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Equal Others:  
The Erotic as the Site of Power

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of

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## Abstract

This thesis comprises two sections: a critical research essay focusing on Joy Cowley's 1970 novel *Man of Straw* and the first 30,000 words of an original adult novel entitled *A Fine Piece*. In both sections, I undertake an exploration of the role of the transgressive erotic scene.

In the creative portion of my thesis, transgressive erotic scenes are central to the narrative. The implications of the erotic transgression are central to the advancement of the plot and the development of thematic elements of gender, power, sexuality, romance and nature. *A Fine Piece* traces the effects of betrayal on a family and the role of the erotic in maintaining social conventions in 1960s New Zealand.

In the critical portion of the thesis I investigate the impact of Eros and the desire for unity in Cowley's *Man of Straw*. Using the lens of G. W. F. Hegel's dialectic of recognition, I argue that deep unity and recognition between characters in the novel are largely held in check by the social constraints of 1960s New Zealand. True and mutual unity, then, does not arise merely from physical union but from an ethical decision to consciously value and recognize another person. When the erotic leads to union without this ethical component it occurs in the form of a transgressive act with far-reaching and even fatal implications. I also examine the ways in which Cowley depicts the relationship of characters with the natural world as an indictment against a society that has become increasingly unnatural.

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## Introduction

This project involves two parts. The first part is 30,000 words of a longer adult novel, presented here as chapters one to nineteen of *A Fine Piece*. The second part of this thesis is a critical research essay in which I investigate the impact of Eros and the desire for unity through the role erotic scenes play in the novel *Man of Straw* by Joy Cowley.

Not far into the study of erotic writing it becomes clear the erotic scene is not just about the sex. In literature, the erotic act, and the desire for it, brings an understanding of the world the characters belong to: its ideologies and social construction and the way these impact on a character's desire for unity. "Understanding desire as the desire for recognition changes our view of the erotic experience", writes Jessica Benjamin (126). For what we most desire, the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel proposed, is to be recognized as an equal by an equal other (111-12). In this thesis I use Hegel's dialectic of recognition as an aid to understanding a character's needs for unity in the erotic scenes in Cowley's *Man of Straw*.

I was drawn to study *Man of Straw* firstly for the similarity in themes between Cowley's novel and my own. Both books trace the effects of betrayal on a family and the constraints of society on a woman's ability to remain an individual subject. I was also drawn to study Cowley's writing in *Man of Straw* for the way the language of Eros pervades the text, particularly as she evokes the natural world in terms of desire.

In my critical research I examine the role of the erotic scene in *Man of Straw*, a novel written and set in New Zealand in the late 60s. I focus on

how the social mores of this text affect the possibility for unity and recognition between characters. Power shifts of mutuality and domination are reflected in the text through the denial or embracing of Eros, first as experienced within a character, and secondly as experienced within the erotic union of characters. Cowley evokes these states of mutuality or domination, in part, through the characters' perceptions of the natural world. In scenes of unity in the landscape, characters experience a blurring of boundaries between themselves and the natural world. In these scenes of Eros, Cowley affirms the importance of a subject's capability to be free and independent.

I explore the themes of individuality and the possibility of unity in *A Fine Piece*, which is set in Wellington in 1962. The sexual/cultural/political conflicts of my text are played out in the relationship between Tom, a tradesman, and Lily, a designer and mother, as she negotiates and redefines her rights to live as a creative person within the cultural assumptions of the early sixties. It is in the transgression of sexual mores that the struggle for personal freedom will be contested.

The trigger for this novel was seeing a gown called 'Paris' displayed at the Hawkes Bay Museum. 'Paris', designed by a woman with six children, was voted the most avant-garde design in New Zealand in 1963, and the designer, Dorothy Kirkcaldie, was not able to travel overseas to another competition as invited because of family commitments. I wanted to explore within a novel this time of women beginning to claim their power of creativity and the impact this had on the men in their lives.

There are two specific erotic scenes in my novel that affect the family structure by transgressing codes. It is through the shifts in power as Tom seeks to dominate Lily in an erotic scene and Lily seeks a balance in power by having an affair, that I make an emotional exploration of desire and recognition: the struggle against domination to the mutual recognition of each other.

## Part One

### *A Fine Piece*

#### Chapter One

1952: Tom

He remembers the leap up from the unfamiliar mat. His body twists into a backward somersault. He is in that realm of perfect freedom. Gravity is yet to leaden his limbs. He is still turning, his legs straight, feet pointed, shoulders following the arc of his hands. She watches him. A diver's body. The slow, graceful curve towards the mat. All this in real time, you understand, as quick as a cat leaps from a fence, flicks into the undergrowth. The slowness, the camera-like tracking of his body's motion is in recall. How fast he comes down; his legs unfold too late, his head strikes the trampoline's steel end.

He even stands up again.

Not broken – though that is what people say. The soft, ruptured cartilage, the fine mass of gel, the disc fractured.

He knows something is wrong. He stands there in the fairground and she comes to him. It is their second date, and he wanted to show her what his body is capable of. More than that – the joyousness of his body in

motion. And that body would become hers. Up there as he twisted, her eyes following every shadow and light on his torso, a matter of seduction.

“You’re hurt,” she says.

“Take me to the hospital.”

A short walk to her father’s car. A large Holden. She opens the front passenger door, but he points to the back seat. He won’t be upright much longer. The leather seat is sun-warmed beneath his body. His head too heavy now, like balancing a sack of plaster on a finger.

The drive itself becomes a passage of torture. He can feel she is taking it slow, taking wide turns, as much as she can making it a smooth ride. At the hospital he won’t get out. He knows he’s at the end of his limits of pain, of coping. He cannot move, not even a finger to test if it is possible. How will he be lifted out? How will he get into a bed, to help, to a surgeon’s fine control?

When he wakes, his head is tied by wires inside his skull to a weight which hangs behind his bed. His neck is braced. He still doesn’t try to move. That’s for later. For now he doesn’t want the knowledge. Just the morphine.

A week, or maybe more. Closing time for visitors. She sits to his right, his hand between her cool fingers. Behind her, if he slides his eyes, is the hospital garden; the tips of rose bushes, a soaring elm. He waits for her kiss goodbye on his rough cheek. The hospital is not set up for shaving those who need shaving twice a day.

“I’m not leaving,” she says. The curtain is around them. The ward quietens. A nurse comes in to check on Tom. Where is Lily? She did go, but only down the corridor to the bathroom, she tells him later. Only waiting. She lifts the white cotton sheet and slides in next to him. He stares at the ceiling, the place his head faces, where she must come in to his sight if she wants him to see her. Tonight he is seeing with his skin. She moves slowly over on top of him. Kneeling up, she brings the soft weight of her breasts to his face. Like water to a man in a desert, she offers herself. He tastes soft skin and then the hardened ridges of her nipple with his tongue.

He rises, he rises. His penis comes free from the side of his thigh. Her hand moves down under the regulation linen cover and grasps him. She nudges the rounded head against her, slides down over him, so that his penis is submerged in her. All movement is hers. Beyond the curtain another patient coughs, a harsh bark like a sheep’s.

She kisses his face, then his mouth, his tongue firm against the roof of her mouth. He gasps, and the bed, pinned by their weights and the weight of the lead behind his head, creaks. He lies still, just the muscles inside her now squeezing in rhythm with his own wild pulse.

“Sssh,” she says, though it is her own ragged breath he hears.

That is how Eliza is made.

If this was such a thing fathers could talk about with their eleven-year-old daughters, he would tell her this tale: I was broken and your mother made me whole again. She climbed naked into my bed while the ward sister was on her round. She rode me in the dark while I was chained by weights

and tubes to the bed. She showed me there are other ways to move than diving, that freefall plunge into oblivion. She dressed and climbed out of the hospital window into the night.

## Chapter Two

1962 August 5<sup>th</sup> Tom

Tom woke as Lily rolled over onto him. He wanted to think it was with desire, but there were two of their four children layered sideways in the bed, Connie 2, Aldous 7, blocking her exit that way and in the cramped bedroom across the stairs, Eliza crying out in one of her nightmares. Tom caught Lily's arm and held her there, her warm body laid across his.

"I have to get to Eliza."

"Eliza's all right," he said thickly. Her legs stirred against his own. He lifted his knee between hers.

"Let me off." She pushed her hands against his chest. He kissed her neck, breathing in the warm, musky smell, her hair across his face. His penis thickened.

She manoeuvred off him, stood up on the floor. Beside him, Connie rolled closer and snuffled. Aldous snored. He heard Eliza cry out again, then the murmur of Lily's voice. He looked at the clock next to the bed. 3.30am. The rain on the roof above deepened in sound and drummed heavier. A wet ride to work, then. A cold, damp day at the factory.

Eliza quietened. Tom's feet drifted over towards Aldous. His damp feet felt like a hot water bottle. Lily's space in the bed was now filled by Connie, her hands up by her face and her mouth sucking again as if the thumb by her cheek was inside.

He wanted to call out to Lily. She'd taken her shawl. She didn't come back. When he woke again, it was 4am. He pushed his arms into the

rough wool of his dressing gown and went looking for her. Eliza was fast asleep. Tom went down the stairs to the light in the sitting-room. She had lit the fire and was stood beside her sewing model. Calico draped it, but Lily, with her back to it, was knuckling her eyes. The baby, Alice, lay propped on cushions with a bottle in her fists, her eyes tracking her mother.

“You couldn’t wait to start,” he said. “You have to be up in the night and leave the baby on the chair.”

“Alice’s fine.”

He went over and picked up the bundle of Alice, quilt and bottle.

“It’s four in the morning,” he said.

She put her hands down from her eyes and picked up her pin cushion. “I only just put her down. It’s my best chance to work.”

“Come back to bed.”

“I need to fix this seam. I have to get this whole pattern sorted by today.”

“Why?”

She turned back to the model and started to pin the cloth.

“Do you get paid if you get in that competition?”

“It’s not the point.”

“Lily, you’re burning up wood in the middle of the night.”

She kept pinning as if he hadn’t spoken. Alice was a solid weight in his arm. He took the poker and bent and stirred the smouldering log so that sparks, then a flame, brightened the room. Alice sucked on the bottle. The rain, in a gust of wind, flattened itself against the window pane.

He'd be wet all morning, the bottoms of his overalls and his boots, the wind in the factory doorway and Joseph with the truck and the warm job of delivering. What was wrong with starting a day like that inside your wife, her pale legs wrapped around him and her breasts flattened soft against his chest?

There was a time she would have asked him. Now she stood with her dark hair falling forward on her cheek, her hand with pins, not a glance at Alice or her husband, not even when he climbed the stairs with the baby to take her back to her cot.

All he did was devote his life to a kitchen full of children and the means to keep feeding them.

Alice burped once, loudly, at his ear. He laid her down in the cot wedged between Aldous's and Connie's beds.

"Sshh, sshh," he said. She looked up at him and he passed her the small rabbit and went out, closing the door.

Lily by the fire with pins in her mouth. He stood and looked at her a moment. Her nightgown, the cream shawl over her shoulders, her lustrous hair. She had large feet and large slender hands. Her hands now folding, pinning. She didn't look up at him. 4.20. He rued the memory of her weight on him in the bed, the smell of her.

Connie had encroached even further onto his side of the bed. He pushed her small pyjama and nappy-clad shape back into the middle and climbed into bed. His stomach rumbled. He wished he'd brought bread and jam up with him.

“Stop it,” moaned Aldous in his sleep on the far side of the bed. He turned, and Connie turned, kicking out with one heel as she did so. Tom grabbed at his aching groin too late with his hands. He’d wanted Lily. Instead, he shut his eyes and waited, awake behind their darkness, for the blitz of pain to ease, for sleep to descend.

What Lily loved most, he thought, was to make things. Anything. He’d watched thoughts flicker on her face in the pew at church last Sunday taking in God knows what: the shape of the arum lilies, the tubular candle, the swaying brass dish of incense, the alabaster statues. In her mind she was making something from it. And in the meantime the baby in her arms unattended. Well, she held Alice, she had her dressed and clean and close, but her mind, her passions, were far from the comfort of the baby in her arms, he thought, of Aldous kicking the seat beside her, of Tom himself, his thighs straining the tight wool cloth of his trousers and his sleeves rolled up over arms broadened with a man’s work.

He lives, he breathes, he desires – what? Lily to turn and acknowledge him? To grace him with her body – not – it wasn’t even taunting, the way she rolled over him earlier; soft and firm and briefly his. Not taunting because she didn’t think of him, of how he would be affected, how he would feel. She didn’t think because she didn’t care, and if she cared for Eliza – as she must, going to her in the dark after a restless, child-kicked sleep – it was the care of a mother for a child, primitive even. A daughter cries out and the mother goes. Not uncaring, but unthinking. Unthinking of him, too, as she rolled her body over his.

And later she'll be making the lunches, giving them their breakfasts, and all of it done unthinking because her mind will be in some realm of imagination into which he can't follow. No one can follow her there. Her own private world of colour, shape, texture, how things lie next to each other, things she could make from them – or, not even – but the contemplation of it; the way shapes and colours lie next to each other. She tried to tell him once, when they were first married and talked to each other, in the spaces now filled by Eliza, Aldous, Connie, Alice. He had seen, briefly, how that world was for her. He thought he had some kind of access to it when he remembered diving (though he tried not to); that space in the air between the water and the height of his body, to create what he created – perfect form turning in the air; not part of land or sky or water but like a petal on the breath of wind, homeless in time and dimension and existing utterly unto itself.

And then—his body broken. His body a workhorse—repaired enough to work and not to fly.

Lily flies. He knows it. That dress down below—she's flying when she touches it. Her dreams are coming through her fingers onto the wool, and through the pencil onto paper and through her scissors peeling back the threads.

## Chapter Three

1963

*Eliza cannot speak. She is twelve years old now. The bandage on her head as she lies there is like a fancy dress turban. He imagines in a moment she'll open her eyes and remind him tonight is the school social and he will argue that she can only stay out till 9pm, it is a school night, still Thursday. He'll wait outside, he'll be watching her through the window, or he'll be inside, with the teachers, he won't be taking his eyes off his daughter anytime soon, because that is what a father is for. If he could kneel at her side and lay his hands on her or if he could tear some part of himself out, he would. He only has his useless dread and the feeling that somewhere there was a turn he could have taken and all this would not have happened. He searches back in his mind. How far do you go?*

*Do you go to the day he was eight years old and his parents never came home again, splattered at a railway crossing with their best friends. And what did they think about all that happened after? His own life, with the orphanage, and even that was after his sister Violet was abused by the suitable man the church thought to impose on them, the church elder who came to stay with the orphans and Violet, 16 and old enough to cook and clean for them and make sure Tom got to school each day as she walked to the hospital for her nurse aide training and at night a man at home to keep them safe. Tom eight years old and at the door of her own bedroom, the single bed and the man on top of her and the noise of the headboard against the window frame and Violet under there somewhere he knows that he heard*

*her cry out earlier and he thought it was the mess he left in the bathroom, so much mud, from washing his rugby shorts and all he'd tried to do was play as if he hadn't anything else in life to strive for but to get that ball and he knew she'd be mad and when she called out for him, yelling, like Tom! he didn't go, he kept the bathroom door shut he thought if he could just get the mud off she wouldn't be mad and he wouldn't offer to thrash him and Tom could pretend that everything was fine and his mum would come and tuck him into bed that night no tucking, here's this man and the rocking of the bed and his black shoes on the floor and his socked feet at the end of the quilts bunched up Tom standing there and then he goes away and runs out the front door and he doesn't come till dark and Mrs Ogilvie next door calls out to him sharply why aren't you home for tea what would your mother think, get home and help your sister.*

*And of course that's what he should have done, helped his sister. Instead she got sent away and he got put in an orphanage and one day she came back with a legitimate husband, Don, and a wrinkled dark-haired baby, Hazel, who Tom loved then more than anyone, it didn't matter who her father was or how she came. And Hazel was dead now, dead at fifteen. And Eliza can't talk. And somehow he thinks it all goes back to that bedroom that day and the black shoes on the floor by her hospital uniform and , but before that, if their parents hadn't gone for that drive, if his mum had said no, instead of laughing, and getting in the car or his father hadn't been driving or before that if he hadn't been born or Violet, and then...*

*But Eliza is in the white bed and he is beside her.*

## Chapter Four

1962 August 5<sup>th</sup>

Tom went out the back porch. He put the rubbish in the fluted grey bin and walked down the path, past the clothesline creaking madly in the wind and the peg bucket swaying. He stood to examine his vegetable garden. A row of young cabbages, their leaves with sickle-shaped bites out of them, two completely eaten back to their stalks, like a framework of a tree. The cabbages weren't thriving but the weeds were, between the silverbeet row and in the new row of carrots. He squatted beside the sogged soil and pulled young grass shoots from between the fern of the baby carrots. A few slim orange slips came out with the grass. He pushed a blunt finger into the soil, making new carrot holes, and dropped them in, packing up the soil around them.

From here he couldn't hear the cacophony of the kitchen. He took the peg basket off the clothesline as he went past, put it on the shelf in the laundry and went inside, out of the wind. Alice was still crying in her pushchair in the corner, Connie in the highchair, Aldous lacing up his boots and Eliza in a funk at the table, pushing round her weetbix with a spoon.

"Eat up your breakfast," he said as he walked past.

"Why couldn't I have had porridge?"

"There was only enough for your father," called Lily, apron on, at the bench with the lunches. Egg sandwiches. "Pick up Alice, will you."

"I'm late," he said back, but went to his baby anyway, her dark hair a question mark above her forehead and her weetbix-smearred face. She

burrowed into his shoulder. He kissed her tender neck above her nightie, inhaling the child smell of flannelette sheets and milky breath.

“Give her to me,” said Lily. “Here’s your lunch. You’re going to get wet.” The rain had started up again in fits against the window.

“Wet through,” he said. He took his oilskin off the back of the kitchen door.

Lily’s hair was stuck in curls on her forehead. Her eyes had dark thumbprints of bruises under them.

“You didn’t sleep at all after I went back to bed?”

“No, and I’m wishing I had.”

“Goodbye, blessed children,” he said.

“Goodbye, Dadda,” Aldous said. Connie waved. Eliza, still cranky, lifted her face and in the end flicked some fingers at him.

“Learn lots today,” he said.

“Oh,” Lily came to the doorway with him. “Your sister’s taking Eliza to ballet. Can you pick her up afterwards?”

“From ballet? I’ll be at work.”

“From Violet’s.” She lifted a cheek to his kiss.

He stowed his lunch and white overalls in the lidded bucket and hung it on his bike’s handlebars. The rain didn’t look like easing up. He wheeled the bike out of the shed and up the path to the road. The letterbox had an odd tilt to it. The wind in the night or some kid knocking it with his bike. There had been young men the other night drunk weaving their way up the path; one had knocked into Tom as he manoeuvred his bike into the gateway.

“Watch it,” Tom had growled at them. They’d laughed and kept up the path, and the shadows of twilight lengthening as he went up the front path past the kitchen lights and to the shed at the back. Maybe they had knocked the letterbox. Tom stood by it and moved it on the post. The flap was partly open. He lifted it and there was a brown envelope in there. He pulled it out. His own name, Tom Beaconsfield, on the front in a hand he didn’t recognize.

Tom looked back at the house. A curtain of rain between him and its warmth, and the oilskin hat on his head sending a shower over the brim and down, just missing his nose with the cold of water. He flipped the letter over, no address, and ripped it open. He didn’t owe money. He wasn’t after a raise. Not after one, always after one, not expecting one, or to lose his job either, not that that was guaranteed anywhere.

He pulled a piece of paper out, heavy with the newspaper words, stuck in clumps of ill-glued forms. **Your wife is having an affair.**

He nearly dropped the paper. He swivelled and looked at the house again, though that action knocked water from his hat onto his shivering cheek.

Not possible. Not possible. Who did they know? They didn’t know anyone. Lily didn’t know anyone. She stayed at home with the children and she sewed. He pushed the letter in his pocket. The rain had fallen on it and the letters hadn’t run. They were glued, inked by typeface. They were etched on the paper, in his pocket now. He pushed his bike onto the road and got on. Down the steep incline of Ascot Street, passed the child in a large coat

heading up for the dairy. Past the shuttered curtained houses and the picket fences and the lavenders and bare branches of the trees and the rain falling on the roofs and the rain falling down the chimneys on the smutty banked up fires that didn't warm a house properly on a sunny day let alone on a day like this. The sky so low with cloud the hills that rose up just behind the houses could almost seem not to exist. Hidden in their coat of grey and the shingling down of needled rain, the hills were no help at all in orientation or in pointing to the sky.

The factory was sodden as well. Joseph's truck outside the stacking shed and Joseph under the cover of the iron looking at the pile they stacked yesterday of the fibrous plaster sheets. A job up in Onslow St and the rain heading off any chance to lay the sheets on the deck and start with the building process.

"Morning", said Joseph.

"Morning, Boss," said Tom. He stepped into the factory proper, took off his coat and shook it in the doorway, pulled off his hat, did the same and hung them on the peg by the door.

"Morning." To the foreman Reilly wiping mutton fat on the concrete bench.

Reilly nodded. Young Jimmy had a coke fire burning in a bucket and was crouched over it warming up his hands.

"Room for you, Tom," he said. He shifted his own nailbox around.  
"Want to warm your hands?"

“I’m fine, Jimmy.” Tom went over to the bin of plaster, He estimated two sacks were left, enough to get started before one of them, and it wouldn’t be Reilly, had to go out and heave ten more in for the day’s sheets.

He started on the bucket of plaster face for the first table. Hosed in the water. Scooped in the plaster and worked it with the smaller of the metal stirrers till the lumps broke down and the water disappeared and instead the substance of water and plaster began to look like something new, something not slimy but that felt through your fingers like another skin. He lifted the bucket and went over to the bench Reilly had wiped with fat and kerosene.

“Come on Jimmy, work to be done, get those rules over here,” Reilly called.

Tom put down the bucket and eased his shoulder up and down a few times. Jimmy brought the two long steel rules for the edges, fumbled one and dropped it on the table. Tom took it and helped him set up the mould for the ceiling sheets they were to make today. The steel rule so cold it was like a knife on his fingers. And Jimmy’s hands would be worse, heated up by fire. Tom pulled the shorter rules into place, making the four sides of the ceiling board, and lifted up the bucket to pour the white slop in. It ran out across the table, filling over the shiny black concrete of the form table. Reilly was there with a trowel, smoothing it out. Tom thought he might get to go and tease out the hemp, but Reilly obviously had that warmer job sorted out for himself.

“You may as well get started on the drums,” he said. “Jimmy, go out and start bringing in the sacks of plaster.”

“It’s still raining,” said Jimmy.

“The plaster will be wet soon enough.”

Jimmy went out to do what he was told, though they didn't need the new plaster just yet, enough for a drum in the bin as Tom had checked. Jimmy wouldn't question Reilly and Tom had no reason to get Reilly's back up against the workers. Anyway, Jimmy always did what Reilly said. If Reilly sent him down to get a pint of elbow grease Jimmy went, he hadn't worked it out yet, being sent from the engineers empty handed but promised he could get a left-handed hammer at the next shop, or a long wait, or a sky hook. They all knew Jimmy and that Jimmy would do whatever they asked, and come back still with a pleasant kind of countenance on his face and offer his lunch pail around to whoever was at the factory that day.

Tom pushed the hose into the drum and watched the water level come up to the mark, then scooped out three scoops of plaster before Jimmy came in dumping the sack and spreading powder over Tom's hands and into his face and eyes and up onto Jimmy's face and his hawk-like nose.

“Sorry, Boss,” said Jimmy. Tom wasn't the boss, Joseph was the boss and after that the main plasterer, Kev, who'd been there ten years longer than Tom, and after that Reilly who was the foreman, and then Tom, who was just the plasterer and mostly the factory guy making the sheets and the cornices and getting to put them up when the house lot was made. But not getting to the fancy work, like the ceiling roses that Joseph designed and Kev made. Tom was the ordinary man in the firm and only Jimmy called him boss, and called no one else that, not even Joseph, who Jimmy didn't call anything but tipped his cap to or nodded his head usually with a goofy grin of shyness on his face.

“Want to take over the mixing?” said Tom. He’d seen Reilly had gone out to the toilet, and Tom was going to get at the hemp first.

