

BARBARA

Cilka Žagar

I wrote this book for our children and their children so they will know how we came to be here.

I wish to thank my family for the patience and encouragement. I thank my many friends for sharing their experiences, ideas and opinions with me.

I am grateful to those who read my unfinished manuscript and commented on it. I specially thank Robyn Lincoln for her generous support.

Mark Twain when visiting Australia said: It is the goodness of god that in this country we have three things: freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and the freedom never to practise either of them.

Barbara

I shall be telling this with a sigh,
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood and
I-
I took the one less travelled by
And that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost

Prologue

"Paula, I have to tell someone," says Barbara.

"Why me?" laughs Paula stretched in the sun on the banana chair. The colourful leaves are slowly falling on the lawn and the mellow autumn warmth is pleasant.

"I feel safe with you and I can tell it as it was, I don't have to twist my thoughts to please you," Barbara tries to find the right reason and the words.

"Are you afraid that your people would love you less if they knew?" asks Paula.

"I feel that you like me."

"Many people like you," Paula reminded.

"But they don't like the same me you like, they like me because they are my people. I like you because you are not my people." Barbara reasons.

"You are a very likeable person," assures Paula.

"I always gave away the best apple yet I never felt generous," admits Barbara.

"Why did you try to be so good?"

"Because I had a good husband." Barbara becomes lost in her thoughts. "I blame the mothers who tell their daughters to please their husbands."

"I wonder why women always blame other women for whatever is wrong in their lives. Especially their mothers," said Paula.

"We learned to be women from our mothers. They learned from their mothers."

"What is wrong with that?," asked Paula

"No woman could ever be good enough for a good man. You kill yourself trying to be good enough," Barbara tries to sort out her anger.

"You are good enough," says Paula.

"I hide behind a polite smile because I am afraid to swear at the bastards who fucked my life."

"Wasn't it a good life?" Paula tries to reason.

"I dealt with the rage and the guilt inside me."

"You didn't like the way you felt."

"I hated myself because I fucked up my children's lives. They will blame their confused parents for all their troubles," Barbara laughs through tears.

"Ivan was never confused. He lived by his rules and he made everyone believe that he was right," says Paula.

"My rule was to please him."

"The poor man only did what he thought he had to do. Did you love him?"

"It is hard to love somebody you are scared shitless of. His arms were my prison. I dreamed of escaping. I dreamed of other men," adds Barbara defiantly.

"We dream of things we haven't. If you could do it all again, Paula tried to look from the other end.

"Yes, I think I would marry him again?" Barbara knows what Paula was saying.

"You are angry because your mother's rules changed."

"We lived by the rules that were proved worthless."

"Do you really believe that they are worthless?"

"Nobody respects them."

"Does that make them bad?"

*There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds.*

Tennyson

Father Damian

Only a small number of Slovenian migrants were scattered over the sparsely populated Australian continent, when Damian's ship arrived to Melbourne just before Christmas 1954.

Damian's bishop in Austria wrote eight addresses of Australian Slovenians into a little pocket book and gave them to the new Franciscan missionary. These migrants were to introduce Damian to the rest of Slovenians in Australia. Young Damian soon became a travelling priest and the first and only link between Slovenia, God and Australian Slovenians.

Damian became genuinely interested in the people he baptised, married and buried. He listened as they explained their relationship with god and he concluded that people created god in their own image and with their own measure of understanding. God understood them just as they were because he was just like them and only as perfect as they tried to be.

Slovenians often came complaining to Damian that god did not do what he should have done. Damian again and again assured his flock that everybody will get their just rewards in heaven.

Damian usually stayed with Ivan and his wife Barbara over night when he came to Linden, the little town on the outskirts of Sydney. Their friendship grew firm over the last thirty years and they felt much like a family.

Damian first met Ivan in Cooma in 1961. They were young then, full of idealism, ambition, determination and faith in the future. Australia gave them a second chance and they wanted to do things right.

At the time of their meeting Ivan prepared the little shire hall for that first Slovenian New Year celebration in Cooma. During the festivities they also organised the time for Damian's first mass for Slovenian migrants from the bush around Snowy Mountains. Damian noticed that most Slovenians, indeed most migrants in Australia then, were in their twenties and early thirties, full of zest for living and ready to build a better future.

Damian realised even then that one day Ivan would lead Australian Slovenians.

Like most adolescents in the eighties and nineties, Slovenian children rarely attended church. Australian masses seemed more poorly attended every year but Damian's congregation in Linden grew steadily. Ivan kept reminding them until it became a habit for them all to meet once a month at the Slovenian mass in Linden. The kids brought their friends, boyfriends and girlfriends, husbands and wives and lately their children. The young generation did not recognise political and social divisions in Slovenian community so it was easy for them to enjoy this important social occasion. Slovenians of all social classes and ages chatted in front of the church after the mass and they knew that they belonged together.

“The visiting paid off,” thought Damian.

Nineteen years old Damian was in his second year of theology in Ljubljana when Hitler attacked Yugoslavia in April 1941. Germans and Italians split and annexed Slovenia without much resistance. Sick of old Serbian dominance many even welcomed victorious occupiers.

Damian’s own sister befriended a German officer and probably became his mistress. Damian later heard that partisans shaved her head, raped her and killed her for betraying her nation. She was only a kid falling in love with a smiling face and a shiny uniform. War is war.

When Germany attacked Russia one million Slovenians were caught between Hitler and Stalin. Hitler promised to fight Bolsheviks and protect Christianity and Stalin promised the Utopia of equality and freedom. Nobody in Slovenia was allowed to remain neutral and the small nation once again began to fight each other.

Damian joined the anti-Communist movement. As a theology student he could not possibly join communists. At the beginning they were just little group of village men trying to protect their homes and families.

Damian became a young curator in the better organised national force of Home-guards in 1943. They met in the fortress of the old castle in Turjak to plan their war strategy.

On the eight of September 1943 Italy capitulated and Italian soldiers were ordered to give their weapons to Tito’s resistance group. Many Italian soldiers also joined Tito’s resistance.

Damian and his friends realised that Tito’s communist revolution was succeeding and that the Home-guard resistance was hopeless. The allies weren’t allowed to help Home-guards because Home-guards did not accept Stalin. The Home-guards in Turjak surrendered after heavy casualties. Their more influential leaders were tortured, shamed and killed but a group of young boys was allowed to leave in the company of retreating Italians.

From Italy they went to Austria. Damian could have gone from Austria to Argentina with his friends, but he wavered, utterly confused, until it was too late. Bewildered by the war and the post-war political manoeuvrings, changing public opinions, church’s directives and his conscience, he came the closest ever to losing his faith. He lost his parents, his sister and his friends in a war he knew nothing about. He simply did not know what to believe. He wanted to do the right thing for Slovenia and for his god.

Damian saw the tyranny of Bolshevism and he witnessed the deceit and horror that was Hitler. The church leaders, like most others at the beginning, were misled by Hitler’s propaganda and false assurances. Like everybody else, Damian’s superiors turned against Hitler when they realised who Hitler was. The world turned against Hitler and many embraced communism. Damian wondered if there was another side, the right side in the terrible war.

Damian continued his theology studies in Austria and became a priest in Rozna Dolina, (Flower Valley) a Southern, Slovenian part of Austria. Immensely interested in the fate of Slovenians along the Yugoslav-Austrian border, he spent all his time visiting and listening to their experiences. His beloved Carinthia provided him with a new spiritual awakening. People here were good, they toiled and prayed as they have done for centuries.

The bishop recognised Damian's empathy for the Slovenians outside their homeland and he sent the young priest first to America and later to Australia.

Damian returned to Slovenia in 1990. During the Sunday sermon he spoke to Sydney Slovenians about his visit.

"I have not been to Slovenia for forty seven years," said Damian and paused so his words would sink in.

"This year I returned to Slovenia to be at the Reconciliation mass in Kocevski Rog. Things are changing in Slovenia." He stopped to look at every face and the eyes of his parishioners told him that they were eager for him to continue.

