print edition of *The Metronome* to be published by Giramondo in 2017)



Play With Knives: Three:

George and Clare and the Grey Hat Hacker

A Novel in Prose and Verse

PREFACE

Play With Knives: Three: George and Clare and the Grey Hat Hacker is a sequel to Maiden's original two *Play With Knives* novels and those of her later poems which feature the characters George Jeffreys and Clare Collins. The 'Grey Hat Hacker' in the title is George's grandson, Idris, known on the Internet as 'Red Idris', a daring political hacker and leaker. In another sense, the 'Grey Hat Hacker' is also death, 'the blind swipe of the pruner and his knife busy about the tree of life', as Robert Lowell has it.

George and Clare are house-sitting by the sea in Thirroul. They are in grief after they are unable to stop a round of executions by the Indonesian Government. They realise that the executions did not include a dispatch and that they had both fallen in love with one of the condemned as they tried to rescue her. Dealing with their own trauma, they spend time on their emotional and physical relationship. Maiden's aptitude for explicit, relational love scenes is at its height here (if the reader is uncomfortable with detailed erotic depictions, they can avoid them by skipping the first verse section, chapters one and two).

Later, Idris takes refuge with George and Clare because he is being targeted by political assassins. Clare's friend Sophie (a French woman who was



saved, with her baby, by Clare in France) is now Idris' girlfriend. She and Florence, her now seven year old daughter, come to stay with them. Sophie works with Idris to piece together 'Frankenphone, The Unhackable Hacker', allowing them to learn when the attack on Idris will be - information which is encrypted in Quantum in Europe. George and Clare plan to smuggle Idris to safety, and unexpected events follow.

As with the Quemar Press editions of *Play With Knives* and *Play With Knives: Two: Complicity*, Quemar asked the author to create sketches for the cover. Maiden also arranged these into a black and white collage.

The Grey Hat Hacker is exclusive to Quemar Press and does not have a print edition. Quemar Press, however, is grateful to Maiden's print publisher, Giramondo, for its support for this project, even though Giramondo felt that the *Play With Knives* series did not fit into its own publishing timetable.

In *Play with Knives: Three: George and Clare and the Grey Hat Hacker*, Maiden glides back and forth between third person verse and first person prose, enjoying the advantages of both forms together. This also allows the forms to blend into each other, bringing illuminated lyricism to the prose and energised narrative to the verse.

Katharine Margot Toohey

QUEMAR PRESS



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Prologue

George Jeffreys:

I thought: too many forces are working against us. I was surprised that she had agreed to house-sit with me, surprised that after all this time we didn't both expect the jaded and the irritable - all the encrustations and pretexts of grief - to finally capsize us. And there would be the new grief of watching the executions. We had tried everything and not been able to prevent them. We would obviously be using sex as something therapeutic, and as aphrodisiacs go, trauma isn't one of the safest. There had always been that necessary confrontation between us. We had demarcated roles: losing the identity of one meant losing the identity of the other. And forgiveness was



too great a loss of identity. When we stood outside the house, we looked at each other, and walked in hand in hand, as if ourselves to an execution.

The place was at Thirroul, and the owners - volunteers for our Prisoners of Conscience organisation - had an obsession with D.H. Lawrence, who had once lived nearby. Inside, it was like every sea house one had ever imagined. There was even a conch shell and a tortoiseshell ashtray, full of chipped marble. I said, quoting *King Lear*: 'Take physic pomp. Expose thyself to what wretches feel.'

She said, 'Except that they aren't wretches.'

'I meant us', I said, and held her other hand, too, as if we had begun a final ballet.

The clock by the bed went round, but it wasn't time.

Chapter One

The Killing Ground

George Jeffreys woke up in Thirroul, in a cliffside brick veneer

he was house-sitting with Clare, who was watching TV.

It was *The Nightwatch*'s thirtieth anniversary. Clare's earlier



lover, Godfrey Reilly, was still on it, with live cover of the latest Indonesian executions that night soon. Clare dreaded that he was going to prate on about all smuggled drugs. And he did. She said, 'I always kill the wrong people. When I think of the number of times I watched that man sleep...' 'But you must,' said George, 'have loved him.' 'Yes, but still he was a very noisy sleeper. You, on the other hand - or the other arm actually - have always been surprisingly quiet. You really don't toss around or snore.' 'It's only when you're there,' he said, with disarming cunning, 'that I'm peaceful at all.' Reilly still attacked the demon powder, with wired detailed relish, lethal facts. George said, 'He's only in his mid fat fifties, but he looks older than me.' Clare said, 'He usually was. Sometimes I miss the house in Ashfield, but the light



from that white paintwork always tended
to eat one alive.' He agreed, 'Whited sepulchre', but that
returned them both dreadfully to death. The youths
were already on the execution island. George
had visited them three weeks ago: a child-mother,
with a baby in Manila, and three boys, younger
even than his grandson. Clare said, 'Don't be guilty
that you're not there.' He said, 'I'm not. At a certain point,
you just sit in a tent near the killing ground,
singing Protestant hymns: not my scene.' His Deep Throat -
a priest - had phoned him earlier, but 'They won't let
him near them.' Clare said, 'She might be okay, if
she breaks down early enough. They'll dope her.'
He said, 'But it's her and the boys: they'll all hold
up too long for each other. And then there's *after*.
With Chan and Sukumaran, they didn't even bother
to do the fucking dispatch.' She hadn't known: was it



the priest who told him? Then she reasoned:
of course, that game they played of not telling
which soldiers' guns had blanks: how can one
do a dispatch without knowing if the gun's live?
She thought: they didn't dispatch, and for half an hour
the men must have writhed there alive. George
did the things you do when impotent and angry,
strode the floor and quoted the increasingly
indispensable A.E. Housman: 'Be still, my soul
be still, it is but for a season, let us
endure an hour and see injustice done.' and she
gave up and switched some Proddy hymn tunes on.
She joined in, in a faint cathedral treble, probably
not knowing that she sang: *'I would be strong,
for there is much to suffer;
I would be brave, for there is much to dare...
Who is so low that I am not his brother?
Who is so high that I've no path to him?*



Who is so poor I may not feel his hunger?

Who is so rich I may not pity him?'

George saw the photos on Godfrey's feed

were recent, talking, wistful, trying not to seem

senseless with terror. 'They looked like that with me',

he said, turned off the show. Outside, the south coast sea

misted the window duskily, in broken shades of blue. He

threw himself at her feet as she folded herself in an

armchair, in her old gone-to-earth-position. He put

his head heavily on her knee: so much energy

and not a thing to do. He said, 'Clare, make love to me',

because that seemed the least barbaric, most true

democratic sexual option then. *Then*, when

survival's very scream was to distract. She thought:

but I can't - not while they die, then said that, and:

'I don't think I can. I wouldn't mean it. I'm too dry.'

'Just lie down then. We'll talk.' She rose to walk

into the toilet, then said, 'I've got execution bladder',



as if that was a Thing she knew, but added: 'Really, they only wet themselves in movies, though.' So, lying beside him in a room which smelled of sand, in the half-dark of a tidal moon, she warned him, 'Just don't try anything at all that you could be arrested for in Sweden.' She knew he wouldn't try worse than that. He said, 'I was thinking that Assange was not naive to think the Wikileaks release of Hillary's hawkish emails or Goldman Sachs would change the election.' She said, 'He didn't. He just kept trying not to die, and maybe so did Ecuador, so cut off his internet access. Hillary might have tried to Missile Crisis them, if it didn't work in Syria.' He agreed, 'Somewhere small enough', squeezed her fist in his, and drummed it up and down. The clock by the bed moved round, but it wasn't time. Assange was always quite a good distraction. He said,



'I've always thought Robinson's Defence was very strange.
He described Rough Sex pretty comprehensively, which
Assange wasn't doing, anyway (just the normal
Queensland five minutes), and then got him extradition.'
That tic with her fist was actually quite hot, she thought,
because it was absent-minded. She usually associated
sex with deliberation, especially when it was done
by George. She was becoming obsessed
with an image of the Filipina's face - tactile
and caressing her own, the tear salt in her mouth -
and Clare's body and limbs contorted
with involuntary cramps. She craved a penknife
in her side, as if on an ancient ship
and doubled on peritonitis. George helped untwist
her calves and fingers. She said, 'Should we turn
on the TV?' He said, 'No, they're still dying.' So



any land beyond the bed became like stepping
into the death field twice. She asked, subdued and brittle,
'Would you think less of me, if I asked you
to hurt me, and it wasn't sexual?' Her phrasing
mandated denial. He murmured, 'No, not less, but
I wouldn't know much. Pain has a second wave,
and when we make love, I make sure that hasn't come
before we're caught in pleasure. I time it to be fast. If
that timing was gone, I don't think I'd be able
to work out any other way to measure.' She
seemed content enough with that technical
explanation. He suggested, 'Would it help
if you were bound?' She'd never thought of it,
almost panicked if her movement was restricted,
unless it was by the eager and the human. She asked,



'Why?' 'I don't know. Not bondage, I suppose, unless that involves the idea of swaddling. It does seem to make babies feel safe.' 'I'm not a baby', her indignation quite incongruous and charming. He said, 'I'm not a gaoler' and gave up - at least that minute, before his next avalanche of facts: 'You know, the Greeks tied up their goddess statues often,' he said, 'apparently in rituals to regulate their power. Will I turn on the light or do you feel safer in the dark?' She added the obligatory 'Benjamin' for him, and turned on the lamp herself.

'Other people's furniture doesn't cease to be amusing', she sighed, in some return to the dark arts. The walls were bright with prints of Sheaf's D.H. Lawrence sequence. The nearest was the one where Lawrence and Frieda lie beneath the cusp of a turning wave, nude in the sea, and his hat



flies westward to the beachhouse on the shore, his arm extended. George asked, 'Is he celebrating an orgasm?' but she said, 'No. The wind blew it. Look. He shows his eyetops like a dog, and Frieda's face is quite impassive, the same as Shead painted the Queen. I think that Frieda in reality had a cute German grin. Have you ever done it in the sea, George?' 'Once with Heather. We did come, but it was more conceptual: I had to concentrate on holding her up so that she didn't drown.' There was scrabbling and squeaking from the lounge. Clare said, 'Damn, we forgot Johnny Depp.' The sooky male white rat, two canaries and a Blue Tongue were part of the house-sitting arrangement. She stood up, tried to balance her hand on his shoulder and fell down. The ground was still steep from estrangement, not



tame carpet but different, indifferent terrain. She
promised herself secretly that she'd turn
the lounge TV back on, since the executions
unwatched, had just colonised the room, but all
her spirit warned her against it, anticipating
the ragged crackle made by midnight guns. George
pulled her up beside him, half on his lap, and fussed
her clothes straight, slid her ankle strap back on. She
had colt legs, like a taller woman. He
said, 'Do you know in Irish children's slang,
"buckle her shoe" means "fuck" I've never been
able to work out what it rhymes with.' In the lounge,
the rat still scabbled. Kindly, Clare put her arms
in a straight line on George's shoulders. Sometimes
he liked to move her around like a doll: not



primarily a sex doll, just a tidy pretty toy,

like the ones he didn't have as a child. She said

sympathetically, 'It must have been awful, being

a boy.' He asked, 'Did you have dolls in prison?'

She had, after all, been nine.

She said, 'They let me keep my best one. They weren't

too bad like that.' She hardly ever mentioned her

shock-conditioning, but now: 'I used to hang onto

her before the shocks. But when they actually happened,

I just wasn't there.' she looked at him again: 'I just

looked out the window. I just wasn't there.' Untangling fine

silver hair on the nape, and closing her jacket, he said,

'We had better move it. The animals aren't fed.'

She stood up too quickly, so that she'd stabilise

her balance or topple, then strode to the lounge.



The clock by the bed moved round, but it wasn't time.

The canaries were called Lily and Snape,

and theatrically in love. The family's kids

must have been into Potter, and possibly Pirates,

but Johnny Depp the white rat

had a soft soul, craving devotion. Clare

fed him with a clucking, cooing sound. Outside,

the shiny Blue Tongue waddled out, as George

offered it fruit and salad from a lunchbox. It

was called Hello Kitty and seemed to know its name -

which is more than I may, soon, he thought. The ocean

in the lunar night swirled visible, although not

as Lawrence described it, 'ice-fiery', let alone

'the huge rhythmic Pacific': it just seemed

too close, as if its breakers crept right in: some



clinging extension of the garden. He said, 'I've decided against moonlight as an asset to seduction', after he returned to her in the kitchen. She had turned the TV on, but there still hadn't been an announcement or the sound of gunshots. However, stray hymns were heard thinly at times: as if filtered through water. She said, 'It's that most awful thing: you want it to be over, then you think, and never want it to be over.' He asked, 'Is Godfrey still narrating?' 'Yes, they've got him on all night. They're making quite a thing about the fact he isn't sleeping. Do *we* want coffee or chocolate?' Her first-person-plural still thrilled him. He finished Hello Kitty's plastic salad. They sat at the kitchen table, drinking thick cocoa, prolonging the normal. He remarked, 'I've forgotten what it was like to stay-on-the-rails, except



there was usually another train that hit one.' She said:

'It's that no-matter-what that is the problem.' She went on:

'You know the electric shock-conditioning...' and he understood

that was to be her penknife-in-the-side tonight: distraction,

the strongest she could find not physical. He established

the basics for the Useful Conversation: 'At that time

in N.S.W. prisons, they mainly used it to alter what

they thought was sexual aberration, for example,

homosexuality, which then was still illegal. They'd decided

you must have got off on your killings of your sisters

and brother, and they wanted to make sure

you didn't go on doing that.' She said, 'At that age,

I believed what someone told me: that it

destroyed your memory, but that was ECT.' He shrugged,

'Yes, shock-conditioning never really had



anything at all to do with the brain. Can I turn
the TV off again? It will take another hour before
they get to the execution.' Her grip closed round
the warm cup like a small marsupial, clinging on
to its dead mother, and he shuttered his own fists about
hers once more, in bleak protection, whispered
'I've got you', into her shoulder. On TV, the killing island
oozed vapour, like something out of Dickens. To obliterate
the plump face of Godfrey Reilly did give him a little
stylised satisfaction. He found, on his way back to the kitchen,
a shelf of political paperbacks: Twentieth Century American:
Mailer and Vidal. He brought her *The Armies of the Night*.
She said, 'I don't like Mailer. His politics are okay, but I saw him
on TV with Melvyn Bragg, bragging about Picasso and saying
women's cunts have an Aesthetic, and that a beautiful woman



can still have an ugly one, and vice versa. Is that how you would see it, George?' She'd released her hold on the cocoa, so he felt ahead on points, except that now he had to clarify his assessment of vaginas. Temporising, he mimicked the action of drinking and she drank, but smiled at him, as if distraction was always spiced with danger. He tried: 'I think it's a bit of a myth that men discuss vaginas, just as the size of penises isn't really important to women. Probably Bragg and Mailer were trying to sound in-the-club, like Donald Trump on a bus or something. Do you know that when Tallulah Bankhead met Mailer she asked, "Aren't you the little boy who couldn't spell 'fuck'"? I've always thought he was more comfortable with creative journalism.' She said, 'I thought Tallulah was gorgeous in *Lifeboat*' - apart from sex and reading, the house-sitting had already



reached the old movie stage - 'but what do you, yourself,
think about it?' 'As opposed to me, someone else?'

'Yes.' There was nothing else to say, so he said: 'I
think women's cunts are all different from each other,
but in my experience - which didn't always involve
a lot of time for observation - they are really
like the woman herself, not different to her. Heather's
was fine, still and classical, but, unlike yours, had no
live, subtle and sinewy pulse of its own.' She said, 'That
sounds more experiential than visual.' 'So my case'
he said, 'rests about Mailer', then he bolted back
to any safety offered by history: 'Did you know
in the Restoration they had pubic wigs called "merkins"?'
She poured them some more cocoa: 'Yes, I knew. It's
alright. You didn't say anything wrong. Sometimes



I think any joint biological thing - sex or childbirth -
has to be estranging because, in them, each one has to
always objectify the other.' The sadness in her voice
was something he associated with cocoa: was it
full of reflective esters, or did its sweetness comfort
her, and make some dolour safe? He asked, 'Did I
pass some test?' And she said 'Yes', but didn't
name it. Then she asked, 'At some time can you phone
their priest?' 'Maybe afterwards. At the moment
he'll be trying to give them dope. Extra attention
is really the last thing he needs.' They took the cups
back into the bedroom. She said, 'It would be worse,
fighting the terror through a haze, but, of course,
it isn't about emotions, just the pain.' The clock
by the bed moved round, but it wasn't time. George



who was used to radiating anxiety as a form
of reassurance about intent, was this time anxious
truly. She embraced his back instinctively. He turned
instinctively away. It wasn't a solution yet
to break down in Clare's arms. She asked, 'Are you really
like me, and her face so close to yours? She seemed
always so sudden in welcome. I remember the scent
she wore: pink, piercing jasmine.' He'd smelt that
jasmine all day. He said, 'It's an aphrodisiac in some
parts of Africa. I don't know about Manila. I've
always thought it sickly, but there's no doubt
it has power.' The sea moon through the night glass shone
on a Shead print directly, beyond the lamplight rim.
And it had to be, of course, George thought, that skinny
motherfucking crucifixion. Clare said, 'And they have this in



the *bedroom*?' He laughed: 'Well, it is a sex position.'

A naked Lawrence was hung on a cross, like a picture,

with no visible signs of restraint, his spread-out hands

still clerical and attractive, but the rest of him

depicted male body as an unachieved erection: clearly, he

was not aroused by martyrdom. Two women: Frieda

glum in a white hat, and another lady, watched him, were

being the two Marys, as if in a Passion Play. For no genuine

reason, maybe, George remembered Nye Bevan's phrase

'The Passion Play of politics', and thought: it wasn't just

about passion in parliament, but also perhaps passion

in the politics of death. When Lawrence had lived here

he had feared the coal miners' gritty socialism, thought it

had the casual violence of his incarnate miner-father, wrote

Kangaroo about right-wing insurrection. Clare said, thinking



executions: 'The poor girl said her favourite hymn

is *Abide With Me*.' 'Which, thankfully', George observed,

'wasn't played on the *Titanic*', then felt contrite for that

defensive insensitivity of facts, and hummed to prompt

his memory: 'Swift to its close ebbs out life's fleeting day...'