He went over to the lowered part of the factory with the concrete floor and the rafters low above your head where rats sometimes crept or sat and watched you. They didn’t worry about the rats but when Tom had first started Joseph used to go on about the whistling spiders, “Watch out for those whistling spiders living in the plaster, you can hear them at night time, you don’t want to get one on your hand unawares.” Tom would knock every plaster bag keeping an eye out for a whistling spider, whatever a whistling spider was supposed to look like, and now he knew of course, it was an age-old trick probably come from Joseph’s dad, the old bastard himself. Jimmy still thought there were whistling spiders. He knocked each bag of plaster before he ripped it open.

Tom cut the twine holding the bale of hemp compressed, fine white sisal hemp from South Africa that didn’t stain when a ceiling leaked, if it ever leaked, not by their workmanship but by rusty roofs, or this wind that never left off, it seemed, lifting the edges of the guttering now outside the shed and sending a cascade of rainwater down on the gravel outside.

The hemp sprang up and Tom took an armful, pulled it out and dropped it on the floor. He began to tease it out, giving his fingers and his arms a workout and his legs too, with his drier overalls over his clammy wet trousers and the tops of his socks wet but his dubbined boots keeping his feet more or less comfortable in the temperature inside the factory; a kind of low hum of cold.

Reilly cast a look at Tom already on the toe, their name for hemp, and went over to Jimmy.

“Come on, Jimmy, how’s that plaster coming on?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, if you don’t know how’s anyone going to know? You’re the one making it.”

“It feels all right.”

“Stick your arm in, give it a wiggle through your fingers.”

Jimmy stuck his arm in, forgetting to push up his overalls first. Reilly sighed and turned away. Jimmy kept stirring the smooth powdered water and Tom came over to check.

“That’s all good,” he said. He took the drum off the stand and manhandled it over to the bench. “Go and clean your arm up,” he said back to Jimmy. “Use the hose on it. Reilly’ll have another set of overalls for you.”

“Bugger off,” Reilly said. “If the lad can’t work things out by now he’s not getting my dry pair.”

Tom poured the thicker plaster mass onto the face he’d poured on the concrete bench. It spread out more thickly than the finer mix he’d made. He helped it along into the corners, and Reilly was already lifting up the hemp, teasing it out again and pushing it down into the plaster. Jimmy came over to help, his soaked overall arm forgotten in the task of getting the hemp down into the plaster all across the sheet.

Tom left them to it and went to make another bucket of the slippery face for the next sheet. He stirred the bucket and watched as the fluid

became pastel like and eddied in white whorls in the bucket. He checked over his shoulder that Jimmy had shifted to the next bench to wipe the mutton fat mix on the concrete. Twice more Tom poured the face and then the buckets of plaster, while Reilly kept for himself the task of teasing the toe and Jimmy ran from one task to the other. Tom helped push the last of the toe into the third sheet, tucking down the strands into the corners and he and Reilly smoothed it off with the edge, passing the trowel this way and then that way over the flattened fibrous surface of the sheet.

“Where you off to?” Reilly barked at Jimmy.

“The dunny.”

“Well, give us a hand with this first sheet before you go.”

“I’m busting though,” he said. “It’s the cold, I can’t hang on.”

“Off you go,” said Tom. He walked over and took the rules off the first sheet and stacked them under the concrete bench. “Just take the other end,” he said to Reilly. Too bad if the foreman thought him forward. The job needed to be done and the rain had momentarily stopped. Reilly put down the knife he’d just cut the next hemp bale with and took the other end of the sheet.

They carried it out to the yard. Reilly was on the end and Tom could feel him thrusting the sheet at him, forcing its weight into his hands. His fingers were muscled and well-used to the grip needed but the weight of Reilly shoving creased his palms and pushed a sharp edge against his fingers.

Tom didn’t say anything but shuffled ahead backwards, keeping the sheet taut between them. Reilly would do any small thing to make a man’s

life more difficult, for no reason that Tom could think of; it hardly made your day go faster, unless the pleasure in thinking up these small harassments kept his mind from the long cold hours of the job.

Jimmy didn't have the capacity to think up problems. His whole delight was in sharing, if it was the fire or the weight of something or the chocolate lamingtons his mother often sent for smoko. Yet Jimmy would never get married, he'd never own his own home, he'd probably work at no other place but this factory, making fibrous sheets until he turned sixty. And still stumbling behind them, still going to the toilet at inopportune moments, still sticking his arm in wet plaster with his sleeves rolled down, like his mind could only hold the present few seconds in it and didn't retain history. A mind Tom thought could do you well in life, maybe.

He lifted the sheet with Reilly and attached it to the clamps in the drying shed. Joseph had gone with the truckload and Kev and the apprentice Greg. The rain looked like it might stay away now. The sun could come through. He looked up. A pale sun blotted out by a thickening cloud, and the hills hung all about with mist and the stones at his feet syrupy with water still in a yard half mud, half stone, rutted truck tyres and the memory of frost all winter embedded in its surface.

Not raining, but the wind still keen and an icy bite to it. Tom's fingers cold from the plaster and the edges of the steel rules and the fresh plaster sheet. He went back into the factory and though it wasn't ten yet, he stopped and sat down on Jimmy's nail box and held his hands over the red coke in the bucket. He let the heat come into him, making his fingers shine red in the fine stretch of skin between his digits, his hands out to some small

comfort in a derelict, low ceilinged, corrugated iron sided draughty shed, end of May, and a long cold winter stretching ahead of him of more of the same.

“You want to get that next bucket of face done before smoko,” said Reilly, and Tom for once ignored him. A question or a demand. “Let Jimmy do it for once, he’s capable,” said Tom.

“Jimmy?” He isn’t capable of wiping his arse, let alone let him loose on the face of a ceiling for the mayor’s house. What are you thinking, boy.”

And Tom, who wasn’t a boy, and hadn’t been one for a very long time, held his hands over the coke and thought of the Reverend Stalky’s quote from Heraclitus: “It pertains to all men to know themselves and to be temperate.” He knew one thing about himself, and that was this, he only saw what he saw and then he was slow to act. Like how he let Aldous slope off from his jobs emptying the kitchen scraps. If Aldous didn’t do it, Eliza soon was sent to by Lily, and Tom saw that and he was going to get onto it next time. A boy had to learn to step up and take responsibility. And another thing he knew, he had taken it well, about his neck. It wasn’t a thing anyone said to him. Violet never brought it up. Lily, in the early years, she looked on him with a tenderness in her stare, he thinks that what she meant by it. How good and quiet he was about his catastrophe. Or did no one think to mention it because to them it wasn’t a catastrophe? Did people grow up and not dive anymore, anyway. Did people stop tumbling even though they could? It wasn’t the tumbling, it wasn’t the soar through the air so much as knowing you could do it. At any time you could do it. You were majesty of your own body. And Tom wasn’t of his.

Jimmy came in the door and headed straight for the bucket.

“Do you reckon it’s smoko already, you two?” said Reilly. “I’ve got the face done already.”

“Then I’m doing the toe,” said Tom. And got up and went into the lean-to for the second time that day, taking his still warm hands into the task of loosening the hemp; tearing at it like it was clumps of hair, ripping it through his fingers.

## Chapter Five

1962 August 5th

Violet and Don lived in a new house at least twenty minutes extra ride in the low dark evening for Tom, and it would be a lot longer than that, walking beside Eliza for the trip home. If Violet could take her to ballet, surely just once she could drop her back home again, not make the child late in the dark and this weather, at one minute sharp and cold with wind, another slurring with rain. The street lamps were on and Tom's shadow biked past him at a regular interval. He saw the car in their garage, the shiny red of it and parked his bike against the bumper and knocked on the door, then opened it.

"Violet, it's me," he called.

At first no response. He walked down the hall to the kitchen and to the sitting-room where a TV flickered in the corner and Eliza sat transfixed, her legs curled up underneath her by the fire. She had a cup of something, most likely cocoa and a slice of toast and honey.

Don came in to the room.

"Hey there, Tom. Eliza, where's mother?"

"Gone to shut the chooks up because we were late home. Hi Dad."

"Hi, honey." He went over and stood near the fire himself, and like Don, stared at the screen, watching the Lone Ranger on his white horse and Tonto his sidekick, forgetting about the rain overhead or how the walk home would be or that lunch had been a long time ago.

“Tom!” His sister came in and smiled at him. She said to Eliza, “Are you ready, luvvie, have you got everything?”

Eliza turned from the screen and looked up at Violet. An inscrutable look. She didn’t say anything but got up and took her cup and plate out to the kitchen.

“How was ballet?” Tom asked Violet.

“You’ll have to ask Eliza. She’d like to come over again tomorrow, if that’s fine with you.”

“Well,” said Tom. He was thinking of the extra ride, and how it was only Tuesday. “It’s a long walk home.”

“She’s young and fit. Is it your neck?”

“No, it’s not my neck. Why would it be my neck?”

“You don’t have to take that tone with me. I’ve been looking after Eliza and I have a busy day too, you know. The church doesn’t get organized by prayer alone.”

Tom went to the door. “Eliza, what are you up to?” He felt a pressure in his chest.

“Just patting the kittens, Dad.”

“Oh, we’ve got two new kittens,” said Violet.

“I don’t know what for,” said Don. “It’s not like we get mice, or the other cat ever wanted company.”

“Eliza likes them,” said Violet, as if that sorted things. “Are you all right?” she asked Tom.

He stood by the door twisting his woollen hat in his hands.

“Would you like a cup of tea or something?”

“Yes, that, thanks.” He followed her out to the kitchen and stood watching Violet’s wide back as she fussed with the teapot. It wasn’t the tea he wanted, it was that note, like a hot piece of coke in his pocket. Eliza had the kittens on her lap by the chip heater. He pulled the note out and when Violet turned with the teapot to the table, he thrust it at her. “I got this.” She put the teapot down on its cork stand, pulled the cosy over it and set out two cups and saucers. Then she took the piece of paper and looked at it, looked down at Eliza, looked at Tom.

“What are you going to do about it?”

“Do? What? As if it’s true?” he said.

“Well, isn’t it?”

“I’ve never heard anything so ridiculous.”

She looked at him as she did when he was young and didn’t understand a question.

“Violet. We’re talking about Lil.” He stopped, looked at Eliza who was patting the kittens’ ginger fur. “Can I speak frankly?”

“Not here. In front of Don, you mean?”

“No.” Tom took a sip of tea. The liquid scalded his cold lips. “In the garage?”

“If you must. I’ve got our own tea to see to.”

He followed her out to the red car and then didn’t know what to say. He didn’t have to defend Lily to Violet. To anyone.

“So you’re saying nothing gives you any clue that this could be true?”

“Of course not.”

“She’s welcoming to you in every way?”

Tom stood there. The way Lily pushed at his chest, this morning, the way she turned her cheek so that his lips only grazed her. How long had that been going on? Weeks, no, months. When had she last turned to him, and laughed, and lifted up his shirt?

“See what I mean,” said Violet. “It pays to think carefully about this. Why would someone warn you otherwise?”

There was a leadenness in his lower belly. As if the sacks of plaster he’d heaved in the day had been tipped there, and stirred with a stick and lumped with insufficient water, pulled down heavy into his legs and dragged at his bowels. A feeling of the coldness of the factory shed in the rain and wind whipped around his calves and powder threatening to choke him.

“I’ve heard things as well,” said Violet. “At first I was like you, scoffed. But the people who told me.”

“What people?” said Tom. “What would they know?”

“Did you know a Tuesday morning Lily gets Thelma Appleton to look after Alice and Connie?”

“What of it?”

“She hasn’t told you? And she doesn’t tell Thelma where she goes either. And once Alice didn’t have enough milk for the four hours.”

“Four hours?”

“And she was crying that much. It’s not right. A mother’s place is looking after her own children.”

“Dad?”

Eliza stood at the front doorstep looking out to the garage.

“I’m here, love.”

“I’m hungry. Are we going now?”

“Get your things,” he said. “I’m just getting my bike ready.”

“At least you know now,” said Violet.

“I don’t know anything,” said Tom. “And I’d like you to keep this to yourself.”

“You didn’t have to ask,” she said.

## Chapter Six

1952

When he reached the door of the dance hall he no longer had the positive thoughts he'd had as he'd lifted his ironed shirt off the back of the chair and put his arms into the smooth sleeves. It was as if he'd put on another person then – someone more handsome, more sure. Someone capable of more in life – not just a tradesman, a labourer. He imagined he would do something in the world, and beside him he would have a wife. And one way of meeting her was to go to that dance.

He pulled on his jacket as he walked away from the lodging house and whistled as he walked up Mansfield Terrace and down Kent to the door of the St John's hall. Then his confidence had left him. His throat was dry – all that whistling in the warm night air. Two couples, laughing, pushed the door open into the brighter, warmer interior and he followed them in. The room was decorated with swathes of ferns, and blue and white bunting hung round the fronts of the tables.

He looked for his friend Jack, or even Violet, and saw, over by the kitchen door, a woman in a yellow dress. She had dark hair looped up on her head. She didn't seem to be with anyone but stood near a group, as if to align herself, and held her head up at an angle that spoke to him of her courage as much as her vulnerability – a vulnerability he felt equal in.

She watched the dancers, a slight upturn to her lips, ready to smile. Tom started his way across the room. He watched her eyes, ready to smile if she but looked at him. A couple cut across him. He was in the middle of the

dancers, a short-cut that hadn't worked, and next minute she waltzed by him in someone else's arms.

He reached the side of the room where she had stood. He imagined a perfume from her still remained in the air. He shut his eyes briefly, then scanned the room. It's not that everyone else was in a couple and happy, but right then it seemed to him that was true. The song "Glory of Love" brought to the dancers a shiver of hope and poignancy, and he could almost feel how they shifted closer to each other, their laughter stilled.

A woman danced past him, her cheek on her partner's shoulder. Where was she, in her radiant yellow dress? She came now, her face not laid on the man's chest but alert, thinking. She swept by him and she turned. She saw him staring at her. Too late he got his eyes to slide past her, and caught the beginning of a smile on her face, then she was gone, and it was his sister, with her lanky husband Don, who filled his vision. Violet managed to look in control, not vulnerable, not even poignant. If Don was shorter he would have had his head on her shoulder. Tom felt a fool as his sister's eyes brushed over him, for standing there alone, his great hands sweating in his pockets and his collar too tight around his throat.

The pianist was a man Tom had been to school with. Garth Beavis. Garth hadn't had many friends then, looked like a twerp with his protruding eyes and hair that stuck up if copious handfuls of Brylcreem hadn't been applied, and Garth wasn't a great one for Brylcreem. And all along he'd been at home practising his scales and then busted out at 18 as the pianist in bands and had two girlfriends, they took turns so the rumour went. Garth's hands had a large spread over the keys. Tom had a wide span himself. He

could play the war songs that reminded him of his mother playing and the old hymns she loved to sing. His mother was a fancy pianist, schooled to grade eight Royal School and had her letters in music and small pupils she coached after school. Tom had a dim memory of being shut out of the front room for mother's lessons. Later, her warm hands over his, showing him his first chords. Violet had seen to it afterwards that he continued lessons; they both had lessons, as if being able to play the songs their mother played was one way they kept her with them.

How come she never played in public, in concerts, or in bands, he once asked Violet, and she assured him their mother thought it would have been a misuse of her skill, which she reserved for church alone, for the organ and the mighty hymns her fingers lingered over.

Tom could play but not like Garth, who, hearing a song once could make it his own. He took the hit songs from America, heard over his crystal radio set in his bedroom, and brought them to the dance hall before most people had ever heard of them. Taught the band, taught Jessica, the singer out there, daughter of one of Tom's mother's best friends, and sometime visitor to the house when he was eight. She'd stood holding onto her mother's skirt, six years old and shy, and up there now with a throaty voice that stirred something in Tom that caught him unawares. He'd put a frog down the back of Jessica's dress, only to hear her do something, move away from her mother. Her mother had clouted Tom so hard on his ear it was still ringing by tea time.

Jessica leant into the microphone and Garth leant over his piano and the guy on the trumpet leant over his instrument, all of them looking like

they were privy to some sort of passionate secret about life that Tom was only now fumbling towards, a secret that had something to do with the woman in the yellow dress, he was sure. Only the guitar player looked as if he didn't believe in anything, standing there strumming with a vacant look that was at once more cool than the others on stage, as if he knew the secret and didn't give it any credence. The music was the only thing.

She came towards him. She'd broken off from her waltz. She knelt to take a hanky from her bag and turned her face away, and then standing up again, turned and looked straight at Tom. He was six feet away. His hands sprouted moisture in his pockets. He rubbed them against his thighs, pulled them out, looked away from her, looked back, swallowed, and she looked at him with some kind of light in her eye that drew him past the buxom women in their silk taffeta long dresses and past Bertie Osgood in his pinstriped suit till he stood beside her. And that's when Garth tinkled out the start of 'How High the Moon', and he asked her would she care to dance. She looked right in to his eyes, at Tom, who was almost shorter than her, he pulled himself higher, at Tom who knew his place in the world, as tradesman, and yet knew the secret of his own body, what he was capable of in motion, what fears he tossed aside when he brought his arms down then flung them up, lifting his body before his gorgeous flight.

Something of this she must have seen. He knew he wasn't the handsomest man in the room. He wasn't the tallest. He didn't grin like Toby Moorhouse who had danced with her the last. He didn't have black curls like Jack, who could sing any song that made a woman swoon over his honeyed tones. He was Tom who could dive, and could triple-back-

somersault on the ground, who could step up a man's leg to his shoulders and balance there owning the bones as if they were a wide earth beneath his feet.

She said yes. He held out his hand. She placed her creamy hand in his and he led her out onto the floor. Jessica was belting the song out as if she and Garth had been to the moon, as if she had a true love, as if the song was meant to be danced to not mooned to. And Tom could dance. He didn't own his body just for the air. His hand on her back, the two of them light in the music, her dark eyes catching his and not turning away, and after that song, "Somewhere there's music, it's where you are," she thanked him. She walked away. And there was Robby Downes, lined up to ask her and Billy Tatton after that, and Tom walked home. He knew her name, Lily, and nothing else. All they'd done was move to music, Garth's hands on the piano driving that secret into them. And she knew his name. Tom.

## Chapter seven

1962 August 5th

“How did Hazel die?”

“She died a long time ago,” said Tom.

“I *know* that,” said Eliza. She skipped a skip to keep up with his bike. “She died before I was born. But how?”

Tom pushed his bike over the kerb to cross the road. Eliza seemed to find out most things. She’d have found out about that note if he hadn’t left it in Violet’s hand, not that he meant to. Just when he left, he realized he hadn’t got it back from her. Eliza looked up at him as she walked.

“You know that she died, because. Well, at the time, she wasn’t well. She...”

“Because she wanted to,” said Eliza.

“To what?”

“She wanted to die. So she did die. I already knew that.”

“Oh.” Tom wheeled along with his hand on the bike seat and the other on the handlebars. His smoko bucket swung in the street lights. “Did Violet tell you?”

“Sort of. And then I figured it out. And now you’ve confirmed it.”

Hazel killed herself, and she did it by hanging, and this wasn’t the sort of information Tom wanted Eliza to have. Damn Violet for opening her mouth about it. He had his own daughter to protect. Just because Violet had lost hers, had lost Hazel, and God knows there were things she could have done differently with Hazel. Things that might not have driven her ... But he

would never try to say it was Violet's fault. It's never a parent's fault. Or was it, because Hazel was still a child? She was just fifteen, and though she acted like she was much older and demanded to be treated like she was much older, she was only five years older than his own girl who walked beside him. Eliza, who knew how to figure things out.

"It's a hard truth," said Tom. "We didn't want you to know. It's not what any parent wants their child to find out, that it's possible to end your life."

"You can talk about it with me," said Eliza. "I know lots of things. It's not going to make me go out and do something stupid."

Tom stopped walking and lifted his hand off the handlebars to give Eliza a quick hug. "You are a sensible girl, I know," he said.

"I'm not sensible. That makes me sound like I'm old. You know, aunty aunty old."

"Is Violet sensible?"

"She's so sensible she drives me up the wall. She has everything so organized, which is kind of nice, because Mummy..."

"She's too busy."

"Yes, she's so busy nothing is in order, and Violet has everything in order, and I don't like that so much, because if you do one thing that doesn't fall into her pattern, she doesn't know how to cope with it."

"I grew up with her, remember. Imagine her coping with a teenage boy." And then Tom was silent, as Violet hadn't coped with a teenage girl at all. They crossed Onslow Road and started the uphill push along Hill Street. Ahead of them their hills were dark as the night, yet he knew behind them

was the sea, and behind the sea, on the hills that rose above Oriental Parade, there were houses blocked out with lights that made the hills look like something from the Mediterranean coast, as if the houses were all white stone villas and in the day the sea would be aqua and calm.

“She took an overdose,” he said. And then to Eliza’s stare. “Violet tried to get help for her, but it was too late. I don’t think Hazel really meant that it would be the end. I think it was a terrible mistake. She would have been free in a few years. She could have done anything she wanted. She was so bright.”

“Am I bright?”

“Of course you are. Mrs Holland raved about you at the teacher interviews.”

“I didn’t get to be class captain.”

“You don’t want to let the voting majority change your mind about your qualities. They’re a fickle lot. How do you think politicians survive? And it’s not the most deserving ones that get the vote, I’m telling you. It’s the manipulative ones, the ones that know what to say that can get people to do what they want. They say what the people want to hear, not necessarily what’s good for the country. They say what will get them the vote.”

“Well, if I’d got in, I was going to make Fridays free lunch day,” said Eliza. “And we could hold a baking day to raise money and everyone can sit down and have yummy food, like pies and chips, stuff we don’t even get. And Robbie got voted in because he said I didn’t have any idea how things worked.”

“Personal attack,” said Tom. “It works every time.”

“I didn’t want to say stuff about him, but I could have. I was trying to make positive stands for my campaign.”

“You keep like that, Eliza. Don’t let one pushy boy put you off.”

“I can’t stand his smirking at me.”

“That’s a good word,” said Tom, who was pleased the topic had gone from Hazel into something he had a better opinion on.

“Smirk,” said Eliza. “Sounds just like it means.”

“Here’s another, rattle.” He guided his bike through the gateway, ignoring the letterbox, and pushed it up the path, past the lighted windows.

“Slosh. Mutter,” said Eliza, following behind him. “Oh, and this is Aldous – truffillgate.”

“What’s that?” he turned back to her.

“A word he made up that means stuff parents say to you when they don’t want to say the truth.”

## Chapter Eight

1962 August 5th

Across the table from him Eliza pushed at her food. Liver and bacon on mashed potato, and peas, cooked till they'd shrivelled. Lily had her hands full spooning the pap into Alice's mouth. Aldous ate diligently, as he did most things, taking what was practical to do, in this case to get sustenance. Connie placed the brownish green peas in small heaps on her potato scoops and flattened them into the potato with a spoon.

"I thought you were hungry," Tom said to Eliza.

"No," she said. "Can I leave the table? I need to do my homework."

"No one gets up till the dinner's eaten." Lily turned around to her. "I don't care if you want to sit at the table all night, Eliza. I didn't want to spend an hour cooking it either, if no one wanted it."

"I like it, Mum," said Aldous.

Tom thought the same, liver and bacon like his Mum used to serve.

"It's fine, Lily," he said. "Eat your own tea, I'll see to Alice."

He got up and pulled the pushchair around to park near his own seat. Alice had potato and spat out peas on her bib and cheeks and on her waving hands.

"Did you get Mrs Appleton to look after these ones?" he said to Lily, starting there.

"When?"

"Tuesday last."

Lily considered him a moment. "I often do," she said. "It's when I meet Darren."

"Darren? Oh." Darren was one of those feminised designer men Lily used to work with. The magazines he gave her fed her with ideas beyond what this life was capable of. They were piled on the dresser now, where Lily could find them at a moment's notice for inspiration.

"Why?" she said. "I've been meeting Darren for years. Have you got something against that?"

Eliza looked from Lily to Tom. Tom felt the lump of potato thicken in his throat. "No, just Violet said." He stopped.

"Go on," said Lily. "I'm really interested in what Violet has to say about my own working connections."

He knew that was a mistake, to mention Violet. And to start anything in front of the children. He forked in peas, and then more bacon. Lily stared at him and he turned with another spoonful for Alice.

"You know it's impossible for me to work, to have contact with other designers. If I don't see Darren. But then it's none of her business surely. I don't ask who you meet at the races, and God knows we can't afford what you spend at the races."

Tom pushed back his chair and stood up. The note was real. Someone had put it in their letterbox. Someone had gone to the trouble of cutting out each letter. And telling him about her homo friend Darren didn't alleviate his feelings at all. He stalked into the kitchen for a glass of water and stood looking out the window where his vegetables were being battered down by the rain that was falling outside.