"After I said mass on the graves of my dead friends an old woman dressed in black came to me. Father, she said, my husband and my three sons are buried here, please pray with me for them. I said to her: your husband and your sons have been with God for a long time, they do not need our prayers. Let us pray for those that killed them. The killers need our prayers because the faces of those they murdered keep haunting them. And she started out loud: For those that killed my husband and my sons, God have mercy. Our Father, who art in heaven... I feel better, said the old woman after the prayer. We both felt stronger by forgiving. Those that died, didn't die in vain after all."

Damian knew that Slovenian rulers needed prayers. On one side they were threatened with the political opposition and on the other was the old age and god. Both seemed to call for punishment. They were afraid to meet their maker and those they killed or ordered to have killed.

After the mass Damian came to Ivan's Linden home. The two men had to talk. Damian drove his car up the garden drive and into the shelter of a linden tree on the side. He stood for a moment in the splendour of greenery. Nobody failed to notice the fragrances and the colours of Ivan's garden. People drove by to take photographs. There was a prayerful, deep serenity among the buzzing insects and the feeding birds. The lizard crossed Damian's path and disappeared into the shrub. The native and foreign trees and shrubs blended into the landscape that seemed to be here from ever. The tennis court and the swimming pool were hidden at the back among the manicured lawns. A man came once a week to mow the grass and take the rubbish away but the rest was Ivan's work. It became a ritual for Barbara to come into the garden every morning so Ivan showed her new blooms and buds. She smelled his roses and praised his efforts. The grounds sloped down from all sides and the white house stood like on a pedestal. Damian spent many happy days in Ivan's home and he knew how hard Ivan worked. He deserved everything he had.

Damian was a frequent guest at Barbara's dinner table. He said the grace, ceremoniously tasted the wine, offered toasts and compliments. He loved good food and there was none better than from the Slovenian kitchen.

The silence never bothered Ivan or Damian because neither man enjoyed idle chatter. The long table covered with the starched white table-cloth provided enough personal space so they could choose to be silent or to talk as the process of eating and thinking continued.

"It was easier to fight the system than to forgive them," said Ivan and Damian knew that the words related to his sermon.

"Fighting is human, forgiving is divine," smiled Damian using the old cliché.

“I need time,” said Ivan.

“Our time is running out.” Damian helped himself with generous portions of roast, salads, potatoes and noodles.

“Nobody cooks like Slovenian women,” he said looking at Barbara.

“It’s been 32 years, Damian,” said Ivan ignoring the compliment.

“47 years for me, Ivan, and I am a priest, teaching forgiveness. The first step is always the hardest, they made the first step towards democracy in Slovenia.” Damian realised that in reality nothing changed, but an attempt was made to right the wrongs.

“Democracy? Communists still hold all the power. They still don’t allow anyone to talk about communism. They insist that we forget our own history,” yelled Ivan.

“Communism is dead, let bigger powers worry about its burial,” said Damian and both men searched for words to explain why they were concerned.

Ivan lost interest in political development at home until in 1988 he read about the four young men imprisoned in Ljubljana for their anti-Communist and anti Yugoslav activities. The men demanded human rights and Ivan felt strong affinity with them. He organised a protest march against their imprisonment and he carried the flag through the streets towards Yugoslav embassy. The names of the imprisoned men ignited a spark of hope for a new and pure spring in Slovenian politics. Ivan simply had to hope that somehow one day the good will win over the bad.

Gorbachev in the Soviet Union and Jansa in Slovenia made it possible for Ivan to dream again.

“The old communists should go out and the young ones should take over. People like Jansa and his friends who were in prison for their beliefs. They have no past to trouble them,” said Ivan.

“We all have our past to deal with, we are all the children of those that split the nation during the war. It is up to us to unite it. We must put our priorities in order. This is a time of nationalism. We want to get out of Yugoslavia and form a nation state,” said Damian. He only half believed his own words. He came to the conclusion that too much democracy like too much of anything else can kill you. A person is not safe where everybody lives by his own democratic rules. How could the young ever learn to make the right choices without the wisdom of their elders? Damian was afraid that the rule of law was taken out of democracy and the best of democracies were beginning to deteriorate into anarchy.

“Those that gave the orders for killing and those that keep the lists and those that killed, they are united because they can’t afford not to be. Their secrets makes them strong. They prepared the way for their sons and daughters,” said Ivan.

“Our survival as a nation depends on reconciliation. Our population is decreasing because we don’t like each other anymore,” said Damian.

“How can you ask those that suffered all their lives to reconcile with those that still keep tormenting them,” said Ivan.

Damian was elated by the prospect of independence for Slovenia but he began to realise that nations became increasingly economically interdependent. Political independence

within the united Europe meant little and independence within the New World Order meant even less. The multinational millionaires ruled the world, they looked for cheap labour and a rich market. Gold was their god. The world became a market place.

Maybe even independence wasn't all it was cracked up to be. A single veto in the Security Council could destroy any good intention The United nations or NATO countries may have. The big nations manoeuvred for power and nobody cared for a little spot on the map called Slovenia. Unless Slovenia, of course, served some of their own aims. Slovenia has never been independent but it has always been a coveted jewel in somebody else's crown.

"We don't deserve to be independent until we are prepared to examine our national consciences," said Ivan, unhappy about Damian's sudden turn around. They used to criticise the Yugoslav regime in the past but now Ivan felt abandoned by the reconciling Damian.

"One thing at the time. We must get out of Yugoslavia with as little fuzz as possible. We have the rest of our future to fix our democracy," said Damian.

"I don't trust communists to get us out of this mess, Yugoslav communism kept them in power," said Ivan.

"They realise that their days are numbered, they have to change or go. Nothing lasts forever. Whatever we do, we must do as one. Fighting each other would be a national suicide," said Damian.

"Germans punished their war criminals but communist criminals are allowed to change. They don't want to talk about history because they are afraid and ashamed of it. They say that history is dead but those that suffered are still everywhere. We all suffered. Mothers who lost their children after the war remember them every day."

Barbara was frightened because Ivan put down his cutlery and yelled at his dining guest. Ivan yelled a lot at his family but Barbara always covered up for him. Other people didn't know anything about his yelling.

"Nothing will bring back our dead," said Damian quietly, not knowing how to make Ivan see the futility of his anger.

"That's why murderers have to be punished," said Ivan.

"There is no perfect society, Ivan," said Damian, thoughtfully choosing the words with which he wanted to explain his sudden change. "You see, a long time ago people carved little wooden fertility idols and prayed to them. They needed to believe. Later people discovered science. They looked back shaking their heads at wooden Gods, Baal was forgotten, it was ridiculous to believe in the wooden carving. They started to believe in people, in the human brain, in science. They even fashioned Gods in their own image. Every generation had its own Caligula. But their Gods died and people condemned them. We knew of Hitler and Stalin, we knew Tito."

"Christians never worshipped idols," interjected Ivan.

Damian couldn't tell Ivan that he often struggled to reconcile his faith with the rules of his own church. He realised that the church in the past often ordered their believers to close the eyes to the evidence of the truth because the evidence would undermine their power. Power was always important, powerless could not change the world or maintain the order.

“After a time our ideas become old fashioned and ridiculous. People become ashamed of their past beliefs. We have to allow ourselves to change but we still need to believe. Let’s hope that brotherly love.. Believe me there is such a thing, there is Jesus in every person. People want to love, people need to be good,” Damian tried to find words with which he would take the bitterness out of Ivan.

“Don’t talk to me about love and brotherhood, I escaped from brotherhood. You escaped before Yugoslav brotherhood, you know nothing about it.”

“Slovenians need the healing of love. We need hope and faith in the future. Without love we cannot sustain ourselves as a nation. We need to experience the divine side of our being. The leaders want to improve the system, they do the best their nature would allow them to do,” said Damian.

“For THEMSELVES. The system served communists and they’ll make democracy serve them even better,” said Ivan.

“Nationalism, religion, private enterprise, union with the West, they are all external expressions of the need for justice and order. People want to be good but they still need to follow the leaders and the stars. Our future depends on the stars that will emerge,” said Damian.

“In 1990 Slovenians still fly a communist star on their flag,” said Ivan.

“Many newly created democracies fly a flag with the hole in it. They cut out the star,” said Damian.