The painting was bland in its moonbeam, showed no blood

or positional asphyxia. Clare helped, under her breath:

'Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes, shine

through the gloom and point me to the skies.

Heaven's morning breaks and earth's vain shadows flee.

In life in death, O Lord, abide with me. We sang it all

the time in prison. Mum told them I was Church of England.'

He said, 'I've still got my copy of *Maria Cross* out there

somewhere. It may be in the kitchen. I don't really think that

Conor Cruise O'Brien would have included Lawrence



in his essays on sex as a metaphor in literature
for the Crucified Woman.' Clare remained transfixed, however,
by the pastoral print. It even had a rainbow. Every book
that Lawrence ever wrote seemed in these paintings. She
investigated: 'George... Why is there a white cockatoo
on that other man's head?' George said, 'Beats me. I
don't think he wrote that one. When in doubt, it
represents the human soul: you know: anything
pale at all with wings.' She said, 'I'm really happy
that these people didn't have a cocky. Those canaries
are weird enough for anything.' *Maria Cross* had recalled
to him her body making love: on her back, the twisting
helpless head, the hands gripping up , or above,
and the final head flopped forward, or beside, or on
her stomach, lips moving against his hand that



was supporting his arm on the pillow. He said,

'I suppose foreplay is precluded by the hymns,

but if I tried a modified Assange, do you think you

might be into it more by the middle? I would be careful.'

George being helpful always made her feel sorry, but

she explained, 'I'm frightened there'd be nothing between

me and her face, if we did. When you fuck, there are always

times when you're trapped in your head. It's not that

I wouldn't enjoy it, too, but that, in the last resort,

it wouldn't distract me enough.' He agreed: 'There isn't any

way we could really keep it short. But I would try to watch

you, and keep your attention.' She said, 'One of my problems

is that because, when we visited her separately, we both fell

in love with her, my horror is that we care so much more

about her than those three scared little boys.' He quoted now



something she'd always liked from Lowell: 'But you can't love everyone. Your heart won't let you.' She drew the curtain, lost the crucifixion, but the darkened floor became uneven with impatient death again. The clock by the bed moved round, but it wasn't time. George said, 'You'll fall over again', but she reached the bed-end, awkwardly. He made a steadying gesture, but didn't touch her. He said, 'The hymn thing may generate white light, but I don't think I can take too much more of it without crying.' He found his MP3 player, put it on a speaker and played his own recording of a woman at a Labour Party Conference in Britain singing *The Internationale* in a robust voice, pure Yorkshire. Clare laughed: 'They're drug mules, not Corbynistas,' but he said 'They're people. This is just about people': intentionally simplistic, but implacable. Pointedly, she put her arms



around his back again. This time, he let her, turned and put his arm around her waist, so that her head could rest with her chin on his shoulder. The pressure bit in sharply, provided a resting focus for all his body, which quickly relaxed out like a sigh. She thought: it is as if he'd actually expanded, like a paper flower in water: gone back to his right size, in a way even beyond any sexual aspect. She remembered widows saying what they remembered most about their partner after he'd died was his back, and she let her weight rest against his, drawing in warmth, not needing anything in the lamp-held night to change. No one was requiring rescue here, and no one dead. The music was not an intrusion. They seemed to sleep five minutes but as if it were longer, then he startled, and she said,



'Are we going to make love to *The Internationale*?', one of those old, innocent Clare questions. He asked, 'Would it help?' She reached to turn it off, but then reflected: 'Yes, I think I do feel safer.' He turned it down somewhat. She sat on his lap backwards, in a sitting version of spoons. It was a strange mix of the erotic, the secure and the perfunctory, as required by the time frame, the fear, the fearful nature of the evening. He moved his fingers in rhythm, held her as she came, and then entered suddenly, without being guided by her hand. But, though easy, the thing itself took longer than they expected, as unpredictable always as childbirth or dying. When they both came, she had somehow turned herself to face him, with her arms around his neck: and when they rolled back, it was as classical lovers, mouth to mouth. In lamplight, her eyes were darker, the newborn



midnight-blue but full with secret shadows, like conspirators
in a Jacobean play, glimpsed in alleys and intent on
insurrection: the quiet mischief he regarded as his
private space of her. He asked, 'Did you think of her face?'
'Once or twice, but it was alright - I suppose because you
were thinking of her, too: I could relax.' He was between
her and the lamp, and his body's silhouette
dappled over her like a tree: an unquiet one, gnarled
and leaning on its elbow, but he could discern some
features of her body, with its cloud limbs sprawled
precisely, as the clouds do late at night. It was as if
he and she had become whatever was outside
the drawn curtain: then he realized he'd been dozing.
He qualified honestly, 'I wasn't thinking of her then:
I knew that sex was the one thing that would take



it away for a while. If it was with you, I mean You
take quite a lot of concentration.' She pushed
her clothes into a pile to dress, then grinned,
kissed his lips again briefly and gave the heap
to him, with her levelled arms out front. It was all
light white cotton: blouse, pants and slacks. He dressed
her, his fingers drinking in the contrast between
the solid metal buttons and her breasts' soft coolness,
or laughing, 'How can I fit these on when you're
sitting on my hands?', as facts returned.

The clock by the bed moved round, but it wasn't time.

She asked, 'Will we turn the TV on?' He said, 'I don't
think I can. I'll phone Dan Bright as soon as the iPad
says its over, but last time afterwards they just let him
wander around. I don't want to just listen to someone



bleed on the ground and talk to their priest.' 'You won't',
she said 'By then, they'll have found his phone.' They
went back to the lounge. The canaries were feeding each
other birdseed with their beaks. The rat was ecstatic
to see anyone human. George assumed that the lizard
was okay. She said, 'I hope this is the last time I
see Reilly.' They turned on the *Night Watch*, heard guns.

Beyond a screen of trees, was short burst repetition.

Lights spun above the bush. Hymns howled between
the noises without hope's dignity, their tone forever
an animal that can't adjust ever, ever, ever, ever
to its loss. Clare said, 'Now pray that it be short.'

George had turned bloodless white and his eyes
flickered as if in a quinine fever. She said 'It's alright.

We did love her, and she always knew that we



really tried to help her.' He said, 'We don't even know if she's dead, won't know how long before she finishes dying, ever.' He rang the priest, but Clare was right. The phone answered in Indonesian. He said, 'I suppose that doesn't mean he isn't still out there with them.' She comforted, 'No, they took his phone, that's all.' She thought in an awful joke: we are both walking shot, then suddenly sat down next to Johnny Depp, Lily and Snape. She patted the rat's cage and touched its nose, but animals can only share in human grief by copy, not response. The rat clearly knew that something was needed, but he could not work out what. George had regained his colour, folded his arms, walked over and knelt in place beside her. He said, 'I know that



thing you were feeling: I just want you to hurt me physically, with everything you've got.' She said, 'That's gone for me at the moment. But now I need to order everyone around. I want to email the priest and tell him what to do, and I want you to issue a statement from Prisoners of Conscience. Sometimes now, you almost run the outfit. We can still try to stop them doing it again.' 'They will do it again,' said George, 'and we shouldn't do anything in grief. I think you and I were always right about the nature of trauma: when one's stable structure collapses, one way or another, one bounces up and down like a crazy elevator in a short circuit, always at the bottom or top, never either one of those for very long', he held her hands: 'When you do your Hitler in the Bunker, usually



you start crying pretty soon.' She answered: 'It doesn't feel as if I'll cry for hours.' She pressed his forehead to her knee, in case he wanted to, but he shook his head: 'I think right now I can't cry, either.' She said, 'I can't see her face near to mine anymore, or feel it: that cosmetic smell and the soft cheek, like feathers, when women greet you, so you guess what they'd be like in love.' They were trying with all their might to turn the specific validly into the general, and survive. He patted Johnny Depp, who was relieved that his new humans knew what to do for each other. The rat rolled on his back luxuriously like a kitten, for attention. Clare praised him and he scampered round his wheel. She walked the carpet in an arc, rubbed her fingers abrasively on her eyes, like a toddler sensing tears.



George stood up and drew the drapes back, showed black glass, the sea as extra darkness, condensation quickening to suggest the empty dawn. The effect was to increase the threat-sense on purpose, direct her back into his unresting arms. He had again an agitated fluency like a large tree, that moved itself in many directions in the circle of a storm, as he too walked the room, she thought: but being sure still not to impinge on her stress. She said, 'We're like animals in the zoo, doing the lateral walk.' He stopped and she stood in front of him, close. She recalled, she said, an early Irish song, that had run through her mind since the afterplay kiss: *'And my love came behind me, he came from the south, his breast to my bosom, his mouth to my mouth,'* added



'It's nice that we've never been self-conscious about that old password word "come".' But was aware that the sun was disinterred here, would be in Indonesia, that the mourned, on their mind all night, had gone. He kissed her, his lips reading skin on the scabs she'd bitten, as if they were whorled like some runic gnomonic writing, keeping his mouth's pressure so light that he could understand what it touched. He said, 'In a movie, they'd jump cut to us recovered, smiling a bit, doing something normal, but this is real and long. We need simply to cope with a dangerous transition.' She said, 'I haven't thought much about other things. We should sit and make a list of stuff that must be done.' They did, and it was on 'Check the plants' she started crying. This was not the type of grief sleep comforts by infusing the lost beloved. It was the type that any inadvertent sleep at once



contorts with ghosts, so they tried their best to work
in the useless, sleepless day. George rang Dan Bright at a new
cell phone. George and Clare finished their report. The deaths
were supposed to be 'okay', but family were at this
point a priest's priority. George shrugged, 'He still may
tell us someday, or indeed this may be true.' Clare said,
'Now is not a good time to be lied to. I've always agreed
with you about what Montaigne said about lying: it destroys
all hope of communication.' George said, in the overbright
insomniac light: 'He wouldn't see it as lying, just as very few
see killing as killing.' 'I knew I was killing', said Clare. He
emailed the report in, agreed, 'Yes, and I know when I'm lying.
Lets see if it feels safer now to lie down and rest.' The clock
by the bed moved round, but it wasn't time. They sat on
the bed end and looked at another Shead, this one fixed



above the dressing table. Lawrence in braces, shirtsleeves
and a tie, held Frieda up by the waist, her head back,
and her shoulders bare. She had a sad, transfixed expression.
They were on a cliffside verandah, watched by a kangaroo,
the sea below dull sapphire, and the sky sky-blue. Their hair
was all the same brown-brown, and his beard rested down
above her breast (the left, upon her heart). 'It doesn't look
like Thirroul', said Clare, 'there isn't anthracite in everything.
There isn't any mist and the grey air isn't thick so that
the sky falls always in the ocean.' There were no oil tankers
too close on the slow horizon. 'He's about to wrestle with
that kangaroo, I think,' said George, 'maybe it signifies
the problem of writing novels, but there's that device,
anyway, in Lawrence of male wrestling: in the nude in
Women in Love. He carried off Frieda from her daughters



and husband because she knew about Freud. Maybe she quoted to him Freud's aphorism about all jealousy being homosexual.' 'Freud was really just an aphorist', said Clare, 'Did Frieda want to be abducted?' 'Not entirely', he said, 'Apparently she screamed and clutched the carpet. She really loved her family. Anyway, there they both are at Thirroul.' 'Apparently, also,' said Clare, 'in a cocktail dress and heels.' He said, 'It was the Twenties. Perhaps she did dress in style.' 'She's undressed in style in most of the others', said Clare, looking round the room. She flipped herself backwards, in the Maria Cross position on the pillow, so that he had to lie down on her arm, with his chin above her heart breast, where Lawrence's had been. There was that slight peppermint smell of her sweat: the one when she hadn't slept. She asked, 'Did Lawrence have a sense of humour?' 'Probably, but he



didn't exercise it. He would have thought it was like jokes about sex, or like swearing. It only served to lessen the theme.

Perhaps he was right to some extent. It can stop you going deep.

I've always said it takes some guts to be silly, and that sort of seriousness is silly when extreme.' She said, 'You use jokes to detach too much.' He considered: 'At my age, it takes huge courage to re-attach yourself to life, when you know you have to leave it. Detachment is the easiest, most dignified choice.'

She said: 'I've never had a dignified life', while giving in to sleep.

She woke hours later in the sea-deep dusk, with George gazing beside her at the ceiling and her arm now on his arm, her sleeping hand on his penis' warmth for comfort.

She asked, 'Why are you feeling so old? Is it the sea? I've seen that people always move to the seaside to die.' He said, 'No, I was just tired. I'm house-sitting not retired: not here with a rug



on my knees. Just you on them. I was watching. You're a quiet sleeper, always, too, when you don't wake calling out. Do you dream of your brother and sisters?' 'Yes, but it's never bad. I loved them.' 'And when you wake up and they're dead? Does that make it a retrospective nightmare?' 'No. I still feel they love me. When I'm badly guilty about them it really isn't ever caused by sleep. I was really dreaming grief, however, for the three in Indonesia. I'm quite surprised that it didn't show.' They both realized she'd put numbers on the mourned now, but accepted that as a small recovery. He saw: 'That trauma elevator doesn't just jump hierarchically, it goes between subjective and objective crazily, you know.' She said, 'I know. I'm used to seeing some awfully distraught people use some awfully strange statistics, though. I'd better get up. I'm bleeding.' At fifty-two, the shock of the executions had brought on her



menstruation: a flood, because stress-delayed before.

She said, 'I always think it's stopped forever.' He asked,

'Will you miss it?' And she chortled 'My God, no.' She went on,

mechanically: 'Although I suppose the skin's more sensitive then,

and one doesn't worry about lubrication.' In the bathroom, she

needed a hotel-sized bathsheet. She said, 'Never in the history

of humanity has a woman associated menstrual blood

with any other sort of bleeding, unless as an unwarmed child.

But help me. I'm gone.' When he hurried in, her forehead

was on the bath rim, and the tremor through her body

jumped as if the childhood shocks had finally

come back to finish their work. It's hard to crouch

lower than someone else when, literally, on the tiles, but

she had a clear impression that he looked up at her face,

when his arm was around her. He asked, 'Is it Indonesia



or the children?' She said, 'I don't know, but the blood isn't my blood, and this room isn't a room. It seems to be the killing ground again.' They were both caught up in that first decision: to live it or distract? George's subconscious seemed to make the choice, because he cut himself on some hidden edge of the bath. He bled a little from his still-balancing hand. She gazed around through a sightless fog for band-aids. He said, 'I'd rather just let it bleed, I think, in solidarity. It doesn't hurt much.' She said, 'Freud said there are no such things as accidents.' He was suave: 'As you said, just an aphorist', as he looked at his increasing blood, and shook his hand somewhat. He continued: 'And you presuppose a subconscious.' 'Well, yeah', she drawled, sounding like his grandson, on purpose, since that was Idris' response to what he believed obvious,



replacing the 'No, duh' of a previous generation. She was too worried, however, to hide her real distress. She had lost a quarter of her body weight in fluid, and her mind was anyway overbraced from years of stress, and that last bad, anticipatory night. Her mind kept insisting she was shot, and she could not dissuade it. She looked crucified in earnest, on the bath rim, hands spread out. He said, 'So, subconsciously, would you like me to pick you up? We can talk about Freud on the bed.' She lied, 'I can walk,' but added, 'Don't hit my head on the door frame.' 'I would never do that', he said in indignation, his very deliberation apparently in question. In lifting her, the decision was between the Rape-of-the-Sabines or Prone-Ragdoll position. The former was easier, but the latter became the only she could manage and stay conscious. To pass



out had a death terror about it. She gripped his shirt,
trying to share his consciousness like blood. On the bed,
with anxious literalness, he said about Lawrence:

'He liked washing Frieda's bloodstained panties, in
Italy, and she had it off with farmboys, but the marriage
was apparently still happy. You're right, she did have
a cute German grin.' She nodded, 'And, by then, she
may have found her daughters again.' The savage
whiteness of her skin on the cream sheet was odd.

She asked, 'But what about Freud? I've been
thinking about Kenneth Tynan, and that book you have
by his wife about him: how anyone so sane could be
serious about Wilhelm Reich, and all that sexual
psychotherapy.' He said, 'Reich has always seemed
a good influence on schoolteachers. It was Reichian



therapy that transformed Sylvia Ashton-Warner,
and A.S. Neill separately. Before that, they were both
authoritarian and prone to inhibition. The special
thing I'd add in that context about Tynan is that he
was pedagogical.' She said, 'That's right. As a theatre
critic he wrote he couldn't love anyone who didn't like
Look Back in Anger. There's that line by Ashton-Warner:
"I teach by espousal".' She felt as if some blood was back
in her arteries at last. George felt sure enough leave her, and
fix them some makeshift dinner, feed the pets. He returned
with a deranged cheese antipasto on a plate, two plastic
boxes of Hello Kitty's salad, and some coffee, saying
'It's alright. She has plenty.' 'How do you tell the sex
of a lizard?' asked Clare, who was Clare again, if vaguely
ethereal with anemia. He said, 'Do you know that Tynan



wrote an essay on panties for American *Playboy*, but they

knocked it back because the subject was too kinky?

Which brings us full circle to Lawrence, I suppose.'

In the outside dark, a bushfire wind began its loud

hyperventilation. Sometimes when it met the road

you could be hemmed in here. It wasn't rhythmic,

but seemed to attempt the same breath, over and over.