He walked back to the table and sat down. Connie threw her plate on the floor.

“That’s it!” he yelled. “No one’s going to waste food here. Everyone’s going to eat it, and Connie’s going to bed.”

“She hasn’t had a bath,” said Lily.

“I don’t care,” said Tom. He pulled Connie out of the highchair, and carried her, potatoed as she was, up the stairs. No one spoke behind him and as he reached the top of the stairs he heard Lily again.

“Your father’s right. He doesn’t work all day in the cold, either, for you not to appreciate the food you’re given.”

“I appreciate it all,” said Aldous. “Dad’s not going on about the food.”

“It’s all about the food,” said Lily. “And Eliza eat up or you’ll be going to bed as well.”

“Is there pudding?” she said.

“Did you make some?” said Lily.

“I’ve been out, remember. I had to walk all the way home in the rain.”

“It wasn’t raining,” said Aldous.

Tom shut the bedroom door and lifted Connie’s jersey over her head. He hadn’t finished his own dinner, nor had he changed out of his work trousers and his chin was bristly. He remembered how his own dad came to the table showered and shaved before every meal, and he’d spent as long as Tom did on the job, winter or summer, and sat at the table cleaned and content.

He took advantage later of a break in the rain to go out into the garden in the dark. Sometimes he thought he'd like to smoke a pipe, only for the ritual it would give him to come outside each night and look at the sky and the hills so black nearby him, like they were a row of old uncles out on the porch, having a pipe too and talking about the old days. Lily was finishing up the kitchen; he could see her head in the window above the sink. She turned, saying something to Eliza beside her, then Eliza, who should have been in bed, was next to her. He imagined the tea towel in her hands, Eliza who hated to dry and hated going to bed early even more.

The cabbages had lain their slight leaves down on the rain-heavy soil. Some wind, pale sunshine, and they would perk up again. Carrot fronds, it didn't matter what you did to those, they stayed upright. Like Jimmy, he thought. And he himself was more like those cabbages, ready to fall prostrate, or did they fight that rain to the last, and then go down to the loam tenderly, asking the earth for strength?

A pipe would be good. He wanted the heat of tobacco in his throat, and pushed his hands into his pockets for warmth. The back door opened, and Lily was there. She had her dressing gown over her dress and pulled it close, looking out into the dark for him.

"I'm here," he said. And she walked down the path towards the clothesline and the garden shed where he stood with his back protected from the wind.

She came to him, and he put his arm around her and held her warmly to his side.

"Are you over your grump?" she said.

Over that, the whole tea time thing, not over anything else. He squeezed her, yes, and she leant back against him. He began to thicken, that old feeling, her weight against him and her arms inside his. He breathed on the back of her neck and looked over her head where there would be stars if it was a night for stars.

“They’re all in bed,” she said. “And asleep. Eliza’s reading. She doesn’t like going to bed.”

“Is it the nightmares?”

“I think she doesn’t want to miss out on anything, that’s all.”

They stayed like that a few minutes, slightly swaying, as if the wind could reach them and they were just saplings, pushovers. She turned inside his arms to face him and now her gown was open and she huddled into his embrace, her legs meeting his. She felt him hard and lifted her face to kiss along his chin, prickly chin. Her teeth nibbled.

“I know, I need a shave.”

“But I like it,” she said. “You could take me right now.”

He looked into the shadow of her face. He certainly had been thinking of it.

“Not here,” he said. He was thinking of their bed and the door shut, and both of them muffled, moving as quiet as he could, Eliza awake, and the others likely at any moment.

“No, right here,” she said. “Why not?”

How she came to him in the hospital. The risk. He wanted it then. But here, with the neighbours’ back door through the fence behind them. With the kids in the house. On the lawn? Like animals?

“I’ve got no protection,” he said.

“I brought it with me.”

She kissed him again, on the chin, under, closer, on his neck. Her hand came down from his shoulder and reached behind his back, pulling him closer into her. A faint moan from her throat.

Out here, where anyone could see.

He said, “We’ll go inside. It’s wet out here.”

“I don’t care.” She was pressed up close against him and her hips now moving, and he saw that note, bitch wife, wanton wife. What was she doing, pushing herself at him out here, like some kind of desperate show of love and loyalty to him? Some – look what I’ll do for you: I’ll lean up against this cold tin shed. I’ll open my legs out here in the dark. I’ll have you push into me, hitting my head back against metal in your need for me. He said: “Lily. Stop it.” He pulled her arm down from his shoulder. He twisted his body back away from her. “What’s got into you? You’re not a slut.”

“A what?” She looked at him. He saw the glint of the whites of her eyes. She pulled something out of her dressing gown pocket, her hand trapped there then coming free.

“Bugger you,” she said, and threw their last condom towards his vegetables.

“Oh, you’re just going to leave that out there for the children to find.”

“Why not? If you don’t like it, pick it up yourself.”

She walked back up the path. The back door banged shut after her.  
And the kids asleep upstairs.

When she came at last to bed Tom had been asleep for an hour. He'd left the fire, and Lily ironing, some music of hers playing the minute he switched off the races. He'd come up the stairs, tuckered out. Not a particularly long day at work, not heavy work or all day plastering with his arm above his shoulders. Still, his legs felt as if he'd run, how they used to for diving practice, three times round the block, he and Jack and Billy Hollis, who got killed in the war and was better than all of them. Legs as if Tom had run up flights of stairs, as if he was coming down with something, and he was coming down with fear. He'd waited and waited in bed for Lily; at times angry, and some moments bowled with love for her, and then thwarted desire, and then fear, and then sleep, so that when she climbed cold-limbed in beside him, he woke with his heart thumping, not sure at first what it was that he wanted.

Some kind of truth.

He said, "Do you ever have any men visit you here?" His voice husky with sleep.

"Pardon?" she said. She shivered down beside him, legs up behind his hotter thighs to get warm. "You mean Jimmy?"

"Jimmy comes here?"

"Sometimes on a Saturday, when you're at the races. He brings the children cake from his mother and once brought me flowers."

“Jimmy.” He couldn’t take it in at first. And then knew, as Lily did, that his questioning along that line was ridiculous. Unless Jimmy made the note up? But Jimmy wouldn’t,

“You’re cold,” he said.

“The fire went out and I didn’t want to go out to the shed for more wood.”

“I meant to bring it in before tea.” Or he could have after she left him out there by the shed. Brought in wood and calmed himself down.

“But you walked Eliza home. Violet didn’t offer her grand car?”

“Violet does what she wants to do, and she wanted to get on with dinner.” This was more like it; they were talking, the garden anger forgotten; her feet across his, his blood heating hers and her soft front against his spine. The note was some kind of wicked joke school children had, well not with that word affair, some, oh, he couldn’t think. He just wanted Lily’s body beside his like this every night. He turned over towards her and went to kiss her neck.

She pulled her head back. “I’m too tired for that.”

“For what? A kiss? You weren’t before.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I’m tired too, and I miss, I miss.”

“And at the table— what was that rubbish about Thelma Appleton? About what I do with my day? I’m so mad at Violet. She better not show up here anytime soon, and I’m not going round there for Sunday lunch.”

“Family lunch,” he said. “It’s how we make those bonds, for the children’s sake.”

“I don’t care. I’m not going round there again. She doesn’t talk to me anyway. She talks to you, and she takes over Eliza and makes her uncomfortable.”

“She doesn’t.”

“You wouldn’t know. You don’t know what currents are going round that house; you’re stuck on Violet being the be all and end all of your family,”

“Which she is.”

“And I’m more of your family than her. I am. I’m not just someone you come home to and have sex with, and your loyalty goes to your sister.”

“Violet has our.” He stopped. This was going in a far different direction than he’d imagined. “There’s rumours going round you’re seeing, you’re with,” he couldn’t say it. “A man.”

“Oh, for God’s sake.” Lily sat up and turned the light on. She pulled the blankets back off him. She stared at him with eyes blazing like they were electric too, like a train about to slam into him. “How dare you,” she said.

“Why? You don’t think there’s talk about you? You’re not like the other women round here.”

“Thank God. I can hardly stand any of them. And especially your sister.”

He slapped her. His hand flattened in a sting across her lips before he even thought about doing it. She slapped him back just as hard and he grabbed her by her arms, holding her there so tight he knew his fingers were

decorating her slender bones, the flesh there imprinted with his. He held her tighter than he meant, as if that was one way of keeping her beside him.

“You’re hurting me,” she said. “Tom. Tom!”

He loosened his hands.

“What are you doing?” She rubbed at her arms above her elbows.

Kept rubbing.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Lily?” He reached out a hand and she pulled back from him. She lifted her fingers to her mouth.

“I’m sorry,” he said again. He tried taking a deep breath. The size of his lungs, though, it felt like however much he tried to breathe calmly, there was a factory-sized amount of air in there forcing itself out.

“Sometimes I don’t know who you are,” she said. “Any chance you get, you go away from the family. Every Saturday, work, and in the afternoon, races, or you’re out in that garden. There isn’t any...”

“What?”

“Anything left for me. Any energy you have, Eliza gets that, if anyone does. No, Alice, she gets your love. And she’s easy. Anyone can love a baby. They don’t take any work. They’re just a receptacle for love. But a woman, Tom. She takes looking at.”

“I’m looking at you.”

“No you’re not. I’m not someone you can slap. What am I to you? Someone that makes your lunch? Someone that changes the nappies?”

Then she put out the light and lay down, pulling up the blankets. His heart, thudding from adrenalin still, whooshed in his ears. What did she mean? That he didn’t treat her well enough? That someone else did? He put

his hand down towards the shape of her. He fingered her neck, between the fragile bones at the base of her head, up into the heaviness of her hair.

After a while she sighed. She turned towards him and he lay down beside her. He put his face against hers and then after a moment moved his cheek till his lips met hers. For a long while they were linked by that finest of skin covering, her nose cooler against his but her skin under the blankets, under her night-gown, blood-warmed in his hands. He pushed his leg between hers. She kept her lips against his a moment longer, then pulled away.

“Tom. You haven’t got anything.”

No, she’d thrown that in the garden. A perfectly good condom.

“I’ll come out,” he said, as he slid over onto her.

“Just for a minute then. Just a minute Tom. Tom.” But he was filled with the sound of breath in his ears. The breath of fear. The breath of anger, tripped by how she gave way to him so easily, how ready she was for him. Who else then? Who else? He pushed deeper into her, faster. Who else? She thrashed out in the bed.

“Get off, Tom. I don’t want...” kicking and kicking at the sheets and the blankets heavy across their legs.

Release, and with it, his love for her flushed across him, like the warmth up his neck, across his chest. His Lily. He lifted his face from her shoulder to kiss her, and she turned her head one way, the other.

He felt himself shrink and slide out of her, his cock leaving a warm trail across her thigh. No condom. He lay on his back, the room above his open eyes dark, and his breath calming. He didn’t care right then what she

thought of it. Maybe he would later. It was what they did, though. For years, argued, and made love just like that, her twisting underneath him in a parody of refusal, and the quick, hot release for both of them.

He knew it wasn't like that now, but he couldn't say he was sorry. She got out of bed and stood there. He heard Eliza cry out again. And Lily, taking that as her cue, pulled on her dressing gown, came back for her pillow. She didn't speak.

He would tell her about the note in the morning.

## Chapter Nine

1962 August 5<sup>th</sup> Eliza

In her dream her mother wasn't with her, and then she was. Eliza felt the weight of Lily on the bed and then her warm hand on her forehead.

"Hush, you're all right," said Lily, and Eliza, who hadn't realized her cries had gone beyond her dream, opened her eyes. It was dark, night, and rain falling on the roof above her room; a noise as comforting as her mother's stroking on her arm.

"What were you dreaming?" Lily asked, but Eliza never told, and sometimes didn't know herself till she was waking to Lily's voice, that she had been in that dark place again. Dark, and someone calling her, and someone saying go away.

The branches outside her window were like black twigs from an upended broom, the tips of a tree right outside her room. Her room was the size of a cupboard, compared to Aldous's and Connie's and Alice's room. They could jump from bed to bed and Aldous could sit on his rug and build Eiffel towers from blocks. But in this room, Eliza was above a tree. She had a nest, and when the door was shut her room was full of secrets.

"Are you okay now?" her mum asked, and Eliza nodded, then said yes. Lily got up from the bed and went out the door and left it open behind her. Eliza got up too, her feet still warm on the cool floorboards. She shut the door and got back into her hollow, which was already cooling, and tucked her knees up, inside her nightie.

In her book under her mattress she had today's date. Today she would have porridge for breakfast, and though it was a ballet day, she would not go to ballet, for there- she checked with her torch – it was written in her own handwriting for August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1962, it said – Porridge for breakfast, no ballet, potato and gravy for dinner.

They looked like meals you could take a good guess at, for didn't everyone have porridge for breakfast, potatoes for tea? Not her mother. Her mother was capable of giving them soup four days in a row, till even Aldous wouldn't eat it, and Aldous ate everything as if it was a gift from the gods, it was one of his most annoying traits, and there were many. Pea and ham soup, that's how her predictions had started. Once, eating that for tea, she had looked around the table at the usual mess, Connie tipping her bowl over, Lily trying to eat with Alice in one arm, Tom buttering toast and passing it down the table, and she had said to herself – I bet in three months time we have this exact same dinner. It wasn't a bored kind of question and answer but simply a picture in which here they sat, spooning up this greeny brown soup with the hunks of bones in their bowls, so that when she got up to her room she wrote the date in a notebook: In three months time, 16 June 1962, we will have pea soup for tea.

And they did, despite having it on the 13<sup>th</sup>, the 14<sup>th</sup>, the 15<sup>th</sup>: her mother in the middle of a project and no time for cooking. On the 15<sup>th</sup> when her dad had come home from work, with actual frost in his hair it looked like, and had seen the bowls on the table and the same old pot on the stove, he'd said "Lily, I've had enough of that soup to last the rest of winter. I'm starving after one of your stews." He said "I beg you Lily." Which was

one way he could say what he wanted Lily to do without her mum deciding to make a stand over it.

Connie wouldn't touch the soup. Aldous ate it without saying his usual, "This is so good, Mum." Lily spooned it up as if it was natural to eat the same soup every night, and besides she had other things on her mind. Eliza saw her look at the clock above the dresser – how long till they all went to bed and she got back to the blue princess gown taking shape, emerging as if from a dream on to the model in the sitting-room.

Eliza herself didn't say anything about the soup. She ladled it into her mouth and thought surely Mum won't give us this soup *one more night* and make my prediction come true. And then it was Friday 16<sup>th</sup> June, and just how she had seen it three months before, Tom buttered and passed the toast, Connie pushed her bowl over, Aldous barely touched his, and they all ate pea and ham soup for the fourth night in a row. To predict potatoes and gravy and porridge six months in advance was not to be taken lightly.

Eliza dressed in the kilt her mother had made her. It was a glorious deep black colour with green and orange stripes. Eliza chose blue jersey, blue tights and went down to breakfast where Lily, with the small saucepan of porridge bubbling on the stove, passed her a bowl with weetbix in it instead.

"I hate weetbix," Eliza said.

"Hate bix," said Connie.

"No you don't, Eliza," her mother said. And she didn't, but that wasn't the point. She pushed the soggy brown shapes with her spoon. If she didn't eat it, would that be not so bad? Not as true as eating porridge, not as

wrong as eating something else. But eat nothing? And how long would that have to last – surely just till lunchtime, which she'd made no predictions for. And if the porridge was wrong, did that mean fish pie or something else for tea and ballet again with crabby Mrs Claudia? Did it mean she couldn't really make predictions, that her book of secrets was a lie?

Her dad came in from the wind, the kitchen door banging behind him.

“Eat up your breakfast,” he said as he went past.

“I don't see why I can't have porridge,” she said.

The porridge didn't work out, and there, at 3pm, in her red car outside the school, was Auntie Violet ready to pick Eliza up for ballet. Eliza hoisted her school bag on her shoulder and the extra blue bag that had her ballet things and opened the door.

“Hello luvvie,” said Violet.

“Hello,” said Eliza.

“Did you have a good day?”

Eliza never knew what you were supposed to say to that question. Did the day encompass everything from breakfast on, or before that, or did they just mean did you behave yourself at school and learn what you were supposed to learn? Breakfast didn't go too well, and after the porridge thing and her dad had left for work, her mum had yelled at her. It wasn't the greatest way to start school, having your mother call you a name and not even say goodbye to you, though Eliza presumed there were much worse things, guns and bombs and tidal waves. She'd got wet feet in a puddle on

Cruikshank Street when she wasn't looking where she was walking, trying to walk twenty paces with her eyes shut, which sometimes she had managed even with a corner to go round. Mrs Holland had been in a rainy day mood, too, to be polite about it, and had sent four kids from the room. Eliza escaped that and then was told her writing was a mess. It wasn't. Eliza would have liked to point out to her that Mrs Holland's writing on the blackboard was a worse mess. Instead, Eliza had sat there and looked away out the window where the rain was a grey curtain over the playground.

"A good day, thanks," said Eliza. And Violet smiled, that was the correct answer, and drove up High Street towards the ballet rooms.

"Eliza, I know it's ballet today and your mum loves you to go to ballet, but I had a proposition to make to you. What do you think about missing ballet, and coming to Uncle Don's Star Troupe practice today?"

"Really?" Eliza was amazed. This was a prediction coming true and with a bonus. For one thing, she found ballet more boring than anyone else in the class, and consequently didn't try hard enough, which reflected in her attitude and got up the teacher's nose. And another thing, ever since she'd been old enough to know about the Star Troupe and to see them perform, she'd wanted to be in it and both her mother and her father had forbidden it. And yet here was an adult, her father's sister, proposing that Eliza go to it, like a lie against her parents.

"Of course!" said Eliza. She grinned at Violet.

"Your uncle and I have always thought you'd be perfect for it," said Violet. "You've got your dad's physique, strong legs like him, and light and supple with it. The ballet has been good training, that's why we've not

mentioned it up till now. And I've talked to your dad about it a bit lately. He said you wouldn't enjoy it, you wanted to do ballet. And I thought, why not let Eliza have a go, and make that decision herself?"

"Exactly," said Eliza. "It should be my choice."

"Little Hannah Armstrong, well we've been training her to be at the top of the troupe, the one up on top, I mean."

"The star of the star troupe," said Eliza.

"And now she's broken her arm. Oh, not at gym, falling off her pony, and Don and I, we both thought of you right at once."

"The star of the Star Troupe," said Eliza. She sat back against the seat of the car and held that picture in her mind. The curtain pulling back, the audience, her Mum and Dad amazed to see Eliza on the stage, and then how she effortlessly bound up the legs of the first layer, onto the shoulders, swinging round to take her position at the top of the troupe, balancing there, her arms raised.

"And I chose today, because. It's a special date for me. My Hazel."

Eliza waited, and Auntie Violet pulled in to the parking space without finishing her sentence.

"Is it Hazel's birthday?"

"It's the anniversary of the day I knew Hazel was coming in to the world. I'll never forget that day, how scared I was and yet. I knew she was going to be everything to me."

Eliza knew the day her Mum found out that Alice was on the way, because there was a big row at tea time when her dad got home from work

and started moaning about the boss. Her mum had flung the contents of the pea dish across the table. She and Aldous had stared in disbelief.

“Because you had to have sex!” her mother had yelled. Eliza was thrilled. She’d heard that word at school and then there it was at their own table. And sex must be what Violet was talking about. An anniversary to do with sex that meant Hazel was on her way.

Violet parked the car and Eliza got out. She left her school bag on the floor but took her ballet bag, though she wasn’t keen on putting her leotards on for the troupe.

Violet put her hand on Eliza’s back and steered her towards the door. Eliza knew the door and where to go. Auntie Violet’s hand felt as if she, Violet, couldn’t quite believe Eliza would do this, and the hand was there to make sure she kept on moving forward. But the Star Troupe – that was where Eliza exactly wanted to be, throwing her body up in a curve and the feel of shoulders shifting beneath her feet. She turned and grinned back at her aunt.

Uncle Don, too, was amazed to see Eliza walk in the door. Eliza watched his face, the way her raised his eyebrows at Violet, then came forward and took Eliza’s hands.

“Eliza, Eliza, Eliza, you don’t how happy I am to see you.”

“Me too,” said Eliza.

“You can put the uniform on. The others always practice in it,” and Eliza looked to the stage, where nine other kids looked back at her. They all had purple shorts and purple tee-shirts, with a red star on them.

“Everyone, this is Eliza, Eliza this is Taylor, Brent, Justin, Charlie, they’re the bottom row, and Lydia, Jeanette, Rachael, they’re the next level, Fritha and Georgie they’re the third, and Eliza will take Hannah’s place. When we’ve got her trained up, eh.”

Eliza went out to the small, damp changing room and swapped her tights and kilts for the shorts and tee-shirt which only just fitted her. She went out, bare feet and legs cold through the corridor to the hall and stage, where Uncle Don had music on a big tape recorder and was leading the troupe through exercises. She swung up onto the stage.

One at a time, arm held out high and leg kicked to meet it, the next arm held out, leg kicked to meet it. She found it easy, like work at the bar, how her leg would be pushed higher, higher by Mrs Claudia, the muscles up the back of her thigh twingeing as her teacher pushed her leg, and always it would go as far as the teacher wanted.

After stretching, the mats were rolled out and they had forward rolls, long perfect lengths of them, with Violet watching from a chair below, her hands busy with her needles, knitting blind as she scrutinized the forms they made. Eliza kept her legs straight, her toes pointed, and Violet didn’t call out to her, like she did to Fritha, “Keep that leg straight, tuck those feet under as you curl!” Eliza lined up behind the girls, waiting her turn, to be here, in the chilly afternoon on a wooden stage instead of in front of mirrors and the girls around her in their black leotards and pink cardigans doing what every other girl had ever done at ballet. Not only was Eliza doing now what she wanted to do, but she was doing it secretly.

When Don held his arm out to help her tumble, she felt her body curve over his arm and find the floor, as if she had always done this. As if her body had been taught and was now just remembering something it loved to do. The third time she lined up and ran towards the mat, Don didn't have to hold his arm there, guiding her body over, she did it all herself, and when she stood in line again, it wasn't Auntie Violet's "Good girl Eliza, that was great" that she hugged to her chest, it was the knowledge that she had found what she was meant to be doing, and it was here on this stage, it was wearing the colours like the other nine, it was knowing that what her body set out to do it would do, and effortlessly. It was knowing that what she did was the river of a kind of energy that ran through her muscles and skin and was something that her teacher at school describing geographies of countries or her teacher at ballet with the music of Strauss or her mother, bent over a velvet cloth showing Eliza how to bead, how none of them had any inkling about this feeling – or maybe they did, in their own world, her mother with that blue dress, but all of what they wanted for Eliza was nothing like this, her body moving through the air as if Eliza herself was just a particle of something, like a dust mote in afternoon light, shining.

## Chapter Ten

1962 August 5<sup>th</sup>

“That went very well,” said Violet. “Didn’t it Eliza,” and Eliza, in the front seat of the car in her kilt and tights, looked at Violet and could only nod.

“A belated afternoon tea, I think.” And she took Eliza back to their house in Woburn Street, a different kind of house from Eliza’s, which was wooden and old and had a smell of coal fire about it even in summer with all the windows open. Auntie Violet’s house was full of big glass windows and had a shiny red bench in the kitchen and matching table in the dining room, and a fireplace that looked like a fire but you pushed a button to make flames that weren’t flames. Eliza was ready for a big piece of any kind of baking her aunt had in the tins, she usually had three different tins and would let you choose two things, so you could have chocolate cake and a cream oyster, but Violet, forgetting about the promise of afternoon tea, or that Eliza had been working hard with her body for the last hour and a half, took Eliza up the hallway instead, and hesitated in front of a door, her hand stretched out to the door handle but not opening it, and then, opening it.

Eliza saw right away that this was Hazel’s room. There was a bed with a pink bedspread on it and a white rug on the floor beside it and curtains with pink and blue stars and a framed photo on the wall of Hazel, not at fifteen when she died, a younger smiling Hazel. Hazel in purple shorts and purple tee-shirt with a big grin on her face. Eliza knew that grin. That was the grin of doing what you loved to do, even if you’d only just

discovered it and didn't know till that moment that that is what you longed for.