“That’s what we should do,” said Ivan. “I read that Tito’s last wish was not to engrave a star into his white marble tombstone. Many dead communists were honoured by the star engraved into their tombstones. Did Tito want to tell us something?”

“Communism left people without ideals but they can’t exist in the vacuum. Most embraced nationalism, because they needed to embrace something. Nations can’t exist without ideals. The hole in the flag is a symbol of that emptiness.”

Damian wandered what was god’s plan for Slovenians. Long ago through his ministry Damian discovered that people didn’t really want to be like god, they wanted to be god. They wanted to be admired, loved and worshipped forever and ever. Did god really want to be loved and worshipped? Was god jealous of people, did he tear them apart, so they would forever try to become what he was? Did god give his people the commandments they couldn’t keep, to humble them? Did he want to keep them busy striving for perfection only he could achieve? Did he program them to long for the union with him, to be where they were in the first place?

“People are greedy and ruthless but they all have the insatiable wish for goodness and perfection.” Damian wondered if God’s jealous wish for love was only an invention of jealous people who killed each other in god’s name.

“Take some more, please,” smiled Barbara. Damian enjoyed this Slovenian custom where the women tried to persuade their guests to eat more than they needed. Ivan looked through the window into the garden he created. The satisfaction of creating something so alive and vibrantly beautiful calmed him.

“I am not going home while the bloody symbol of the revolution shames our flag,” said Ivan after a while.

“I dislike the emptiness most,” said Damian.

“My flag has no hole and no star,” said Ivan. “I hope the church will pull us through. There would be no democracy without the pope’s help.”

“Let’s not leave it to any one person or party.” said Damian.

“Eighty per cent of Slovenians declared themselves Catholic, they listen to the voice from Rome,” argued Ivan.

“The church is only as good as the people in it, or rather as good as the people who run it. The church is only as wise as their leaders. The cloth does not protect us from the mistakes and corruption, you know. Even church leaders have ambitions, they are only human.” Damian followed the reconciliation between the church and the Slovenian government and wandered what each side expected from the other.

“What do you mean,” asked Ivan perplexed.

“The church made mistakes in the past,” said Damian quietly. He didn’t want to shatter the simple faith of this firm believer with the memories and thoughts he himself still failed to understand completely. The church suffered in the end whoever came to power. Germans moved Slovenian priests and intellectuals to concentration camps because they knew that without their leadership Slovenians would be lost. Communists killed those influential people that were anti-Communists. Without the Christian leaders Bolsheviks had a better chance of taking power in Slovenia after the war. Lost in the ideologies nobody cared about the little nation being destroyed.

Damian remembered the days before the war. The Holy See signed the Concordat with Hitler in 1933. All Europe was with Hitler then, they knew the danger of Bolshevism but Hitler didn’t show his true colours yet. Hitler promised to honour the church and co-operate with it. He promised order, work and prosperity to nations crippled by the First World War.

Instead of being the voice of Christ, the church leaders soon realised that, they were fast becoming a voice for Hitler. Gradually they realised that Hitler was a monster and that they joined forces with the Devil himself.

Hitler told the world that he was fighting the atheist Bolsheviks and the Jews, the main carriers of Bolshevism. Many young believers collaborated with Hitler because the clergy told them to fight against godless communism. Damian reasoned that Vatican never condoned the genocide of Jews. He wondered if millions of them died because some power mad, sadistic elements just couldn’t stop themselves from killing. Did their leaders become mad dogs baying for blood. Was all that preordained somehow.

“People gradually accept any change, what’s more, they learn to own and defend the change they first resisted,” said Damian. Barbara offered sweets but they declined until later. Her delicious strudel and sweet cream were something to look forward to as Ivan and Damian trashed out their differences.

“I never change,” said Ivan.

“We have to change whether we like it or not.” Damian realised that the church leaders distanced themselves from Hitler and quietly worked against the evils of the war. But it was too late for them to ever wash their hands completely of everything that was Hitler.

Damian wandered if Slovenian Church in 1990 intentionally gave this same tacit approval to Slovenian Bolsheviks. Did they both hope to recover the power, the wealth and the prestige if they co-operated and presented a united front. Were they making each other strong by reconciliation? Did they hope to rule together like in those very beginnings of Christianity when spiritual leaders were the aristocracy of Slovenia? The revered Count Celjski was after all only a licentious philanderer but such was aristocracy.

It was frightening how pragmatic political manoeuvring went on endlessly all over the world.

Catholics in Slovenia were made ashamed of their collaboration with Hitler for the last fifty years. Anti-Communist families have been splattered with mud until nothing but mud could be seen. Have communists finally come to see how it feels if one has to live one's whole life in exile unrecognised and unfulfilled? Could a price be paid for all this suffering?

Tito was Stalin's servant and his historians wrote their own heroic history.

Have communists finally recognised the fact that Stalin and Hitler were the same. They started as allies at the beginning of the war. By the end of the war both men proved to be cold blooded dictators and murderers. To subdue nations, Hitler killed during the war, Stalin killed after the war.

Caught between Nazism and communism Slovenians only tried to stay alive yet the two dictators split them into heroes and traitors

Damian wandered if Slovenian communists, former Stalin's collaborators, would keep washing their hands of Stalin for the next fifty years? Was that the reason why they refused to talk about Slovenian history? Were they trying to bury their collaboration with Stalin together with their own sins? Were they also humiliated by their mistakes? Did they finally realise what damage they have done to Slovenian nation by ostracising thousands of people in their midst. Did they realise that the nation was dying without faith? Maybe the Premier and the Bishop had to stand together to heal the nation.

“I don't like the bishop and the Premier standing together,” said Ivan following his own thoughts.

Damian remembered how people followed Hitler because he pointed a finger of blame at Jews. In the same way Slovenian Premier in 1990 blamed Serbs for everything that was wrong in Yugoslavia and people followed the communist premier. People like to blame others, hate unites them faster than love. Former Slovenian communists now vehemently denied that they ever worked for brotherhood, they claimed to have always been nationalists.

Wiser now, Damian watched all events with suspicion. In different guises and with different methods materialistic consumerist, international Bolshevism was still winning. The world served the human greed. And the Church in Slovenia remained silent. Damian wandered if Christ would be silent.

Catholic Church had always been international and closely tied to Rome. Other Christians had their national churches. There was Russian orthodox and Serbian orthodox and Greek orthodox and Bulgarian Orthodox Church. The national, historical and religious union seemed to bind people more than Catholic Church bound the diverse ethnic and racial groups. The orthodox governments supported their orthodox churches and their churches supported the government.

“The communists will shuffle their positions to camouflage their intentions. Yugoslav ambassadors will become Slovenian ambassadors, they might swap their postings to fool people.” It infuriated Ivan that Damian stopped fighting.

“They might do that,” said Damian. “But we must not lose sight of the bigger picture. We must think of our independence. What is more, we must act honourably and with dignity. By promoting our nation we must not demean others because the history will be our judge.”

“Nothing in history happens by chance, everything is carefully planned. What do you know about Cyril and Methodius?” asked Ivan.

“Are you talking about the missionaries who brought Christianity to Slavic nations in ninth century?” smiled Damian.

“Cyril and Methodius also devised Cyrillic script that is used in Serbia and Russia. After the war communists only allowed the priests who were members of Cyril and Methodius group to preach to our children. Why?” asked Ivan and hastened to explain. “This little symbolic gesture was to bring Catholic Slovenia closer to Orthodox Serbia and Russia. Same script, same text, same people.”

Damian silently considered the situation. Throughout history the Slavs from the Balkan split their loyalties between the East and the West in every conflict. Yugoslavia became a front-line in every war. Damian wondered who will fight who in the next war? If the Slavs united against the West where will Slovenia go? Will it stand with the Western Catholic nations against the Orthodox Russian supporters or with Slavs against the West. Slovenians have been under both and with both and split between both powers. Will the next war be a religious or national or racial madness? Damian wondered if it would ever be possible for Slovenians to unite and go all together with either side.

They were aware that Muslims, left in the heart of Balkan by the long forgotten Turkish rulers, could ignite the spark of war. Damian wondered if these Muslims were really Serbs and Croats who over the centuries of Turkish invasions accepted Muslim religion to save their lives.