Clare clasped a salad container, listened, and quoted

from Stevie Smith: "'Twas the voice of the Wanderer,

I heard her exclaim, You have weaned me too soon,

you must nurse me again'" She misremembered the next

bit, but then went on: "'But would she be happier if she

were within? She is happier far where the night winds fall

And there are no doors and no windows at all. No man

has seen her this pitiful ghost, And no woman either, but



heard her at most, Sighing and tapping and sighing again,
You have weaned me too soon, you must nurse me again"
On cue, the wind rose as if it were trapped. George asked,
'Would you like me to feed you? I wouldn't like it if you got
to the pitiful ghost stage.' But her pillow face had almost
reached it: corpse pale. She asked, 'Isn't that a too Mrs. North
Shore fantasy?' He asked, 'For you or me? I'm the one
who likes to dress a doll.' 'But you never asked before.'
He said, 'There are many things that I have never
asked you.' She said, 'I suppose we could just feed each
other, like the canaries: not mouth to mouth, though. Do
you think its oral sex for them?' He said, 'I don't think so.
Or that's what they'd actually do. They don't seem to be too
absorbed with metaphor. I think with humans, however,
you may need to have active and passive.' She asked,



'Do you think that was Lawrence's problem? The nature of sex so intrigued him that he thought all politics should be like that, too: dominance and revelation.'

'Well most of it is,' said George,' but A.J.P. Taylor, defending Bismarck made the point that his observation that the future of Europe was blood and iron was just a prediction, not a recommendation. You could make a fortune analysing sex in the last American election.' He put one of the lizard's small tomatoes in her mouth, on purpose not squashing it in advance. It burst in her teeth like a tiny balloon, with a honey flavour, the juice too strong for the seeds to counteract it. She said, 'It's only the seeds that are bitter: that's why I never cook them.'

Even if he and she were in their graves together, he thought again, there would still be spectral voices, as they gave



each other information. He licked some juice from her lips, and realized tomato was like one of her vaginal flavors, but was careful not to let things become too overclose to the canary. He tried her with a cocktail onion. She asked, 'Do they really feed that to Hello Kitty?' He answered, 'I'm not sure how careful they were to fillet. I take all the onions out, anyway, and eat them.' He put some broken cheese in her mouth with the onion. She swallowed, giggling. She said, 'When they show people's fantasies about this, it seems to happen much more slowly, and involve something sappy and a spoon.' He said, 'Teaspoons do some seem to be erotic objects. Maybe the clitoris compared to the penis. They are certainly feminine, but the rest of it is probably fetishism: doing



something to someone with a thing.' He fed more cheese.

She put her head on his arm, her metal-bright hair so soft

he could think of no comparison, even expensive fur

sold from a wild animal. He couldn't help but press

his fingers deep in it, hold back her head by what

felt like a satin harness. She had the delicate skeletal

structure to look like an actress, head thrown back

as if stilled on a Hollywood chaise longue. He said, 'Tynan

said Garbo looked the way that every woman

looked when he was drunk. You always look like that

when you make fun of me like this.' In that situation,

he fed her a whole salad, bit by bit. He asked, 'Was

that sexy?' 'Yes. Can I have my head back?' 'No,'

but he let her go. She didn't ask if he wanted to

be fed in return, since obviously he didn't, saying



'I don't need to be even more helpless', but he was relieved her skin had dappled to winter rose.

He said, 'You did look dead a little', but she appeared too troubled, remembering. They finished the cheese, and he thought of another distraction, then knew that now it was better to meet this directly. He quoted Housman:

'Be still, my soul, be still. The arms you bear are brittle.'

She nodded, asked, back on the pillow: 'Do you think brittle arms are better than nothing? I've seen people die because there were too few signatures on a petition: some petitions should never happen.' He thought and said, 'It's always a difficult decision, and I agree that sometimes it is better not to try.' She shrugged, 'I was asking then not arguing, however it may have seemed to you', and he conceded: 'Yes, I know you, and that is what you do.'



Conditioned as she was, she still fought a compulsion not to challenge any system, unlike George, who would take on a battalion, albeit with appropriate stubborn cunning. He added, 'But then sometimes you compensate, take out someone in passing as if you were a Swat Team, darling.' He was one of the few people who say 'darling' with no exasperation or manipulation, she thought. He enjoyed the word, as if it had secret power to touch directly on the skin, as if it was really one of those words that have some alchemy about them. Because she was, at that point, prone physically and emotionally, they decided to stay there and watch one of George's vast collection of pre-Code movies, arranging the laptop between her knees in the Missionary Position. He cuddled his arm around her on the pillow, as *Aggie Appleby, Maker of Men*



flickered past brightly. Aggie, a splendid blonde, both brazen and winsome, transforms a weak rich man into something more macho, to the delight of his fiancée, who initially leaves him to Aggie, asking 'Where can a girl whose just lost a husband get a drink around here?', but in the speakeasy meets Aggie's Previous, accidentally, must have asked him some question, as he declares 'Am I *rough*?', looks likely to prove it, by beating up the bar. At the last, of course, Aggie trains him to be softer (as he says, happily, 'I've lost my manhood') and returns the transformed other to his lady, and upper class. 'That was all quite good', said wan but interested Clare, 'I don't think classist? Although they did try to make it look like a sacrifice.' George said, 'That was just the pathos. She really did prefer the working man.' Clare laughed. They had made a poignant effort to concentrate:



every now and then the distracted gaze of either
looked sideways in quick sadness, and was met, before
redirecting bravely to the screen. It was as if the movie
was a child before which they should seem cheerful, as if
it had its own integrity, and right to happiness. She did not
want him to shift the awkward-edged laptop, because
he would have to leave her pillow, where he rested so
close that they breathed each other's breath, accepting that
should be the air's default taste, really. The clock by the bed
went round, but it wasn't time. Their sleep rolled
in like a rhythmic tide of breakers, its lined-up ghosts
sheer to the horizon, safely. When she woke, there was no
bleeding. She said, 'Perhaps it wasn't a period, just a sort
of mop-up or something. Who knows? I'm at the mercy
of peculiar forces.' He sat up: 'So am I.' The morning



had the smoky taste of a few small escarpment blazes,
but the garden view was a whispering blue,
and watercolour clear. Johnny Depp munched on a carrot,
secure that they were there. Lily and Snape continued
angling beak to beak, the falling grain
pattering on their cage's floor like rain. In the garden,
canna lilies blew in clusters, the colours of Picasso.
Hello Kitty slithered out in welcome. George opened
up the salad, gave Clare the onions and hand-fed
the blue-tongue with the rest. Clare clasped her knees
in a white cotton skirt, against the lilies, laughing. He put
a large straw hat on her. She said, 'The new nurturing-you
does seem to be very bossy.' 'I sort of thought that's what
it meant', he lied. By her side, in the grass in a summer
shirt like a spilled paintbox, the sort that comes on sale



often at op-shops, he felt very un-George, rolled up
his sleeves as the breeze found his ribs and shoulders,
under the airy denim. She was drowsy, her tongue
peppery with the onion. She said, 'We could make love,
but we'd have to go back inside.' He said, 'In *Sons and Lovers*
Paul and Clara start doing it near the road, but that's
supposed to be a sign of desperation: that their love affair
is jaded.' She said, 'Reilly used to suggest that, but I faded
out on him, pretended I'd not heard. I suppose I should
have been more experimental, but he didn't have what
you have, when you tune in to some sort of mutual weird.'
George absolutely glowed. To hide some of his pleasure,
he strode to the edge of the garden. The sea was playing
around the granite and coal with the same mannerisms
as Johnny Depp around his wheel. There were long trails



of impossible, tossing silver, like her hair. Apart from that the colours were brown, blue and and neatly plain. She had walked to join him, the grey wind molding cotton around her hips like a statue in a fountain. George said, 'Lawrence described this same sea as being "pale green glass" and the rock floor as "all wet and sea-savage", but do you see it?' She studied the seascape: 'Not savage. But he had that terror of anything native, including "natives", then his idea of the bush made *Picnic at Hanging Rock* look like *Skippy*. I think you have to presuppose an unlucky exercise in projection. And it's certainly not green.' He caught the breezing white folds of cotton, drew her onto the bench at the garden's end with him. He said, 'The first time we made love, I thought you tasted like the sea.' She said, without flattery: 'I remember being surprised that you



were good at it.' Startled, he asked, 'What did you expect?'

She reflected: 'I suppose someone more selfish. You know,

in general I think that's what's always undone me about

you: at unexpected moments, you have a lack of casual

routine selfishness. You'd have left me with Reilly, if

you'd thought it was what I wished.' He said, 'You make

me sound like something out of the *Wife of Bath*,' vaguely

irritated: 'By no stretch of the imagination would I have

left you with Godfrey Reilly. Remember, you threw a plate

at him, and he said you shouldn't have children.' 'Yes,'

she said, 'but that opened up the possibility, and in

a good piece of real estate', not entirely joking. He asked,

'Do you wish you could have trusted him?' 'Of course.'

'And you would have asked me to go?' There was a strange

sound in the sea, like the world's breath disappearing. She



thought too long before she answered, 'No.' Honesty suddenly seemed the most devastating of human attributes, and he asked, 'Are we were building up irritation because we didn't made love in the garden?' A useful enough question, and easy enough to agree, so she did so, but she added, 'Do you want to talk about jealousy?', demurely, as the Blue-Tongue ventured outside its usual limits, played at their feet, discreetly absorbing sun. George pretended to groan: 'Do-It-Yourself-Wilhelm-Reich', but she did the Idris impression: 'Well, yeah. The dude is dead,' continued in her own voice: 'And you know that I'm a very jealous person.' He said, 'All your life you've been set up to be many things, but I have never seen in you a trace of envy. Do you know that Oscar Wilde wrote *Reading Gaol* after reading Housman? We accept the axiom that each man kills the thing the loves, but then do we ask



why?' She hadn't meant the topic to rebound on her so strongly.

She said, 'I've tended to accept your reasons: that love

really is "as terrible as an army with banners", that my

mother was a pretty, silly girl, at the time, and I competed

one last time for her attention, all the time on fire with

something I didn't even know was anger. Even twenty

years after, I was grateful, when you said you loved me

best. It was as if it solved a great equation, and matter just

turned back again to energy, that's all. You were never

concerned at all with whether I was sorry. You knew I

was, but that it didn't signify, and the children's deaths

were what I'd have to carry, with me like a special weight

from hell.' Her narration was authentically trancelike,

so he said, 'But there are other things as well. It

was maybe love's nature that killed them: possession



of the soul discarding the body, seeing it as a rival, death
being the prevention of escape. Freud aphorised that
dreams are the royal road to the subconscious, but maybe
then so is religion. I've no brief for any, but it seems to me
that the Judaic need to be fair to all equally is fought
by the Christian urge that *every* case is special. God, girl,
have we ever never argued that every refugee or shaking
felon is the system's sole exception? And hasn't the system
pretended to believe us, half the time?' She smiled:

'The road to hell is paved with the impartial. I know I wanted
to keep the children with me, for just one thing to be mine.
But if that is your other reason, it still seems very simple.' He
said, ' Even if the truth is simple, it's still useful for a little.' They
realised they held hands: both hands, so that they partnered
each other's gestures, as if absent in a dance. Her trance



appeared to be gone. She asked, 'But jealousy?' He said, 'I don't want to talk on the bench, where we can be seen from the rocks or the path.' She said, 'There's no one I can see, but lets go back to the house, and lie down on the grass.' They unlinked two hands and swung the other two, as Hello Kitty followed them back companionably to safety. He asked 'Will I get a rug?' She shook her head, preferring earth. He lay down first, and the always-damp soil through his clothes reminded him of lying with his dead wife in the Gardens when they were courting. He said, 'I did this with Heather. We didn't fuck. It was too public.' Clare spread herself full length on him on some sunlit ground. She said, 'I admit it throws me a bit in Europe when so many people actually do it in front of you in parks. Would Lawrence approve of that, do you think?' They were careful not to crush



any bright lilies, made a comfortable hollow between, her hair against his neck in trickling air, that swirled in rivulets around the cliff. 'I don't think so. He'd think it too public for passion. It's probably just utilitarian, but he'd believe it was display.' She said, 'The only book of his I like is *Lady Chatterley*. Reilly had it lying around, but it isn't porn, and there's no dramatic conflict for the sake of plot. It shows sexual passion as being a solution for industrialisation and property. I thought it quite left wing.'

'That happens even more as you get older,' said George, 'and at that stage he was dying.' He was entertained by memory: 'I remember when I was a kid I read anything I could about the Court Case, and I came across John Sparrow in *Encounter* arguing that the 'undisclosed element' in it was anal sex, that Lawrence was fundamentally dishonest and guilty of a "failure of integrity" for not being his usual explicit self about that. But



knowing about writers now I'd say that Lawrence was simply consumed with stark terror at the subject, tried his best.' She tensed on his ribs, asked 'Have you ever done that?' 'No, not that I consider it a monopoly of being gay, but I'm going to need a lifetime to exhaust the possibilities of the vagina.' Then he asked more perceptively and gently, 'Why, have you?' She said, 'Not in prison. Reilly did it with me a couple of times. I didn't mind, but it didn't feel like anything much, and after I had cramps and couldn't go out eating. He was angry, but there was nothing I could do.' He didn't want to sound disapproving, and he'd long ago accepted his deep need to murder Reilly, was always grateful when it seemed that she had that, too, but he asked, 'Is that to do with the jealousy you wanted to discuss? Do you think that I sense all these things that I don't guess? I suppose



ignorance is just a form of jealousy.' She upturned her face to the close clouds and sun, the back of her cloud head beating to his heart, then squirmed herself more easily into a crescent, knowing her weight's discomfort would comfort him at last. He relaxed then, pressed between her body and warmed ground, reflected suddenly that it was probably another form of swaddling: by her skin, and by the earth. She raised the grass-mottled white skirt enough for his hands to slip under, then pitched forward on his shoulder when she came. She let herself stay limper than usual, didn't bounce: so he threw her up and down on him for longer, and her head and arms were free. They stayed there together until the darkening sea tided up to the base of the garden, and Johnny Depp squeaked for them from the lounge room, hungrily. As



the animals ate, Clare answered her phone, which always sounded like glaciers dancing. It was Xanaan, whom she had smuggled out from Nauru, on a woman's boat hired to cross to Kiribati. Clare exclaimed, 'Darling!', remembered the exhausted hand in hers and the breeze from the bitter salt water, the engine's fractured roar, the simple, tactile, overwhelming colours. Xanaan was in London, studying IT, and a volunteer for Corbyn. She was over-awed by George's grandson Idris, who had hacked successfully in the interests of both Sanders and Corbyn, and who was known - but seldom seen - as 'Red Idris'. Clare put the phone on speaker, to tease the incredulous George. Xanaan said: 'I heard him speak in Islington. He's great, but he had to hide his face. He had lots of red hair, though, and I think a beard. I want



to learn to do what he does. I can't believe your partner is Red Idris' grandfather.' She had the Somali lilt, and graceful diction. George made a noise like sneezing. Clare realised she'd never actually heard a real person snort before. It sounded like a pig unearthing truffles. She remembered babysitting Idris when he was tiny. George and she had once or twice made love while the baby slept, and one time when he awoke he had seen her breasts and his hands had circled like a spruiker on the pavement outside a nightclub, but she didn't think it had caused any trauma. She and Idris had always adored each other. George could never make up his mind if the boy were a genius, or an utter idiot, but it didn't really matter. Xanaan said, 'I wanted to go to America to learn more about mirroring and unencryption, but I'm scared of Trump. Do you think



he does hate Muslims?' Clare said, 'Probably not as much as Clinton hated hackers. But I think I would feel safer if you stayed right where you are.' George said, 'When I met him, he didn't seem like a great hater, but the use of hate is always like keeping a jungle animal as a pet until it eats you. I agree she shouldn't go.' Xanaan told Clare excitedly about London, had been able to replace George's concocted papers with some real ones by now. Clare and Xanaan discussed Clinton. Clare said, 'It was maybe for the best. I don't know which would have been worse to watch: Hillary destroying the world, or the world destroying Hillary. Her daughter shouldn't have let her make herself so sick, but I suppose that's what happens when you marry investment banking. Before that, Chelsea was a nice vegetarian.' When they'd finished talking, George



said goodnight to Xanaan, too, protesting: 'I'm not so old that you have to include me in everything politely' afterwards, to Clare. She smiled luxuriously, 'I was tormenting you', as she reclined, reading along him on the couch. He said, 'The word "hacker" always reminds me of Lowell: "The blind swipe of the pruner and his knife, Busy about the tree of life". That wasn't just about Death, of course, but about U.S. Foreign policy: "small war on the heels of small war". I do approve of hacking, of course, and don't believe Assange is remotely right-wing...' - 'Except,' interpolated Clare, 'for those Queensland Five Minutes' - 'But I'm never sure what Idris is up to, and my C.I.A. drinking buddy tells me that in truth the Powers That Be pursue him, but even C.I.A. aren't quite sure which ones.' 'In that case', said Clare, 'it should be safe for you to use your Langley phone with him.' George's friend



had given him the phone, which had transcendent power, and eccentric frequencies. Clare said, 'I don't want to inhibit him, but I'd hate to think someone might extradite him to Fort Leavenworth, or something. He doesn't have the deviousness for prison, could never let his soul increase, in secret, underground.' She was reading *The Story of O*, and wriggled her hips in his groin absently. He clasped his hands around her waist, and they demarcated reading positions: although, actually, she read and he just talked. He said, 'Certainly, your soul had increased when I met you, but it took me about five minutes to realize you weren't a pretty monster. From then, everything on my part was an act.' She said, 'Except the love', with that sudden quiet intimacy of discourse which preserves the future of humanity intact. She added, 'I started loving you when I was seventeen, and I've loved you ever since, but don't



ask me what sort of love, because there's only ever one sort, for anyone, and all aspects are included', as if, after some thought, that was what she had decided. 'You're right, and I wouldn't ever dissect emotions into pieces', he answered, but then the word 'dissection' prompted a discussion of her book. She said, 'The woman calling herself Pauline Reage did write it to retain her lover, who loved Sade, but I don't think it's that much like him: there isn't all that amputation and resurrection. Apparently when it was an e-book, the Mrs. North Shores disliked it, threw it out, because they had expected it to be like *50 Shades*, which it inspired. Of course, the suicide at the end is unpredicted. I've never thought that plausible, myself, although the French have far-out logic.' George said, 'It's certainly the sort of sex which could only be invented by two French publishers in love: culminating in one of them



disassociating and the other one becoming, finally,
an immobilised owl with the death-wish.' She said, 'I've
read that Octavia Paz went out to a restaurant with them
both. Not knowing one wrote the book, she remarked
"Pauline confuses love with religion", having said that
for Sade love was an idea, and the true reality was pleasure
that annihilates everything. And Paulhan, the Sadian, whom
Dominique (Pauline) wrote the book for, said, "Perhaps
Masochism, more than a perversion, is an idea". Here,
Dominique said "She deified her lover, and, as we know,
the gods are cruel". Of course, she didn't deify him, really.
She lived to an un-anonymous old age, gave interviews. I
think that may be why he found her suicide impossible,
and said so in the preface.' George said, 'It sounds very literal,
even for the French. Except for O herself, all the characters



in the novel are paste: it is just all her psychology: but
that works for me actually: she's the book's one true survivor:
dies for Dominique, who lives.' Clare said, shifting her weight
on him onto her other hip: 'It would be difficult, dining out
with French publishers.' At the window, night crawled up, as
always from the ground. They kissed. He laughed at her:
'I'd have an erection, but your weight precludes the blood',
so: Clare, indignant: 'I'm not heavy.' And indeed she wasn't.
Even apart from his newly discovered taste for being rather
crushed - really to take her weight more, he thought, never
any desire for the sharp earth re-triumphant, like Frost's
To Earthward - there was always an elation in her balance,
poised as in a natural *pas de deux*.