“Hazel's room,” said Aunty Violet. They both stood there. The room of someone who had died. And not only died, but died young. Died tragically. Eliza looked around at the walls and curtains, at the floor, as if there would be a clue to what it all meant. It didn't look like a teenager's room, which Eliza imagined would be brown and orange, and have a record player and posters on the wall, and would be messy, clothes on the floor (though not in this house, surely). It looked like the room of a girl the age of Hazel in the photo. The age of Eliza right now. Though Eliza's room would never look like this, all pink and white and girly. Her room had a white cover on her bed, but her bed had a wooden headboard where she sometimes carved small initials that stood for secret words and thoughts. She had a dresser she piled with books, and her own pictures she drew pinned on the walls. A small bedroom at the top of the stairs, not a big bedroom in a new style house.

Violet moved over towards Hazel's bed. She sat on it and patted the bed beside her for Eliza to come.

Eliza sat. She felt the bed give way beneath her, then rise up again. Her blue-tight legs, next to Auntie Violet's lumpy ones.

On the wall opposite was the picture of a pony. Someone's pony. It was a framed photo.

“Did Hazel have a horse?” she asked.

Violet took a deep breath. Her breasts rose up and then lowered again, the buttons straining briefly at her blouse.

“It was her friend June’s pony,” said Violet. “Hazel hung the photo there so she could see it from her bed. That’s the only reason I’ve left it there, it’s what she saw when she woke up, or went to sleep.”

Eliza resisted the urge to swing her legs. She looked across at the pony too and pretended for a moment that she was Hazel. She shut her eyes then opened them. A shiny brown pony cantering on green grass. A happy pony with a white striped face and bulging brown eyes. A significant pony, more than likely. Did Hazel really want one, beg and beg for one and Auntie Violet said no. Because they were too unpredictable. Because you could break your arm and not be on top of the star troupe.

“Hazel wanted everything June had,” said Violet. “She wanted June’s life. And June had too much freedom. And I was right; June went off the rails completely. She ended up having to shift to Australia. Her parents got her out. Before she ended up in jail.”

Eliza turned and looked at Auntie Violet. She thought her aunt had moments of looking like a frog, when she puffed her cheeks out like that, as if her cheeks were full of all the things she really wanted to say about June. Or Hazel. Imagine the fights. Hazel in this pink and white room when Hazel wanted to be galloping over the grass.

Was it something to do with June, what happened to Hazel? Eliza looked at the pony picture. Her stomach was making an empty noise, like a stick thumping along corrugated iron?

When Auntie Violet was driving her home from gym practice, she hadn’t gone on in praise as Eliza had expected. She hadn’t said one word about how good Eliza had been, how amazingly outstanding Eliza had been.

Eliza tensed her foot, pointing her toes, and felt the strange ridges of the candlewick bedspread under her knees.

“You look very like her,” said Violet.

Eliza nodded her head.

“I think you think like her as well.”

What Eliza thought was no business of Auntie Violet’s. Eliza pictured her mind contracting, like those flowers that ate flies; clamming shut, sticking up the edges, so that no prying thing could get in.

“I saw how you liked to tumble.”

Fair enough.

“And you were born after Hazel died,” said Violet. “Isn’t that strange? You could almost be her, as if she had come back again. But not to me, to go to Lily. That would be her idea of revenge. As if Lily needed you, or wanted you right then. It was because of Tom. Hazel was trying to get with Tom, he always took her side. It’s nothing about your mother at all. And I don’t know where those other children came from or what they’re doing here, what they are to Hazel.”

“Apparently her brothers and sisters,” said Eliza. She stretched her toes out again, and the movement rolled the weight of her leg uncomfortably closer to her aunt, so that their thighs touched, Violet’s in a thick ribbed brown stocking and Eliza’s in a beautiful blue, that her mother, who was Lily, not Violet, chose for her. Eliza shifted her leg back. She pressed her elbows close to her side.

She thought about what she could be having for dinner in six month’s time instead. The date would be -December the 16<sup>th</sup>. She made her

mind go quiet, in the way she had been training herself, and waited for the picture to form: their kitchen table, and her Dad's arms dishing up, and her Mum with Alice on her knee, and messy Connie, and Aldous being proper, with manners and everything. But her beautiful family wasn't there. There was nothing there. It was all a blackness, darker than night time. It was the black of her kilt, impenetrable black, and no dinner, no prediction, no family and that meant no Eliza either.

"I'm Eliza," said Eliza. "That's all I am."

"Of course, dear. Don't take any notice of me. I'm clinging to all sorts of ideas because they give me hope. And, what I said about your mum and dad, of course they're your mum and dad and your brothers..."

"Aldous, that's all."

"Yes, Aldous, and the babies. I'm a bit under the weather today. And seeing you in her gym outfit, because I hadn't even washed it since she wore it, it was like you were her, like she was back with me and Don, and had never gone, had never ... Are you hungry,?" Violet asked.

At last.

"I really am," said Eliza.

"Have I told you how I got Hazel?" her aunt began again, as if she hadn't heard Eliza's hopeful tone. "Do you know what it means to be violated? Do they talk about this sort of thing at school?"

Violated started off with a happy sound to it, like it was going to be a flower, or an aunt that cared about you, and ended in a hard consonant sound that rhymed with hated. Besides, Eliza knew what that term meant, and many more.

“Sometimes in life you trust people you should never trust. People that the world around them trusts, oh yes, because they only see what they want to see in that person. If a person looks like they are a good person, people want to believe that and they don’t look any further and they can cast children in front of those people, and what’s worse, not even believe what the child has to say. Do you know what I mean?”

“Sometimes the person who you trust to do the best for you can harm you instead?”

“You remember that, Eliza.”

“I write things down in my journal. Sometimes it’s not till I write it down I can see what it means.”

“Hazel wrote things down too. Some I had to burn. That’s all there was to it. Some things, some feelings, should not exist.”

Eliza thought there might be some things she would write soon about Auntie Violet that perhaps shouldn’t be said. But they were the very things that needed to be put down and thought about. If Hazel was still there, Eliza could have talked to her about this. She tried to imagine if her own mum would burn her journals. But her mum, even if she was vague, if she didn’t really see or understand Eliza, and thought that by teaching her to sew she was discharging her proper duty as a mother, even Eliza knew it wasn’t about things like that at all. But her mum, Lily, would understand how sacred a journal was, and the things that came out of your pen. That only when you grew up and reread things you could decide for yourself to burn things. But no one else had that right. Because up till that moment you could still look at them, still be figuring out things that needed to be figured out.

Violet lifted back the bedspread from a white lacy pillow and brought out a small red velvet pony. She looked at it a moment then half thrust it into Eliza's hands.

"Why don't you take this home," she said.

Eliza could only think that Alice would be sick on the pony and Connie would leave it in the sandpit.

"You could hold it at night. You could think about Hazel."

"I will think about Hazel." Eliza tried to pass it back. But Violet got up and looked at Eliza till she slid off the bed, then her aunt smoothed and smoothed the bedspread until you couldn't tell that they had ever sat there. She turned out the light before Eliza got through the door.

Violet went up the hall to the kitchen and Eliza went to the front door where she had left her bag with the ballet things in it and Hazel's purple gym outfit. She squeezed in the red pony. She wanted to go to the kitchen for food, for how long would it be till her dad got there? And the new kittens might be in there. But so might Aunty Violet. Eliza went into the sitting-room instead.

Her uncle and aunt had their own television set, which was switched on though there was no one in the room. It was a room that looked like no one did anything in there, a room all set out and not even comfortable. The couch had six brown cushions in a row along it, like it was a couch for cushions to relax on. Eliza went and sat on the floor by the fire and watched the white horse on the screen. After a while she began to think only of the horse and the man who rode it, the flickering black and white and grey shapes. When her aunt put a mug and plate of toast down in front of her, she

only just remembered to say thank you, as if the words were coming in slow motion out her mouth.

When her dad came in the door she turned and saw him, just for a few seconds, as if he was someone else's father. He had on white overalls that were splodged with crusty white shapes of plaster and one of his socks had a hole over his toe. But he had floppy brown hair and smiley eyes and he looked so safe, her heart did a kind of loop.

Her uncle came in the door from the hallway.

"Tom," he said. "And Eliza. Where's mother?"

Eliza didn't know. But she'd heard the kitchen door bang.

"Gone out to shut the chooks in I think. We were late home. Hi Dad."

"Hi honey." He came over and stood beside her by the pretend fire, which was still warm. Her Dad's overalls had a wet mud smell to them. Or was it the smell of his socks near her plate?

Her uncle had a shirt and tie on, even now it was nearly tea. Even at gym practice. Would he say something about gym to her dad? She watched Uncle Don's face. But he was looking at the screen too.

## Chapter Eleven

1962 August 5<sup>th</sup> Lily

Everyone at last asleep. A silence came down over Lily, like velvet curtains – blue, and slightly tarnished, with dust on their hems and spiders in their folds, but a soft blue that came from the depth of their pile. That was the kind of silence that had descended on the house. More than silence. For it could be silent in the day with Alice asleep and Connie asleep, Aldous and Eliza at school and Tom at work, but it was a silence fraught with the possibility of people waking, of people returning – as if Lily had been given a rope to hang onto only for so long out the window, and would then be pulled back up again. No, if it wasn't for the promise of the silence of the night, of that blue textured velvet, she would be on the edge of the rope, her fingers clenched, knuckles whitened, and loosening, loosening until she fell, and where she would fall to she didn't know, and that is why she could not fall, and why, at 4am, she was there in her chair at the table with her notebook in front of her and the sea somewhere out there beyond the window. She imagined the briny smell of it and the live motion of the small waves that slapped against the wharf. If she could, she would stand up and leave this coal-warmed sitting-room, turn her back on her notebook and the dreams within it and walk, arms swinging, to the sea. Herself, out in the chilled, dark air and only the water to remind her of darkness, and weight.

Like the weight above her of five beds, and five people sleeping, and in their dreams and in their nightmares and in their brief waking interludes – or cries, from Eliza, contemptuous snorting, whimpers, ulungated snores,

fretfulness – in all this they held the knowledge of her. That she was bound to them and they to her, and there would never be then any such opening of the door and walking, one hand on her hat, one holding her coat to her chest and her feet lifting and falling faster and faster, as if she was going downhill. Which she would be, descending first down the steps of the verandah and the drop at the gate, and the footpath that winds down to the road and the road down to the bay, as if that was how life was arranged – everything falling with gravity towards the level of the sea.

Where she would fall one day. For now that she had said ‘never’ to herself, never let go, she was certain then that she would.

But not without fighting it.

By drawing this line, like that, by writing next to the jacket – a black wool, and by the shoes the shape required, by the figure a tight curve to the hip she envisioned with her pencil. HB3, charcoal, on the heaviest linen paper she could afford.

Once, her father had taken her mother and her – she was 15 then- and her mother not long till she was killed. Her mother holding secrets to her, her mother with whitening knuckles on the end of a rope. They went to Haast. Her father had a job in Milford Sound, a place so far away he had to show them on a map. A place her mother went willingly to, into the cold and snow and the places, it felt, no one had ever been before. As if this could rewrite her mother’s life, make what had happened between her and the soldier be as if it never did, as if Lily’s father had never found out. Take her mother’s life back to rock.

The scenery was remarkable. The mountain range that extended most of the length of that cinched in South Island rose up out of cloud two days into their journey. A mountain that came down to the bay had been worn into strange finger joints at the water. A hand splayed on a polished table.

Lily sketched. The heavy charcoal line covered the grains of paper. She pressed harder. For it was she who had found her mother, head down on the table and her fingers bringing back the picture of the southern rocks, how they fell into the bay, how they pressed into the bay as if to prevent entry, as if anything could stop that rockslide of atoms down to the level of the sea.

She pushed away her notebook and walked to the model in the corner, where the fire cast an orange glow on the calico folds. She bent her head and let her fingers sort and pin, taking the shape to that more closely resembling the one just drawn, feeling the orange glow on her cheek, and her right eye registering the lift and fall of flame over the oval coal.

Tom came to the top of the stairs. She heard his footfall and didn't look up. His gaze on her like the burn of the coal fire, much too much for comfort. The model too close in the corner, the room too cramped to get any kind of distance, and she at her work in the middle of the night and resolutely not in the fifth, the largest, bed. Sleep near the bottom of her priorities – though sometimes it was all she longed for. Yet sleep was the only thing she had left to negotiate with.

After breakfast, when Tom was gone to work, Aldous to school and Eliza stomped upstairs, Alice asleep and Connie with her blocks on the kitchen floor, Lily went outside herself and leant against the door frame, the green door shut behind her to keep in the little warmth. Good morning world. No sun, but the brightness of the grey sky enough to be harsh on her eyes. She looked down at the path instead. There were drowned worms, bloated pink tubes, on the concrete.

She looked up at the hills then, daylight on the gullies and shadows of darker green beside the ridges. Was there somewhere she could situate herself, between the solidness of the hills and the translucence of the worms, whose bodies were no barrier to the rain that thundered on them and to whom the earth, in this case the pitted concrete, offered no safety. She leant against the house in her woollen lemon dress, which did a good job of keeping out the cold and moistness of the morning, and her legs in pale stockings that didn't. She felt the menace of winter on her calves.

Eliza would be late for school if she didn't come down any moment. And come down quietly, Lily hoped, so that fractious Alice would sleep an hour at least. Come down and go to school. It wasn't till she turned and went in, checking on Connie, resolutely building a 'cave' from her blocks, the breakfast dishes thickened on the bench, up the stairs and Alice noisily breathing and asleep and Eliza's room empty, that she realized Eliza had indeed gone to school, gone out the front door secretly without saying goodbye.

Later, the laundry, and steam that rose to the ceiling, curled along the shiny paint and went in tendrils to the open door. Lily looked up from the copper and watched the ephemeral haze. Alice, on her hip, took that opportunity to reach towards the nappies in the boiling hot water.

“No, Alice, hot!” Lily put Alice back in the timber apple box on the floor, where there was a saffron pillow for her back to keep her upright, a carved giraffe with slim neck to fit a baby’s fingers and knobbly ears good enough to chew.

Thirty nappies, then, lifted with a wooden paddle and dropped into the cold water in the first tub. Outside, a wind sucked at the curls of steam so they left the ceiling in constant flight. The window in front of Lily was cobwebbed, she saw now, and with the pane of glass cracked in one corner. Beyond it, the neighbour’s pohutukawa quivered, green silver leaves flashed at her. Wind, and a break from rain. The nappies would dry, then, once she had fought with the spinning clothesline. They would be dry by lunchtime.

One by one she lifted a nappy up to the closed rubber lips of the wringer. She turned the handle with her left hand. The flattened, starchy shapes held their rigidity as they passed out the other side, fell into the second tub of water and melted back to cotton again.

The water was so cold on her hand. She fished quickly for the nappy. Once it was enclosed in the ringer, she rubbed her hand down her navy cardigan to warm it briefly.

“What are you doing Lily?”

It was her mother, who came sometimes at odd moments, not successful moments. Was she there when Darren told Lily she had a chance

at the Gown of the Year? That she had such a feel for simple design – elegant, elegant – he said, his hands fluttering over the china teapot at The Silver Spoon. Such a feel for it, and what made a woman look good. “Even a church warden, Lily. (Lily of the Valley, he would call her.) Even a warden you could make look divine.”

But Lily is cornered in a tin shed with a cooling copper and half frozen nappies, a box of baby at her feet, another one asleep inside, the ironing in a basket by the table and the beds upstairs unchanged, unmade. She turned to look for her mother, who could be the steam, made whole, or her imagination. But Ailsa is there, not whole you understand, 17 years dead and long gone from Lily’s life.

“I’m washing the nappies, Mum.”

“I can see that. That’s not what I meant at all. And Alice is sitting on a cold concrete floor. It’s winter.”

“She’s safer there.”

“Wel, get her a blanket at least.”

“Watch her, then.” Lily bent to kiss Alice, gave her a wooden peg, and went back into the house for a folded woollen blanket, one she had just washed and dried and aired from Connie wetting her cot. Lily lifted Alice to sit her back down on it.

“Much better,” said her mother. “I do think you’ve made beautiful children.”

“Tom and I made,” said Lily, and began to pass the nappies back through the tension of the wringer to the waiting basket.

“Does he ever give you time off? I’ve seen that dress you’re planning.”

“Really? Did you like it? What colour was it?”

“You know what colour you want. Just get on with it.”

“I’m on with it. I was thinking of it now, if you weren’t interrupting me. Mum—I do love you.”

“We’re a great pair. You and your washing and a man who doesn’t know who you are.”

“How do you know that?”

“Does he sing your praises to that family of his, or shuffle in embarrassment when your name comes up?”

“I wouldn’t know,” said Lily. Her hands were now red with cold.

“Can you watch Alice while I hang these out?”

“Put her in the doorway then, back from the wind, and you can see the both of us.”

Said her murdered mother, who knelt beside Alice and pointed out the trees to her, how they tossed and tossed, and how the clothesline fought against Lily’s hands till she pegged each square. White, even in the grey air, as white as if they were new.

Lily scooped Alice out of the box and the blanket too, and went into the kitchen, which felt warm, briefly, out of the wind. Her mother was gone again.

The gown would be black. A neck detail like on the frock her mother had on, as if Lily had made the whole thing up herself. She strapped Alice in the pushchair, gave her a cruskit, with a bib around her neck, Daddy’s

Darling, and sat at the table. She took her notebook from under the top  
Vogue magazine on the dresser and began to sketch.

## Chapter Twelve

1943

The soldier came into their lives at 4.30 on a Saturday afternoon. Lily's mother Ailsa, with her slim ankles and long, slim navy frock, tripped when crossing the road from Kirckaldies and Stains on Brandon Street. A car veered around her, pulled up and a man in uniform got out. Ailsa was in the gutter thinking how to get up the kerb, one foot lifted off the ground. He was 27 years old, she was 35. He picked her up, at once smelling of aftershave, his clean shaved cheek next to her hair, which was dark and springy to her shoulders and smelt of apples.

He insisted on driving her home and carrying her in. It was a house where there was no man – Lily's father was in the North Sea on a frigate – no one to light the range or cook the tea, Lily being at her friend's for the night and Sidney down the road at his friend's. The soldier went out to the car and said he would see to the young woman, came back in, took off his jacket, rolled his sleeves up his golden American arms. He was nothing like Lily's father who was 17 years older than Ailsa, had pale arms covered in black hairs and who didn't cook at all or whistle as he did so, turning three slices of corned beef and a pot of mashed potato, and mustard and mashed tomatoes from a jar in the pantry to make food as comforting as the fire.

When Sidney asked to stay the night with his friend Duggy, Ailsa said yes. She told the soldier and stood there in the hall after she'd hung the phone up. He took three steps towards her and she felt her body, her hips, tilt towards him. Two long years and sparse, distant letters and a body that

longed for comfort to be entered, was entered, up against the olive green frieze in the hallway. Roughly, her bare leg hooked round the twill of his trousers, and then in her bedroom. The pale eiderdown pushed to the floor and the pillows for her head and under her hips. His chest skin to skin with hers. She held him there afterwards, her nose in that curve where his neck rose from his shoulder. That was how the soldier came into their lives.

In his company Ailsa was the perfect magazine-cover mother: apron round her slim waist, a frypan in her hand, a big smile, her bouncing hair, and Lily and Sidney at opposite sides of the table, the soldier where Ailsa used to sit and Ailsa where Lily's father used to sit. The soldier took the food from Ailsa, took the place at their table, and in between mouthfuls, and joshing a bit with Sidney, who was easily won over by the uniform, the soldier would look at Lily.

Lily was almost 15. It was summer, and the troops had mostly left. The soldier, too, would leave. Ailsa accepted it—that this was for now, it wouldn't last. Her husband would come home and resume his chair, and life would be like that other life again. So she feasted on the soldier's face. She didn't see, when she turned away, how he looked at Lily, he tracked Lily.

Till the day before he left, and Ailsa just gone down to the shops, and Sidney and Duggie in the back yard, Lily could hear them yelling to each other for the ball. She looked up from her bed. The soldier was in her doorway. And then he shut the door.

Lily sometimes thinks – was there a part of her that knew what was coming, the way he watched her eat, his eyes on her mouth, the way he almost wouldn't stand aside when she walked through a doorway, so that

she had to ease past him. She had bare arms and bare legs and he was always in uniform.

“What’s that you’re writing?” he said, and came close and sat on the bed next to her, his arm behind her casually on the mattress. Then he tipped her back.

“What’s that you’re writing?” he’d asked, in one voice, her mother’s soldier who cooked their breakfasts on a Sunday morning. And then this hand across her mouth, his fingers wide and gripped over her cheekbones. She thought to laugh at first, like it was a game, but his legs were uniform rough on her legs and through the dimpled pane of glass – “Pass it here! Pass it here!” young boys running, and on the footpath outside the shop, Ailsa, checking she had everything, was there one more special thing she could buy? One more night. She didn’t know how she would bear to carry on.

But I will, I will, she said. She said to herself – this is now, and then I will have a different now. It will just be a different now. One I’m used to. That is all. I can do it. I can carry on.

She carries on, up the footpath, but of course there are worse things than those you imagine sometimes. There are things you don’t even know to imagine. One is finding your daughter crying with a dry soundless cry, as if her voice will never come back, and another is finding out she is pregnant. Having to deal with that, to get that group of cells out, to find someone who would do that. Saying to Lily – you can do this, you can do this, looking into her eyes and never wavering, never letting her doubt for a moment that she would be there only for her.

## Chapter Thirteen

1962 August 5th

A cup of tea with an Anzac biscuit dipped in it, then Lily, with Alice on her hip, went up the stairs and began to restore order to the bedrooms. She pulled the sheets off their own bed and smoothed clean, white cotton ones on, plumping up the pillows in their fresh white cases. She longed to lie down on the bed. Her eyes felt heavy looking at it. She could hold Alice in her arms under the sheets in the warm and the both of them be bathed in a heavy descending seductiveness of annihilation. Ambrosial sleep.

On the floor, Alice had tipped the contents of Lily's hairclip bowl on the carpet. Lily knelt down and picked them up, put the bowl back on her bedside table and carried Alice into Eliza's room. Her bed was pulled about, pyjamas on the floor by the window. Again Lily stripped the bed, carried clean sheets from the cupboard on the landing and made the bed whole and smooth. Alice rustled the pages of a book on the floor, picking it up by one corner and shaking it. Lily recognized Eliza's journal.

"Baby, give that back," she said. She lifted it out of Alice's grasp. Alice screamed and clenched her fists. She was well used to standing up for her rights against Connie's onslaughts. Lily could only smile at her antics. She put the journal under Eliza's pillow where she liked to keep it.

Lily sat on the bed. From here she could watch the hazelnut tree clink and scrape against the window, and Alice, rage forgotten, on a foray under the desk in her blue corduroy smocked dress, amongst the mouse-like dust balls and pieces of screwed up paper. Next door something dropped

with a bang. Lily's house registered it. Or was it a small quake? Nothing else shook. The bed white beneath her, the Marcella quilt draped over it once Ailsa's own.

That hospital quilt, when Tom broke his neck, how tight that was, how it resisted Lily as she sought her way under. She remembered that feeling of Tom inside her. Her gift to him, to ride him like that. When all along he was bequeathing her – Eliza.

Two weeks after that she'd stood in the bathroom of the flat she'd shared with Anna McBride. On the black tiles, her bare feet. Her body reflected in the mirror – nipples tight and erect, breasts rounder, stomach flat. Something, though. She'd turned side-on and looked at the depth of her breasts. She'd held her hands underneath them. She was 22 years old.

In ten minutes she would be dressed, had to be dressed, in the lilac linen frock and matching cropped sleeve jacket with broad white buttons, and would walk with Anna down Willis St towards the Fashion Emporium where they worked, both as cutters; Anna for her boldness, Lily for her preciseness. The long table down the center of the room, the six of them around it dressed as if at any moment they could be called on to walk into town, bearing the Emporium's designs.

And Lily in the bathroom mirror with a terror that had descended on her, that had to do with the weight of her breasts, the knowledge that her life in the industry had only months to go, that her body had taken in to itself the means of destroying her freedom.

She put on her ensemble, brushed her teeth, spat bitterly into the basin, went out to the kitchen and said nothing to Anna, who knew

everything but not this. This time there would be no taking out of cells. On that table that day, dry-eyed, she had promised her body that next time she would see it through. And that meant marrying Tom, if he would have her, a man she had been attracted to for the way his body moved, at ease with his hands and feet, and for his vulnerable smile. But calloused hands, and a mind that didn't embrace knowledge, or learning.