“We have to get away from the barbaric South and stick to the Catholic world,” Ivan brought Damian back into the present.

“Few people ever think of themselves as equal. There will always be those one considers themselves superior to and those that consider one inferior. Do you want to be a king among beggars or a beggar among kings,” Damian spoke his thoughts quietly but Ivan felt chastised for putting himself above other nations.

“I find it hard to identify with their barbaric, vulgar behaviour, I can’t tolerate sloppiness and stupidity,” protested Ivan as an explanation.

“There is a place for all persons,” cautioned Damian.

“Given a choice I’d lean to the West any time. I think the church should play a more decisive role,” said Ivan.

“The old church offered some certainty and security but these days everybody tries to interpret the Bible and nobody seems certain any more. Including me,” said Damian and immediately regretted the words. He changed the subject and tried to repair any damage he may have caused to Ivan’s faith.

“The priests’ interpretation of the Gospel, will have to change. Jesus said: If they take your coat, give them your shirt as well. We learned to suffer silently, but Jesus did not want us to be a doormat. He told us to stand up unperturbed against evil, because our stand will bring the evil to the notice of more powerful nations who will want to correct the injustice. When you stand cold and naked the world will judge your attacker. If he strikes your right cheek, show him the left one as well. When you are small and powerless you have to bring the injustice to the notice of the world.”

“Are you saying that we should just wait quietly for someone to rescue us,” asked Ivan.

“I am afraid, Ivan, that Slovenians will die before we’ll be allowed to be free,” said Damian. “Let us only hope that when the war comes this time, we will all stand together. There is absolutely no room for division.

“There are only two millions of us, we can’t afford to lose anyone,” agreed Ivan.

“The inevitable conflict will erupt like a volcano but we must count on the goodness in people and on our unity,” insisted Damian. “We must get out of Yugoslavia before the war begins. It will be a bloody war. So far we are the only nation within Yugoslavia clean of hatred towards other nations. Let’s keep it that way.”

“Serbs and Croats in the past have dug pits that are filled with too many slaughtered bodies. There is no hope for them to unite sincerely with each other,” agreed Ivan.

“That’s why we must forget who is who in Slovenia as long as they are Slovenians. We must get out of Yugoslavia before it explodes. We must not risk any real animosity towards us,” said Damian.

“It irks me that bastards will die unpunished. I must irk them because I will always be a reminder to them that they were communists,” persisted Ivan.

“You have to give them a chance, the only real enemy Slovenians have is each other,” said Damian.

“If they shoot me in a dark alley I will never know,” said Ivan. “Is that what turning the other cheek is?” Ivan had a bad feeling about all this, it was nothing he could explain but there was bitterness in his heart that he couldn’t reason out. It was a premonition.

“When you go home, Ivan, please go and see my uncle in Rozna Dolina in Austrian Carinthia. He will introduce you to real Slovenians,” said Damian suddenly changing the subject again. He often remembered his people in Carinthia.

“They accept what rights Austrian government is willing to bestow on them but they know who they are. They have lived there in the millennium before Christ. Their roots are in the land, the faith unites them, they stick to traditions.”

“Much like us in Australia,” said Ivan.

“Not quite,” said Damian. “Slovenian roots are deeper in Carinthia than anywhere else. Meeting them also gives a new meaning to faith. Austrian Slovenians never ran away, they held their ground as a minority within Western democracies and neither the communism nor religion ever split them.”

Ivan didn't tell anyone yet that he decided to go home and that he was scared to go. Did Damian read Ivan's thoughts? Did Damian also know that Ivan was searching for an inner peace and a final purpose to his life. Proud of his achievements and riches Ivan failed to relax and enjoy the fruits of his labour properly.

*We owe respect to the living;
to the dead we owe nothing but truth*
Voltaire.

MIHA'S FUNERAL

Miha was sixty three when he died in 1990. About two hundred Slovenians from Linden and Sydney came to his funeral. A hired pianist played Amazing Grace in the church by but nobody sang. Amazing grace had no meaning for them, they would have cried much more easily singing Slovenian funeral songs with father Damian. Greta was in charge of her husband's body and she wanted Australian service. She hired the pall bearers, the priest and the cars. Greta and her three daughters bravely faced the crowd that wanted to share Miha's life even in death.

"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life," intoned the Australian priest who conducted the funeral.

Barbara stood between her husband Ivan and the Franciscan Damian beside the mound of red clay that was dug out to make the resting place for Miha. Her navy blue dress and Ivan's grey suit expressed respect rather than grief. Father Damian wore priestly black.

"Rest in peace," read Barbara on the nearby tombstone and realised that rest and peace were the two most elusive quantities.

"Which one of us will be next?" wandered Ivan, happy that he helped reconcile Miha with God. While Miha's Austrian wife Greta went shopping he got Father Damian, to bring the last Holy Communion for Miha from the Slovenian church in Sydney. The three men prayed together. It was important to Ivan to deliver Miha to God before it was too late. He felt responsible for his people who followed him to Linden. They wouldn't be here if he didn't build a town for them, with the church and cemetery on a hill just on the outskirts of town. Ivan remembered all the arguments he had with the town planning committee about the site for the Catholic Church. Other churches were built randomly all over the town but Ivan's Catholic Church was built where he wanted it.

Ivan wanted the cemetery nearby like they had at home so people could visit their departed after mass. He wanted his children to come and show the marble monument, bearing his name, to their children so they will know that they belonged here.

It worried Ivan that his children never experienced death and mourning. Far away in Slovenia their relations were born and died but his children could not visit their graves and learn to show respect for the dead. How will they ever learn and how will they teach their children things they never learned. His children never cried with friends and family at the funeral. They never bonded themselves with those that passed away. They had no secret site in Australia so Ivan had to see that they identified with a graveside of their ancestors before it was too late.

It was rather sad that Miha never came to church in Linden, he was the only Slovenian not coming to mass when Damian came. Greta refused to go to the Slovenian church while they lived in Sydney and he refused to go to any other, so they stopped going to mass altogether. Ivan prayed reverently for Miha's soul.

“Whoever follows me, will have eternal life, I am the resurrection and the life.” The priest sprayed holy water on the hole in the ground and on the mourners waiting their turn. “Let the perpetual light shine upon him. May his soul and all the souls of faithfully departed through the mercy of God rest in peace.”

Barbara wandered what special thing really happened that moment when Miha’s live body became suddenly dead. Where did all his thoughts and feelings vanish? Would the life forces that were put to rest ever re-activate themselves by some unexplained cycle of events?

Miha was the first Slovenian in Linden cemetery. Barbara shuddered and became suddenly sad as she realised that she hardly knew Miha, that in fact she did not know him at all. She didn’t know anybody well, in all her life she didn’t get to know anyone well. Married to Ivan for over thirty years, she didn’t even know him. He was a man she cursed and loved and hated and obeyed. Barbara wandered what Ivan was thinking as they worked, ate and slept together? She kept busy all her life because inactivity frightened her. Idleness was like standing on the edge of death. She had to keep moving to keep out of trouble, to exhaust her body and to quieten her soul and please her husband.

Looking back, Barbara saw no proof of her existence, her restless search was all she was aware of. Did people search in order to live. Parents of all generations pointed the way, they shone the light on solutions, but their children needed to search in the dark tunnel with the light shining enticingly at the end. Wisdom only shines when discovered by one solitary person. We embrace what we discover and carry it as a treasure to pass on. Searching, embracing and passing on, was that all? Barbara remembered the people near death reporting that they saw the light at the end of the tunnel. Maybe near death the light becomes brighter, maybe there really is god smiling like a benevolent parent clapping to a child at the end of the race track. Is it the light of wisdom that shines at the end?

Ivan trusted in God and God rewarded him with many riches, but as God looked at Barbara’s restless soul, his finger was constantly pointing at imperfections. She covered up, like band aids on sores she placed silk and lace on her sins, only she knew that God knew and saw through.

“In a few years we will all probably rest together in this cemetery without ever getting to know each other,” she tried to dismiss the gloomy thoughts.