Chapter Two

But in Suddenness, Her Hair

But in suddenness, her hair

now swerved side to side on his face like an animal in panic,
and she convulsed to sitting on the couch edge. She said,
'I *saw* them. They were Indonesian shadow puppets, in a row,
black on white and there was that cackle of guns - more crackly
than any fireworks - and they fell down, torn. I don't even know
if I'd shut my eyes. Did you see it, too?' As if in that timeless
light he might have. He realized: 'I did feel it.' She said, 'It's
because we half-forgot them for those hours. I'm not ready. I'm
not ready', began a difficult, guttural weeping, caught up his
hands and rubbed his knuckles to her eyes, the 'I'm not ready'
becoming nonspecific in despair. He said, 'We've postponed so



many other reactions, it's just that they've all snowballed together and sprawled us like an avalanche, hitting that fissure in defences caused by the fact we loved her. But its still the skyscraper surviving by not wind-resisting.' He found her tears between his fingers to be as intimate as fucking, moved his mouth down to taste them, softer always on the lips than other water, broken down by every catalyst that animates the human. They swayed quietly, face pressed tightly against face. Then she said , 'Well, here we are. And we should go and cook some food', suggesting here everything was strange, functional and also nonspecific. In the kitchen, they piled some of Hello Kitty's salad on plates, cooked some pasta, adding to it anything likely: dill, artichokes and mushrooms, threw in old white wine, and cream. They ate it at the table, the sort of laminex Keating said was why he left the suburbs. Clare spilled some sauce on it, and wiped it with a cloth. She said, 'I like it,



actually, laminex. It's bright, cheap, meant to help. Keating would have done better to keep it - better than to deregulate, end up a pig-farmer in a room of antique clocks.' George said, 'Keating knew Jack Lang in the suburbs, but its as if he didn't understand being radical is more than character.' So they returned, in quiet, to the food. The compound they had invented to eat tasted acceptable, as often. She said, 'And there's luke-warm pasta left in the red pot for Johnny Depp.' They took it to the rat, who was ecstatic. Clare praised him again, but then started shivering on George's shoulder. He said, 'Grief comes in waves, to allow the mind to function, to recover, but that's what also makes it infinitely harder', in a tone, she thought, like protest to some recovery provider. She tried to listen to the sea, to stand calm, but always there was something painful in that wave-keen outside: night over-emphasising



each inevitable falling. They washed-up in the kitchen. He remembered how she'd washed up decades ago, when Heather was alive, and Clare had visited and laughed with Sheridan, in a glee of slippery teatowels, cutlery, how he must have hesitated, how shocked she'd been at his perceived error, how she'd explained indignantly and sarcastically that she wasn't going to kill his daughter. Now he said, 'Sheridan should be up by now in London. We could tell her how much Xanaan admired Idris. I would say at the moment, she does know where he is.' Clare said, 'Good suggestion. It won't worry her if I start crying.' The women talked at the same time as each other, but were obviously still able to listen perfectly, simultaneously, while George finished, grinning, his share of the washing-up. When he finally acquired the phone, he said, 'Hello, baby', which in the flesh would have been



on penalty of death, but Sheridan just said, 'I'm not worried' meaning *not now you're going to solve the problem*, 'but Idris had someone after him again and said he was going to stay with you for a while.' She deliberately didn't say specific places.

George thought: he's on a plane, but maybe not even to here.

He usually stayed with Sophie. He'd deal with any Idris issues later. There were usually quite a few. He said, ' But are you looking after yourself?' Her voice gave him an image of her warm auburn hair, like her mother's. She said, 'Of course. I'm not silly. And my children' - a Putney classroom - 'come round here all the time, and feed me. They know Damien's not here much, since he's gone to Dusseldorf to lecture.' She added, 'I still go the gym.' She had once been a school's front row forward, and was squarely built, if slim. He asked, 'Why do they have to feed you?' She said, 'They don't, but they like to



visit, and I started it by giving them breakfast. Did you know rich English people don't know how to feed their kids?' George and Clare weren't all that big on breakfast, so Clare rolled her eyes up slightly, but he asked, 'Will you miss Idris?' Sheridan said, 'Of course, but will you ask him to ring? Half his things are still on the stairs, and I can't throw them out, in case he's hacked into the Pentagon again.' She added promptly, 'I'm joking', although she wasn't - was absently eating apples - but she said goodnight to Clare with deep affection. Clare said, quite sincere: 'Thank you. She's always so normal and reassuring.' He said, 'I got away with "Hello,baby" but she was thinking about her son. I don't think I should start with that next time.' She said, 'We should learn to work their dishwasher', examining its buttons. He wondered if a kitchenful of shattered cups, frothing water, was the sort of distraction they needed, but decided there were limits



to evasion. He said, 'We'll work it out in the morning. But I'm old and I want to go to sleep.' She abandoned the fascinating machine and walked into the bedroom, wide-eyed with open derision, and asked, 'Are you starting a routine?' He wondered if he actually did want to give her orders, in a game. The difficulty of that was the way he had to work out what she wanted, so the process usually had a five second cognitive delay. But, in truth, he wasn't tired, and sleep still wasn't welcoming, despite some ghosts at bay.

She sat crosslegged on the bed end, the white skirt, with its stains from grass and pasta, covering her ankles and her knees. She had turned the lamp to almost nothing, so the Sheads were in shadow, said: 'I can't compete with Frieda', but he said, 'Oh yes, you can: your legs are better, and your take on Freud is clearer.' She asked, 'What is it still about *legs*? In that conversation Trump had on the bus, they say this anatomically impossible stuff about grabbing



pussy, but the last thing is the other guy, burbling "the legs, the legs" as if that's what really finishes them off.' He said, 'You'd have to be geriatric to understand. It's the conditioning in the Fifties: small children seeing calenders and pin-ups. The most potent part of porn is what you thought was sexy at the barber. In the same way swearing can be stronger if it isn't Anglo-Saxon. Gen Y just throw "fuck" around on the internet like candy. It has no strength at all.' Obliginglly, she crossed her ankles in white sandals above her in the air, as the long skirt swam like swan wings on dim water, kept her feet together as she swung them round and round.

She had sleek small knees, squarish because double-jointed, like Princess Diana's: those creases in the middle should seem awkward, but in fact prolong the line, and look intimately lithe. It was because her body was so small, he thought, that her legs could be so long. He said, 'I suppose the leg thing isn't awful: it has to be to some extent



about movement, direction, escape or transportation.' She could discern one of the depressed Friedas in the dark. She said, 'In terms of direction, I think that was the problem for Lawrence: the sex is his solution, not his means to finding one.' 'Maybe he was uncertain where that went', said George, 'In *Lady Chat*, he obsesses on tenderness, that Mellors has it, and that the way he loves Connie should be the world's future. It's certainly more attractive than a right-wing *coup d'etat*.' She said, 'I read that when Aldous Huxley remarried after his wife's death, he said that the best monument to tenderness is tenderness. I've always thought that was nice. Sort of English. It's why I like the English Labour Party: they list all the Good Works, including by Attlee and Wilson, then hope really hard to do it again. Well, anyway, the Corbyn ones.' 'For whom Idris almost got arrested, finding out about the Blairite advertising agency which coordinated that strange string of parliamentary resignations,' said George,



'and its link to the BBC. The BBC seemed not to like it.' She rested her ankles on his shoulder, still in sandals, but the sandals were thin vinyl, barely there. He added, 'If I were fetishistic, I'd have a thing about that cotton skirt by now.' She oddly threw back her face quickly, looking febrile and flushed, and not quite present. It took him a second, to reassure himself that it wasn't somehow his words that caused it, then he said, 'It's so many things, isn't it, not just Indonesia?' They now referred to the mourned as 'Indonesia', perhaps the process Duras uses, he thought, in '*Hiroshima Mon Amour*', which in truth he had always suspected of exploitation. Everything in art, though, seemed a little less cynical, at least on these occasions. Clare in some private determination not to crumble, swung her legs down abruptly, kneeled next to him, her hands at the back of his neck, put her lips on his, and chewed and sucked at them



minutely, then his ear-lobes, leaving light blood blisters, the whole thing a transition he should have expected, he realized, but he had to think to meet it. It was certainly erotic. He made no noise, but his eyes were still with attention, almost fright. She relaxed, appeared insensate with her forehead on his throat, her body completely rag-doll, as it had been in the afternoon, which in fact made it impossible to respond with any force, however stylised. He wasn't sure if they'd gone completely out of vocal mode. He asked , 'Do you want the skirt?', touching the waistband, then thought the usual Clare would have asked if *he* did. But she was forcing him to deal with the unusual. The only possible action was a sort of apache dance, throwing her about without her anchored down by sex, and she not offering the connection for him to have any other power. She said, 'Leave it on', her voice soft but detached, as if she,too, were waiting to see what would



happen. George, who had never been a dancer, understood, however, the difference between appetite and meaning. All the desire now was in interpretation, all hunger for relief suspended purposely beyond the physical, but the physical in whatever they did at present was supreme. To talk was apparently okay, but not, in itself, propulsion. He trailed her over his legs - she was taking her weight completely - and thought: I was right about the skirt. It billowed out as she twisted about under his hand, the white suggesting a cool inappropriateness, some formal lack of preparation. She began to struggle as if in mortal danger, the strength in that the force of spinning metal, taking a vast amount of strength to hold, like someone who was actually drowning. And meaning was what mattered, or he had no course of action. What was she doing? Just



exhausting the heart's poison, or demanding a dishonest reason for desperation? Sometimes she was face up, arms crossed like a mummy, pushing her shoulder-blades harshly against his thigh. He spread his knees wide under, to give space for her actions. Whatever this was, it was actions, not ritual activity. He thought: that thing about Sade that his imitators don't follow: each action takes place purely in space not time: so never a consequence: after amputation, the heroine returns limbs intact in the next chapter. For imitators, the aftermath is part of the arousal, whether cruel or belatedly moral, but like Clare, Sade has no truck with mercy. Or retribution. So when he was a Magistrate, appointed to render mayhem, he disgusted the Revolution by refusing to execute anyone, even his Mother-in-Law, whom he detested. George said, 'I understand that you are dancing. There is a process, but this is it. There



are no results to speak of, in its own terms.' The clock by the bed went round, but it wasn't time. She said, 'Spin me around, where I am, when I'm still lying down.'

He realized it could be done: one lifted her an inch then rolled her away, then under, up, away, then under.

He steadied her with his right hand, kept the left arm straight like the one that guides a top. She became deliberately giddy, drunk on movement, unmourning, always a new person, looking up at him, then so unknown she might have been a victim, on her face, with her mouth drying against his knee in concentration. The face would glow blanching, then darker than blood in patches, as if blizzarded by snow, her eyes abysses in their indigo, the glint of teeth showing slightly, as he had seen on the dead from one sudden catastrophe or other, but the whole impression



was strange with life not death. The natural direction
of the process was for her to fall unconscious, her
head rested back one last time on his thigh, as great
imbalances of blood and pia mater finally
transcended every stubbornness to dance: and truly
he knew that was what he wanted: to persevere
in his rounded action until she wasn't there, except
a sumptuous small prostrate painting, but then awoken
quickly, freed from horror, gaze to gaze. But he remembered
how much she hated to faint: how Sophie had suggested
once that it must feel romantic, and Clare had then corrected
this to him: 'Oh, no, its horrible. I used to do it sometimes the hour
before the shock-conditioning. It takes you over as if you're dying,
fainting.' Now, she showed the whites of her eyes, as some
people do sleeping. He stopped the turning. There wasn't any



purpose, he thought, in talking. He let his left arm raise up
and fall rhythmically on the white skirt, neither stroking
nor striking, until she set her attention to it, reviving, as
if it were some expected. metronome. She watched him,
luxuriantly did nothing, wondered if his eyes in lamplight
were brown jade or moonstone, smiled presently as stilly as
if a glow barely flickered on a statue in an alcove. He
thought: the white skirt writhing is a universe away. She
dragged herself up by his shoulders, then hugged him
about the neck, so he hid his face peacefully above
the warmth in her blurred pale blouse, the whole clearly
ballet not foreplay, at least not for that day. She asked,
'Would you check outside for me, while I have a shower?
I don't think I've got the *Psychos* but last time I could hear
all the time I showered something like a child calling "Mother!".'



George took his torch and cell phone outside the bathroom window.

There was smoke on the wind from the valleys to the west.

The sea's breath chilled his face. In scented garden darkneses,
so sad with jasmine, he could indeed hear calling. Further seaward,
in a pine tree, the torch located babies: two night-hawk chicks,
beaks open in an innocence of down, and in the distance the moon
caught their mother's wings out on the ocean. He took their photo
with his phone, and turned to go back in. But then in the side path,
there was another sound, as if a person. He re-raised the phone,
pointed the torch in that direction, but the footsteps retreated to
the roadway out the front again. When he went into the bathroom,
Clare was in her nightdress: actually a blue cotton kaftan, drying
her hair's wet silk. He took the towel and she bent her head
to he could fluff it with his hands. He showed her the picture, but
as she cooed, he said, 'I think we might have had a prowler.' She



shrugged: 'So maybe Idris is arriving after all. Is everything locked up?' And he nodded. She dried her hair again, sleepy, as George showered, too. The steam brought out the wood smell of his body. She said, 'Once I dreamed you were a tree, like Daphne when Appollo touched her, in the myth.' He said, 'She was trying to escape. You always tended to be me in your dreams, remember?' She said, 'When I want to escape, I do, eventually. But I'm still here, aren't I?' She walked out past him, brushing against him, so as not to seem rejecting, and ignored the Lawrence procession in the bedroom. Drowsing, she breathed him in from the water droplets on her shoulder. Watching her sleep, he thought: if he was a tree, he felt a quieter one at last, leaves feeding out their vintage processed oxygen in dark. When she awoke, the early sun dripped down the window like a frozen peach melting, veined in grainy crimson streaks. George was asleep



with her body gathered up against him, but then his eyes focused open. The clock by the bed moved round, but it wasn't time. This wasn't Australia, wasn't Indonesia, wasn't now anywhere. He sighed, as if to face the morning, but she said, 'That arm thing you did was interesting.' He said, 'It wasn't hitting. If you'd asked me for that, I'd have made sure we did have foreplay, as I said: so any second wave of pain wasn't quite experienced, and it wouldn't have gone on as long as the arm.. I don't know what it was. Not patting. Freud' - he avoided the serious dawn gaze of the Lawrence family - 'of course said a beating mirrors the rhythm of sex, but that isn't quite it, either.' She said, 'It was sort of mechanical, but not.' She had her look of a mouthful of sweets, as if thoughts were that tasty. She asked, 'Of course, we could make the sex mirror *it*, don't you think? It really was an



interesting rhythm?' George thought: offered any opportunity like that by the woman you've pursued for three decades, you don't say, 'Give me time to wake up', so he sat up, with admirable attention. She was still curled into him, so he thought-out the arm-thing, and penetrated from the back to feel the roof of her vagina, well before the firm cervix circle, so that the movements actually suggested those gestures of his arm, rubbing her from underneath at the same time, although the pressure of her body made his circulation numb. She was absorbed in an extravagance of writhing, as if she still had the white dress on. What he was doing must have been working, because that first ridge in the vagina that rises with pleasure was already there, forming its barrier, paradoxically caressing, giving him



extra traction to thrust in. When he was deeper, she stilled, her energy focused to her throat, so that she sang to his leaning hand in those fine noises mezzos make in their gliding transitions, or then the breath intakes of her normal blackbird treble. At the last, when he lost control, the very fact of that threw her head back, and, after they came, the small shudders still went on, like children in a paroxysm, helpless. Breathless, when they sat up, they still held each other's arms, disengaging slowly, as if a tension still needed to ease down. Her head was thrust against his throat and she held her ribs up from underneath as if making breath profounder, then his hands gripped hers and helped them. She breathed with increasing sureness, as if learning at first to walk an alien atmosphere's surface, without helmet. His voice,



anyway more baritone with age, was husky in a way she'd once said it had when he was defeated, but he didn't feel that now. He laughed, 'We should save America. And Sheridan would tell us to have breakfast.' So they detoured on purpose into another world. He located in his briefcase a report about Trump's plans to check forged visas, said, 'Some of my best work is under threat here. We should make those phone calls pretty quickly, find some alternative arrangements.' She asked, 'Canada? Well, I've always liked Trudeau's grip on pandas and quantum computers, but I don't see him welcoming too many Mexican gardeners, let alone their hidden, anxious children. Still, I'd rather work the phones than eat breakfast. Just don't snitch on me to your daughter.' He said, 'I know. I once ate some breakfast. It just sat there in my stomach for the rest of the day, preventing all



blood from returning to my brain.' She said, putting on a white shirt decorated with red playing cards, and grey slacks, more garden-friendly: 'You must be so happy Trump ditched the TPP, however. Does it mean the C.I.A. conservative faction that supports China has taken over from the globalists who want to wedge it?' He said, 'It looks more complicated. My mate in Langley is anti-globalist, too, but it may just be his Supervisor. I still don't know why I got that postcard from Trump.' She examined it again. It showed the White House, and an old man dazed and waving: '*To George, my friendly enemy. One day, this may be worth some money.*' She asked, 'Will he phone again?' 'I doubt it. They'll be watching him seriously.' She said, 'I suppose American politicians are always into some unusual correspondence or other. Did you know that Eleanor Roosevelt and the Security Guard she had one of her



affairs with exchanged letters daily until the end of their lives?'