She had said, "Have you read *Brave New World*? Have you read *The Seven Story Mountain*?" By Merton, her favourite book. He shook his head. He wasn't the man for her. Her man would read deeply, widely. He would be in the arts in some way. She would design and he would create. An artist. A writer. A painter.

Not a plasterer. Their worlds had no connection. He was broken, tied to the bed in hospital, and her desire to give herself to him had at its core a kind of generosity. She forgot herself in the desire to give him something. And look where it had got her. She straightened her cream stockings. Her legs the same, her stomach the same flat tautness. And inside, unspeakable betrayals.

She didn't want the baby. She didn't. And that's what Eliza yelled some nights: "No baby! No baby!" and Lily had to scramble out of bed and get to her.

"Shsh shsh. I love you." She'd hold Eliza; she'd say those words and mean them.

Alice sat back up under Eliza's desk and hit her small dark head against the leg. She screwed up her eyes and cried again, this time not with rage but with real hurt. Lily crouched down to her. "Come here, little one."

She held her close and, like Tom had done earlier, she pressed her lips into their baby's chunky neck.

Anna McBride's new shop was on Lambton Quay. Lily stopped the pushchair outside the window display and gazed in at the two models with their tapered hands and feet and the black and white frocks, A line, above the knee. Anna saw her and beckoned her in wildly.

Lily considered her passengers. Alice had taken a break from kicking out at Connie, who was strapped on to the front seat of the pushchair and staring at the window display as well. Models tipped over, that was what Lily was thinking. She turned around and pushed the weight of her hips against the door though and manoeuvred the pushchair in.

"All my darlings," said Anna. She kissed Lily first, then Alice's creamy cheek and Connie's marmite smeared lips. Lily handed her a tissue, then licked another one and applied it vigorously to Connie's face. "I'm not staying," said Lily. "I'm not letting these two loose for a moment. I just had to see your shop. It's beautiful." 'Penny Lane' was broadcast from the brown speakers in two corners of the room. Lily ran her hand across the top of the first rack of clothes; she twitched out an orange mid-length shift, brown beading at the neck.

"Mum," said Connie. Her legs thrashed back and forth. The slim white leather restraint strained at her weight. Lily let the garment slip back into the row.

"Do the girls need a raspberry drink, or a cracker?" said Anna.

“No, no, they are perfectly fine,” said Lily. “And we are going. Drink, on your new rug? We’ll beat the rain if we go now.”

“You’ll be here tomorrow for the opening, though. 6pm.”

“That’s the thing. Tom’s not home till way after then.” She considered the cold house and Aldous and Eliza home from school and bath time and the dinner to get ready. “It’s hopeless.”

“I want you, though,” said Anna. They both looked at the pushchair full of trouble. “Can you come to the run-through, then? At 2pm. I’ll even have a pianist for that. Ray Adams. He’s new in town. We’re at the St Mary’s Church hall. I’ve got Claire and Katya as models, and Jessica Bremen?”

Lily shook her head.

“There’s an article on her coming out in the next Playdate. Darren talked her into it for me.’

“I’ll be there,” said Lily. “I’ll get a sitter for these two.”

“The darlings.”

“Yes, two for the price of one?”

Anna laughed and shook her head. She opened the door and held it for them.

Anna Lane, the name bold in white on the window. Her husband gone now, but the name, she’d told Lily, the name had an open sound to it.

## Chapter Fourteen

1962 August 5th

They were meant to have fish for dinner. Lily had bought it from the fish shop on the way home, and now when she looked at it, a translucent pale on the plate, she didn't want to cook it and she didn't feel like facing the smell of it afterwards. The smell lingering in the kitchen and clinging to the nappies, clean and folded now on the stairs ready to go up to the drawer.

She brought liver and bacon out of the fridge, one of Tom's favourites though Eliza would be sure to complain. She set the bacon frying with some onions, an old trick her mother had taught her, the comforting aroma of onions cooking enough to keep any hungry man calm as he waited for his tea. Onions could cook while she checked Aldous's homework, ran the bath for the younger girls, laid out pyjamas and clean nappies, all the time her thoughts on that swish of coat hangers along the silver rail in Anna's shop, the mod lines of the frocks, the simple cuts, and the walls bright above them with Matisse prints to match the black and white rugs on the floor. Anna's own shop.

Aldous set the table while she dressed the girls, mashed the potatoes. Eliza and Tom still not back yet and everyone hungry. The dining room was once more cluttered with blocks and Aldous's books, the kitchen bench with pans and the decibels rising. She wiped her hair from her face and took off her apron. By the time the girls were tied in at the table, the door opened and Tom stepped in.

There was something still so youthful about his face, especially when he was tired, as if he'd stopped being that breadwinner with a houseful of his own and was that young man she remembered, who pulled himself from the swimming pool after three hours of diving practice. That same weary look to his face. He tousled Eliza's hair as she came in behind him, the both of them with red noses and chilled hands. Eliza laid her hands on the side of the stove.

"Tea's ready," Lily said and Tom looked across the room to her. She smiled, and he lifted a corner of his mouth back to her, that could have been a smile or an acknowledgement in shorthand of a long, cold day.

When he left the table later, pushing his chair back hard so it almost fell over, and lifting Connie up amidst her shrieks, Lily wanted him to take them all up. Take Alice, put them all to bed, why didn't he? Read them stories, answer their questions, sleek his hand over their heads, tell them they were loved and warm and safe. The evening stretched out, interminable ahead of her. How long it took, to make each one feel safe. Even to change nappies, that one last time, or get that last glass of water. Just for once, could Tom do it? Then clean up the kitchen. She wanted to lay her head down on the table between the plates and the soiled cutlery and stay there, till the house was velvet quiet again. Till morning, even.

"Is there pudding?" said Eliza. Pudding?

"Did you make it?" said Lily.

Yet afterwards, when the table was indeed clean and Connie and Alice asleep and Aldous in bed with his book and Tom outside in the garden

cooling off, Eliza approached her at the kitchen bench, coming close with a tea towel over her arm, like an offering, and Lily turned to her.

“Not even asked to,” Lily said. “I just felt like having someone to help me.”

“I thought so,” said Eliza. She took each plate from Lily before it went in the rack.

“How was ballet?”

Eliza kept polishing the plate she held.

“It was ok,” she said. “Mum, does Aunty Violet ever talk to you about Hazel?”

“Never,” said Lily. “Did she say something to you?”

“Kind of. She took me into Hazel’s bedroom.”

Lily scrubbed the bottom of the potato pot and examined it before passing it to Eliza.

“She gave me Hazel’s toy. A red pony.”

The knives and forks were still too hot in the bottom of the sink. Lily made a lunge for them with her hand. Her ring finger was pricked by the meat knife. Would there be blood? There wasn’t.

“Careful,” she said. “They’re hot.” And inside, a tightening in her stomach. She didn’t want Violet anywhere near Eliza, if she could help it. She hated the way Violet simpered that smile of hers at Eliza. The way she ignored Aldous, clever, sweet Aldous, and favoured Eliza, the girl. The one who looked like Hazel. And who could she talk about that with? Tom? Hardly. And not Eliza either.

“I guess she always misses Hazel, and maybe you remind her of her.”

“More than remind,” said Eliza. “She thinks I am her.”

Lily hooked the plug out with a fork. She waited for the water to recede before she lifted the knife out.

“I’ll dry this,” she said. “It’s already caught me out tonight.” Buying time. “In what way?” she asked Eliza. “Because you do ballet?”

“Did Hazel do ballet?”

“For years. I think she wanted to keep on with it, and her parents were keen on her being in the troupe.”

“She wanted a horse too,” said Eliza. “I bet she wanted lots of things that Aunt Violet didn’t want her to have.”

“You’re not her,” said Lily.

“How do you know?”

“Funny girl,” said Lily. “For a start, I don’t think Hazel would ever go out and help her Mum do the dishes because she wanted to.”

“Wanted to help,” said Eliza.

“And Violet probably wouldn’t do this back.” Lily grabbed Eliza and held her tight, then with her hands spanning her ribs, she tickled Eliza there until she squirmed.

“Come on, I’ll walk you upstairs.”

Now Eliza tucked into bed as well, with the red pony still in her school bag. Lily went through to her bedroom, turned on her bedside light. The bed had that special look to it that only clean sheets, unslept in, gave a bed. She put her silk night dress on and then her heavy blue dressing gown.

Tom was still outside.

It was early spring, the air washed clean and cold by the rain, and she would go outside to him. Their bed was the site of child-kicked, child-sandwiched, sleep-disturbed nights. No wonder she and Tom reached for each other and failed at times. Like early this morning, thinking he could slide inside her, while Eliza was crying out and Connie squashed up beside her.

Yet she missed Tom. She missed his hands, calloused as they were, catching on her nightgown as he lifted it over her shoulders, releasing her. His hands in the dark outlining her, bringing her back from her mind and her dreams into her lived-in body. Sometimes, through tiredness, she felt disassociated from her limbs. Whose knees? Until he kissed them. The hours of careful beading, her neck held stiffly under the light, her back braced against the cold. She would lose all that in sleep, she would give her body to the night, but Tom reclaimed it for her, his hot breath in her ears.

She would go out to him. She wanted wind on her legs, she wanted starlight in her hair. She opened the drawer by his bed, found the brown paper bag, the cardboard package, squashed. Empty! But there was one foil packet. She put it in her dressing gown pocket. Discarded her knickers under the bed.

“Light out Eliza,” she said as she went across the landing.

“Three more pages till the end of the chapter, please.”

“Okay, just three.” She didn’t look in the door; she didn’t want to become a mother, sensible and firm. She was Lily. She went lightly down the stairs, her feet in Tom’s thick woollen socks, and out the back door.

Aah, it was moon cold, wind cold. Her nipples chilled under the silk and cotton. Her stomach tightened to see the shape of her man by the shed. She went to him, and he put his arm around her and held her close. The smell of his sweat in his work jersey filtered through the wool, the smell of dust and plaster, and at his neck the warm, oily smell of his skin. Her nose was cold against his warm skin. He kissed the top of her head.

“Are you over your grump?” she asked. After a moment he squeezed her. She leant back against him. “They’re all in bed,” she said, as if it was some difficult project she’d completed. “And asleep. Eliza’s reading. She doesn’t like going to bed.”

“Is it the nightmares?”

“I think she doesn’t want to miss out on anything, is all.” She felt him shift weight from one foot to the other, as if the wind that rocked the peg basket on the line rocked them too. Under the woollen socks she could feel the cold and roughness of the concrete path. She turned inside his arms, and warmed her front against him. Her back exposed to the air now, and the wind defining her calves. His erection, inside his woollen trousers, pressed against the thin silk of her night dress. She thought of him inside her. The dark sky and wind could make them new again. Not the bed and the children breathing next to them, evidence of all the years of married life. Out here, she could believe in him again, the young Tom, and she, too, fresh again.

“You could take me right now.”

“Not here,” he said.

“Why not?”

“I’ve got no protection.”

She was so pleased with herself for her forethought. "I brought it with me," she said. She reached up to kiss along his jaw line.

"It's wet out here." His voice moving under her lips.

"I don't care." Her own neck was exposed. Her eyes shut. Her breath louder. She softened against him, and began to push, rhythmically, her pelvis bone into his thigh.

"Lily. Stop it." He twisted back from her. "What's got into you? You're not a slut."

"A what?" She opened her eyes and looked at him. He was looking at her as if he'd caught her with a sailor, or if she was his mother he'd just walked in on having sex. She grabbed in her pocket for the condom, missing it, finding it, and flung it out towards the garden.

"Oh, you're just going to leave that out there for the children to find."

"Why not," she said. Right then, she didn't care one bit who found it. She may never make love to him again. Coming out to him with the gift of her desire. "If you don't like it, pick it up yourself."

She walked away from him, then ran. At the top of the steps she kicked her unprotected toe against the doorstep. The jolt of pain made tears smart in her eyes. She banged the door shut behind her.

Inside, the air was fuggy with the smell of coal and fried onions. She went into the sitting-room and crouched by the fire. She could open out the package of black woollen fabric she'd bought today. When Tom came back in, she would be at work, at her own work, her back towards him. But she

knew she had no heart for the joy of cutting tonight. Besides, her eyes ached with tiredness.

Where she'd got the energy to go out to Tom like that, she didn't know. She'd been upstairs, right next to the bed and hadn't got in. She could have been under the white flannelette sheets and the four pink blankets and the white feather quilt. Was she a fool? She looked around the room. That basket of ironing sorted from yesterday's washing at the foot of the stairs. She went up to the landing cupboard for the iron and a towel. She heard Tom come in. The radio went on, and the races. She went down to the kitchen and set herself up at the table, without looking at him, there by the fire. Alice's dresses first. She spat on her finger and tested the heat of the iron, then began to push the heated point into the delicate folds.

## Chapter Fifteen

1962 August 5<sup>th</sup>

Lily stood by the bed and looked at Tom. He was asleep, his mouth tilted toward the pillow and his breath noisy, how Connie breathed. His wrists lay near his face. One showed the sharpness of the bone, the other, turned upwards, the vulnerable veins in the paler skin. His hands, unclasped, rested on the sheet. She thought of how he worked for them using those hands. How he slept now, unknowing of her gaze.

She got into bed. The sheets on her side as cold as if they had been stored in the fridge. She pressed up close to Tom, her legs along the back of his legs – warm, almost hot as he slept. She felt him stir and waited for him to turn to her. Instead he said:

“Do you ever have any men visiting you here?” As if he was speaking in a dream.

“Pardon?” She held herself closer to him. That fire in the sitting-room had been a meagre comfort. It had been a choice to go out in the cold for more coal or stay in the room at her beading, which she’d turned to after the ironing, and get colder as she sat there. She was so cold now it was like her body warmth had contracted out of her fingers and toes and buttocks and spine and condensed around her heart to keep that beating. She slipped one arm around Tom, over his naked chest (how did he do that, get into a winter bed with nothing on?). Her arm warmed on the underside of her elbow, the inside of her wrist that lay against his skin.

“You mean Jimmy?” she said, eyes shut. “Sometimes on a Saturday. Once he brought me flowers.”

She let that image float there. For when had Tom bought her flowers? Sweet Jimmy, his willingness to offer himself in any way possible. Cakes, brought from his mother, banging in his duffle bag with his long, loping stride. Aldous was always happy to have the larger, crumbled bit. And the way that Jimmy could move a silver coin over and between his fingers, the coin disappearing and reappearing in a flash of light. Alice would put it in her mouth if she could. Connie would take it for her money box. Eliza would be reading, too old for games and Aldous – his fingers would twitch as he watched, as if they could, by volition, begin to do the same.

She felt the heat of Tom radiate through her front. Her eyes sealed, as if something pressed in to them. She felt the beautiful descent of sleep flatten her in to the bed, so that her hand, when she tried to move it, didn't want to move. No more thoughts.

“You're cold,” said Tom. He turned over. His lips on her neck.

“I'm too tired for that,” she said, her voice coming out of near sleep, solumbrious.

“For what? A kiss? You weren't before.”

“You know what I mean.” Her voice not just tired now, but exasperated. That brief surge of energy she'd had towards him, ending with the condom flung at the cabbages, and *now* he wanted her. The thought of how he'd pushed her away outside, as if, yes, she was the fool to make

herself open like that, show him her desire so he could rebuff her; claim her later when he felt like it. And what was all that about at teatime, and Jimmy?

“At the table,” she said. “What was that rubbish about Thelma Appleton?” She pulled back from Tom. His breath right in her face. Her buttocks in the cold part of the bed now. Eyes shut, but wild behind her lids. “And Violet? I’m so mad at her. I’m not going round to Sunday lunch.”

There, she’d said it. Those long hours while Violet reigned supreme over Lily’s own family, and she could be at home getting her work done. It was a waste. It was like giving her precious energy to Violet to be ignored. Like Tom ignored her. She pushed his questing hand away from her leg, awake now, irate at his blathering about his sister. Violet wasn’t getting her grip into Eliza either.

“There are rumours going round you’re seeing a man,” Tom said.

“Oh for God’s sake.” Lily sat up. She fumbled for her bedside lamp and switched it on so hard the lamp rocked, almost fell. She flung the blankets off her legs.

“A man?” And the one she had didn’t see her. Didn’t see past his own desire, as if that was all she was good for. That, and bringing up his children.

“You don’t think there’s talk about you? You’re not like the other women round here.”

“Thank God,” she said. “I can hardly stand any of them. And especially your sister.”

He slapped her right across her mouth. For a moment she was shocked by the pain of it, and his face goggle-eyed with anger. Then she

slapped him across the cheek, so hard her palm stung. Her mouth hurt. She could tell that to Violet. Her precious Tom.

She went to get out of the bed and he held her. His hands gripped on her arms. The light blazed above them. Their sleeping children breathed softly in their beds behind the wall.

“You’re hurting me. Tom. Tom!” As if she had to call him back from somewhere else. He straightened up and she pulled her arms across her front and kneaded herself. “What are you doing?”

A fight was a fight, and if they had never come to this before, it had been brewing, Sunday after Sunday making her go to Violet’s when she didn’t want to, or him walking up the stairs at night and leaving her with a kitchen full of dishes and a room to be cleaned. She was tired too! By God.

“I’m not someone you can slap,” she said. And meant it in ways he perhaps didn’t know yet. “What am I to you? Someone that makes your lunch? Someone that changes the nappies?”

She put the light out. Her eyes flamed behind her lids. She pulled the blankets up over her chilling body. The side of her mouth still smarted. Her head on the pillow in the dark and the man who was supposed to love her breathing above her.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, and something in his voice made her listen. The sound of exhaustion. His calloused fingers then on her neck, pressing up into the fragile space where the spheres of her skull joined. After awhile he began to draw her back from that lonely shore. Her breath easier in her chest. She turned towards him.

## Chapter Sixteen

1962 August 6<sup>th</sup> Eliza

When Eliza woke, her feet had the curious sensation of floating, as if they were hot water bottles with wings, and hovered a foot above her mattress. She looked down. Her feet were covered over by the quilt doubled up, thrown off in the night as she got hotter, and now it was morning and the rest of her was cold.

She was tempted to go back to sleep, but she could hear Alice in her cot through the wall – “Mum Mum!” getting louder. No response from her Mum and Dad’s room. No sound of anyone else either.

“Mumiza,” Alice finished on. Eliza got up and went barefoot into the younger ones’ bedroom. There was her mother asleep in Connie’s bed, and Connie, amazingly, still asleep. Aldous awake, only his eyes showing above his quilt. Alice was standing up with a fierce grip on her cot bars, and the whole room stank of poo.

“Why didn’t you change her?” Eliza said to Aldous.

“I was waiting for Mum to wake up.” His voice was muffled under the sheets, where he could only smell his own stinky self and not Alice.

“Baby baby,” said Eliza. Alice reached one arm out for her. Eliza lifted her over the rails, what a big baby, and lumped her through into the bathroom.

“I’ll take them off but you have to lie still for me. Promise?”

Alice looked back at her with round dark eyes. Eliza lay her down on the rug in front of the bath. It took ages for the tap to run hot up there. She rinsed a flannel under the icy water and knelt beside Alice.

The poo had come out of her overpants, into her pyjama pants; a golden smear down one thigh and up her downy back into her singlet. Eliza did her best. She stood Alice up, naked now, and pushed the pile of nappy and soiled clothes into the lidded bucket by the toilet.

Her Mum was still asleep. Connie, special Connie, got to be snuggled up, snoring. She didn't have school and bossy Mrs Holland. It was lucky every interest in education hadn't been driven out of Eliza by her teacher this year. Bored out. Was that a verb? Yes, to do with wells, and, satisfied with her verbal skill, she looked in Alice's drawers for a singlet, nappy, woollen overpants, white tights, and from the musty wardrobe, Alice's best (and Eliza's favourite) red velvet dress.

The bedroom was still slightly smelly.

"You should get up," she said to Aldous. "Just cos Mum's asleep."

"Is Dad awake?"

"I don't know. I'm not the nappy scraper, people-waker." She considered lifting Alice on to Connie's bed to wake the mother-daughter pile. How could they still be sleeping through this noise? But then she put Alice on her hip and went one stair at a time down to the kitchen, where her Dad was up and the porridge cooking, not that it mattered today. The fire in the sitting-room cast a flickering glow in the room still dark with the curtains drawn.

"Good morning loves," said her Dad.

“Morning. Look who I found.”

“Anyone else awake yet?”

“Just Aldous. Here you are Alice, go to Daddy.” Alice, who loved Daddy, clung to Eliza’s neck, her dribbly mouth clamped on the collar of Eliza’s pyjamas.

“Come on Alice,” said Tom. He held his arms out and Alice laughed and tipped into them.

Alice was Dad’s favourite. Eliza was sure of this. She was everyone’s favourite in the family. The site of non-contested affection. Alice loved them all and didn’t fight and wasn’t trying to get anything out of people. They just wanted to hold her, squeeze her, kiss her.

Alice was the favourite, number one, and Connie was the least. That’s because she was so messy and so loud. And kicked you in bed if you had to share with her and wanted whatever Alice had. She got into your things: Aldous’s dictionary and ripped a page, Eliza’s journals and once her drawings off the wall. Connie had soft fair hair, though, and large brown eyes that looked in to you, sometimes with a tear of not-fairness clinging to one lash. But mostly she thought she ruled everything and had a license to mess.

Aldous and Eliza alternated at being second in her scale. Aldous could be so tedious. He loved his dictionary and would concentrate on particular letters and try and put odd words into the conversation. Like last night it was putrid and partridge. Try that when you’re eating gross liver.

But Aldous had this overall goodness. You just knew he had right thinking, whereas Eliza was good but gave the impression of being bad. Or

was she bad and gave the impression of being good? Certainly lying about ballet came under being bad. Though she hadn't outright lied. She'd avoided the question. Was avoidance bad? Or a necessary good?

"Porridge for my darling girls," said Tom. He strapped Alice in her pushchair, leaving the highchair for Connie, and put a plate of porridge with melted brown sugar glazed on top, just how she liked it, in front of Eliza.

She didn't mind her place in the scheme of things. It was better to be aware of these things, and know about them, than go blindly on thinking you're the favourite in the family. If she had children one day, she would choose the most awkward one to be her favourite. In this family, that would be Connie. If Eliza had a Connie she would try and make her best girl. Then, like a shadow in the doorway, she saw a slim, older girl, the thoughtful, left out, oldest of the family, and thought – no, I would make her the favourite. I would tell her what I was hoping and planning and trust her ideas on things. Because girls that age are going out into the world to face all sorts of things parents didn't even know about, and babies were just babies. They were like kittens. They didn't have to leave the basket by the fire where they were warm and safe. Definitely the oldest one needed the attention.

At that thought, Aldous clattered down the stairs, all dressed for school, followed by Connie shrieking "Wait! I'm first," and then her mother, in a light purple dress with her hair on her shoulders all brushed out.

The first thing she said was, "Eliza, you're not even ready for school."

"I had to deal with Alice and change her disgusting nappies and dress her."

“In her best dress,” said Lily. “She’s going to Mrs Appleton’s today. Those tights will be black within ten minutes on her floor.” Lily bent to kiss Alice, who was sucking her cruskit, and went into the kitchen.

“Why Thelma’s today?” said her Dad, but her Mum began dishing porridge and didn’t answer.

“It’s all right I’m going to Auntie Violet’s after school, isn’t it?” Eliza said to her Dad.

“Sure.” He didn’t look at Eliza though, he was waiting for Lily to reply, and she wouldn’t, she’d spent the night in Connie’s bed.

Gym practice after school, it was all arranged. And if Eliza hadn’t asked her mother as well, it was because her mother wasn’t talking.

“Will you pick me up from Auntie Violet’s?” asked Eliza. But now her father wasn’t talking. He got up and went into the kitchen. Eliza scraped the side of her bowl, tipped it up, looked at Connie who was watching, then licked her bowl. Connie, not needing much inspiration, picked her bowl up to lick too, dumping its gluggy contents on the tray.

“Children seek to define their boundaries of experience through visual intake,” said Aldous.

“Where did you read that?” said Eliza.

“It’s my own thoughts on the subject.”

“Well you got to use the letter v. Was visual your word?”

“Intake,” said Aldous.

“And where is this note?” Lily’s voice, raised by the pantry.

“Violet?” She banged the pantry door shut and Alice, Connie, Aldous all

turned towards the kitchen. Tom had his back to them. Lily was between Tom and the bench.

“Have you done your homework?” Eliza asked Aldous.

“Of course. I did it last night before your intentional arrival.”