Barbara looked at the mourners standing around the pile of flowers on the freshly dug dirt and with refreshed/interest she tried to find the real people behind the solemn faces. She wandered what made their hearts glad and what pain they remembered. Were they also haunted by love? Was the love under their sober, ageing faces tempestuously tantalising, thrilling and pure, divine and passionate, fresh, unique and promising. Did love make them forget the loneliness and meaninglessness of their lives and the wrinkles? Were all people really so much the same? Was god another word for love?

Hidden behind the sun glasses Barbara could look directly at people’s faces as she tried to read their thoughts. Although she never came close to any of them, she knew that without them she simply wouldn’t be alive. There were moments when they all touched somehow. Some shared fleeting moments and exchanged the words carelessly while others shared their whole existence. They followed each other to the grave because they only lived in each other’s eyes and were caught in the web of love.

A few women wore black scarves tied under their chins piously. They reminded Barbara of the peasant women in Slovenia after the war, they wore black scarves because they were mourning for their sons and husbands. The Queen of England wore a scarf tied under a chin like that, only her scarf had happy flowery patterns.

Some women used this opportunity to buy a new hat, others had their hair set. Men seemed hidden in the anonymity of their dark suits, white shirts and black ties. Barbara knew them by the clothes they wore, by the colour of their skin, by the house they lived in and the jobs they did. She exchanged words with some but she never shared her dreams with any.

A few Aboriginal women sobbed audibly and Barbara wondered what memories of Miha made them sad. Maybe there was something in their culture that made them cry for strangers. Maybe death scared them. In black and white finery they mopped the tears from their red eyes while Miha's own family stoically endured the ritual. Why should they cry and pretend to hold on the person that stopped existing?

Miha's son Michael didn't make it to the funeral. He ran away from home years ago at the age of fifteen. Miha prayed for him to return, Miha and his only son used to go fishing down the river. Neither of them was a fisherman, they just liked to be together, to talk, to watch the birds and animals. Sitting among the red gum trees on the riverbank they even enjoyed the companionable silence.

A month after he left, Michael's sister Marta decided to move into his room. She wanted her own furniture so Miha took out Michael's heavy chest of drawers. Stuck behind one of the drawers he found a little tin box neatly tied with a rubber band. He realised that it was hidden there, so he opened it and found it full of seeds. He put the tin in his pocket, the seeds were a little bigger than radish seeds but so similar.

Years ago Miha and Michael planted radishes and watered them together waiting until they were ready to be picked. Both pretended to like radishes. Miha sowed the seeds from the tin into a little secret spot near the river where he often cried for his son. The police promised to let him know if they heard about Michael but teenagers run away from home all the time. Miha felt like a nuisance pestering the busy police. If he was a proper father his son wouldn't run away anyway. He wouldn't cause the police so much bother.

Miha stopped annoying the police when the plants started to grow. They weren't radishes, he realised that before of course, but he hoped. The seeds were too big. He was familiar with hemp, they grew it at home and used its flax for rope and linen, home spun hemp was also used for sheets. They used it for everything during the war when other material was hard to get. Only his son grew hemp for different reasons.

Miha sat under the tree drinking beer, smoking, coughing and remembering Michael while the plants grew tall. One day he chopped the flowering hemp tops, dried them and left the marijuana in the hollow tree not knowing what he would do with it. Miha wanted to get close to Michael so one day he rolled the crumpled leaves in the cigarette paper and smoked. At first he became elated, rebellious and light headed but his head soon started to spin and his stomach started to twist. The pain gripped him as he retched in the grass on the river-bank. He stayed near the river most of the night crying with his head buried into the grass. He cried for the last time in his life on the damp ground afraid to move and be sick again. He burned the rest of marijuana but he drank more and smoked a lot since then.

Miha's wife and daughters, dressed in imported black finery for the funeral, held black lace edged hankies to their eyes but never needed them to wipe tears. They were strong and taking it well. For the funeral the Marta dyed her hair black, Ingrid remained ash blond, Frida wore a lace scarf and Greta wore a wide brimmed black hat. Their eyes were on the hole in the ground, they had nothing in common with other mourners.

"We gathered to say farewell to our friend," Barbara caught the priest's words.

"Where is Miha going, whose friend was he?" Barbara would have liked to talk to someone about life and death? Were all living things aware of their living and dying? Was everybody aware of a losing struggle for the survival of love and loved ones? Were people the only ones cursed with the restlessness and the love of love?

"Dust to dust," the words echoed from the time immemorial and Barbara remembered her old friend doctor Mitja saying: "Every bit of dust that once was Adam is still circulating the Earth." So even the dust was forever changing its form in a life of its own. Miha might turn into a frog or a rock next. His dust might become a part of a tree or a bird and play tricks with them. Were souls just as playfully moving from one form to another, was everything really alive and nothing dead? Were jewels and stars and mountains made alive by love? Barbara searched for Mitja's face among the mourners and she found the old man solemnly looking to the ground. The oldest of the mourners he was aware that next time they might gather to farewell him.

"God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believed in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Barbara heard the words many times and the prayer became a part of the pattern of life. In the solemnity of prayer she wandered if death meant coming home to God, was it a reunion with the universe, becoming one with everything else? Was it becoming unafraid, because there was nothing else, because one was one with everything else, because apart from this oneness there was nothing to be afraid of. Was death the end of becoming? Was death the union of everything and everybody that couldn't unite during life, was that the everlasting life? Mitja once said that the meaning of life was life itself and the only function of living things was to reproduce and protect new life. He said that Vestal virgins thus protected perpetual fire which represented life.

Marko in a white shirt and black funeral suit stood on the other side of the grave next to Drago behind their Aboriginal wives. Barbara would have liked to talk to Marko sometimes about the long time ago when as children they were neighbours and so close to each other. She was afraid that he would remind her of things she was afraid of. He might have heard about things nobody here knew about.

For a few prayerful, silent moments Barbara returned to the enchanted kingdom of her childhood. She remembered how Marko, ten years old, barefooted boy then, seemed to her enormously big and brave and responsible, because she was only six or seven. They grazed their cows every morning before they went to school. The hay was stored for winter so the cattle could wander in the paddocks to use the last growth of grass before the winter set in. The war ended then and there was an air of excitement.

Barbara followed Marko as the first sun-rays glistened, caught in the morning dew on the weeping willows along the river. The ground was still white from the first autumn frost. Her feet, bare, muddy and wet, trembled and her hands were blue from cold. She followed her

cow and Marko, who carried a tin with burning charcoal in it. The meagre smoky warmth blew in her face. He was going to make a fire so they could keep warm and roast chestnuts for breakfast. He gathered twigs from the nearby forest while Barbara looked after the cattle. The twigs dried on the charcoal as Marko and Barbara blew into the red coals to keep them alive until the twigs burst into flames. Their faces touched in the smoke that brought tears to their eyes. One morning Marko took Barbara's hands and rubbed them between his to warm them up. Barbara remembered vividly that moment because she suddenly felt grown up and a uniquely separate person. That was the dawn of her awareness,

"He that loveth not, knoweth not God; for God is love," read the priest. The words from the Bible, imprinted on Barbara from the beginning, entered her consciousness again, but were still beyond her understanding.

Were people only a minute speck on the pattern of a beautiful, endless recreation of love and birth and growing and dying? Barbara felt the flight of birds stir the air. The movement reverberated within her and the scent of the bush enveloped her soul. She remembered her love for Marko and wondered if every love was just an added peace in the mosaic of one love. Was life only the beauty and the constancy of the changing pattern, the everlasting longing for sunsets and sunrises, the reaching out for the stars and the horizons? Love always seemed within reach but never close enough to hold and keep, it was an ever-growing awareness.

That morning with Marko Barbara became aware of the longing for love and for the places far and beyond. She never found the place or the love she searched for, but she never stopped travelling and hoping that one day she will return to the beginning, to the oneness that is love. Since that cold autumn morning nothing would ever be the same again, nothing could ever again contain the longing in her heart. She suddenly became a female back then when Marko took her hands to warm them.

Barbara loved her parents and she also became aware of that love on that cold morning. She longed to make them happy and proud and loving. One day at that time she returned home from the paddock and her father told her most solemnly and sternly that she was not to go with Marko again because he was a bad boy.