'I didn't have an affair with Donald Trump,' protested George,

'We just talked about women's legs, agreed about Globalism,

and I opposed everything else he believed in, loudly, at charity

fundraisers. I still think he may have believed our Prisoners

of Conscience to be the C.I.A. one.' She said, 'Your socks are

inside out. Why don't you put on sandals?', finding some

in a pouch in his suitcase. She held them in her hands, knelt

on the bedside floor, as if trying out his own predilection

for dressing her sometimes. The tableaux was vaguely

Christian. He was grateful that his feet hadn't aged as much as

those topographical maps, his hands. She clipped the buckles,

then put her head on his knee. He'd always wondered why

women arrange that stance, then realized he must feel a little

vulnerable, because he'd distanced her as 'women.' He ran his



fingers through her hair, that was tousled from sex and sleep.

There were a couple of stray tears on her face, but neither he nor she wanted to limit and weigh them with meaning. After five minutes like that, she stood up quickly, having heard Johnny Depp outside wake up alone and squeak. She said, 'We have to feed them.' They apologised to Johnny Depp and gave him his breakfast pellets. Like most rats, he was an animal of infinite forgiveness. They didn't distract Snape and Lily from their lively mutual seed, but changed the husk-congested water in their cage. In the garden, Hello Kitty ate the salad, George and Clare also eating some of the tomatoes and fierce onions. Then they sat on the bench with their phones and laptops, sorted out long problems of border guards and papers. The waves below seemed faraway and fragile in murmuring and spray. Hours later,



they followed the Blue-Tongue up to the house, and George went out to shop for groceries, since Clare felt suddenly so exhausted that she couldn't walk awake. She lay down in the bedroom in tired afternoon dimness peculiar to all memory-secret structures by the sea. The Sheads no longer intruded: they might have been still-lives, the characters as smooth as flower vases. They were soothing, but the sleep stunned her like a first electric shock. She woke up in dark fever, shivering in rigors, as if fighting one virus or another, too sick to ask if George were back. When he woke her later, it was night. The room felt alert, had uninvested itself temporarily of its alternate being. He said, 'You looked really feverish. I was going to get a doctor, but it stopped so quickly, and you just wanted, you said, to be left in peace.' 'Did I say that? I must have meant it, then.' She sat up cautiously, but her recovery



passed the coffee test. She drank it without nausea. It was undeniable that George made quite successful coffee. She had dragged clothes, pillows and the quilt around her, to stop the violent coldness. He put them away, helped her stand, test the firmness of the floor. Unlike the night of the executions, the lounge room did not seem charnel and remote. He asked, 'We could sit out there with the rat and the canaries. Listen to music?' She said, 'Johnny Depp likes Wagner. I had *The Fall of Valhalla* on a few days ago.' In the lounge room, they found music files on his laptop, hooked them up to the vast rectangles that played music in this house. The Siegfried and Brunhilde refrain rose up at intervals above the waves from the Rhine, and Valhalla's Rainbow Bridge to Devastation. The rat basked at once, its delicate pink feet curled above it in anticipation. It was viscerally impossible, thought George, not to tense up,



waiting for those eight notes of passion. Clare was lying on the couch, deliberately enjoying the hope that one often feels after fever. The Rainbow Bridge music always seemed to her more vulnerable and touching than may have been intended, she thought, but, anyway, the Siegfried and Brunhilde tore into it like some final admission: undermining everything before and saying: *of course this was my only meaning, all you and I need to own*. She said, 'I keep thinking of that line from Robert Graves about the Trenches: "So tense with hope the tears run down".' He knelt at the couchside, gathered up some pages he'd been writing in assessment of the new U.S. National Security Director. She took them from him and kissed the top of his hair, from the back like a greeting mother, except that she pressed her lips there too long, and undermined the discourse. Every discourse was undermined by Clare. She said, 'It's either me



or you who kneels down to the other, like this morning. I suppose that is one way of re-appropriating slippery trauma hierarchy, to make it safer.' He said, 'Sex still always is. And art'. She added, 'And music.' The eight notes cut in deeper, rose higher - hoping wings - and Logic, pure incendiary, set everything on fire, while Valhalla - stubborn as a city - surrendered stiffly to the Rhine. And the eight great notes subsided, closed on themselves again. She shuffled his notes like playing cards and asked, 'So what is your first verdict on Michael T. Flynn?' He said, 'I don't know yet. You'll have to wait until the jury comes back in.' She was interested: 'Really? So he may not be utterly evil? That would be unusual in a National Security Director. Clinton called him an Islamophobic torturer.' 'Complicated again', said George. 'He won't disown torture, if practised by his allies, but once I *know* he stopped it in Afghanistan. Would you like some more music?' 'Something for Johnny Depp', she said, 'more Wagner.



You think him a good Catholic family sportsman? It says here he likes Movement more than Force sports. Is there something you think can be done with that? You can sometimes be pretty quick on your feet yourself, you know.' He found *Winterstürme*, in which he knew she always delighted. It was a ten minute version: Bayreuth, 1980, with Hoffman as Siegmund, Altmeyer Sieglinde. The tenor's tone was hard-edged and explanatory: maybe the same sort Lawrence used to convince Frieda. Clare said, 'I'll always love that Anna Russell description: that Siegmund loves her, despite the fact that she's married to someone else, which is immoral, and that she's his sister, which is illegal. And there's that, thing, too, that Gutrunne is the first woman Siegfried's met who isn't his Aunty.' 'She does keep it all on a human level', said George. Like a ghostly reminder, the Valhalla theme crept always behind Sieglinde, suggesting, Clare thought, something both comforting and fatal. It was a good



background to discuss America. She asked, 'So what is Flynn's actual attitude to Islam?' George said, 'I think he likes it, keeps pointing out Daesh is secular, but it exploits religious community support. He has that odd Christian habit, though, of trying to revive the Aramaic. He's hired Professor Sawma from Lebanon, who wrote a book to prove the Koran was at first in Syriac, and that the Arab versions contain too many cultural distortions. Are you hungry?' They hadn't eaten. He fetched a loaf, some brie and olives from his big bag of shopping. The brie was in a tin and very liquid, tasted like sharp goat cheese. They dipped rough crusts from the bread in it. She said, 'One can't break bread, one tears it, despite any songs about communion.' He said 'People have strange ideas about communion, even apart from transubstantiation. Patrick White once wrote there was communion in the smell of cooking meat. Of course, he cooked.' She shuddered, 'Uhhh', then remembered the rigors. She said, 'I don't know what



happened', and he added, 'You looked awful. The olives aren't pitted, but they're quite good, like the ones at your mother's.' She nibbled on the edge of one, with her small cat-bite, and he wondered if his earlobes still showed bruises. There was still one blood-blister on his lip. She fed crisp crusts to Johnny Depp, who supplicated to the music like a guest in paradise. The two canaries separated at the beak at a luscious soprano high note, mimicked it thinly in small whistles to each other, improvising, but still mutually confident in their easy adoration. George wondered if birds ever felt the doubled-up, stone-in-the-gut anxieties of passion. He said, 'Flynn fell out with Clinton and Obama over four years ago, when the French attacked Syria. The White House wanted to build up Daesh against Assad, and Flynn didn't. He thought the jihadists were supported by border tribes and that a new Emirate could result in North-East Syria, supported by



Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Apparently, that was really what they wanted, because he wasn't *persona grata* from then on.' Clare said, 'The other thing I heard about General Flynn was from the *Russia Today* TV people. They asked him to their Anniversary party, a year or so ago, and he turned up. Apparently, Obama wasn't happy.' George grinned, 'General Flynn just likes a Russian party. So do I, but the after-midnight vodka they got from their grandfather is deadly. Apart from you, though, no women are more beautiful than the Russian.' She mimicked the Trump bus conversation again: 'But, George, the legs, the *legs*?' He agreed, 'The legs maybe not so much, unless they're those really strong ones, like a Cossack dancer. Those stand with their legs apart, as if striding, standing still.' She said, 'But the General likes his family, so the TV Dinner was to make some point about his politics, no doubt, and not to appear



intimidated by the White House. Hence Trump. Anything else?'

'He likes his presentations in short information, no pictures or graphs, likes the facts collaborated by international sources, not domestic. That may mean more surveillance.' She considered:

'Or he'll have to leave more channels open.' 'Yes, and use more people on the ground, but they all say they're going to do that.'

She said, 'Whenever one meets one of those people, they get one in a rugby tackle, to tell one who they are, like your beer buddy in Langley.' George said, 'They get lonely.' 'After the first half hour?' 'Apparently, yes. You have to ask who gets recruited to meet a quick directive.' They finished the bread and olives, as he knelt back at her feet, took off her vinyl sandals and pressed his thumbs under her arches until she almost slept. She trailed her fingers laxly on his head, remembered the characters in some Iris Murdoch books had hair like 'healthy fur', but



his felt like warm linen, dry and human. At this time of night, the forelock he had always had would begin to droop over one of his eyes. She pushed it back, with an elegant almost geisha gesture, half-humour, half-sleep, half-possession: some role, although she seldom played one. Whatever for, he thought, it suited her. Before they closed, her eyes shone blue midnight, like the great glass of the doors.

They slept there for an hour, then George woke to a noise.

It was like a cat tapping to get out, except that he saw it was actually his grandson, tapping to get in. He thought: If he calls me 'Dude', I'll kill him. He unlocked the door quickly, admonished, 'Don't wake Clare.' Idris hugged him, no different to his exuberance as a child. George had always been his favourite male relative. George locked the door. Idris still hadn't let his arm go, exclaiming, 'Dude, how *are* you? You



look great.' George hugged him back: 'I'm fine. You seem in quite good shape, yourself, boy.' Uninvited, Idris rummaged in George's shopping, and found squashed bread and cheese. These days, George only drank when he was working, but he offered, 'I'll make coffee, or would you like some wine?' Idris answered, 'I only drink wine with Sophie. The French don't lose that habit, although their screw-top stuff is ghastly. Accounts by itself for their foreign policy. We'll have some wine when she comes this morning, though.' He looked at the sleeping Clare with a reverence only exceeded by Johnny Depp, and said, 'Fuck, dude, she's lovely. She never gets any older, does she?' 'Considering her history, I hope she ages normally,' said George. But she was delectably otherworldly, there on the couch in white, mouth open slightly on her arm, her hair, in chimes light, whorled christmas-tree-silver, nearly to her waist, and her bare feet



tucked under, like a jazz era sprite. George thought: *if I'm going to be cross-questioning a twenty-one year old boy, that counts as work*, and went and fetched two stubbies of a good Queensland beer. They sat at the french window where Idris had entered, but this time drew the drapes. George checked the glass door he'd just locked, again. They drank and he asked, 'You are still no doubt funded by too many sources?' 'Yes.' So George continued, ' But it's not the Russians?' 'Hell, no. They only give you military honours and a Moscow TV show.' As Xanaan, had observed, Idris did have a beard, but her 'I think' was also valid, since it still grew in traces, albeit a vivider red than his mother or grandmother. He saw George looking at it, smiled: 'This is my on-the-run beard.' George knew that you have to take any beard seriously, but couldn't help his mouth corners twitching. He asked respectfully: 'Would you like to shave?'



Idris said, 'No hurry.' George said, 'Anyway, you had better call your mother, before she stops worrying about you.' But the warning didn't phase the boy. He was used to being loved. George offered him the Langley phone, explaining: 'It's just the C.I.A.. They don't seem to be the ones that you're avoiding. And they still never monitor their equipment.' George dialled, said Hello to Sheridan and left them discussing what to do with the forsaken belongings. Idris was giving detailed instructions, as George went to wake up Clare, who would wish to talk with his daughter again. And, anyway, he liked to wake her. Before any realisation of what life had been, her eyes were always hopeful with affection, and her body stretched with agile languor, assessing. He said, 'Idris is here. He's talking to Sheridan.' She sat up and pulled on her sandals, asked 'What time is it?' He answered, 'After one. He's on his own,



but Sophie is arriving in the morning.' 'With Florence?' George said, 'I suppose so', wanting to give her anything that made her voice so urgent. Florence was seven now, but had been a baby when Clare rescued her and Sophie, her mother, from a Paris apartment set on fire by a typical French father. Charmed by Clare's accounts of the western suburbs, the two would travel to Australia: stay a while with Clare's mother, move from there to the inner city, where Sophie fixed computers. In the process, She had met Red Idris on the web, and set up many mirrors, for his many Leaking sites. When they finally met in Leichardt, they already knew that their two families were connected still by loyalty to Clare. Sophie was then mid-twenties, Idris about five years younger, non-threatening and winsome, and she in turn was after all Parisian, with a face like Paris Hilton. All went well. Now Clare sat near Idris, drank some of George's beer, and spoke



to Sheridan, who said, 'I don't want to be part of Sophie's Botnet, just because she was the only person who could help me turn

Windows Ten off.' Clare said, helpfully, 'I don't think she infects *every* computer she fixes.' Idris muttered, 'Well, she ought to.'

'I don't want my entire family in Fort Leavenworth', said George.

Sheridan wished them good morning and went back to what sounded like half a Putney classroom in a food fight. Clare

looked like a tired elf. George asked Idris, 'How serious is this?

Should we sleep in shifts?' Idris looked uncomfortable: 'I don't

think so, but there's one group out there I can't account for. They

may be some new E.U. thing.' 'In Australia?' 'Yeah. There were

some weird dudes on that plane.' George said, 'Then they think

you're Russia.' 'Maybe, but I keep trying to explain.' He yawned,

the slow yawn of a puppy. Clare looked at him exactly as she

looked at Johnny Depp. 'Yes', said George, 'He's really sweet. But



he'll think much better when he's had some sleep.' Clare said,
'We all will.' There was the same blue as a Bunsen burner under
both her eyes. George organised Idris and his backpack into
the spare bedroom, and Clare back into theirs. They both slept
in seconds, but before he rested he checked every lock in
the house again and turned on all alarms. Then he lay down
beside her, dozed until the dawn. The clock by the bed went round,
but it wasn't time. Blue opal, thought Clare, waking as a dawn gleam
lit up a Shead in the corner, and wondering what colour the nighted
harbour in it was. In it, Lawrence had a scarlet beard like Idris, but
that seemed to be the Sydney neons, as there was a smattering of red
too on Frieda's forelock, and over Frieda's dress. The dress was low-cut,
barely covering her nipples, and she was positioned in the bow, with
Lawrence's hand on her shoulder, tentative and possessing, a bit
preoccupied, only just beginning to feel his way into *Lady Chat's*



world-redeeming ‘tenderness’. Clare was reminded that on Nauru an under-employed boat captain had told her he always sailed with a woman, because the only way to discern a storm was coming, or the sea's general direction, was to get one to stand in the bow and answer questions. Clare herself - as opposed, in George's phrasing to Clare-someone-else - had only sailed with women, but they did always seem pretty canny about the ocean. Maybe that was one reason, she thought for bare-breasted figureheads. She had often found that if she had to make a speech for Prisoners of Conscience, wearing no bra under her shirt always helped her relax, to read the responses of the audience, but that of course depended on the jazz era build. An opera singer would probably get distracted, she decided. Shead's gorgeous evening Harbour looked much more like Thirroul with its darker colours, than did his depiction of Thirroul itself, in simple holiday blues. She looked forward



with real excitement to she and George and Florence going to the sea pool at Austinmer today. And there was something special, anyway, about this coal-coast horizon, its sea-sky. She found herself remembering that old Civil War song, *'Her Bright Smile Haunts Me Still'*: 'I have sailed the falling skies, I have chartered hazard's path, I have seen the storm arise, Like a Giant in his wrath...', its invincible tune that she would sing to Florence as a baby. For a second, she recalled Indonesia, but suppressed it enough not to cry. She had long ago mastered the mantra that suppression is not repression, and won't always come back to cripple you in some inconvenient spasm. She looked at George and felt such focused passion, that his eyelids flickered and his head turned to her, still sleeping. And his theory that trauma results in compulsively changing places, up and down in a hierarchy, and that also this included one shifting



fearfully between objective and subjective, seemed to her to be in process for her now: one minute she saw him as he was, but in a painting, from a distance, say a Wright of Derby in which astute observers gather around a candlelit experiment, if one with a tendency to lightning, oblivious in, and of, their deep social interaction. A cool, strong face, attractively unaware of any witness. But then her sight turned so subjective that she saw the scene in pieces: his lips, his nose, his eyelids, as if each belonged to a different person, each a different process, different time, its only function what she gave it, meeting, since any of those separate things remained closer to who he really was. Now he opened his eyes. He did not wake as she did, in brief amnesia and optimism. He woke in full memory, calculation, only allowing himself any hope if it came directly from another person, if his happiness met



her need, as it did now. And his eyes did have a softness:
one that could perhaps allow itself later some small ration
of independent joy. Time incarnates in the human. The clock
by the bed went round, but it wasn't time. There was a car
noise outside, and they held hands by instinct, although Clare
said, 'It's only Sophie and the baby.' Indeed there was the sound
of a child calling 'Clare!' confidently, and knocking extravagantly
outside, at the front door. George said, 'At least this lot don't
come in by the windows.' He wrestled open the front deadlock.
He usually didn't like those, believing more danger in locking
someone in than out, but he had still locked this one, in that
new circumstance last night. Florence hugged his leg in an
obligatory fashion, then rushed past him to find Clare. He kissed
Sophie back on the cheek, and helped her carry many cases
from her tiny city car. In the meantime, Idris got out of bed,



waved and made coffee - before George could stop him, thinking an early morning on Idris' coffee might finish him right now. In the bedroom, Florence had found Clare, and was sitting on her, confiding everything that happened in the wilds of Primary Year One (Red), and comparing notes on anything re *Frozen Fever*. Clare laughed and exclaimed, 'Florence Aubergine!' her old pun on Florence Aubenas, the journalist once kidnapped in Baghdad, after whom Florence was named. George thought Sophie must have identified desperately with such a famous hostage. For Sophie, Clare always had the romance of a rescuer. They gathered in the lounge room for Idris' acrid coffee. Sophie had brought croissants, and put them hurriedly in the oven. They talked of Idris' arrival, so Florence and Clare spontaneously began to sing 'Go In and Out the Window' as they went into the yard to feed the lizard, leaving the onions in the container. Florence stroked Hello Kitty, who swayed to the song:



'Go in and out the window, As we have done before... Stand and face your partner, As we have done before... Go round and round the village, As we have done before...' The words always seemed slightly odd to Clare, a little spooky, but they made Florence emphatically happy.