“Arrivals aren’t intentional. That’s not the best use of your word. What about illustrious – my illustrious arrival. That makes more sense.”

“Only to you,” said Aldous.

“To Violet!” Lily’s voice reached an intensity hardly ever heard in this house. Connie began to cry. Alice looked up from the cake of soap she’d found in the pushchair and stared. Aldous went over to the bookcase in the sitting-room and brought his dictionary back to the table. He opened it and pushed his finger in at a word. Meanwhile, Eliza tried to eavesdrop. Not the easiest over Connie’s howl. Her tears certainly weren’t attracting any attention from the kitchen.

Eliza got up and went round to her porridge- splattered sister and lifted her out of the highchair. Her pyjamas were soggy and smelt of pee.

“Mum! Connie needs changing.”

“Eliza, just go and get ready for school,” her mother said, not even looking at the two of them. So Eliza went up the stairs, lugging Connie on her hip.

“You don’t have to cry now,” Eliza said, which only made Connie cry louder. Eliza took her into the bathroom, divested her of her pyjama pants, wet through overpants and a nappy so heavy it fell to the floor. Eliza added it to the bin and rinsed another flannel in icy water.

“I do it,” said Connie, interrupting her cries. She wiped herself between her legs, up her stomach, round to her bottom, never mind the cold.

“And now we’re getting dressed,” said Eliza.

“I do it.”

“Yes I know.”

Eliza chose Connie some tights, woolly jumper, pinafore and a small pair of knickers.

“No wetting them. See, they’ve got a bow on the front.”

They both dressed in Eliza’s room. Connie sat on the floor and applied herself solemnly to figuring out knickers and tights. Loud voices came up through the floor – one deeper, one shriekier. Eliza brushed her short hair in the mirror above the chest of drawers and then hoisted Connie up to do hers.

“I do it.”

“I know, I know.” Eliza gave her the brush and Connie lifted and stroked it over and over. Her blonde hair gleamed under the electric light.

“No I won’t!” yelled Lily from beneath them.

“Mummie,” said Connie.

Eliza felt a rush of affection for the little girl who she’d relegated to the bottom of the list. For Connie, being aware meant she had joined the struggle – which Alice didn’t know of yet and Aldous used words to defend himself from and Eliza had her secrets. Connie didn’t have any kind of plan or protection yet, only her fierceness to do everything herself, which moved her further and further beyond the babyhood of the basket and into the arena of the world.

“Oh, you can be number one,” said Eliza.

“No,” said Connie.

“No no no.” Eliza tickled her sister.

“No no no no no no,” said Connie.

Eliza kissed her on her shiny head and took her by the hand, all  
clean, all dressed, back down the stairs to a silence.

## Chapter Seventeen

1962 August 6th

“How was your day, luvvie?”

“Really good,” said Eliza, though it wasn’t. That morning at home with the fight, then she’d forgotten her lunch and when she’d asked her best friend Suzie for a sandwich, Suzie had refused. The sandwiches were white and soft with thick slices of pink ham. Suzie gave Eliza a biscuit instead, a thin packet arrowroot, and a small hard apple, which was better than nothing but engendered a sense of unfairness in Eliza. She would have given her friend a bite of such deliciousness, not eaten it in front of her with her eyes almost shut.

“Auntie Violet, I’m hungry,” said Eliza.

“Didn’t your mum make you enough lunch?”

“No lunch at all,” said Eliza, betraying her mother. The fact of the wrapped sandwiches left on the bench balanced against Eliza having to change two nappies, one of them particularly evil.

“We’ll have to do something about that. A growing girl.” Which had the effect Eliza had hoped for. They pulled up outside The Copper Kettle.

“Would you like a milkshake?”

“Oh yes. Please.” She chose caramel. Violet had strawberry. They sat at the table by the window and for awhile Eliza was in milkshake heaven, sucking the cold caramel fluid up her straw, her hands on the metal container and the cold going right down her throat to her stomach. She could feel it hit the emptiness and begin to fill it.

“Are the whole troupe practising today?”

“No, just you, dear. Don wants to work on your tumbles with you and getting you up on his shoulders. Are you excited?”

“Yes!” Eliza put the cup aside at last and sat back in her chair. It was sunny outside, not even windy. The bright air warmed her arms and, replete, she enjoyed the chance to sit without teachers or her noisy class cluttering up her thoughts. Or her Mum and Dad yelling. She felt a frown crease between her eyes and looked out the window again at the people walking past; the women all in coats and the bare-legged children more oblivious of winter. It was a long time till it was dark.

Violet sat there and looked thoughtful, absorbed in her own life, and now and again taking a turn at the straw then looking out the window, like Eliza was. Eliza didn't want questions: about how her mother, or father was, or what went on at home or even had she slept with the red pony, or told her Mum about gym. Sometimes it was better not to think or talk about your life. Better to let it happen as it happened, and not explain it to adults and give them a chance to make judgements or explorations to find out things you didn't want to tell them.

Violet didn't mention Eliza's lack of lunch and Eliza, picturing the sandwiches abandoned on the kitchen bench at home, felt briefly protective of her mother, who had shrieked Violet's name this morning and wouldn't be quiet or subdued until her Dad had left the house. Eliza had watched from her window as he wheeled his bike roughly down the step at the gate, got on it, and lurched furiously away, the lunch pail swinging.

Don didn't get to the gym room till nearly five. They'd had to put all the lights on. Violet knitted and Eliza, who had practised probably ten too many forward rolls on her milkshake-full stomach, ran across to her uncle when he climbed up on stage in his purple tee-shirt and purple trousers. The ballet teacher had taught them always to run across the room on tiptoes. ("Girls, girls, I haven't time to watch you slouch across the room. Lightly! Lightly!")

And that was how Eliza lifted her weight, from Uncle Don's knee to circle round and place one foot on his shoulder, then the second foot, his hands steadying her ankles, till she stood, poised, feeling the core of her balance in her lower belly and hips. He took a step and let her gather her balance again, then another step, till he could walk from one side of the stage to the other, lightly, lightly, with Eliza grinning from up above him and Auntie Violet with her knitting set aside so she could watch.

It felt somehow protective to have two adults so pleased with her, as if when she was with them, and all their attention focussed on her, she wasn't that bad person pretending to be good, but was simply Eliza, a springy girl with good balance and clear-seeing eyes.

"We should go out for tea – the three of us," Uncle Don said as they walked out on the street to the car.

"I have dinner organized at home," said Violet. And Eliza, who hadn't ever had 'tea out', wondered if that meant white tablecloths, a candle on the table and ordering in French words.

"I made steak and kidney pie this morning."

“Well what could be better than that,” said Don. Eliza, relinquishing French cuisine, thought the pie sounded good as well. At home, her Mum could decide to serve soup, seven days in a row, just to vex her dad. Pea soup, probably without the ham. And lumps of flattened barley gluggy in your mouth.

“You’ll stay for tea, of course,” said Violet. “When your dad comes to pick you up, we’ll ask.”

In the meantime, back at their wide-windowed house, there were kittens. Despite the milkshake, Eliza was hungry again. Would she ask? But Uncle Don was on to it.

“How about some cocoa?” he asked her. He sat back on his heels after turning the fire on in the sitting-room and watched Eliza on the green, velvety rug lift one kitten over the other, the small, sleek bodies slippery in her hands and their tiny claws like pinpricks.

“Cocoa please. And toast?”

“I’ll see how far off that pie is.” He went out, but flicked the TV on first, so that Eliza, with instant heat, baby animals, cartoons, and the promise of food brought to her, began to think this was a good place to spend the evening.

Her Dad arrived but only spoke to Violet at the door. Eliza didn’t see or hear him. Auntie Violet came in to tell her to wash her hands for tea (no toast) and that Eliza was staying the night.

“I told your dad you had an uncomfortable stomach and you’d be better off here than taking bugs back to the little ones.”

“But I’m not sick,” said Eliza.

“Most likely it was the milkshake, and all that gym work. Better safe than sorry.”

“Is Dad still here?”

“No he’s gone, luvvie. He looked tired and cold. I said come in for tea with us but he thought he’d better get home.”

He didn’t try and see me, thought Eliza. She lifted the kittens back into their basket and went and washed her hands in the bathroom. The light was on in Hazel’s room. Eliza went and stood in the doorway. The bedspread was turned back on the bed, pyjamas laid out by the pillow. A lamp by the bed put a greenish light over the bedside table. She turned and went up the hall.

Dinner was to be served at the dining table.

“You set it,” Auntie Violet directed her. “There’s a clean cloth in the third drawer.”

Eliza chose a white one with embroidered tui in each corner. She set a bowl of hot peas in the centre, a glass for each of them, a jug of water, three white plates and the heavy silver knives and forks.

Uncle Don sat with his back to the kitchen door, Eliza on the side looking towards the sitting-room. If the door had been open, she imagined she would have been able to watch the TVs she ate. Cartoons and food. Instead they ate in silence; the table not distressed by three other children with their own agendas, the noise level down by decibels.

Violet dished Don first. He got the biggest serving, then Eliza. Lastly, Violet. Pudding was pineapple and custard.

At the end, after wiping his mouth with a crimson serviette, Don said “That was marvellous Violet. You get better every year.”

“It’s just the same as it ever was.”

“Nonsense, the pie was divine, wasn’t it Eliza?”

She’d liked the custard best, but nodded.

“And I’ll do these for you, dear.” He got up and cleared the table, and Eliza could see he intended to wash the dishes. He came back with a fresh cloth for the table. Eliza had spilled gravy by her plate.

She tried to imagine her Dad thinking of tablecloths, or doing the dishes. Marriage was strange. How would you guarantee what sort you got? Uncle Don was definitely helpful around the house. He had a long, thin neck with a prominent bob in it, and cleared his throat a lot. He was bossy to her when she needed to jump higher, but with Auntie Violet he was like her servant. Though she did the cooking and tidying, he made out it was like a surprise she did the things she did. Eliza’s Mum cooked the tea and cleaned as well, though her Dad didn’t make out it was wondrous what Lily did.

Marriage was odd, and not something Eliza required for her own future. It seemed hit and miss how it could end up, the way the very floorboards at home this morning had reverberated with shouting. Eliza imagined herself in a two story house with a white tablecloth on the table. She guessed she would be the one putting it on and off and washing and ironing it. But if she wanted it, she could have it, and not ever have soup, and have a television set in the exact same room, and kittens in a basket at her feet. Her Mum and Dad could come for tea, but only on their best behaviour, and her Dad would say, “You’re a majestic cook, Eliza.”

Eliza, that day, would have astounded the nation with her acrobatic performance, and would be then ready for bed. Which she felt like right then, a tiredness coming over her. She let her eyelids droop. How much easier they came down on her eyes, than the muscles involved to pull them back up again.

“Look at you, you’re all tuckered out,” said Violet.

“I’m so tired,” said Eliza.

“Well, shower first. No one is ever that tired they can’t wash beforehand.”

Auntie Violet got her a big towel and turned the taps on in the shower, testing the water under her fingers for the right temperature, till Eliza thought maybe her aunt was going to shower her herself, soaping up the flannel and rubbing it over her body. But Violet unfolded a mat on the floor by the shower, and left Eliza to it.

## Chapter Eighteen

1962 August 6th

Eliza put the pyjamas on and stood by the bed. Now what? The house was so quiet. No Connie shrieking, no Alice's pouty lips for a kiss, no Aldous being smart with a definition. She missed their presence, and when she sat on the bed, which was warmed by a hotwater bottle, she missed the comfort of her journal as well. She wanted to feel words sliding out her pen and filling up a page.

Did Hazel have paper? Were there things in the drawers? Eliza got up and went over to the dressing table. First she quietly closed the door. Then, oh, what if that looked suspicious? She opened it again, how hushed it moved across the carpet, and left it ajar, but only slightly.

The first drawer had folded pants and socks in it. Oh, God, all her clothes. Hazel's things, as if she was just away for the night and would be back tomorrow. The next drawer, stockings. The first wide drawer, gym clothes, three folded tee-shirts, three folded shorts, and ironed blouses.

Eliza didn't look in the bottom drawer, more likely jerseys, how Eliza had at home, the bottom drawer that was always hardest to open, and too weighted down with woollen things. She opened the wide flat drawer between the underwear and stockings drawer. There was a journal, with midnight blue cover and a flying horse on it. Three pens. And clips, and lipsticks and a moisturizer container, Ponds beauty cream, that when Eliza opened it, showed the contents almost gone, and those that were left, tackier round the sides. She wiped her finger in it and applied it to her cheek.

In the mirror, Eliza with Hazel's moisturizer, Hazel's pyjamas. Eliza looked at herself, cheeks slightly whiter, and her mouth in a determined line, determined to be herself and nothing other. She took the journal and a pen and went back to bed, which was soft and warm. And soon Auntie Violet would come in to kiss her and tuck her down finally, for the night, and stroke her hair, and go out closing the door, pretending it was her own girl in there, made young and good again.

So Eliza imagined. She opened the journal. If she had thought to find a fifteen year old's journal, she was mistaken. This one was dated 1950. Pages of close cramped writing and they were the thoughts of a thirteen year old. They were about gym and being late for school and how her kilt had got a rip. Page after page. They were thoughts that Auntie Violet could safely read. They said nothing, on any page Eliza flicked to, about what Hazel was thinking. She closed the book. Heard a slight shush sound of the door over carpet. Put the journal under the cover. Violet and Don at the door, looking in on her. Had they seen her shut the diary with distaste and hide it? She was certain they had. Then they came forward, and she prepared herself for their kisses, not on the cheek, softly, like her mother's or a hard hug from her dad, but proprietarily on her lips, Violet, and somewhere on her neck, Don.

"Just look at her," said Violet. And Eliza looked back at them. It was the strangest feeling, that they were looking at her but not her, at some illusion of what she stood for, some girl in green pyjamas with her dark hair clipped back from one side of her face and a book under her knees that was the truth and in a deeper way wasn't.

"Goodnight luvvie," said Violet.

“Goodnight princess,” said Don.

“Goodnight,” said Eliza. “Thank you for letting me stay.”

They closed the door, and when she was certain they had gone, Eliza brought the journal out again and opened it randomly at a page. She read:

“Today I went down to the blue sea and counted boats. There were three red tugboats there and as I watched one of them cast off and began to move. It chugged out into the waves and the wind that was making my hair wrap round into my teeth took the boat and began to heave it up and down, up and down, and I made myself stand there in the cold and watch it until it headed right across the bay, and only then I let myself wrap my arms around me and start running, crazy running, back along the wharf past the big Eiffel tower cranes and the men all in dark blue jerseys and jackets with sensible boots. My school shoes slap slapped on the concrete and someone yelled “hey girlie come and see me” and I couldn’t care less, I kept running, and out onto Jervois Quay where cars drove along as if they were the only reality, not the smoky waves and the clouds scudding along the sky. Oh, cars cars I’m sick of them and the footpaths and the roads and everyone expecting me to be someone I’m not. I’m not not not that girl they think I am. I am something else.”

Eliza shut the journal thrilled. If anyone had read this, opened it and started, it would seem a record of what someone did or said, and the boats and the cars, but Eliza had such a thrilling image of Hazel running along the road her hair flying and the words not not not streaming out behind her. She put the journal under her pillow, switched off the lamp and lay down in the dark bedroom that was once a girl’s who wasn’t what she was.

And what was she? Eliza wondered if she was that girl. But who was she? She was someone who got up and dressed and sometimes dressed the babies, and went downstairs and growled at Aldous and loved her father with such an open sea love, like the tugboat on the waves; it was a love like the sky. And then her mother at the bench wrapping sandwiches Eliza didn't eat, what was her love for her? A kind of dangerous love Eliza didn't know was reciprocated. She knew her mother loved her, but in pieces, in snatches of time. And only the girl in front of her. Not the wild freedom Eliza suspected was within her and came surging out of Hazel's lines. Straight into Eliza.

“What did you want?” Eliza said. “I could get it for you. I could be you.”

Did she say that? She had whispered it under the blankets, which almost didn't count. And then she shut her eyes and remembered herself as the Star of the Star troupe, on the top, arms wide, and when it was time to fly she flew, she embraced the open-armed curve of flight towards the stage. How Uncle Don had described her. How she would be like a bird, astounding everyone.

Eliza had her eyes shut. She listened for the sounds of the house and there was only the unintelligible buzz of the TV set coming down the hall. A white painted door, shut, and blue carpet. Eliza pictured Hazel standing by her desk looking for her journal. Turning to see someone else in her bed. She pictured Hazel come to sit on the bed. The bed almost dipped under the illusory weight. Eliza held her breath. Like a cat had jumped on the bed. A real weight. She kept her eyes closed.

At school they had talked about the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Two bombs, falling from the sky. And underneath, on the ground, girls just like Eliza, and teenagers like Hazel, had been going about their life, had been at school, had been about to pick up a pen and write something, and from the sky a light, like the light of the world, only it was the light of the end of the world. For maybe two hundred thousand.

Eliza's class was doing Japan at school. There were pictures of blossom branches they'd drawn pinned up along the walls; branches with petals and green leaves and behind them, blue sky. The image of Japan in their own windy city. Petals clinging to the branch, everyone knew petals fell down; they had to fall, for the next thing to come along. But while they were there they were so revered, so fragile. And tenacious. Eliza held herself like a petal as Mrs Holland told them about the origami girl, Sadako, the one who died after Hiroshima, from the bomb, and how her belief in the thousand origami cranes to heal her kept her folding; each crease, each delicate piece of paper, a piece of hope she would survive, and yet she didn't. But did she know her story would go on?

The folded cranes. Eliza thought of them, with their wings upright. How one girl tried so hard to live.

When Hazel died, did she wish, did she wish that she had lived? Did she meet a thousand cranes falling red and gold from a blue sky as she rose up?

Eliza pulled back the sheet from her face and opened her eyes. In the dark adjustment of the room she now saw that a streetlight shone through the gap in the folds of the curtain on the high window opposite the dressing

table. The room wasn't dark at all, and no one was on the bed. The bed had a flatness to it that made Eliza's feet feel as if they were curving upwards. A flat bed, and a rubber hotwater bottle on the ends of her feet.

## Chapter Nineteen

1962 August 6<sup>th</sup> Tom

The bed was his own domain when he woke, unlike yesterday with the weight of Lily on him and Connie's kicking feet. He stretched his legs across the cool depths of the bed and listened for any kind of family noise and there wasn't any. He put his feet on the floor and went over to his wardrobe and stood in front of it to get dressed; clean woollen trousers and clean woollen socks, a dark tee-shirt and a flannelette shirt. He noticed each thing about them, the feel of the fabric and the way his fingers fumbled on the buttons, as if he had had too much to drink and wove back and forth on the floor, his fingers hovering over button holes.

He wasn't drunk, and hardly ever had time for that sort of feeling, but he knew this wasteland of emotion anyway. The empty bed, and what he did last night. What he did he could do. They'd been lovers for years. What had changed about that? It was still the same act. It was the fact he knew he had the condom in his pocket, in his trousers there in a pile on the floor. And he'd lied about it. He could have reached for it. He could have put it on. On purpose he wanted to pin Lily down right then and let his seed spill into her. Why? It wasn't like he wanted another mouth to feed, or even more years of sleepless nights. It wasn't anything about love for a child that made him do that.

What it was he didn't want to look at. He went downstairs instead. He heard Eliza in the bathroom with Alice. He stopped in the doorway of

Aldous's room and looked in at the silent shape of Lily in the bed and went on down the stairs.

Porridge glooped. He looked down at the thermal bubbles and moved the wooden spoon in his hand. When Eliza came down the stairs with his baby he looked up at them as if they belonged to some other kind of world he had once belonged to.

“Go to Daddy,” said Eliza, and Alice wouldn't. He opened his arms and she fell into him. That shock of the moment of total trust and surrender. He still had it. He almost laughed out loud like a lunatic. He kissed Alice over and over till she wriggled and squealed. He put her in her pushchair and went to dish up the porridge. Brown sugar on top. He watched it melt on the two bowls, one for him, one for Eliza. He sat at the table, reinstated; father again, human being.

When Lily walked down the stairs he put his spoon down and watched her. How fine her hair was and how dark. She had a tragic quietness about her, a serene straightness to her head that he thought might be for his benefit, and even if it was, it worked. He saw that whatever he had done, there was some core to her he would not get to touch. It only made him want to find it more.

“Eliza, why aren't you ready for school?” said Lily.

“I had to clean Alice and change her disgusting nappies and dress her.”

“In her best dress. She's going to Mrs Appleton's today. Those tights will be black after ten minutes on the floor.”

Thelma's? Leaving the children again. Why? He would be at work and she could be anywhere, doing anything. He picked his spoon up, put it down again, his fingers clumsy. Lily bent and kissed Alice and didn't look at him at all. She went into the kitchen as if he had already left the house.

“Why Thelma's today?”

Lily didn't answer. She opened the cupboard for a bowl, he hadn't put one on the bench for her, and began to dish her porridge.

“Can I go to Aunty Violet's after school today?” Eliza said.

“Sure.” He kept looking to the kitchen. Then he pushed his chair back and went to Lily.

“Why are the little girls going to Thelma's today?”

“I need time off to go somewhere.”

“Why? Where are you going?”

“I need to give you a diary of my hours, is that it? You want to know how long I was in the laundry with my hands in cold water as well?”

“Now you're being ridiculous.”

“Excuse me, I want to sit down and eat my breakfast.”

He stood in her way though.

“Where are you going?” he asked again, and she shut her eyes for a moment as if she couldn't bear to look at him.

“To Anna's parade for her new collection. You want to risk Connie running out the door every few minutes?”

He put one hand in his pocket, as if the note was still there. He felt wretched, as if they were heading in a direction he hadn't seen coming.

“I got a note,” he said. “In the letterbox yesterday. It said you were having an affair.”

“An affair? Where is this note?”

He knew this would be a problem.

“I left it with Violet.”

“Violet? She knows this about me?”

“It’s true then?”

“No it’s not true. It’s a huge lie. You gave it to *Violet!*” She banged her porridge down on the bench.

Behind him Connie began to cry.

“What if I did? How am I supposed to carry on?”

“You ask me. You give me a chance.”

“Mum, Connie needs changing.”

“Eliza, just go and get ready for school,” Lily said. “You don’t,” her voice in a harsh whisper to Tom, “You don’t do what you did last night. Risking another child. You thought I needed punishing.”

“No,” he said.

“You take the only thing we have to express our closeness and you make it into something evil.”

“Keep your voice down, Lily.” He tried taking her hands. He wanted to say – Lily, this is us! He wanted to say- last night, it was you and me together again. He said,

“Lily, tell me the truth.”

She pulled her hands away from him and stared out the window. He looked behind at the children. Aldous with his nose in a book. Alice quiet. Eliza had taken Connie.

“Lily.” He lifted his hand, then dropped it. She was a few inches in front of him and as untouchable as some wild boar in a forest.

“You don’t tell me things,” he said. “You have this – secretive life, and it’s driving me crazy. Tell me. What are you doing? Who are you spending your time with?”

She swivelled round to face him.

“Any corner left to myself – it’s not for you. You’d take everything until it’s all used up. You want me to say there’s no affair? What do you think Tom?” Her voice getting louder and louder. “What do you really believe? You want to go there first, instead of running off telling everything to your sister. I’ll not have her get her hooks in to my life. I won’t!”

“What has she ever done to you?” yelled Tom. He reached for his coat. Was there lunch? Nothing on the bench. He pushed his way out the door and went down to the shed for his bike.

Tom stood under the glass shelter at the bus stop. The wind got to him anyway. He’d left his coat on the peg at work, and here, amongst strangers, his white-splattered workboots marked him as tradesman, here next to a man in hat and tweed coat, and woman with felt hat and her tidy black shoes at the end of long, stockinged legs. He was a tradesman and not even proud of it. He’d be proud if he did work he cared for – precise work –

not the endless smoothing of sheets that hung in people's homes, covered over by wallpaper, all trace of he, the maker, wiped out. He was invisible.

His home, though, the place he gained presence, the one place anyone had a right to call sacrosanct, was threatened by someone out there who knew him. Some stranger, some anonymous writer hidden behind newspaper words, who knew things, despicable things, about Lily. Knew Tom's name, where he lived, and felt they had the right to slip an undetonated bomb in his letterbox and stand back out of range of the fire.