In spring, months after that cold autumn morning with Marko, boys chased girls on the way from school. They ran deep into the forest and Marko caught up with Barbara and lifted her dress as she fell into the moss. For a brief moment he looked at her nakedness and then he laughed and ran away. She lay there ashamed and the memory of his face looking down at her, never went away. She became aware of her powerless nakedness.

After the war the communist Liberation fighters received the vouchers to buy material for their children's clothes but Barbara's parents didn't qualify. Many village girls received shiny nylon flowery dresses from their uncles and aunts in America. To Barbara, America became synonymous with heaven although she had no-one there to delight her.

Unable to reason why, she now knew for certain that Marko was a bad boy and her father was right. She also realised that Marko was growing up to be a man and she was growing up to be a woman.

Soon a silent understanding was reached among other kids that they were not to hit or torment Barbara, because Marko was her friend. "He was a big bad bully," thought Barbara now looking mischievously at Marko across the grave.

At the age of ten, Barbara left the village to go to school in the big city. In the lonely evenings there, she began longing to be back home to be safe near Marko. She wanted to return into the mysterious world of their first discoveries because she longed to believe in the brilliant future ahead of them.

Standing still by the side of the grave now, Barbara pondered the words her old friend Mitja once recited. "Put aside delay and thirst for gain, and, mindful of Death's dark fires, mingle, while thou mayst, brief folly with thy wisdom!" Old doctor Mitja knew Barbara well. "There is only till death do us part," he smiled. Barbara wondered if Mitja, the oldest of them all, also pondered the secrets of death during the funeral. Miha's body had no more desire, it was not tormented with either gain or folly and nobody knew what happened to his tormented spirit.

Barbara felt safe looking at Marko and her past, across the open grave through her dark glasses. She could almost smell his after-shave yet nobody could follow her gaze or her thoughts. Thousands of miles away, and forty years hence Barbara still felt the sweet memory and the shame of her childhood. Ivan never chose Marko as a friend and there was no opportunity for them to remember. Maybe it was better that way.

Marko sniffed into the handkerchief and his wife Edna took his roughly scrubbed red hands into her smoky black ones for support as she leaned on him. A little reluctantly Marko placed his arm around her shoulder and together they cried for Miha whom they barely knew. Edna's cousin Ruth leaned on her husband Drago and the two couples huddled together became the chief mourners for Miha.

Barbara wandered why people cried at funerals, they were born to die and it didn't really matter if they died a year sooner or later. Life after all was only an animation of the ever circulating dust. Everything was an illusion. Barbara could not create or destroy a single speck of dust. Death claimed the dust and the spirit escaped and chose to become something else.

Like most Australians, Barbara never came face to face with an Aborigine until Marko brought his family to town. She felt strangely intimidated by their exotic gypsy like lifestyle. There was something deliciously decadent about the way they laughed and talked. Sometimes Barbara saw Edna walking to town with careless abandon and she yelled loudly at her kids dawdling on the footpath.

Aborigines represented one per cent of Australian population but few of them were full bloods. People in the big multicultural cities would hardly notice an Aborigine. They had varying degrees of Aboriginal blood but it was their lifestyle rather than their colour that set them apart in the towns where everybody knew everybody else.

Aborigines were dispersed after the European invasion and at the turn of the century the government considered them a dying race. They gathered them on Aboriginal reserves under the care of Aboriginal Protection Board. They lived like that in their camps on the fringes of towns and on the edge of the white society. As endangered species the remnants of the wandering natives suddenly began to multiply rapidly. Their tribal laws and taboos died and they began to emulate the white fellow's way of life. They began to move to towns during the sixties. In the seventies the government, shamed by Aborigine's poverty, began to compensate by building homes for them among whites.

Barbara remembered Ivan saying what a pity it was that the best of the natives married the worst of whites. Ivan was most unhappy because his own children did not find Slovenian partners. He maintained that good people find partners among their own nationality. He was really afraid that the worst of Australians would marry the best of Slovenians. Ivan hated assimilation. Integration and multiculturalism were just other names for blending into an accepted British model and the inevitable sameness threatened his Slovenian family.

Not wishing to meet Barbara's eyes, Marko looked to the ground. He knew that she was looking at him but her bold stare made him feel small and common. She rejected him and he felt ashamed of her rejection.

"Even as a kid she big-noted herself," he thought. After she came home from Ljubljana during school holidays, Barbara changed her accent and her walk. Her eyes seemed more blue to Marko and her hands more white.

Marko tried to dismiss the memory of how long ago he wanted to kiss those long white fingers, those red lips. He hoped that she didn't know who brought all those flowers under her window. At fourteen he had stolen the flowers from the headmaster's garden and got the hiding for it at school and at home. Nobody knew who the flowers were for but he felt the shame and the pain remembering now.

Barbara was following him around then, much smaller and more vulnerable, she was shivering from cold and hunger before she left the village. Now she lived in a big house on the hill behind the high electronic fence thinking that she was better than the rest of them. "That's what money does to you. She forgot where she came from," said Marko to himself but he never mentioned to anyone else that he knew where she came from.

Marko didn't want anyone to know that they grazed cattle together because Barbara achieved what he dreamed of achieving. He wanted people to look up to him, to accept him. Barbara's achievements made him look like a failure. She did not want to know him and he did not want anyone to know that either.

Black and shiny, the coffin was moved between the appropriately dressed mourners. Barbara had to remind herself that Miha's body was inside and that knowing this united them, that they became less strangers. The sun was so dazzling that people had to lower their eyes and they looked prayerfully reverent. As soon as Miha was dead they looked straight at his face, because his face didn't look back at them. Eyes were the windows of the soul and people did not dare look at faces that were looking back at us" ..

"And the word was made flesh and dwelt among us," the priest's voice cut into Barbara's thoughts. "Same word, same flesh, modelled and remodelled by our playful God," she thought irreverently. She remembered her mother's constant warnings to repent for the past, put up with the present and pray for the future. "How far is to the future, mum? Is it here or there, you know both sides now, mum. How will I know that I arrived into the future?"

"We brought nothing into the world and we will take nothing," the priest read from the good book.

There was nothing more Barbara wished for anyway, she was free to enjoy the illusion of grandeur and march in the glory of achievement. Was that it? Her children were travelling

the same road over and over trying to find their own way where a better way was once found by others.

“And you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free,” the familiar words suddenly became saturated with a mysterious significance. The scientists of all ages tried to explore and explain the truth. But they only discovered secrets about life that soul knew from the very beginning. They failed to bring people any closer to understanding themselves or the life they were part of. There was more in one soul than science could ever discover because the places in the soul can never be exhausted by the brilliance of the human mind. The scientists assumed to be closer to the truth with every discovery but their rambling search continued.

“The light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not,” the words from the Bible echoed from the sermons of the past. The scientists were only opening the doors to elusive dark mysteries of far and beyond. But who can ever measure all the dimensions of fear, anger, sadness or gladness? Who can draw the borders between the reality and fantasy? When do thoughts become dreams? The scientists can measure the size and intensity of what they see and hear and touch and smell and taste. But how do you measure the intensity of love? How can you determine the depths of despair?

The coffin was lowered and the people leaned closer to drop a lump of red clay on its polished wood. They grimly reminded themselves that: dust you are and into the dust you will return. Barbara didn't recall if these people ever said words solely for her. They spoke to break the silence outside but inside they remained silent.

“In the end we must all let go,” said Ivan reverently and Barbara sensed that he also travelled in the secret realm of his thoughts.

Next to Ivan stood Ivan's best friends Milan and his elegant wife Milena. Barbara remembered the long years of loving Milan, years of scheming and dreaming. Milena's husband always made Barbara feel alive and special.

Next to Milan stood Vida holding hands with her husband Andrej. Their affectionate gestures made them look more contented than they actually were. Vida used to work for Milan and Andrej worked for Ivan before they opened their restaurant. Barbara was at Vida's recent fiftieth birthday party. Andrej affectionately teased his wife that she did not look a day over fifty. Vida dyed her hair a pretty milk coffee colour for the occasion and cosmetics covered up fast approaching lines around her smile.