Florence went in to supervise croissants, and George - edgy with the danger and the coffee - joined Clare in the garden, gripping her arm and sitting on the grass, their bodies close. Sophie looked down at them, not sure of the customs, and asked: 'Are they fucking?' Idris said, 'Well, yeah', but she exasperated Frenchly: 'I mean, are they going to do it *now*?' He closed the curtain. In the lilies, Clare joked, 'We could go to a motel', but George objected, 'It's Thirroul, The only motel is the one Brett Whitely died in.'

She said, 'Yes, I suppose you couldn't ask which room.' They strolled back into the house, George picking up the salad box of onions. Then they arranged to take Florence to the beach. Idris and Sophie were



crouched together on the couch, disassembling several cell phones to make what Idris predicted would be 'Frankenphone: the greatest hacker in the world, and the most unhackably safest.' George sat and watched, as the couple showed him proudly. He asked, 'Why do you two trust me so much? When I was your age, we had a warning: don't trust anyone over thirty.' Idris answered, 'George, I've been a Grey Hat hacker for Sanders and for Corbyn. These days no one my age can ever trust anyone who's under sixty-five.' She dimpled in agreement, smoothly charming, looking even more like Paris Hilton, as she tweezered out a SIM. Idris had first fallen in love so as not to feel guilty about use. He had needed mirror sites - and then twice to hide in her city flat - but he was surprised soon that his feeling for her hadn't diminished, as he expected, and it wasn't just the Botnet: this emotion would still flourish, if all use for it had gone. Clare returned with a white swimsuit under



her kaftan and remarked, 'The trouble with that over sixty-five thing is that it's true and most white millenials did vote for Trump.' She and Florence waited on the back step, while Florence sang some of their old song: 'For her voice lives on the breeze, And her spirit comes at will, In the midnight on the seas, her bright smile haunts me still...' Clare realized that all their songs had been spectral, but children like that. George locked everything again around Sophie and Idris and then climbed down the cliff path, following Florence and Clare, who were half-sliding on the sandy clinging soil. He looked back up at the house and said, 'Lawrence said his house here had "deep verandahs like dark eyelids half closed", but this one is sort of wide-eyed and insisting you believe its story: happy families or some such.' 'We don't know that they aren't happy there', said Clare. They walked partly on the rocks and on the pavement. As they neared the rockpool beach, a younger Florence would



have needed to be carried, but this one usually ran ahead, then doubled back to fetch them. They sat on a rock as she methodically teased sea-anemones. George confessed: 'When I was a baby, like she once was, about two, my legs would cramp and I would beg to be carried, but my father hit me, told me I could finish the distance. I suppose I must have, every day.' She said, 'You said you don't remember,' and amended, 'If it were here, now, I'd carry you, like Florence. You must have been a pretty little boy.' He saw she was remembering her brother, then her sisters. The morning waves broke brown and blue like innocence around them, as transparent as if never their water were caught up like this before. George surveyed the scene from mountains to ocean always for intruders, but there were no one possible watchers. There were grey clouds behind the tankers, moving just as slow but certain. He said, 'You should swim now, before the storm.' She followed



Florence into the bigger pool, still in her kaftan to keep the sun from her shoulders. The synthetic blue made the shadows in the brine look green glass, and the light cotton trailed behind her on the surface. The light before the thunder turned them both into mer-people. Florence was not a soft doe like her mother, but in French terms rather the other colouring: crisp coal eyes, Piaf fringe, and wiry, like the forgotten father. Clare had taught her to swim, and she was showing off in the deep end. George sat on the sea wall, his feet in the pool, the breakers pushing him. Clare's arms lifted a little, instinctively, when she saw him. She'd been Florence's anchor, but now the girl was floating, still talking, laughing. Clare leaned back against the rock, holding herself up from the lower ribs, felt that odd reflex of a ridge suddenly rising, this time larger and in the stomach, the back of it, the womb. He looked down at her: straight shoulders tapering extremely to the waist, realizing she was like a Minoan painting, more geometric than Hellenic, suddenly



seen from that angle. She said, 'You should swim. You like that. I can see anything threatening from here.' She thought: she wanted simply for him to be with them in the water: just that: the element itself was enough connection. She remembered the same thing with snow, that links where you are to the horizon. He swam a few lengths, to please her, trying to be both wet and alert. Then, when they heard thunder, they walked back down the coast. Florence asked them to torment with her any sea anemones still open. Clare asked, 'I don't think they suffer?' He said, 'No. It's all reflex. They enjoy it, think they've eaten. That's why they say shut so long after.' The peculiar empathy was quite convincing. As the storm was coming in, the waves quickened higher, and the gleam on their faces became cold stormlight. George recalled: 'It's like the wild weather at the end of *Man of Aran*, where Flaherty finally shows the at-first archetypal man then the boy's face in that clear close-up, their real beings' particular expressions.' And, Clare thought: it is



that fine. Florence looked like a Cicely Barker fairy: The Blackthorn
brunette who climbs the branches, face upturned. She dragged them both
- one hand each - to a flustered rockpool, where the seaweed forests
streamed like manes across the coloured rock. George, as instructed,
put his forefinger in an anemone, and it at once closed predictably like
a vagina, not just the texture but almost the same degree of pressure.
It was actually vaguely troubling, as if Dame Creation had doubled up
cavalierly, or in a mad display of thrift. He wondered for a second
if they could just enquire which room Brett Whitely had died in, and
avoid it, but decided they still had to watch the house. Clare had a look
of mirth on her face in a chiaroscuro light that was worthy
of Ingmar Bergman. Rain splattered sideways in blotches as it does
upon the sea, then howled down like a wolf pack. They half carried
Florence up to the road, reached the house again in ten minutes. Idris
and Sophie were at the door as they went in. They heard Idris call,



with genuine concern: 'Be careful not to drip on the connections. Some of them are sort of hot-wired at the moment. I thought I'd make a better alarm system.' Clare gasped in an armchair, sopping: 'George, he's going to kill us all.' George didn't feel in a position to guarantee that he wouldn't, in one way or another. Florence had dragged in her enormous suitcase full of books and toys, while her mother dabbed at her with a towel. It seemed a good time for *Harry Potter*. Florence put on one of the movies, where Lily and James are murdered by Voldemort in front of little Harry, as Snape rushes in and grasps Lily's body, crying as wildly as the baby. The canaries Snape and Lily stopped their dual feeding, watched uncertain. Johnny Depp looked concerned. The Blue-Tongue crept in the back door flap and advanced on the onions. George grabbed the container. Idris asked, 'Isn't it supposed to eat them?' George gave the lizard lettuce, and put it back outside, telling Florence, 'It's okay.'



They don't bite.' She looked a little disappointed, but accepted.

They went back to watching Lily's death. All girl children were rapt, he knew, at Snape's possessed obsession. Florence said, 'They have the same patronus. It's a doe', with genuine sadness. Rickman's acting was so effective because he worked with a character's weakness, no easy hints at moral salvation, thought George: two helpless little boys distraught by the one blow, but Harry will grow up, and Snape can't now. He knew it was true enough, had seen it, maybe been it, but the pendulum with Clare had let him rest, and Children's Literature is always allowed the best access to the tragic obvious. Sophie stood up, to hide the fact that she'd been crying, and announced that they should eat. She seemed to have brought a blender, put half of George's vegetable shopping in it, and some sour cream, producing



eventually a species of tepid vichyssoise, with croutons from a packet. At the prospect of a screw-top, George found a bottle of his old St.Emilion he'd brought in pure nostalgia for when such things had mattered to him, let it breathe. He understood that odd paradox of someone who once drank heavily, and now not often: the lowered threshold, but the increased detached ability to control it. After pouring everyone else's, he brought his glass and a fuller one to Clare, sat at her feet to drink. She had changed into white slacks and blouse. The wine as usual comforted gently before expected, although it was a characteristic French blend with their beloved touch of acid. Australians, he thought, had that taste for bottling one grape variety only, quite successful, but with that reverential flavour of stewed tea. Florence suggested they all look up the *Harry Potter* site, discover their patronus: the animal guardian, who protects one from Dementors.



She knew hers already - a nightingale - but you could get others with more email addresses, and Idris had a bottomless supply of those. Sophie's actually was a doe, skipping across the lake and woodland with a kind expression, polite as Paris Hilton.

Idris said, 'These are really quite good, because the program is based on real responses, not random. And, anyway, the Web can never be really random. It just isn't an option.' Clare's was a silver fox. George wanted an eagle, or at least a vulture, but the phantom wood produced a labrador. Clare comforted, 'They can be quite nasty' and Idris added, 'Especially if they've got pups.' But: 'I haven't got pups', said George. Idris' patronus was a stoat, and he had to google it up , but then showed them happily: it had beady eyes, red whiskers and a look of paranoia, combined with insatiable curiosity. George said, 'I think they got you right. But why



is the web never random?' George had a theory called 'cybermetrics':

that the internet had the same pattern as basic rhyme and metre,

the stress and unstress, binary one and zero, which was why

it was so easy to internalise, just as if some ancient bard had

memorised it to hand on. Idris explained: 'Exactly what you've said:

it follows anthropocentric patterns. Random would be too

objective, mean there wasn't enough energy going round.

Energy has to have direction.' Clare asked, 'But what about Quantum?'

'It still works on binary', said George. 'Yeah,' said Idris, 'it uses qubits -

binary quantum - as its basic unit.' Clare said, 'But that quantum spin

of electrons, atoms or photons that can multiply all together must mean

more numbers than just one and nothing? If they all exist in space

at the same time?' Sophie said, 'The American Intelligence Advanced

Research Projects Agency gave us some money, you know, because

they want to decode with quantum.' 'I just told them they shouldn't



do it', Idris said: 'The qubits overheat and destabilise each other when you want them to communicate. You can fix it by using berillium ions and then magnesiums to transfer the heat and quantum state, but they already know that. They must have wanted me to suggest something simple.' George said, 'Eventually they'll break out of the qubit and use more numbers than just binary, but you can't defeat the metrical pattern. It will just be threes or fours or fives built around the positive and neutral: still the atom.' Clare said, 'There's something lovely about the idea of discrete energy states all working in layers. It's like a diagram from Dante. The Beatrice bits, I mean.' To some extent, they were talking to provide a vocabulary for Florence, but the wine did make it easier to deal with abstraction. Idris agreed that the way discrete states overcame the temporal was lovely.



He often felt himself circling round the digital, tapping
the outside of a wall and knowing that a timeless flood
of absolutely luscious energy hid inside, a steadiness
of being/nonbeing. More and more, he discerned what
to look for: circling, breaking rocks then the flow,
the crowded, pointed light - like a wingbeat - when
you know you've got what you were after. A few other
anagrams, a few strings, and then everything had opened.
He said, 'If I hadn't spent the best times of my life listening
to you dudes talking, I wouldn't be like this now.' The horror
of the responsibility sobered George completely. He went
out in the tempest, turned off the power, and reinstated
the alarm system, with Idris unclamping things and promising
to build it better later: something about utilising a Christmas
sleigh and reindeer. In this area, they seemed fond, thought



George, of festive decorations. There was also in the garage an inflatable leering santa. He thought it best if Clare and Sophie finished the wine. He went back into the bedroom, changed wet things into dry, lay down, and listened. Clare in the lounge read Florence *Peter Pan*, the Barrie play, in one of their rare rebellions against Disney. The Barrie is much more eerie. Clare had given it to Florence, who loved it from a baby: Peter, clearly autistic, exclaims things like, 'Don't touch me... no one must ever touch me.' Hearing things like that in Clare's soft, careless intensity made George shiver to the bones of his weary, rain-numbed limbs. The clock by the bed went round, but it wasn't time.



Chapter Three

You Shoot Sharper Coming Down

GEORGE JEFFREYS:

The clock by the bed went round, but it wasn't time. I dreamed of Clare's hair turning brightly to knifeblades, and men with AK-47s and mobiles hidden out by the sea in the lilies. Then when I woke up, probably after ten minutes, Clare was still reading *Peter Pan* to Florence in the lounge room. Even in my mid-sixties, I couldn't hear her voice for long and not need to see her. I put on safe shoes and socks instead of the rain-black sandals, and left the bedroom in its afternoon haze, a light that made Shead's Lawrence and Frieda seem head-heavy as dolls. My own head felt clearer.

She was reading on the couch, Florence lying with her little patent-leather French fringe on her knee, Sophie next to them disembowelling at least eleven cell phones delicately with tweezers, and Idris spawled at their feet, engrossed in listening. Clare would read him the Barrie play as a child. Indeed, it was his old copy (returned to Clare and re-given) that she read now: 'PETER (*who still has all his baby teeth*). Boys, lam into the pirates!'



She was in full dramatic flight, and mustn't have been expecting to see me, because when she did she interrupted her reading and made an involuntary noise, an indrawn breathy short grunt, like a child falling winded on the ground. Like everything sexual, it was entirely inappropriate, and she looked as if she didn't know how to cover for it. The three listeners just suspended themselves in time, politely, although Idris gave a tiny smile of cherubic interest. Sophie had that businesslike and oblivious determination the French get when interrupted by anything sexual. She tweezered on.

I sat opposite in an armchair and grinned encouragingly. Clare caught my grin and mirrored it too quickly for that to be even a reaction: it was part of the same instant. She gripped the glossy yellow hardcover again and focused her gaze on me, a self-rescue by tunnel-vision. I said, 'You're almost up to that bit I like about him changing sides.' She continued: '*For a moment the only two we can see are in the dinghy, where JOHN throws himself on STARKEY. STARKEY wriggles into the lagoon and JOHN leaps so quickly after him that he reaches it first. The impression left on STARKEY is that he is being attacked by the TWINS. The water becomes stained. The dinghy drifts away. Here and there a head shows in the water, and once it is the head of the crocodile.*' She over-acted heroically. I hadn't seen anything like it since Derek Jacoby hissed the 'graveyards yawn' speech sepulchrally from



the edge of the stage in a *Hamlet* matinee in Sydney. She was the perfect Pan. It is a pants-role for a specific type of woman: a wriggly, leggy sky-urchin, forthright but crouched in shadowy manipulative evasion, then flying like a fledgling: too high with too much wing-dip, showing off. She continued: *'In the growing gloom some strike at their friends, SLIGHTLY getting TOOTLES in the fourth rib while he himself is pinked by CURLY. It looks as if the boys were getting the worse of it, which is perhaps just as well at this point, because PETER, who will be the determining factor in the end, has a perplexing way of changing sides if he is winning too easily.'*

Florence exclaimed, 'I do that!', and Idris said, 'Me, too,' looking up at me lazily for an explosion.

I just said, 'As long as it's not the Russians.'

Clare went on: *'HOOK'S iron claw makes a circle of black water round him from which opponents flee like fishes. There is only one prepared to enter that dreadful circle. His name is PAN.'*

She read through to the end: his autism, his need for admirers, his petrified babyhood, his lack of memory, his incapacity for intimacy, his adventures. Her trauma had been the reverse, of course: after murdering her siblings, a strange, brief premature aging: white hair, lined hands and feet as a child,



but when the aging stopped and she was convincingly, observably normal there had indeed still remained in her some quality of Pan - fascinated but illusive at the nursery window. She concluded: 'WENDY. I haven't seen Tink this time.

PETER. Who?

WENDY. Oh dear! I suppose it is because you have so many adventures.

PETER *(relieved)*. 'Course it is.

WENDY. If another little girl - if one younger than I am & - *(She can't go on.)* Oh, Peter, how I wish I could take you up and squdge you! *(He draws back.)* Yes, I know. *(She gets astride her broomstick.)* Home! *(It carries her from him over the tree-tops.*

In a sort of way he understands what she means by "Yes,I know", but in most sorts of ways he doesn't. It has something to do with the riddle of his being. If he could get the hang of the thing his cry might become "To live would be an awfully big adventure!" but he can never quite get the hang of it... With rapturous face he produces his pipes... till the roof of the little house is so thick with his admirers that some of them fall down the chimney. He plays on and on till we wake up.)' She said 'wake up' abruptly, with a rising inflection. Like Jacoby on an earlier occasion, she had played against expectation by



straining her throat and wasting too much wind. Also as in that case, though, I'd never forget it.

Idris said, 'I like the earlier bit where he says the big adventure will be to die', still to annoy me. Florence took this seriously: 'So did I. But I think this bit is sadder now, like Snape and Lily.'