What was last night about if not some kind of explosion of righteous lust? Those minutes when his skin was so close to Lily's that only sweat slicked between them. He, who hadn't entered anyone else as he had Lily. Did she measure him against other men? What did he bring to her? If not experience, then humble adoration of her, a determination to do the right thing by her. He shuffled his feet against the snap of wind. He kept her warm: his every act of splitting kindling and tending the fire was an act of his love for her. When he held Alice, he loved Lily, who bore her.

And Lily had someone else. So the note said. And if it wasn't true, then the person who had sent it had meant a malice to Tom he hadn't experienced in his world.

The bus came. He waited and boarded last, and took a seat near the back, turned his face to the window. Slowly fences, other homes, passed and then flicked by. Lives, lives, more lives. Who was it?

He thought of men he knew: his friend Jack from the days of diving, when they were all young men in the squad, and the best of them went off to

war and was killed immediately. Not even any hope of prison or long years of rehabilitation.

Not Jack, five children and a wife he was happy with.

He thought of Reilly again, that sly furtive way he directed Tom to the cold jobs, the outside jobs. Did he lust after Lily? Did he wish Tom harm? And if Tom didn't know who had sent the note, even less did he know who Lily could be with. She had a life so proscribed by the needs of Aldous, Eliza, Connie, Alice. She was the wife of his hearth.

But those hours of freedom she bargained for with dresses made for Thelma. Lily was let loose in the city. She could be at that fashion parade or she could be somewhere else. Or that man could be at the fashion parade. Or they could be, right now, in Tom and Lily's bed. Some other man entering her, sliding between her willing thighs, kissing her tender neck. He blinked, stared at the traffic lights; red, red, watched them turn to green. The bus lurched forward. He dug his nails into the palm of his hands. He didn't know how to clean his mind of those images – that bare back lying across Lily, the sound of her exuberance.

## Chapter Twenty

1962 August 6<sup>th</sup> Lily

Alice did not want to go into Thelma Appleton's kitchen and be held by those outstretched dimply, freckled arms. Alice, who went to everyone with a cherub's smile and her dark eyes bright, screamed, wrapped her arms even tighter around Lily then sank her perhaps-aching ten-month-old gums into Lily's neck.

"Alice, Alice." Lily moved the little face away from her. She'd left home too late. It was twelve to two. It was ridiculous how late she was. How all day the thought of being at the run-through had given her back some sense of who she was; had given her the part of her that was unassailable. That was how she'd got through more hours in the chilled laundry and up and down the stairs inside, Alice on her hip, piles of clothes on her hip, Connie on her hip, and between her legs an aching, but not in sweet remembering *at all*. Such anger washed through her, like adrenalin. She'd felt it in the secret tributaries of her body even as he had left the house and silence descended.

Not the thrill of adrenalin, but the chill of abandonment. She'd wanted him gone, and his voice out of her ears, and the smell of him in the still-damp wool of his jersey and the oily parka – she wanted that smell off her skin, and his fresh shaved cheeks with Old Spice – out of her breathing space. She'd opened the kitchen window wide. She didn't care if hail came in.

She'd timed the little girls' sleeps, had them rested and fed, all ready for the walk uphill and along the bumpy footpath and up another hill, the pushchair like a train ready to slide backwards into her wrists. But then what had she done? Sat at the table, her mind thick and grey like the colour beyond the window, her hands heavy on the table. She'd looked at her fingers as if from somehow up above. A woman's fingers, lying on a table.

"Mum. Mum. Mum," said Connie.

"What, Connie?"

"Mum."

"Yes, Connie."

"Mum. Mum."

"What is it Connie?"

The endless repetitions of awareness. Her voice, too, coming from somewhere above. Disembodied.

Then somehow she had made the move to put them in the pushchair, the nappy bag stuffed underneath. A move to action. Locked the door behind her, the key under the mossed flowerpot by the laundry door. And so the journey. Too late. Too late, she would be late, and the precious minutes she had ebbing away.

"Aw, come here, sweetheart." Thelma plucked Alice, dark-haired, long-armed monkey, off Lily and shepherded Connie to the toy box open by the fire. A proper home, where a woman knew her place and was – content – was that the word? Inhabited, that world. Thelma inhabited her domain and Lily, who also had preserved apples and plums in her pantry, a scrubbed table, straightened beds, washing brought in and folded, Lily, too, all this

but only extraneously. As if she was playing a role, and her real life would start – in 30 seconds. She felt it coming.

She closed Thelma's front door. Alice's determined yells would be calmed by the time Lily reached the letterbox, she was sure, and then Lily was out on the road again, her arms so free of the pushchair's laden weight she thought they would lift up by aerodynamics from the very act of walking.

Downhill, and her hips swinging. She felt the blood back in her cheeks and down through her legs and something, like a kind of joy – did she remember that - began to seep into her, so that the clouds, instead of sullen and threatening, began to look like the softest texture; the colour of a gown ephemerally hung on the body of a woman who knew where she was going.

## Part Two

### Eros and the Desire for Unity in

#### Joy Cowley's *Man of Straw*

In Plato's *Symposium*, Aristophanes speaks of there being in the beginning globular beings with two heads, four arms and four legs. Zeus, fearing their growing power, cleaved them in two, and thereafter they ran around bereft trying to find their other half. Sarup, referencing Lacan's account of this story, observes, "So you see how far back we can trace our innate love for one another, and how this love is always trying to reintegrate our former nature to make two into one, and to bridge the gap between one human being and another" (26). Octavia Paz proposes that "Eroticism is first and foremost a thirst for otherness" (15). It is this thirst for otherness, this quest to find unity with another, that I investigate as I study the novel *Man of Straw* by Joy Cowley.

I wanted to explore love and eroticism in *Man of Straw* to understand how the desire for unity both drove the plot and led to a greater understanding of the human condition. Through this analysis I wanted to bring to my own work a deeper awareness of a character's interiority and desire for connection. The erotic scenes portrayed in *Man of Straw* intensify the reader's experience of the fictional world of the text in two primary ways. Firstly, the social fabric of the world in Cowley's novel is revealed through the exploration of the characters' desire for physical unity. Cowley reveals the fabric of the novel's society by pitting its norms and expectations

against her characters' desire for physical and emotional union. Secondly, in the construction of the erotic scenes, the natural world is used to create imaginative space for the reader in which to construct his or her own experience of the other. The ways in which Cowley depicts the relationship of characters with the natural world becomes a deeply subversive comment on the society of New Zealand in the 1960s, a society that sought to keep the natural condition of Eros repressed.

Unity, as I'll use the term in this essay, is a state of being arising out of the recognition of mutual and equal egos. Unity is a dialectic concept proposed by the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Hegel claimed that unless a person is acknowledged as an equal person in his or her own right by a partner they also recognize as a person with his or her own freedom, then an unequal power state arises in which neither of the subjects is able to experience subjectivity (110-19). One key situation in which the role of recognition is significant in literature is the erotic scene.

The erotic scene stands as an important signifier of the social conditions of any literary text. Italo Calvino, in *The Uses of Literature*, argues that:

In the world of language, this is the function of the sign of sex: it cannot escape from its privileged position, whether infra-red or ultra violet, the positive or negative connotation that accompanies the sign of sex in every single literary production determines how values are assigned within the text (64).

The erotic scenes in *Man of Straw* register the condition of mutual recognition between characters. They reveal that when a character's sense of

embodied subjectivity is honoured, then unity is possible between male and female characters. When characters enter a relationship of domination and submission, they are unable to be equal others, denying opportunity for unity for both participants. When there is no chance of unity, then there is the possibility Eros will move through a transgressive erotic act, rupturing social structures to provide new conditions for unity between characters. Cowley's *Man of Straw* explores how this deep drive for unity is fulfilled or not in the erotic scene, as it explores how the main characters are able to maintain a sense of joyousness, or 'jouissance', within themselves. A character's ability to maintain individuality in the novel is revealed through his or her interactions in erotic scenes and through his or her perceptions of the natural world. Erotic scenes can portray two characters acting equally as individuals or they can portray one character dominating the other. A close examination of *Man of Straw* reveals that a character's perception of the natural world reflects his or her capability for joyous subjectivity. The reader, as voyeur and participant in these scenes, is made aware of the character existing in an erotically perceiving body and of this body existing, in turn, within an eroticized landscape.

Cowley's language evokes a sensuality for the reader to experience an imaginative world imbued with Eros. Jennifer Birkett, discussing French writer Monique Wittig's work, in *French Erotic Fiction*, explains how a writer constructs an eroticised world:

her texts set up a theatre of sexuality, constructed in terms of voices and dramatic movement and with a decor of precisely observed but selective visual and tactile detail ... vivid

enough to create an effect of authenticity, inviting readers to recognize and reconstruct their own initiation into desire.

(100)

In this seductive field of language the reader perceives the power shifts between characters and the possibility of recognition of mutual equality.

Hegel developed his theory of the desire for mutuality by examining the terms of Lordship and Bondage, or the Master/Slave duality in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. What a subject wants, he argues, is to establish its independence. Frederick Beiser explains: “Hegel asks what fully satisfies the conditions of absolute independence? He answers: Only the mutual recognition between equal and independent persons” (184). To prove his or her independence, a subject must gain the recognition of an other. The subject then enters into a life/death struggle with the other, for, as Beiser puts it, the self cannot establish its independence unless it defends itself against the other and prevents the other from dominating it (188). The self cannot kill its opponent, or vice-versa, for then there would be no-one to recognize it. One must bow to the other to save his or her own life; therefore one subject becomes Slave, the other Master. Yet even in this configuration there is still no freedom, for a slave is not equal to the Master. Beiser proposes: “Recognition loses all value if it comes from domination or coercion; it is only of value when it derives from the free choice and judgement of another” (189). The Master then grants that the Slave is a free and equal being, and in this way the other can be equal and each subject can give the other mutual recognition.

Not only does this mutual recognition grant independence but it can create unity between people, as they recognize, each in the other, what they stand for. Hegel puts it like this, in Wallace William's translation:

It is necessary that the two opposed selves should make explicit and should recognize in their existence, in their being-for-another, what they essentially are in themselves or according to their Notion, namely, beings who are not merely natural but free. Only in such a manner is true freedom realised; for since this consists in my identity with the other, I am only truly free when the other is also free and is recognized by me as free. This freedom of one in the other unites men in an inward manner, whereas needs and necessity bring them together only externally. (171)

It could be argued that in any society "needs and necessity" are also what bind couples in marriage. What unity demands, and what I will examine in *Man of Straw*, is this ability and desire for people to recognize "what they essentially are in themselves". It is from this recognition, this "freedom of one in the other" that there lies the possibility of two people being united in "an inward manner."

In *Bonds of Love*, Jessica Benjamin expands on Hegel's concept of mutual recognition. She defines "recognition" as:

that response from the other which makes meaningful the feelings, intentions and actions of the self...but such recognition can only come from an other whom we, in turn, recognize as a person in his or her own right. This struggle to

be recognized by an other and thus confirm ourselves, was shown by Hegel to form the core of relationships of domination ... The inability to sustain paradox in that interaction can, and often does, convert the exchange of recognition into domination and submission. (12)

Benjamin discusses Hegel's Master/Slave dialectic as it affects the relationships between men and women. Despite our society's commitment to equality and freedom, she argues, the problem of domination underlies our family life, social structures and sexual relationships. As Stuart Swindle asserts in his article on feminist thought and Hegel, "the lordship/bondage phase of the dialectic of intersubjectivity clearly describes the confrontation that occurs between men and women" (53). It is the loss of this balance of self-assertion on one hand and mutuality on the other that prevents equality between men and women.

Benjamin proposes that seeking a mutual recognition of equal subjects would lead to personal and social transformation. The discussion and search for mutual recognition, then, can have a wider social function. But what is the cost of not being mutually recognized? In *Hegel's Phenomenology, a Philosophical Introduction*, Richard Norman discusses ways in which a person may be denied recognition by others:

Actions and utterances which express his own individuality may be persistently ignored or dismissed or systematically re-interpreted. Others may ascribe to him experiences, perceptions and intentions which systematically conflict with and invalidate his own self-attributions. Within a closed

institution such as the family this persistent denial of recognition may, quite literally, lead to the disintegration of a person's sense of identity. (48)

The cost of living in a state of domination and non-recognition is high, therefore, for both the woman and the man living in that relationship. Neither of them can be sure of his or her own self-hood. Neither of them can know his or herself as a free being who can partake fully in his or her own life, and that of the wider community, unless he or she is acknowledged as free by an individual whom he or she also recognizes as free. Hegel recognised the importance of mutual freedom and acknowledgement. He writes, "self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged" (111).

In *Man of Straw*, a novel written and set in the late 60s in New Zealand, the narrative traces the effect of this "denial of recognition" on two marriages and the cost, not only to the subjects involved but to the wider family and community. Power shifts of mutuality and domination are reflected in the text through the denial or embracing of Eros, first as experienced within a character, and secondly as experienced within the erotic union of characters. Cowley's novel traces the effects of Paul Jonsson's affair on his wife and two daughters and examines the older daughter's relationship as she moves towards a marriage of her own. As the book explores the effects of the lack of unity in one marriage and the attempts to establish unity in a new marriage, it reveals the social, cultural and political mores of New Zealand society at that time. The mores of marriage and romance are particularly displayed, as the daughter faces the

prospect of conforming to a subservient role in marriage. The story is told through two narrators: the daughter Ros, on the verge of womanhood, and her older sister Miranda, about to be married to her fiancé Colin.

Paul's affair with a local woman and the lack of Eros within the parents' marriage impacts on the daughters. Towards the end of the novel Miranda tries to rebel against her parent's passionless way of life. When she finds out about her father's affair, she confronts her mother, saying, "You're sick, do you hear? Sick, sick" (148). She goes on to accuse her mother of living a life in which she had "given up all but breathing" (149). Yet Miranda also moves increasingly away from her own sense of individuality over the course of the narrative, becoming "nothing more than a spectator", as she attempts to live the roles of marriage and child-bearing society expects from her (91). For Miranda, the effects of this life lead to a dying of Eros, and this death is reflected by her loss of connection with the natural world. In her relationship with Colin, Miranda is a being who is not recognized as a mutual other. This condition of non-recognition severs her connection with the life force she felt at the beginning of the novel, where she hoped for a unity with her husband "when they have nothing, not a thing between them" (120). Hegel describes this "unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses" as the "'I' that is 'We' and 'We' that is 'I'" (110). Without this unity, Miranda is doomed to repeat the passionless life of her mother.

Miranda's younger sister Ros keeps a connection to herself and the natural world until the end of the book, yet for her the effect of her father's affair is fatal. When her friend, Julie-Ann, discovers the affair between Paul

and her own mother, Julie-Ann claims Paul has raped her. Local outrage leads to Ros's dog Caliban being stoned to death. Ros runs away and is killed when she falls from the cliff behind her home into the sea that she loved. She enters the natural world of the sea in a final union, where death is the outcome. The community's self-righteous outrage at Eros shows the devastating effect of an ideology that values conformity over the needs of unity.

Social structures that keep a subject confined in a situation where they do not experience unity and recognition can be ruptured by a transgressive erotic act, such as Paul's affair with Julie-Ann's mother. Inevitably the rupture caused by the transgressive erotic act allows for the opportunity for new structures to arise where it is possible to experience recognition. After the affair and Ros's death, Paul and his wife move away, and the novel suggests that grief may effect a change in their relationship. Miranda remains increasingly confined within society's mores while Ros, who could have challenged them, is destroyed. This ability of Eros to cause chaos and provide the opportunity to realign new social models is discussed by Katarzyna Wieckowska and Przemyslaw Zywicki . They argue that,

springing from the forbidden wish to violate the social taboos that dominate a particular historical period, the erotic points to a possible transgression of the established norms and thus re-defines the field of possible significations, of culture. (7)

It is this possibility to transgress the "established norms" that gives the erotic its force in society, and this is most apparent when the erotic scenes

themselves are transgressive not only of the mores within the text but of the society that will read it.

The erotic acts that comprise the plot of Cowley's book are transgressive in two ways. First, they contravene the ideology of the dominant culture. In *Man of Straw*, adultery is established as a transgressive act violating the code of marriage. Second, an erotic act is transgressive when it goes against the personal: when the act, instead of allowing a couple to achieve unity, becomes an act of domination and of non-recognition. Paul, the father, transgresses in this text as he commits adultery with Julie-Anne's mother, and Colin commits a transgression against the principles of mutuality with Miranda when he denies her recognition as an equal "essential being" (Beiser 178 ).

This desire to be desired as an equal individual can bring a character up against the values of the patriarchal society in which the text is set, if the conditions of mutuality and recognition are not being met within the primary bond of marriage . If a person is "only truly free when the other is also free and is recognized... as free" (Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind* 171), then a relationship in which a person is no longer "what they essentially are in themselves" means that neither of them are able to offer mutual recognition or experience independence. The quote from Kahil Gibran at the beginning of *Man of Straw* reads: "For what is evil but good tortured by its own hunger and thirst? Verily when good is hungry it seeks food even in dark caves, and when it thirsts it drinks even of dead water." This quote gives an understanding to what will occur in the text: that the basic need for recognition drives people to seek it where they can. Benjamin discusses why

recognition is sought in an erotic act, calling it the ultimate way in which a person can experience unity with an other, achieving that balance of at once losing all sense of one's own boundaries and connecting fully to an other (126). As Benjamin proposes, this "simultaneous desire for loss of self and for wholeness (or oneness) with the other, often described as the ultimate point of erotic union, is really a form of the desire for recognition" (126).

The desire for recognition, then, is sought in this text within an erotic union, as evidenced by Miranda's longing to experience a deep and lasting unity with Colin, where they "lived, died together" (119). Paul's history of affairs also suggests his desperation to achieve the unity that he could not find within the bonds of marriage. Although Paul "dragged his family from one sordid little mess to another, without trying to excuse himself or exercise any sort of self-control for his children's sake", he may be tortured by his own thirst for recognition of who he is (171). As he repeats over and over the pattern of seeking, taking his family into the "dark caves" with him, he is following a deep human drive to achieve unity with an equal other who will also recognize him. "He needs people. They're family to him", his wife says, trying to justify the affairs to their daughter (148).

A character who believes his or herself as an "essential being" is able to bring this self into a relationship with an other. If this sense of self is not honoured by recognition from the other, however, the chance for meaningful unity is lost. If that unrecognized person is confined within a marriage or family structure, the cost can be the "disintegration of a person's sense of identity" (Norman 48). As a character who has lost recognition of

themselves, this person is not able to offer recognition to another. This circumstance can lead to a cycle in which one person in a relationship is diminished and repressed, while the other searches elsewhere for recognition through unity. This is the pattern in which the characters of Paul's wife and his daughter Miranda find themselves in *Man of Straw*. Ros, who remains unconfined by any marriage structure, is the only character who is able to retain her independence and subjectivity.

The daughters, Ros and Miranda, recognize that neither Eros nor unity exists between their parents. Instead of equal, independent beings who recognize each other as such, the parents, in Hegel's terms, "do not reciprocally give and receive one another back from each other consciously, but leave each other free only indifferently, like things"(114). The descriptions of the mother's responses and activities and the father's solitary tasks show a lack of connection between them and a lack of personal identity for the mother, whose sole task and interest seems to be taking care of her family. "Because that's all you ever do – prepare meals," Miranda says. "As soon as one is over, you start thinking about the next."(146). The mother, nameless in the text, is presented as having no other life of her own than feeding the family. She has become, as Hegel puts it, "the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another" (115). Upset at her mother's lack of response or life force, Miranda accuses her of having "given up all but breathing to become a huge, unicellular mass of protoplasm that moved vaguely and simply in response to certain stimuli" (149). A character such as this is unable to bring a sense of jouissance to a relationship or offer any kind of recognition to another. Accordingly, the text

does not show intersection between the parents with any kind of enjoyment. Of her parent's marriage, Miranda recalls that "Throughout her life, she had occasionally heard the words 'When I met your father-' but they had been so flat, so void of feeling" (86). What the other daughter, Ros, wanted was "the house full of noise and laughter...What really bothered her was this – the terrible silence with words measured into it like so many lumps of sugar" (160).

Unable to experience her own subjectivity, the mother is unable to offer recognition to her husband in *Man of Straw*. The ideology of the wider society has contributed to this "disintegration of a person's sense of identity" in the novel. The statue that features in the book gives a clue to how Eros ebbs away from a neglected body. Paul Jonsson brings home a concrete statue of a woman and erects her as a fountain in the fishpond. With her long robe, her exposed breast and her habitat in water she appears as a generic copy of a mythological statue who could be Aphrodite, believed by some to be the mother of Eros. Ros imagines that "She'd once been standing there warm in life with milk flowing from the uncovered breast, and some barren nymph had come along and jealously turned her to stone – concrete" (37). The statue is evocative of the mother, once "warm in life" and breastfeeding her baby, while the words "jealously" and "nymph" bring a warning of her husband's affairs which have "turned her to stone." Miranda describes the process by which her father erected the statue in terms that implicitly connect the statue with her mother's fate. He

gave her lodging by the fishpond, tied her up to the water  
mains ... a lump of concrete ... with a painful air of

resignation and a water-pipe through her left tit ... If she'd been able to talk, she'd have said I'm a Jonsson. But she wasn't talking. No sir, she wasn't saying anything. Water restrictions had turned her off, leaving her supporting one dried-up udder and that vacant stare. (83, 84)

Being tied to the water mains symbolizes the mother being tied to the home. The water not flowing through her anymore draws attention to the fact that her source of reciprocal attention is turned off. She is, as Miranda says later of their lawn, "seared by rainless days and lack of attention" (155). The statue's "vacant stare" and silence are linked to the mother when Miranda confronts her about Paul's affairs: "Her mother didn't answer. She looked past Miranda, her eyes fixed and vacant" (128).

When Eros has done its rupturing work, and the transgressive affair has been forced into the open, Paul and his wife finally confront the state of their marriage. The wife looks honestly at the effects of betrayal. Instead of trying to trivialise the affairs as she had done before, she yells "hysterical accusations that went back over many years" (166). The statue and pets belonging to the couple are also destroyed. The statue, attacked by angry townspeople who believe the claims that Paul raped young Julie-Ann, is "headless and chipped", the new goldfish is dead, "floating belly upwards in the pool", and the dog Caliban killed by a rock (181). This destruction of property and pets echoes the damage done to the Jonsson's marriage. But what this rupturing of life and of the statue also does is lay bare a kind of truth about the structures/strictures of marriage: "Not only had the head gone, but a large piece had been gouged from one shoulder, laying bare the

pipe that connected it with the water supply” (182). The structure of a passionless and non-mutual marriage has led to the destruction not only of the statue and Caliban, but ultimately of the innocent Ros, who in the aftermath of the affair, runs away and falls from the cliff.

The difficulty that the characters face in *Man of Straw* is the repressive force of the patriarchal society that condones marriage purely for the sustaining of the social fabric without acknowledging the importance of Eros or mutual recognition. The society these characters inhabit requires married couples to rear children and add labour to the community. That such couples are required to look as if they are functioning normally even if they are not, is demonstrated by the neighbour Mrs Astwick in the framing first chapter. Here the neighbour looks at the new couple who have come to replace the philandering husband Paul and his downtrodden wife. “In an eye-sharp second, she skewers man and wife, probes, evaluates, approves. Both nice ... The wife draws her skirt from the children and nods, looks at her husband, waits. Nice” (3). This neighbour functions as the monitoring conventional majority, the representing force that attempts to keep the roles of women and Eros confined. To be married in this society is important; correct marital behaviour is policed by others. Mrs Astwick approves of the wife who “nods, looks at her husband, waits.” This voiceless wife is the one approved of by society. Miranda’s mother also initially submits to her husband’s philandering without standing up to it with a voice. Society required that she gave up her own subjectivity to the needs of the family. She lost her voice, and without voice she could not be an equal other.

The narrator Ros represents an innocent life force that has not yet had to come up against the expectations of a confining society in the way her older sister is facing with the prospect of marriage and domesticity. Ros is able to provide a view of what is happening through the eyes of someone who is still connected to herself, who still has a voice. She knows when things aren't functioning properly, or when she herself is not being honoured. The beginning of *Man of Straw* has thirteen year old Ros marvelling at her developing body. Her versions of what she experiences from now on are through the knowledge that she too has become adult and capable of procreation, she too is now aware of the desire for physical unity.