“We work for a comfortable old age but God takes it away,” whispered Vida appropriately after the coffin was lowered into the ground and they picked handfuls of dirt to drop onto it. The hollow sound of the dirt hitting the wood made them feel free to whisper and so share their thoughts.

Milan, debonair in his semi sport outfit turned to Vida: “What old age, young people like us.” He tried to bring a smile to their gloomy faces, he always tried to cheer people up. His wife Milena glanced at him from under her wide brimmed hat as to say: “Behave yourself. Keep quiet.” Milan quickly suppressed the smile. At fifty nine he felt in top form but he realised that there was only one frightening direction from the top. Sometimes the slide down was too sudden and fast and life-long friends become shattered by the loss. They were comforted by the thought that they wouldn't be alone on their last journey.

Father Damian stood with the Slovenians around the open grave. Funerals reminded them that their time was coming as one by one they were saying goodbye. In their early days in Australia many had hoped to go home before they died but now most of them had reconciled themselves to stay with their children and be buried in the new country. They formed new kinships in Australia.

The ties were breaking painfully. The death of a friend shattered them. Even the death of an enemy was a loss, enemies were competitors in love, in trade, in friendships, in power and glory. They were former friends, maybe even future friends. They mourned together and greeted each other in their hearts. The loss of an enemy would be the saddest loss of all. One could love a friend after death but hate dies suddenly and only the guilt and emptiness remains. The hope to make up for what was wrong also dies and enemies go home alone unable to share in the memories of a good person who has just died. The intimacy with the dead is a warm comfort for friends and those that parted as friends.

Everybody liked Miha, well, maybe not like him, people felt an affinity with Miha because he was a kind, harmless, little man. Nobody hated Miha and the luxurious sadness they shared united them.

Miha's plumbing business prospered by his sheer hard work. Although everybody knew that he earned good money he had nothing to show for it and he made them all feel so much better off.

They blamed his wife Greta for Miha's poverty and their obviously miserable family life. Miha, however, blamed himself and was convinced that he was punished for being disloyal to Greta, for drinking and smoking and lying about it. He hated what he became. His coughing became more severe in the evenings and he almost welcomed the first sure signs of cancer because he wanted to die. At night, afraid that his coughing would disturb Greta, he often walked in the garden. Talking to God and looking at the stars, he enjoyed his secret cigarettes among the rose-bushes. Greta told him that smoking was killing him but smoking among the roses became his only real life. He took a packet of soothers to suck on as he returned to bed, so his coughing wouldn't wake Greta. He tried to give up, of course, but he became afraid of life and God without cigarettes.

Joe and his wife Hermina stood close to the grave and Joe's shoulders seemed folded in like wet bird's wings. His tall body sagged under the weight of sadness.

Barbara knew Joe better than anybody else in Linden. They met in Cooma soon after they arrived to Australia. Both remembered their first days in the Australian bush near Bombala thirty years ago. They were so far away and so alone then.

Joe would have liked to say words of farewell to Miha but he didn't dare offend the bereaved family. He was the only person Miha spoke to in the last months of his life. Miha poured his heart out to Joe, he cried for his son and for his family. Joe told Barbara about his visits to Miha but he felt that he had no right to speak at his funeral because Greta ordered that there be no speeches.

The mourners wanted to let God know that they were reconciled. They realised how close they were to their end on this Earth and were ready to forgive each other. They themselves were asking for God's forgiveness. Remembering their childhood God, they heard the lessons of catechism echoing with every church ritual. Misled by the materialism they

longed for the beliefs of their youth and hoped that their religion would bring them back into the life they left behind.

Men would have felt honoured to be pall bearers, but Greta did not give them that satisfaction.

Just as the Australian priest finished his job, Ivan stepped forward and glanced around letting others know that he will speak for everybody.

Ivan's hair became thin and grey at the temples but his face and his body changed little with age. He looked dignified and distinguished as he spoke kindly, softly, but with an unmistakable authority. As he said thank you for Miha's friendship his voice trembled and most Slovenians had tears in their eyes, some cried out loud. They enjoyed the victory over Greta and loved Ivan for being decisive enough to stand up for them. He could always be counted on to represent them.

Most of the mourners worked for Ivan at some time in the past. He didn't pay well, but they felt secure and comfortable with a Slovenian employer who made them feel welcome, when the rest of the world seemed hostile. They sent new arrivals to Ivan to help them along until they found their way. Ivan learned quickly where to turn for information or help. He acted as interpreter and representative.

"Some are jealous of his success, but they depend on him to do the right thing," thought Barbara. "Like I do."

It all seemed like yesterday, they came during fifties and sixties, young, energetic, competitive, jealous, aggressive, hungry for a better future. Father Damian searched for them, found them and invited them to mass where, singing Slovenian hymns, they celebrated the sharing of their lives.

Australians of the fifties and sixties were bewildered by the newcomers, they called them new chums, new Australians or wogs. Cocooned in merino wool production, Anglo Saxon Australians grew under the benevolent shadow of Britain. They cleared the bush to make pastures for their flocks and bring progress to the virgin continent. "I love my country, I honour my queen and I salute my flag," Barbara heard her children chant as they began school. They sang God save the queen with pathos. Whatever Ivan wanted them to sing seemed irrelevant and inferior to his children. The imperial England was the shiny light of their curriculum.

Most Slovenians came from a small village where they knew every tree and rock and person. They were a part of a life cycle and the season. Cut away from everything that was familiar they clustered into groups for emotional safety. Even when silent they spoke the same language and their presence reassured them. they carried with them the memories and tradition, god and hope for the future.

Australia needed workers and they welcomed the newcomers willing to take any jobs, but Australians still worried about the gods these newcomers honoured, about the flag they saluted, about the masters they served. They watched non-English speaking migrants who dressed differently, ate different food, brought children up to behave differently. New Australians dropped amongst the contented flag saluting Brits like aliens. Just as well that they were white and their diversity was not instantly visible.

Cut from the rest of the world British migrants reconstructed their own childhood memories into Australian culture. They became known as fair dinkum rugged bushies and they were suspicious of foreigners. They vowed to keep Australia white and the White Australia policy closed the floodgates to Asian migration. Europeans could gradually be absorbed into the British nation but Asians never.

Years later as the British Empire crumbled, patriotism emerged and Australians paid homage to the fringe groups of the society, they bent the knee and admitted that others also lived on the vast continent. They even sought a treaty with the natives in a bid to become an independent multi-cultural nation.

Non-English speaking migrants were fearful at first and the fear made them feel small and powerless. They needed to grow and be noticed and recognised for their talents. Some concentrated on getting rich, others pursued education. Most, however, hoped that their children will bring them the honour they were deprived of; after all they left the security and familiarity of their home to give their children a better chance in life.

For years they worked hard and now they wanted to enjoy the fruits of their labour. But most didn't know how. Like Miha and Joe, some began to drink more heavily and were less happy every day. They were seeking the company of like minded drinkers to find comfort and forget what seemed wrong with their lives.

Miha's wife Greta came from an old Austrian family that could trace its roots for centuries. She never needed to go to work, she ordered all her clothes from Germany and sometimes from Paris.

Miha refused to join the Austrian club, they never made him welcome there, so Greta tried to stop him going to the Slovenian club as well. He met with Slovenians without Greta's knowing but he compensated her by working hard and giving all his money to her. He also took her to an Australian restaurant every Friday night.

Anyway, Miha hated going with Greta to the Slovenian club. Sometimes he went to the loo and came out smelling of smoke and she scolded him in front of everyone in her big German voice. He bought a spray to disguise the smell of the smoke but still she knew. Without friends she made Miha her whole life and told him when to speak, what to say and what to do. He gradually learned to please her.

Ivan left Sydney in the seventies and began building a new town Linden. Miha admired Ivan but he didn't know how to become friends with the person who had no vices. How could one complain to a person who would present an instant solution to his problems? Things worked for Ivan, he made things work.

Over the next five years Miha persuaded his wife to move to Linden, this little hideaway beneath the Blue Mountains. Greta never learned to like the satellite town without history.

Miha's family returned home from the funeral, they broke forever whatever ties Miha tried to establish for them with his Slovenian friends. Greta couldn't stop them piling flowers on his grave, she made them feel so much better. Funerals were like Christmas, people wished each other well and shook hands, it united them like peace offering in the church does.