The canaries, Snape and Lily, usually joined at the beak, had unwound and were chewing seed absent-mindedly, after Clare's performance. The white rat, Johnny Depp, was manic with admiration, whizzing around his cage like a short-circuited Katyusha. Florence pursued him from all sides with a croissant, but he was too deep in excitement for food to be a factor. At last, though, he nibbled a bit, to please.

Sophie thrust half her mangled phones at Idris, and he began working on them as she did, occasionally borrowing the tweezers. He said, 'We're on our way to Frankenphone the Unhackable Hacker. One day, I'm going to make a quantum phone.' Refraining from demanding what he was going to do with it, especially the radiated beryllium and magnesium, I held out my arms to Clare.

She walked across the room as if it were no-man's-land, slowly, and settled on the wide chair-arm, her mouth on the top of my hair. I said, 'If you were reading like that to distract yourself from Indonesia, it was one hell of a



distraction. I'll have nightmares for the rest of my life about that crocodile's head.' She moved her face away, and pursed her lips a little, to see if I was condescending. Perhaps she decided I wasn't, because she rested back again. After the last few days, she was resting on me less sharply, but at the same time more closely, as if she knew where she fitted on me. I thought an interesting thing about sex was still its function as a key. You found out and operated one aspect, and in the unseen distance heard another corresponding secret open up, like an ancient puzzle.

Idris asked, 'Did those dudes in Indonesia get shot? I was packing, and doing that public speaking, and then I was on the plane.'

He didn't know how much we had loved the woman, pitied the boys. I said, 'Yes. It's all over.'

He asked, 'Did they do the dispatch this time?'

Clare said, 'I don't think so. We'll find out later', but I could feel her body bracing.

He asked me, 'Are you still getting death threats about Indonesia?'

I said, 'I doubt it. I haven't checked all my post office boxes everywhere for ages. But that seemed to be about Dulles killing Kennedy and then the anti-Communist purge. All the assassins must be geriatric.'



The problem had begun with a reference in my memoirs to a retired Indonesian General who had confided to me in his cups that he was part of the Suharto massacre of the Left in the mid Sixties, how of course it was organised by America, and how earlier Allen Dulles, as Director of Central Intelligence, needed to prevent Kennedy placating Soekarno, because Dulles wanted to use Indonesia to split up Russia and China. The same reason he prolonged the Vietnam War. It seemed to be his only strategy, I thought. I had received some death threats about my recounting of the conversation. At that stage, Clare and I hadn't been together for a few months, but I had told her about it on the C.I.A. phone, wherever she was in Oceania, and we had dismissed it. I supposed Idris really just wanted to talk about his own death-threats, and I asked, 'Have you had any more death-threats yourself?'

'Not directly. But these new European people are weird. Too close, and too many of them. I've never worked for the EU, and I don't know them. They were ghosting my mirrors. That's why I left.'

Sophie added, 'I had heard they decided he was like Assange, that it was too late to kill him, but now I am not sure.' She was still Parisian enough to add, 'Do you think it is safe to order pizza?'

Clare gave a breath out of her nose and mouth, no different to a sigh. We were back in a world where it might not be safe to order a pizza. I wasn't



going to let that be done to her, at least not here and at this minute. I phoned for some vegetarian pizzas to be delivered, in a tone no doubt as if I were defying Daesh. Idris added garlic bread, seeming more optimistic. He was almost labile and I thought it was interesting that he had retained his little-boy trait of teasing about that which most terrified him. Sophie had her fingers on the side of her chin, summing up his mood, and she handed him more reassuring debris of phone.

He worked on it so frenetically that it was re-combined in one piece suddenly, and then it began to recite someone's messages. They had clearly been involved with the U.N., and seemed to be arranging applause for Netanyahu.

I laughed and meant it: 'Now you've stolen a Mossad phone.'

He said, 'They're okay. They lose things all the time. They just convinced everyone they're super-efficient about half a century ago. Now they've got this really confused organisation with a rollover of conscripts, and foreigners making Aliyah, and the old dudes are just trying to stop the politicians smashing Gaza and committing suicide. You can pick up anything you want there.'



Clare asked, 'Who's going to open the door for the pizza?', her whisper rounded in mocking awe in my shoulder. I said, 'I wish profoundly that I was drunk.'

Then I said, 'Yeats wrote that the centre wouldn't hold, but the fucking periphery doesn't hold. I've met Trump. He's as scared as I am.'

She murmured, 'The legs, the legs.' The doorbell rang. It was me who accepted the pizzas. No one shot, filmed or arrested me. Well, okay, maybe filmed. The rain was softer, almost quieter than the sea's insistence.

When I brought the food back in, I said, 'There's definitely someone out there. But they were well across the road. It didn't feel like ASIO: not routine enough. The pizza boy was normal. I think at least that we should eat.'

Clare asked me, 'Do you think that it is that bad? Enough to get drunk?' She had known what I meant, because she asked me, 'Have you a gun?' I said, 'No - not for ages.' I wondered where my old mate, Harry Terrence, now a Deputy Police Commissioner, was, and whether all this was within his scope. I decided not, but he might provide a weapon, and I rang him. We had one of our usual surreal conversations. He asked if I were still boxing, as I had with him at the Police Boy's Club. I said no, but suddenly yearned to, not just in stylised foreplay with Clare. When he said, 'Love to your missus', I knew that he meant her.



In ten minutes, a Wollongong police woman - not a baby, but an articulate Senior Constable - knocked at the front door with a Glock 22.40 semi-automatic still in its box, gave it to me, discussed the rain, the fires on the Escarpment, and then left. I said, 'I hope they saw her', and Clare smiled, 'Oh, yes, of course, they did. And Harry meant that they would. There is something for us there.'

I said to Idris, 'I feel that it will happen tomorrow morning. But why?'

He said, 'I'll try to find out', and went to talk on a normal phone, pizza and garlic bread still crumpled in his fist.

The food had an alien quality, as it always does in an emergency, tethering us to an earth that may not hold us. I forced myself to eat it without too much agitation, and so did Clare. It was covered in fresh vegetables, and on what was basically warm bread, they restored earth's succulent gravity to the human. Clare said, 'Patrick White was wrong. It isn't meat that's the communion.'

Idris came back: 'You're right. There's something on tomorrow morning, but I can't find out what yet. The details aren't all on simple binary, apparently. One of my mirror people thinks the system they're transferred from is actually Quantum, but not the sort the Americans are trying. It's too huge. It could actually be in Geneva. I had no idea that I was so important.' He tried



to look cavalier about it, but his legs wouldn't support him, and he sat between me and Clare, who were now on the couch, eating. We put our arms around him. He swayed wildly, his face white and beaded. I forced his head down to his knees until he recovered.

Sophie came over and bent to him from the front, appearing concerned but competent, like a nurse who has gazed at her watch and found a pulse wrong. Florence finished a piece of pizza, then squatted crosslegged at our feet with a Lemony Snicket book, so that Idris was protectively encircled. Sophie fed him some pizza, as if that was the prescribed course of action. The French always look as if they know what they're doing. I straightened him up again, so that he wouldn't choke.

Clare said, 'We have to get him out of here, but I don't know what we're up against.' He seemed to relax more, after being referred to in the third person, and said 'I'm waiting for more information. The mirror I'm talking to tipped off Snowden, but that wasn't anything to do with Quantum. They're scrambling to find the unencryption. You need someone with a real lab. It's virtually country against country at that point. And then you can't rule out the Russians.' At the last sentence, he looked at me, expecting objection, but I opened both hands in the air and nodded, accepting the maybe inevitable. Clare comforted: 'No one is ruling out the Russians.'



Then she looked at me, 'It isn't just about that, is it? None of those Grey Hat hackers found out anything good about the Clintons, and Obama is a genius at hating. It isn't just the C.I.A. out there, after all?'

I said, 'Nothing indicates it. Everything I've got on it says Europe, but - of course - Europe wedging Russia. He's come up with too much about the Ukraine and the Baltics. I don't know if they really believe he's an agent. Probably just a convenient excuse to make him a broad-daylight example.'

She asked, 'So what other information are we waiting for?' She was still Clare, still lashed to the ship's bow by practicality.

Sophie said, 'Their timing, and anything else on Quantum.'

I said, 'It's the Quantum that's the problem. It's going to narrow his allegiances. Iceland and Africa can't do it, nor the Syrians.'

As if to answer Clare's restlessness, an alarm went off beyond the garage. Its bursts were longer and shriller than a car system, and kept on going. The Blue Tongue, Hello Kitty, slid through the back door flap again, and Florence locked it in. I felt as if I were in charge of the Swiss Family Robinson, if it were under siege from a boardroom of multinational paranoid assassins.



I said, 'There's no point in trying to turn it off. They're only doing it to undermine us. They won't attack the house directly. They'll wait for the morning, when he tries to leave.' I unpacked the Glock and assembled it, though. It was a neat little thing.

Clare grimaced, 'I can see why Stephen Colbert joked about calling his gun "Sweetness".'

I said, 'Thank God, they didn't give me one of their M4 assault rifles. You can't control the bullets properly. It was one of those high velocity rounds that exploded when it hit a chair in the Sydney siege, and killed Katrina Dawson. They should have used indoor army weapons.' I was quite pedagogic with adrenalin by now. The bullets Harry had asked to be included with the Glock were unexpected: American Federal 180s, the same as they sell at Walmart. Perhaps they were part of someone's hobby at the local station. I loaded the Glock and tried to remember what I knew about 180s. I continued: 'They're good target bullets that you use for penetration, but, according to my confidante in Langley, you can have trouble if you use them in general and don't wipe your magazines. So the idea seems to be that if I do shoot someone, I should mean business.' The Glock's grainy grey simplicity did give a toylike confidence - perhaps too much, I thought, weighing it my fingers, and trying to remember.



I had never actually shot anything since I was a boy with other boys in the western suburbs, hunting rabbits, and the memory of anything's moment of death is loathsome, if you have killed it. But I'd needed to keep in training from time to time, as a Probation officer threatened by a particularly deadly milieu, and then when with Prisoners of Conscience to impress mercenaries and discourage assorted corrupt officials in various ranks and sizes. A knowledge of guns is invaluable currency in some masculine conversations.

Clare, who would always satirise it mercilessly, and by choice had no knowledge at all of the subject, asked, 'Are you just going to take Idris outside with you and point it at the bushes?'

But I said, frankly worried, 'I don't know. A gun this size is reactive. I don't know. I don't know.'

Sophie and Idris clung together on the couch, looking at last like desperate lovers, and finished constructing Frankenphone. Florence fed salad to Hello Kitty and showed it her toy and book collection. Johnny Depp looked curiously at Hello Kitty, as if he had always known it was out there, and now could study it more than in mere sightings. The canaries fed each other beak to beak again. I could glimpse their tongues interacting deftly. It's always surprising that birds have ears and tongues.



Clare attached my laptop to the speakers, located my Wagner file and played the Fall Of Valhalla again at full volume, to compete with the sequenced screech of the alarm outside. The eight love notes ached even more, as the Rhine music persisted and blended with the alarm and the darkening noise of the tide. Everyone in the room, animals and people, seemed to have the strategic deafness of children, except Clare and I, who fitted ourselves together in the armchair and listened - *listened* in the painful compartment that had become the music, but which was brutally beautiful. Extraordinarily, after a while I realised that she was sleeping, her mind numbed utterly into the sound's magnitude, like someone pressing their face against a cliff. I thought: it's useful if she rests. But there was a trace of bushfire fumes in the air, even inside, and I knew she soon be agitated into waking by her old fear about fires.

The policewoman had said the fires were working their leisurely way down the escarpment, and that a storm tomorrow night would probably put them out, if seeding new ones, but in the meantime, tomorrow morning, smoke would close the Bulli Pass. The task, I thought would be to smuggle Idris up the side of the Bulli Pass and then walk him over it, with a car on the other side. Putting him in a car on this side would be fatal, especially Sophie's.

The alarm stopped outside and I turned off Valhalla.



I asked Idris, 'How many men were on the plane?'

'Two, maybe three.'

'Maybe three?'

'The third guy seemed to be watching them sometimes - I thought maybe he knew who they were, but he wasn't with them. They knew he was there, though.'

I said, 'Two would be the normal number for assassins, if that's all they are. Did they sound French?'

As far as I knew, French was still the preferred assassin option, as it had been for half a century. He said, 'Maybe, but would they be that obvious?'

I said, 'Yes. They would be that obvious.'

He had regained confidence from his success at building Frankenphone. Until it rang. Then he dropped it. Sophie picked it up. It was just one of his mirrors.

I said, 'I'm impressed that you made your phone traceable that quickly', but my voice sounded too sympathetic.

He said, 'I meant to. It's safer for this mirror. They're in Sweden. I didn't think they'd be this fast, though.' He held a brief conversation. The mirror was voice-encrypted, but I could tell she was a woman, by the breath



inflections. When he'd finished, he said, 'Six o'clock tomorrow morning. It is some sort of Brussels mission, and we're going to need Moscow, even if just to get me to Reykjavik. We did have to negotiate for a Quantum lab.'

I had never found Iceland all that secure. I said, 'Don't even think of Reykjavik, just concentrate on Moscow. You could have an illustrious future as a Full Colonel on TV. Anna Chapman proposed to Snowden, and he knocked her back. That's an opening. But, anyway, Sophie can join you after a while.'

She didn't seem enthusiastic, with a small French snort-sneer, but I realized she'd do it, if she must.

Clare had been awake for a while, with her lapis eyes open, but plainly not wishing to be in any other way incarnate. I told her what had happened while she slept, including what the smoke was, because I could see she had forgotten: her memory was reviving blankly, over-alert.

I told her, 'My hands are too old. If it's going to be at six o'clock in the morning, I'm going to open some wine.' It was just that traditional Mercenaries' trick: you shoot sharper coming down.

Idris, having directed Frankenphone towards Moscow, took the opportunity to download the latest J.K. Rowling movie on its elephantine memory. He



soon routed the file to the TV and they watched it with Florence and the animals. It seemed wildly atmospheric, but somehow sweet and sexy. 'She does have a good sense of humour,' said Clare, and added, 'What are we drinking?'

I said, 'Something French but modern. I need it to hit like liquid oxygen, but not be sickly.' I had some Margaux 2009, and took it from the suitcase. It was a tour de force blend they'd used to help rescue the vineyard, and involved some very clever use of glycerin. I didn't bother to decant or let it breathe - I knew it would normalise quickly. I poured two glasses. I didn't want Idris or Sophie more excited, and anyway they said they were too nervous. For the first five minutes, there was excessive licorice, and then the taste smoothed to a deliberate distillation of the classic, like some Interior Decorator who recreates a traditional library: if there was a tiger roaming in it.

Clare said, 'It's as much Merlot as Cab Sab from the taste of it. I don't usually like Merlot, but this one is different: it isn't nagging or cloying. I don't know where you got it, but this wine is reasonably expensive here, you know: a couple of hundred.' She still had a Mt Druitt abacus in her head.

I reassured, 'I didn't pay that much', although I probably had. I could afford it, not drinking much now, and some wines are made to set against necessity.



Clare kept her lips on the glass top, to taste the wine better, then ran her tongue around the rim and said, 'You know, one of the reasons I've got a crush on Jeremy Corbyn is because he doesn't drink.'

I said, 'He may not have to shoot someone in the morning.'

'How will you do that?' she asked. Her question may have started as a challenge, but, by the time it had breathed, it was mournful.

I said, 'I don't know how it will happen. I know what I will do in one case or another. But I don't know how it will feel. Do you remember what it was like, when you decided to kill?'

She carried her glass into the bedroom and I followed, with my glass and the gun. She sat on the bed and I sat next to her. The clock by the bed went round, but it wasn't time. She said, 'When I killed Clem' - in self-defence as an adult - 'I just felt forced to, because he did set me up: I mean I decided, but it was after his decision. He wanted to die and to prove I was a killer. There was something in that I think now, though, that was a sort of bitterness on my part. I thought: so there, if that's what you all want. I told myself I could kill myself afterwards, but I was never going to. And you were right at the time: you would have killed yourself, as well, but you probably didn't really believe that.' She had trauma's soft voice again - one remove from the agony, looking at it politely.



'Oh, I believed it,' I said, 'but did you decide to kill the children?' I wasn't fishing for confessions, and she understood that. I wanted to know the nature of what I was feeling, translated from the experience of someone who had a nature close to mine.

She said, 'I think I did decide, but children have a different decision process: you decide to try out things, you know? But, of course, I knew what I was doing.' She asked herself: 'What did it feel like, the decision?' And answered, after consideration: 'I felt as if it was tremendously important, and that if I didn't do it, I wouldn't be there anymore, and that it was so inevitable that I would do it soon, anyway, even if not then. That I should do it when I wasn't feeling anything, so that I didn't do it badly, when I was angry. But I was nine, and I didn't understand that anger can feel that empty: I thought you had to know at the time how much you loved and hated.' She took refuge in the helpful: 'But you want to know how I made myself ready?'

I said, 'Yes, did the process just take over, or did you have to subdue some inhibition?'

'There is a second', she said, 'when you become the other person. You can see it in that moment when a firing squad pauses. And you *begin* when you are still that other person,' she added with difficulty: 'the victim. You can do it because they are not strange to you. You have to take advantage of that



empathetic second.' She was absent-mindedly in tears: 'But I don't want *you* to have to do that, even for Idris. You're just not the right person.' As if she was?

I said, 'I don't want to, but I'm not going to let them kill him, or take him for rendition and torture. I mustn't let myself relax that I won't have to. But, of course, I will do the least harm I can.'

The wine remained flawless, and I drank a full glass quickly, so that she didn't try to match me. I was working deliberately for the small bleak withdrawal in six hours: when that little extra reality creeps into your brain and your reflexes, taut but elastic. So I postponed the next glass, and she rested against me. The clock... yes. We were kissing for warmth and proximity, not to forget where we were. She began to hum the old '*St. James Infirmary*', that I used to sing to myself when she was first out of prison: 'I went to St. James Infirmary, and I found my baby there, stretched out on a long white table, so sweet, cold, so bare. Let her go, let go, God bless her, wherever she may be...'