In her first chapter Ros is shown in her awakening body in a scene that evokes unity as a sensual connection with the natural world. The language Cowley uses in this passage has a seductive force and the words imply an erotic potential beyond the meanings of the textual surface, allowing the reader to construct his or her own images of desire. At the beach Ros flings herself to lie down on her stomach and enjoys "the luxury of unhurried relaxation, first head, then arms, body, legs, until she was all over limp and sun-warm and could feel herself melting into the beach ... I'm a woman now," she whispered against the shells" (15, 16). This scene of her "melting into the beach" echoes the complete abandonment of one body to another's and is Ros's first experience of the unity that is possible between two equal subjects. This sense of intimacy is reinforced by her whispering to the shells the truth about her body that no one else in the world yet knows. Ros physically connects with this natural world to the extent that boundaries

are blurred: she submerges her head “down and down until the white shells blurred and ran together and were lost from the sight of the sun” (16).

Ros is not dominated by this natural world but connects with it equally, and this is shown by the way in which she retains the sense of herself while within it. She moves within the landscape with vitality: “She could soar over and under the sea” (97). She is that character who knows “what they essentially are in themselves...not merely natural but free” (Hegel 171). Her father tells her she swims in the sea “like a seal. It’s a beautiful thing” (13), and in another image Ros imagines she could “burst out of the foam in a fountain of bubbles, twist mid-air and submerge again to the sand and white shells and fields of seaweed. And no one, not a soul could catch her” (97, 98). These images demonstrate Ros’s natural and effortless state in the ocean. As a free and equal being, she is able to experience unity within the natural world, an experience she realizes is vital, as does Cowley, using all five senses to fix the image of this natural world:

This was the minute in which she had to remember  
everything, absorb all the feelings of the day – the heat and  
blueness of it, the sounds, smells of berries, dog and salt-  
grass – so that she could take them and store them for  
another now, bring them out like so much buried treasure and  
say, This is how it was. (15)

It’s as if Ros needs to remember this time of ability to live in the natural world for when she inevitably comes up against a society that will move to repress libidinal energies and confine them within suitable parameters.

Herbert Marcuse argues that our Western consumer society functions on the basis of libidinal repression: the denial of Eros, which is both life-instinct and sexual drive. He calls this repression by society a “dialectic of domination” over sexual pleasure (qtd. in Hughes and Ince 98). This intensity of pleasure is “feared for its ability to collectivise or divide individuals, to distract them from his or her primary social function as alienated labour and to set them against the procreative order and paternal domination” (98).

Not only can a person’s sense of life force be quelled by domination in a relationship, as Miranda’s is by Colin, society also functions as a dominating force to suppress Eros. The danger inherent in this normalising domination is that the inhibition of the erotic undermines an individual’s capacity for independence and equality. An independent and free person is capable of questioning both personal and social demands. Questioning these demands threatens the patriarchal order that sustains labour and the family set up for procreation and work. “Society’s grip on individuals’ time,” Marcuse argues, “begins with the control and reification of individual libidinal energy” (98).

In Cowley’s text, this intersection between individual libidinal energy and the conforming repressive society is presaged when Ros meets her neighbour Mrs Astwick:

Red, white and blue, the boys love you...she picked a couple of hibiscus flowers from Mrs Astwick’s hedge and tucked one behind each ear...“Hello Mrs Astwick.” But as she said it, Mrs Astwick turned away and started chopping at the dead

leaves as though they were still alive and she were trying to kill them. And Ros remembered the hibiscus flowers flaming behind her ears. (141)

In this scene Ros is looking for unity (“the boys love you”) in terms that signify the natural world: “hibiscus flowers flaming behind her ears”. “Flaming” holds meanings of fire, passion, something out of control. The older married woman, who could have chosen to welcome Ros’s arrival into the passionate world of Eros, instead turns against the natural world, chopping at the leaves as if it was possible “to kill them”. Mrs Astwick functions again here as that monitoring conventional majority. She ignores Ros, giving her no recognition, and commits a violence upon the leaves in front of Ros in a demonstration of a domination of nature and the libidinal energy it represents.

It is through the sensual descriptions of Ros, as newly made ‘woman’, aware of her libidinal energy, that the reader too becomes situated in an imaginative space where unity is possible. Deborah Bergoffen in her book on Simone de Beauvoir discusses people having consciousness “embedded in an erotically perceiving body” that “must . . . be scrutinized for the ways in which its erotic desires situate it in the world” (30). The reader, too, as he or she identifies with Ros’s point of view, become this “erotically perceiving body”. Ros’s burgeoning sexuality and awareness mean it is her questioning eye, and ours, that observes the couples in her family: her father and mother, Miranda and her fiancé Colin.

Ros’s drive for insight into this awakening sexual energy leads her to secretly observe her sister in an erotic scene with Colin. After talking with a

teenage boy, Brent Rowlands, in her driveway, Ros watches from outdoors as her sister and Colin unexpectedly run into the bedroom.

Rosalind knew then that she shouldn't stay, that it – something—was wrong, but while one half of her was running to hide as far away as possible, the other held her knees against the hard stones of the rockery and kept her eyes unblinking on the gap between the curtains. For a few seconds they moved out of sight, and then they were back again swaying like dancers. One dancer. One face joined by two heads, one body with four hands. (40)

The reader is brought into this scene by the sense of voyeurism with the “eyes unblinking on the gap in the curtains”. As secondary voyeur, we observe the couple, anchored in the senses as Ros by the description of knees “against the hard stones of the rockery.” Though Ros is distanced from the erotic activity, which she only perceives visually, her body is in the natural world, the rocks pressing into her knees in a way that gives her a physical connection. We also observe Ros, as that “unobserved observer”: the reader (Gartonski 69). In this way we both observe Ros and identify with her.

There is a double generating of libidinous energy here, an energy generated by the description of Miranda and Colin, and by our imagining of Ros's perception of them. What is evoked in the description of the couple is a myth-like body of one Being, that vision of unity that humans desire and that Sarup evoked as “this love always trying to integrate our former nature to make two into one” (26). What the reader is also aware of through this

voyeurism is the knowledge that, like them, society is also able to observe. Ros, and the reader, have a power over Miranda and Colin through knowledge; in some sense they hold a position of domination over the couple, and this fact suggests that the wider society, in turn, can curtail individual unity and freedom.

Ros develops her self-awareness through physical awareness from the sensual perceptions of her own body and that of others. She scrutinizes her body and those of her friends to see how she fits in, and these descriptions of her body and others reinforce the fact that it is through an “erotically perceiving body” that the world is experienced:

She was much more pleasing with nothing on – particularly her breasts. They weren’t as big as Julie-Ann’s, but nonetheless she admired them with a secret delight. Their firm, round shape was a continual source of wonder, a part of her and yet apart from her, something beautiful her body had pushed forward like a gift to mark maturity. Sometimes even looking at them made her shiver and cross her arms with pleasure. (104)

It’s not only her own body she looks at but others around her, again with that sense of voyeurism for the reader. The reader is invited to invade Ros’s privacy by looking at her, and also to identify with her as Ros, pretending not to, invades other young women’s privacy: “She pulled her skirt down over her knees and leaned forward looking, pretending not to, at the girls in their bikinis” (28).

The reader becomes aware of the narrative character existing in an erotically perceiving body, of this body existing sensually within the landscape, then of the erotic potential of others around the character, and finally of those characters in relation to each other. This pervasion of eroticism underlines the fact that the energy of Eros exists powerfully in this text—an energy that, if thwarted, threatens to cause chaos by undermining the stability of the family through betrayal.

Ros studies the ways couples attempt to fulfil their needs for physical and emotional unity. In her erotically perceiving body, she listens to and examines those around her as she formulates her own ideas about what her place in a future relationship and society will be. After her first kiss with a boy, Donald, “According to Julie-Ann, her insides were supposed to have felt like melted butter, but her stomach seemed to have been in a deep-freeze, and the only feeling like melted butter had come from his hand on her shoulder” (94). Though Ros struggles with the first fumbles imposed upon her by a teenage boy, she finds a joyousness in her developing friendship with the boy Brent, and with this friendship gets close to a mutual recognition of equals. After meeting Brent in her driveway she first suppresses a “smile of sheer pleasure”, then Brent grins as he tries to control his breathing. “Rosalind printed R.J. in the dust on the car bonnet and thought that if Brent hadn’t been there she just might have put B.R. underneath” (39). This is the day she realized she had become physically a woman, and her planning a possible romantic pairing with Brent shows that she is aware now of her own drive to seek physical unity. Though no future relationship ensues from their friendship, due to Ros’s death, their

conversation in the driveway portrays Ros and Brent's understanding of each other. Their mutual smiles demonstrate an innocent enjoyment of each other; as Hegel puts it, "They recognize themselves as mutually recognizing each other" (112).

The scene between Ros and Brent shows the disappearance of a couple that had the possibility to embrace unity. Ros can understand Brent's humour as they discuss the invitation with gold lettering to Julie-Ann Howes's birthday party: "Eighteen carat," says Brent, "and they laughed. It was good. She could have stayed there laughing with him forever, with all time standing still, the smell of dinner fixed in the air and the sun glued to the back of the house across the road" (39). The welcome smell of food and the sun, that source of light and warmth in the natural world, glue this image of potential equality for the reader as they remember Ros laughed with him and wished it could be this way "forever" (39).

The senses of sight and smell that anchored Ros and Brent in the driveway are used in other descriptions of the landscape to produce a sensation of a character being at one with his or her environment or to reflect a character's disconnection. Ros and Miranda have moments in the book where they feel part of the land, or even of the city, with a kind of joyousness in union. For Miranda, one way of feeling this oneness is through smell, as when she returns to the city on her own: "And the smell. She was consciously breathing it, a city of smoke and dirt, coffee, tar, diesel fumes, roast peanuts, steak, dog pee, and dead leaves....And what's more, she thought, I'm in love with everything, everything – oh yes, preserving jars, refrigerator, everything" (117). These descriptions of the landscape to

show unity reveal that the women characters have the ability to experience joyousness in their own embodied subjectivity. Through interaction with the natural world they know themselves as independent self-consciousnesses. Knowing themselves as independent subjects they look towards a mate who will recognize them back.

The sense of oneness that Miranda has with the landscape, however, is not shared by Colin. He does not recognize her feelings or intentions, and this lack of mutuality affects the way she perceives the landscape. On a trip back to the city, before the knowledge of her father's affair, Miranda picks flowers and puts them on her table: "wildflowers in a broken cup" (118). This image represents her relationship with Colin, for though she leans on the window-ledge, looking out in wonder at the evening, her sense of oneness with her world is not reflected by her partner. He shows a lack of sensual appreciation by complaining about the candlelight and telling her "I'm saying that there really is no such thing as good" (121). Later in the book, after Miranda discovers her father's affairs, she grows disillusioned with Colin, and decides that she must leave him "if he [doesn't] change his attitudes" (149). After reaching this conclusion she looks out at a landscape that she does not feel part of and sees "nothing but empty streets, empty houses, empty people" (153). Here her perceptions reveal her loss of connection to her world: Eros is not to be found in emptiness. When a sense of oneness and joyousness is not recognized by the other it leads to a dislocation between the two, for, as Miranda says earlier in the book, "if there's one thing worse than feeling miserable on your own, it's feeling marvellous on your own" (45).

Another way landscape can be used is to imbue an erotic awareness in the text which allows language to seduce readers in their own imaginative space. The words as signifiers bring their own history of erotic significations, and build up in layers in the text, creating an erotically-charged atmosphere for the reader. Language is used erotically, for example, when Ros goes to her first teenage party and sees the landscape as a reflection of her own emotions:

She absorbed every detail of her surroundings...with deliberate greed. A moment swollen with dampness and shining green, hibiscus and fuchsias, wet camellia bushes, trees dripping on a great sponge of lawn, and farther back, the terrace looped with strings of orange Chinese lanterns already glowing. (64)

The words “greed”, “swollen”, “dampness”, “shining”, “wet”, “dripping”, “glowing” have a resonance of sexuality; other meanings linger behind the landscape of garden that is described. This is Ros’s first outing as a “woman”, where she felt “so light-headed that she tossed her mane madly” (67). There is a sense of Eros becoming almost out of control: young men are “leaping”, “yelling”, “the place was so full, full of everything, that it was just plain crazy” (67). The sexualized landscape leads on to this almost bacchanalian, yet still innocent, revelry.

This eroticized natural world becomes not only a setting for an erotic scene between Miranda and Colin, but a way in which to evoke sensuality overall. Cowley uses the erotic connotations within landscape to articulate what is happening between Miranda and Colin, not graphically but in such a

way that the reader is drawn poetically to imagine for themselves: “So beautiful: the light changing across his face, and the smile of silver bubbles, white shells hard in the softness, and the warmth through the chill. And the slow tangle in the silence between sun and sand” (48). Here the hardness of the white shell in the softness of the sand and the image of release with the silver bubbles moving up through the water evoke the sexual act. That it takes place in the “silence between sun and sand” gives the scene this mythical aura and implies that this “tangle” of two humans in the project to become one is beyond the ordinary world.

The impulse to become one, to experience the sensation of two beings with boundaries erased, is explained by Miranda later: “This is when people make love, she thought, not in wrestling and throbbing, but afterwards, when they have nothing, not a thing between them” (119-20). The erotic scene that takes place in the sea shows the closest Miranda and Colin come to achieving meaningful unity in the Hegelian sense of the word. The soft “s” sibilant sound of the consonants in the passage suggests there is no jarring, no mis-matching of personalities or actions. All is “warmth”, and the words read smoothly and slowly to capture that ethereal air of making love underwater, not only fusing the two lovers but also the lovers within the landscape.

The importance of this feeling of being at one with the landscape, and becoming submerged in something bigger than Miranda or Colin’s personalities underlines the sensation of boundaries blurred as lovers come together. In the quote following, “slow movement” is the only physical movement described, as Miranda and Colin make love:

And in seconds they had submerged again, this time between dry sand and cliff ledge, bubbles of laughter invisible, but slow movement the same. And drops of water were running over their bodies, trickling from his hair into her eyes so that her vision was blurred and she was still under the sea, still tasting salt in his smile. (48)

Here landscape acts erotically upon the couple; water runs over their bodies, trickles, blurs, and the salt Miranda tastes is of the sea. The sea represents what the author does not write: it is not perspiration running over bodies, the trickle of his body fluid to her, the taste of his sweat, but these are evoked, as if the act itself can only be expressed in the metaphors of the natural world. Cowley uses descriptions of Eros within the natural world to describe the process of blurring of boundaries: between Colin and Miranda, in the “slow tangle” of bodies, and between the couple and the natural world: sea water blurs Miranda’s vision; Colin’s skin tastes of the sea. These descriptions of blurring of boundaries suggest that unity is possible – not only between people but between people and the landscape, and that this state of oneness with the natural world is vital for the recognition of mutuality with one another.

The landscape also becomes a way of reflecting the effects of domination. This domination occurs when Hegel’s “freedom of one in the other” is replaced by “the perversion of refusing to relinquish one’s status as the absolute subject” (Bergoffen 118). For Miranda, scenes of oneness achieved in love-making with Colin are undercut by scenes where he acts in a way that dominates her: “‘Miranda.’ He separated each syllable. ‘Will you

please shut up'. 'Yes,' she said, and was still, limp as he moved her farther into the cleft below the cliff ledge, silent as he pulled down her shoulder straps" (49). Here Colin moves Miranda away from the fluid possibility of "silver bubbles" and the openness of the sand and sun into a place darker and hidden, reflecting the way violence is hidden in society. The language of this quote causes the reader to hesitate over the words "cleft" and "cliff ledge". Diction alone alerts the reader to the fact that this is not a mutually-experienced scene of unity. The lack of unity is more than mere separation; it is a violation of the autonomy of Miranda. She thinks, "Oh Colin – in silence against his neck – don't make love to me now, don't ask me why. I can't" (49).

This erotic scene demonstrates a shift in the power base of the relationship from one of equality to one of inequality. In Hegel's terms it has converted "the exchange of recognition into domination and submission" (Benjamin 12). Even though Miranda doesn't want to make love, she doesn't believe she has the choice to stop. If this relationship was developing in a mutual way, with equality and mutual understanding, this would be reflected in the way Colin and Miranda moved together. Instead, leading on from this erotic scene, they go on "awkwardly out of step, stumbling against each other" (58). Miranda's silence and her stumbling reveal that she does not hold a position of equal power in this relationship. What's more, she suffers from Colin's lack of connection with her. When he doesn't answer her, "his silence was colder, darker than the night" (58).

Another scene uses landscape to evoke the unity possible in lovemaking, only to have Miranda recognize society's constriction of Eros.

In the middle chapter, Miranda imagines how people's bodies entwined together "were beautiful in the way that trees growing together were beautiful. More so. She could imagine a whole forest of bodies made immortal in marble or bronze trunks" (123). Immediately she thinks this, she realizes that society would not want to see or condone such a display of Eros: "There would be those who said no. Those who would say can't, mustn't, shouldn't, won't" (123). She is beginning to realize that her sense of the beauty of people together, of the pleasure in lovemaking, is not something of which society approves. Miranda's vision fuses humans and landscape, placing Eros in a "forest of bodies". Her description of lovemaking as "beautiful in the way that trees growing together were beautiful" evokes again the importance of oneness with the natural world to foster Eros. This celebration of Eros as a natural and central force in human life is something that society seeks to repress with grave consequences for the individual.

Colin warns Miranda that her sense of life must in some way be controlled so that she fits the role society has in wait for her—that of mother/wife. "And if you weren't so volatile, you wouldn't nearly be so attractive. But one day we're going to have to reconcile it with domestic life, or else" (52) he says. In this sentence is the threat that Miranda's feelings, her desires as an embodied subject, must be subjugated to domestic life, that is, to the role prescribed for her by society of marriage and childbearing.

For Miranda to be a subject in her own life she needs to risk not only the bond she has with Colin but also the role of marriage, by claiming

herself as an independent self-consciousness. She must “challenge the powers of immanence, powers that would freeze her within prescribed categories and/or convince her that she could do no more than submit to forces that determine her destiny” (Bergoffen 146). Instead, as she goes further along towards marriage, her sense of *jouissance* in life, that sense of Eros that saw her feel “intoxicated in the nectar of a Saturday evening” ebbs away (60).

In a foreshadowing of the description of her at the end of the book, married to Colin with children and with “not much to say for herself”, Miranda sits “beneath the tree, not moving, aware and unaware of the smell of strawberries, of the shrill whine of the insects that descended to take her blood. She didn’t brush them away. If they wanted her that much, she thought, they could have her” (224, 91). In this image Miranda is in the landscape but as “nothing more than a spectator” (Cowley 91). She isn’t burrowed into sand like Ros was, or swimming rapturously in “an endless green-and-blue film” (48), but in a state dislocated from her surroundings and from what is being done to her. Disconnected from her awareness, she does not experience a desirous relationship with the natural world in any way that fosters her Eros.

These scenes set in the natural world show that though Miranda desired to be met equally in her wish for unity, to be recognized for her gift of her embodied self, Colin did what he wanted to do, negating the chance for reciprocal generosity. Beauvoir “suggests that an adequate understanding of the erotic requires that it be understood as a relationship of gifted reciprocity and generosity” (Bergoffen 179). That Miranda feels unable to

voice her feelings during erotic scenes and thinks “What’s the use?” (123), reveals that her relationship with Colin is not a generous, reciprocal relationship. It is also a reflection of the social values in the late sixties in New Zealand, where women were not free and equal. What’s more, the socialised individual policed herself. Though Colin tells her to “Shut up”, Miranda shuts herself up as well. In Cowley’s words, “Those who would say can’t, mustn’t, shouldn’t, won’t...” are alive and strong in Miranda’s head. She might wish that things were different but her choice to stay with Colin reveals a choice to not become a woman with “the embarrassment of going into a butcher’s shop for one lamb chop”; she would be “like other women, loading up the car for the family freezer” (116). She would be like “other women,” meaning she would be married with a family. Ros, at the beginning of the book, accepted this as a natural outcome for her life, choosing it over certain career paths. “You can go on teaching for the rest of your life, but I expect to get married” she tells Miranda (9). And Miranda’s prediction for Ros’s life is that she “would eventually find another Jonsson, cut a home-made wedding cake, settle for three unmade bedrooms, a kitchen full of dishes, and if she fulfilled her mother’s ambitions, half a dozen children” (22). Marriage and family, therefore, are the expected and successful, though dehumanising and subservient, outcomes for a woman in *Man of Straw*. Miranda herself held deep fears about the survival of a woman’s individuality after marriage. She described the wedding vows as “the licence to kill, and the confetti ritual is simply a symbol of her own disintegration” (175).

The erotic scenes in *Man of Straw* reveal the power relations between the characters. The extent to which characters are able to leave their selves behind and to take the gift of the other's 'self' and honour it is a realization of the unity they are able to achieve. Miranda and Colin exhibit this achievement of unity in the erotic scene at the beach. In this scene each is held in the space of intersubjectivity, that "space in-between that is created by shared feeling and discovery" (Benjamin 130). In this emotional space they gain the freedom to play—without boundaries, without self. This experience of "shared feeling and discovery" is where the joy of the erotic act, the *jouissance*, arrives. It is, on one hand, all sensation, and at the same time, all emotion; the truly unified couple, as Beauvoir explains it, "are aware of themselves as flesh and as spirit" (qtd. in Bergoffen 162). When one person brings to the sexual act the determination not to give up the self to the other, but to keep the self and also claim the other, the act becomes one of domination. As the relationship moves away from mutuality and respect, it moves away from joy.

Monique Wittig argues that to write about Eros a writer needs an awareness of the subversive possibilities of language. By writing about marriage and the erotic relationships between couples in *Man of Straw*, Cowley holds our society out for us to examine. *Man of Straw*, which could be read at one level as the consequences of an adulterous marriage which leads to the death of a young woman, can also be read as an indictment against society. The story is an indictment of the values of the conventional neighbours, who, representing the voice of society, value what retains the

status quo over the desire of a person to be valued as a subject in his or her own right and recognized as such by an equal other.

Eros has the potential to rupture family bonds. This rupturing can bring social transformation to allow for that possibility of “freedom of one in the other” that unites people “in an inward manner” (Hegel 171). The harshest penalty of this rupturing is death; in this text the deaths of Rosalind and Caliban represent the enforcement of this penalty. Betrayal is the second penalty the Jonsson and Howes families endure. After betrayal, loss—of home or community—ensues from the rupturing of family structures. But against these losses is the loss of subjectivity: the joyousness in the embodied desiring subject and the chance for shared intentions in intersubjectivity with an other, for “that game through light and shade” where Miranda and Colin “flew easily, carelessly, no turn impossible in that endless green-and-blue film” (48). The fluidity and weightlessness evoked in this erotic scene points to the possibility of two people interacting without the heaviness of expectations or of unequal positions of power. To have the possibility of this means the inequality imposed by the social order must be broken, and betrayal is a sure way to do this. Peggy Manouka, in her article on Eros and betrayal, explains that: “Every individual must be liberated from all those aspects that maintain loyalty to an image that does not fulfil the individual expectations but the expectations of the social environment or other people’s desires” (145).

In the early scenes of *Man of Straw*, Miranda and Ros experience the joyousness of knowing themselves as a subject, as “what they essentially are in themselves” (Hegel 171). Their experience of oneness in the landscape

reflects back to them a self-knowing of their own worth and joy: Ros, who imagined she could “soar”, who at the party saw “Everything was beautiful...She looked good. She knew she did”, and Miranda in the street, “...in love with everything, everything” (97, 67, 117). The opposite of that joyousness at being alive is the body that has “given up all but breathing” (149). If Eros is blocked it leads to a headless “block of concrete”, a body as a “huge, unicellular mass of protoplasm” (149). It leads to Miranda who didn’t care about the mosquitoes, they could “have her if they wanted” and who saw “nothing but empty streets” (91,153). Subjectivity must be restored to the desiring body and the consciousness associated with that body must be recognized as equal and free before unity is possible.

Unity does not arise merely from physical union but from an ethical decision to consciously value and recognize another person. The erotic, as sexual union, moves into a philosophical territory. Bergoffen explains, “Patriarchy would have us believe that our erotic relationships are natural/animal. Beauvoir shows us that the erotic belongs to the realm of the moral” (180). It is this “realm of the moral”, the philosophical importance of the erotic act, that society needs to support. “I do not think that a just community can come into being,” Bergoffen argues, “ if the meanings of the erotic are not brought to bear on the realities of social, political and ethical life” (222). It is these realities that Cowley addresses in *Man of Straw*, using the seductive and subversive powers of language to describe Eros in the lives of her characters. For a society to honour the erotic, it means a character has the freedom to first express subjectivity within his or herself, then to experience intersubjectivity, unity, with another.

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