It was a grim song to provoke nostalgia, but I wished I could reassure the man I was then that it was alright: that in all these decades she would still be here, and that so would the danger: since without that last proviso, I think, he would never have believed me.



The alarm in Sophie's car out the front started wheezing and squeaking.

Clare said, 'Well, we can't use that car, then.'

I said, 'I should have let Idris booby trap the reindeer.'

She said, 'He'd have burnt the house down.'

Her mother had lit fires compulsively after the death of the children, but I never quite knew if that were the cause of Clare's fire-anxiety. It must have been the enth in courage for her to rescue Florence and Sophie in Paris. I said, 'I'm sorry, but we will have to go up on the escarpment this morning, despite the bushfires. We have to take Idris across the Bulli Pass. I'll have to email someone to be on the other side in a car. We should be okay once we're up there under the smoke. I know the French. They'll break any Homicide Law in the world, but they'll always obey a *Road Closed* sign.'

The car alarm had disturbed a pair of South Coast owls, which must have been waiting in the bushes for creatures coming out to the road-warmth. They started grunting to each other, then one of them fluttered down past the bedroom window, battered the ground with a noise like running human feet, then flew away, indignant. In the lounge room, Florence turned up J.K. Rowling. I started my next glass of wine, and poured Clare a little more. She



smelled it, but as wine went it wasn't very aromatic: it was compact and directed. The cork had been quite dry.

The car alarm stopped soon. Clare looked weary, but then - reminiscent to me of sex - leant her head back on the wall and held herself up by her hands on the back of her ribs like a singer gaining stamina and resonance.

The prints from Shead's D.H. Lawrence sequence still gleamed on the walls in the lampglow. The Crucifixion was next to Clare's head on the wall, and she looked sideways and inspected it intently, with eyes suddenly rounded, looking somewhat like Lillian Gish. She said, 'I don't think he's circumcised.'

I scrutinised it, too: 'Too flaccid to tell. But he may not be. It's quite long. It's supposed to be Lawrence, not Jesus.'

She asked, 'Do you know Idris has been showing off his foreskin to Sophie? He says he owes it to you because when he was a baby you argued about it with his mother.'

I said, 'It was one of the few things that Sheridan turned out to be progressive and sensible about. God knows what the effect is of slicing sensitive bits off half-anaesthetised babies. Or not anaesthetised at all.' I shuddered spontaneously.

She said, 'I've never noticed much that you haven't got one.'



I said, 'That was pretty well inevitable for babies of my generation. They brainwashed our mothers that foreskins were a constant source of germs. That wretched postwar Health and Hygiene thing again. Not a functional anti-body between us.'

She said, 'Reilly had one, but it didn't mean anything.' We drank some more wine. She seemed to have run out of interest in foreskins, although of course I could have discussed the topic for hours. Particularly now, when the owls had returned and were making complex mutterings like Apaches on the warpath in a 1950s supporting feature. Fortunately, it wasn't the sort of wine that made you sleepy: not enough impurities. Clare and I were actually both intensely focused on security, our heads tilted back at any given moment to listen.

Things seemed quiet in the lounge room, so we went back there, with glasses, gun, and bottle. The movie was over and Idris was fine-tuning Frankenphone, while Florence slept on Sophie in the big chair, in much the same position as Clare and I had done. The sight of a woman and girl sitting asleep through the night to dawn in a room in danger invariably has extraordinary primitive power. There is always the tragic foreboding that when the sun does come up, they may no longer be there: just an open door, a scattering of belongings. That a whole little nation will have gone.



Chapter Four

Blood, Not Rose

I said, 'I'll email Antonelli encrypted. He's used to this. He can wait on the other side of the escarpment, drive Idris to safekeeping at St. Aloysius', until we get him on a plane, and then take Sophie and Florence to stay at your mother's for a while.' Philip Antonelli was a priest who was once my colleague at Probation, and who now devoted all his time to refugee advocacy. He was in his seventies and, like most old men with young ideals, appeared to have enough unpressing time for anyone and anything. I thought of Clare's and Idris' revered Jeremy Corbyn making jam.

Clare and I sat next to Idris, putting the bottle, gun and glasses on the table. Hello Kitty had gone to sleep in a cardboard box with salad. The canaries were hunched together on their perch, eyes closed. Johnny Depp was watching Idris and the phone, as if humans never ceased to be amazing. I asked, 'Who hacked the Democratic National Committee really?'

He said, 'Dude, it was *everyone*. Name your player, including the Republicans. I got some stuff myself when they stacked the numbers against Sanders. Nevada sucked. The only people everyone agrees it probably wasn't



was the Russians, because the C.I.A. smeared Russian fingerprints on it so badly. It could still have been them at first, though, although not really their style. They like the old boots on the ground.'

Clare said, 'Hence Anna Chapman. I still think her giving her cell phone address as " 99 Fake Street" rocked.' Since my hands were free, she gripped my right thumb in her fingers and squeezed it. As reassurance, it was much more effective than holding my hand, going quicker to the Central Nervous System: although, oddly, it did also communicate greater insecurity in her.

Florence whimpered in her sleep on Sophie. Clare gathered the favourite toys and books into a backpack (she knew what they were) and said, 'Idris can carry it. You have to be able to move your shoulders. When we're walking, you watch Idris and I'll guide Florence and Sophie.' Then she added, as only Clare could have added, 'We'll be like the Trapp family escaping over the Alps in *The Sound of Music*.'

I became too helpless with laughter to say 'It's the fucking Bulli Pass.' I was apprehensive, though, about the effects of so much walking, especially in restricted oxygen. When I was able, I said, 'At some point, we will have to carry Florence. We'll walk from here up to the Pass. There's no point trying to use a new vehicle or taxi. It'll just trigger them, like it did in the French Alpine shooting. And I gathered from Harry Terrence's pauses that ASIO



wants to keep Europe sweet, and he can't get directly involved unless something happens.'

She said, 'But the gun was nice of him', and I said, 'Yes', and finished the wine, lying down on the bed, as she sat clenched and rocking slightly beside me. Another alarm went off somewhere near the outdoor laundry, but stopped in minutes. The owls caught something, so flew low past the window, again with their noise of running feet. The clock by the bed went round, but it wasn't time.

In the blue-bleak, pre-dawn, I listened for the noises I needed to hear: a group of holiday-children whose return to the western suburbs had been delayed until the Bulli Pass re-opened, and a procession of Rambo-banded joggers who started as soon as the novice sunrise prevented them from tripping over in the many, many Thirroul potholes on the road and footpath outside. I put Hello Kitty out the back with more lettuce, as Florence fed Johnny Depp, Snape and Lily.

I then organised the Trapp family as soon as there was a maximum population beyond the front door. There was no sign of any assassins. We walked briskly, but without alarm. Idris did wear the backpack of Florence's playthings. Clare and Sophie carried suitcases of clothes and - for some reason - Sophie's treasured blender. Suitcases were the norm in a seaside



suburb, so no one noticed. But several people noted our direction and informed us helpfully that the Bulli Pass was closed. We thanked them, and said we just enjoyed early walking. I had the Glock in my cargo pants side pocket.

It took us less than an hour to traverse the smoky road, which was heavy on both sides with brittle tall bush as we neared the pass. There was the *Closed* sign, and suddenly no people. I pushed everyone up onto the road and then down a side embankment, under a camouflage of leaves and branches, and aimed the Glock at the empty road. Florence hid herself under Clare, and Clare had her arms spread out around Sophie and Idris.

The Frenchmen arrived on two motorcycles and one dismounted to read the sign. He had an automatic rifle. As planned, I was coming down from the wine in clear, classic overfocus. I took off the safety catch, aimed the Glock at him, and shot him twice in his rifle arm, so quickly that I seemed to experience the two recoils as a single sequence. The recoil was an unexpected one, like catching a fast-bowled cricket ball. It didn't tilt my hand up. I levelled the gun again at the other man, who was obviously not the designated shooter. Instead of firing back, this cyclist followed some pre-arranged unalterable plan and pulled the wounded man and his rifle onto his bike, as if across a saddlebow, and drove to a safe distance down the road.



His new passenger was screaming. Without disturbing either's helmet, the cyclist gripped the slippery red rifle and delivered a dispatch to the upper neck of his colleague, so that the bullet entered the occiput at once.

There was the noise of a country truck - probably a fencer checking just in case for spotfires - somewhere. The two men - the dead and the living - disappeared from view at high speed back towards Thirroul. I waited and watched for a minute, and then helped the others clamber along the side of the embankment. The second motorbike was still jutting up at a stiff awkward angle, like a fallen racehorse itself waiting to be shot. The air was thick. If the woodland on the pass had not been so vast, we would have been able to see a dancing flame chain on the far western horizon much more plainly.

Clare said, 'So the only country that we know still seems to do the dispatch only does it when it isn't necessary.' Florence was still hiding under Clare's coat, as we walked northward. I'd found some painter's safety masks in a kitchen cupboard earlier and we put them on against the fumes. They were better than nothing.

The fires still weren't close enough to be dangerous. After an hour, we carried Florence between us, taking turns and making it a game. She was coughing and laughing. On the northern side of the Pass, Antonelli was



waiting in an old Mitsubishi sedan. Idris had been using Frankenphone, and said, 'The guy was called Thierry, and he's already flying back to Marseilles. I don't know what he did with the body. They had to use quantum again, and somebody didn't grid the beryllium properly with the magnesium. Really expensive meltdown. I've sold my soul to Anna Chapman now.'

Away from the mountainside, I was able to ring Harry Terrence, who said, 'Good morning. Good morning', with the raucous cheerful roboticism of a trained cockatoo. I asked, 'Did you find the motorbike?'

'Sure did. And impounded it. Blood and all, mate. But I gather whoever was responsible for that has left us, one way or another. I've sent a couple of constables round to check your place, and they'll stay for a while, just to be sure. But you can back go whenever you want to. They said it's a really nice place, and the rat's a real charmer. You know rats only live two years, don't you? My great granddaughter had one.'

I said, 'They pack a lot into it. Anyway, this one's only six months old.' But I felt sad now to know so much more about its future than it did. Who knew, though, what it sensed and what it accepted?

Antonelli hugged Clare and me, with the undisguised affection of someone no longer constrained by life's consequences, and drove us all to Sydney. St. Aloysius was not an aesthetic church, but a fierce grey Gothic horror.



Florence looked approving, as it was clearly compatible with *Lemony Snicket* and *Harry Potter*. Idris kissed Sophie - they were already back on the internet again, typing to each other - and Antonelli took him inside to sanctuary (actually, from memory, the refectory cellar, now a blossomy pink and white apartment) with a great theatrical rattling of keys.

Then Clare spoke on her phone to her mother, in that strange, courteous, forlornly devoted way they had, and her mother's tone sounded excited that she'd be seeing Sophie and 'the baby' again. Then, unusually, Clare let go of some of her post-mother stoicism and let me put my arms around her. We waved extravagantly back to the elated Florence as they left.

On of the acolytes was driving to Wollongong by the coast road through the National Park, so Clare and I went back to Thirroul that night, under a red moon from the smoke. The fires were stubborn and cloudy in the vapour rising from new rain, and the moon was blood, not rose.

When we arrived at the sea house, all the lights were on and the Senior Constable and her Junior male colleague were in the kitchen, cooking scrambled eggs in a frypan. They offered us and the acolyte some of that, and toast. The Senior Constable fed some bread to Johnny Depp, who was plainly now doubly in love. The canaries had retreated to their own passionate obliviousness. Hello Kitty slithered briefly through the door flap,



as if in greeting, then left. Clare exclaimed, 'Oh, they can actually slither backwards.'

The Senior Constable relayed: 'Harry said keep the guns and the ammo, because you'll need them when you get the Nobel Peace Prize.'

'I'm actually going for Literature,' I said.

Chapter Five

The Sea Anemone

The clock by the bed went round, but it wasn't time. I was lying in the Lawrence bedroom. Idris was going to ring from Moscow in an hour. A Wollongong doctor had just confirmed that Clare was pregnant, and she was sprawled beside me, alternating between astonished ecstasy like a Dionysian



maenad and a paralysing terror that she would miscarry if she moved any muscle whatsoever.

She said, 'I don't want to think it's some sort of charismatic forgiveness, because then I'll think the opposite if I lose it.'

I said, trying to keep a difficult non-commitance, 'It's just a menopausal conception. They happen all the time. The ones I've met all turned into healthy adults, although maybe over-confident because their parents were a bit geriatric. But it probably gives them good values on the whole. I remember Michael Collins was born when his father was in his seventies. Collins said he was always fonder of old people in the darkness than of young people in the light.'

She said, 'He would have agreed with Idris. Why do some revolutionaries always seem to *like* old people?'

I said, 'They can recognise the really good ones. It isn't just sex and wine that show you truth. So does senility. Goodness survives even memory sometimes.'

'The word 'survives' automatically suggested the baby. She said, 'The doctor said that there's a real chance of it surviving, particularly if it gets through the first trimester. And she said if it doesn't, it probably was never viable,



anyway. But it seems an awful sentence, to die because you're unviable. I've never been very viable myself.'

I said, 'You used to say you were an invalid concept.'

We stared around the quiet room at the bright prints of Lawrence and Frieda, who seemed like old confidantes by now. I said, 'At the end of *Lady Chatterley*, Connie is pregnant, remember? It seems strange for Lawrence, to write that, when he never had children, but it isn't about fecundity, I think. It's because there has to be some future world for Mellors to practise his tenderness in, as well as in marrying Connie.'

She said, 'It's a great revolution for Lawrence, I suppose, considering as you say that Mellors is his working man father. He finishes by hating capitalism not socialism. And how many of us would permit our fathers to have children?'

I said, 'It's conditional. Mellors' first marriage wasn't very successful. It takes Lawrence a whole novel to teach him tenderness.'

She said, 'Everyone says babies are born with their own personalities.' She clasped her hands on her stomach,' But there is something genetic. It might be like you, in there, plotting and taking over. Or it might already be another Red Idris, and objecting.'



I said, 'Or another Mrs. North Shore, like Idris' mother. And with everybody's asthma.' She said, taking a breath and being honest, 'It might be my brother or sisters. I'd like to meet them again.' But the thought was unnerving.

I said, 'More likely your mother, and we'd have to hide the matches.' She cheered up as the terrible prospects made the thing itself seem more possible.

For a while, she seemed to be sleeping, then she asked, unexpectedly, 'How did you shoot that Frenchman?'

'Apart from using withdrawal symptoms to concentrate? I remembered what you said about empathising. I knew where to aim for in his arm, and I didn't feel as if my own arm existed. Fortunately, by the time his mate killed him, most of the empathy was over.' Although I instantly remembered, very accurately, the screaming.

In their first trimester brilliance, her eyes were lightning on rockpools. I thought of my finger in the sea anemone: that temporary sudden small ridge appearing from nowhere after the opening, testing itself against an invader, making the whole map change. She asked, 'But how did *you* shoot him?'



I answered, 'I am descended from the Hanging Judge, you know. It was easy. I just forgot everything I ever knew.'

Chapter Six

Trench

The clock by the bed went round, but it wasn't time, then Idris'

Frankenphone rang George's C.I.A. phone, punctually. George

said at once, 'Clare is pregnant.' Idris answered, 'Oh, okay,' kindly.

George said, 'Oh, okay? You don't sound surprised.' Idris said, 'I already thought that was what you were doing. Was it a secret? Sorry.'

'It was a secret from us,' said George, 'but perhaps one

has to presuppose a God.' 'I always do,' said Idris, 'since

that's what Einstein did: but gender-fluid, constantly.



Could you get Florence a Barbie for me,
for her birthday? She likes the monster highschool ones. I
don't think I can be there yet. They'll catch me.' Clare nodded,
said 'I don't think she's got the Sphinx', thoughtfully, from
the background. Idris brightened, 'Oh, hey, dudes, I did meet
Anna Chapman. She interviewed me and lent me her copy
of *War and Peace*, in English and Russian. It's easy compared
to unencryption. Really good. And she is funny: got this kind
of quiet sense of humour.' George said, 'Pierre and Natasha
get married, but she probably ends up living near him in
Siberia, as his politics are still a lot like yours.' Idris said,
'It will take me a while to get there', leaving it unclear
if he meant the marriage or Siberia. Clare asked, 'Is it cold?'
'Oh, fuck, yes. There's ice all over the Kremlin, but it looks
terrific in the dawn.' 'Yes, there's something about snow on
painted onions', said George: 'the best merry-go-round ever.'
But he knew that it was genuinely pretty, and he felt that Idris



in the short term was secure. When they'd finished, Clare said, 'You didn't ask about Anna Chapman.' He said, 'I didn't want to be disappointed,' and she sighed, 'The legs, the legs.' She sat crosslegged and said, 'I think that time I was shivering with rigor, it may have been because the cell had just embedded itself in the uterine wall, like a little alien baby.' George said, 'All babies are alien babies.' With her long affinity for tunnels, she had begun to think of it as a tiny sleeping mole in its dark soft trench, a rabbit or a badger, something less dependent on human cunning to survive. They had begun to make love again, using his hand or hers. And sometimes she would dance without knowing it, the same outstretched arms as if wave-dancing with Florence. Now they went into the lounge and fed the animals, walked outside with Hello Kitty. They still called the baby 'it', anything else was risking too much loss. With microscopic life, there, themselves alive, sitting out by the seawall, in the glistening dour



grey, the wild fiery lilies, the ample
otherworldly air, she asked, 'Do you think it will survive?'
He thought and answered 'Maybe. I accept more
that some things do. Even if only for a while, like now
that sea moss or canna lily': breezed away. However,
she could not see it as a flower. 'There are, anyway,'
he added, 'short, blank, simple line
stretches of something-life: without power.
And really the little thing does seem okay, to be fine
here sleeping with us, for another hour.' She did allow
herself enough hope to say: 'Yes: sleeping with us:
even day by day.' They returned and lay, in daylight, down.
The clock by the bed went round, but it wasn't time.