The mourners embraced tearfully and returned for a wake in the Slovenian club in Sydney. Drinking good wine they remembered Miha whom they neglected to know well before he

died. They recalled the snippets of conversations they had with him and shared for the last time the information about his life that he allowed them to glean.

They listened to Joe because he was the only real link to the man they just buried. Greta gave Joe dirty looks when he came to visit his friend. Greta did not like people visiting Miha but she couldn't stop Joe who just dropped in impolitely without asking her permission or announcing himself. He kept coming and smoked and drank with Miha until the last day of Miha's life. Joe was an easy person to like and Miha found it easy to talk to him during his sickness. Himself imperfect and insignificant, Joe didn't demand perfection from anyone and he made no judgements.

Before Miha was diagnosed with cancer Joe sometimes met him and his friend Albin in the pub after work. They often worked on the same building projects for Ivan and enjoyed an easy comradeship like regular drinkers do.

After his son left home, Miha began drinking heavily. Ashamed to be seen by other Slovenians, he wandered into the pub and there, hidden in the anonymity of strangers, he met Albin.

Miha told Joe how he and Albin got gloriously, foolishly drunk on the night they first met. They poured out the sorrows of their hearts as only true drunks could. With tears of laughter rolling down their faces, they remembered their struggles to change the world and their wives. One had to blame somebody for the life that seemed wasted.

The publican called them a taxi at closing time and they parted like lifelong friends. After this first meeting, they met after work, same time, same place most days. Driving home under the influence became a hazard.

Albin was caught drunk driving and Miha bailed him out because Albin's wife Rozi wouldn't. She insisted that he was better off in jail, at least he couldn't kill anyone there. When Miha brought Albin home she growled: "Why don't you kill yourself. You said you will kill yourself if I leave you. As far as you are concerned I have left you. Don't wait around for me to leave this house because I have worked for it. Your share is down the sewerage."

The next morning Miha came to take Albin to court but Miha was dead in the garage.

"He must have hit his head on the pillar," said Rozi.

"Didn't you go to see?" asked Miha.

"He often sleeps in the garage," explained Rozi. Except for the trickle of blood dried on his face, Albin looked peacefully asleep sprawled over the steps under the house. The doctor wrote on a death certificate that Albin died from an accidental fall over the protruding pipe in his steel bench top. Nobody was particularly worried about Albin's death.

Miha, scared sober, decided never to go to the pub again. Since Albin's death Joe and Miha often travelled to Sydney to drink with their friends in the Slovenian club.

Miha told Joe about his escape from Yugoslavia. During the war Miha's father and two brothers had joined the Home-guards to fight the communists. At the end of May 1945 Miha's whole family escaped to Austria. Afraid of victorious communists they joined tens of thousands other refugees and fled to Austria.

The crowded refugee camps in Austrian Carinthia worried the Allies, they had to solve the refugee problem speedily. Stalin and Tito demanded their nationals as they moved towards Austria threateningly. To oblige Stalin and Tito the western Allies told the refugees that they were taking them to a camp in Italy. The Home-guards trusted English speaking soldiers so they obediently queued up and marched into the boxcars of the train. The boxcars were nailed and locked before the trains moved towards the Yugoslav border where British guards were replaced by Tito's partisans. They queued peacefully for their own death.

Young Miha spotted Tito's soldiers hiding in the bushes before they sealed the trains. While British guards talked about the takeover, he jumped from the train into the nearby bushes. He returned to Austria bruised and scared.

Miha's family was returned to be shot in Kocovski Rog by partisans. A clearing was made in the middle of the forest and the huge hole prepared. The bodies fell into the pit full of other shot bodies. Miha's older brother Stefan escaped from the pit and he told Miha about the ordeal before he died.

They tied prisoners together, two by two, with the wire before they shot them on the edge of the pit to fall back into the newly dug mass grave. Stefan was wounded in the stomach but he managed to pull his dead comrade behind him and crawl to the edge of the pit. He grabbed the root of the tree protruding from the wall and pulled himself from under the dying soldiers plummeting on top of him. A little recess under the rock offered him shelter. He untied his wrist by rubbing it on the rock and he saw that the wire bit into the flesh to expose the bone. He extended the wrist to show Miha where the blue swelling began to cover the wound. Stefan stayed there for five days amidst the stench of the decaying bodies. Covered in blood and flies he listened to the prayers and cursing of hundreds of shot soldiers as they kept falling after the shooting. Stefan was getting weaker and more numb and unable to act. He tried to find comfort in praying but he couldn't believe that his god would allow what was happening around him.

Stefan knew that eventually they would bring the bulldozers to cover the pit. He realised that he would die from starvation and thirst, he also actually called out then for partisans to kill him but they did not hear his weak cry among the shots and groaning of the dying falling bodies. He saw the small round object falling into the pit before the series of explosions echoed into the evening. They were throwing land mines to kill anyone that might still be alive. Stefan knew that he had to get out. Closing his eyes he bit the flesh of the man next to him and drank his blood. After this meagre nourishment he climbed the wall of the pit during the night.

Stefan did not dare seek help in the familiar surrounding countryside because he knew that anyone helping him would be shot. The security was tight, they did not want the world to know about the massacre. He found a spring in the forest refreshed himself with the cool drink. He washed himself and the bits of clothing he scavenged from his dead comrades. With the shirt tightly wrapped over his stomach wound he inched his way towards the border. There were few edible bits to be found in the fields during the early spring but he found a few precious wild strawberries that brought a smile to his face., Barely alive, he made his way to Austria and there during the night he crawled into the straw where Miha slept.

Both brothers knew the farmer where Miha found a refuge but neither of them dared ask for help. Miha cleaned Stefan's festering stomach wounds and offered him some bread and water. Stefan's cold body was shaking and in the middle of the night he became delirious. He moaned and groaned in semi-consciousness about the thousands of bodies falling over him into the pit. Miha wrapped himself around Stefan's body to give him what warmth he had and finally exhausted and cold both fell asleep in each other's arms.

Stefan's body was cold in the morning because he was dead. Miha moved out of the stable and hid in the nearby bushes to watch the farmer discover the body. The police took Stefan away and organised his funeral. Crouched in a foetal position behind the bushes Miha wept silently. Exhausted and dry eyed again at noon, he walked to the nearby village where he begged a peasant to take him as a labourer. Miha was eighteen and the peasant was Greta's father. The farmer showed him where he could sleep in the stable and what work he must do. They saved his life.

Miha and Stefan never had an opportunity to reason the right and wrong of it all. They were simply afraid of death because people get killed in the war. They remembered the prayers: Save us oh, Lord, from famine, pestilence and war. These things killed people for the reasons only god knew about.

After Miha's wake in Sydney Linden Slovenians met at Ivan's place. Milan and Milena, Ivan, Barbara and Hermina sat quietly as Joe told them about Stane visiting Miha a week before Miha died. Stane brought a video about the mass in Kocevski Rog and the three men watched it together.

"What did Miha and Stane say about the Reconciliation mass," asked Ivan and Joe quietly retold the words that became imprinted on his mind because they were spoken so recently and so solemnly.

Stane just knocked on the door and, ignoring Greta's inquiring stare, he introduced himself to Miha and Joe. Stane wanted to snub Greta because he heard how she refused to learn a word of Slovenian in the forty five years she lived with Miha.

Most Slovenians in Australia heard or read about Stane but few actually met him, let alone spoke to him. Both Joe and Miha suddenly felt small in Stane's presence because he was so tall and his shoulders were so wide and he was such an important person. People looked at him with an awesome respect. Stane very briefly and unceremoniously explained who he was and why he came.

Stane was known as arrogant, aloof and a bit strange. Living as a hermit on the hill out of Sydney, he studied constantly. Although successful in his solicitor's practice and on friendly terms with his partners, he had no intimate friends since he came to Australia. Working hard, he prepared to enter Australian politics but as soon as he was nominated as a candidate, the forces of the past caught up with him.

As a teenager in Ljubljana Stane published his first poems, thoughts and political treatise during Hitler's occupation of Slovenia. Nazi editors inserted anti-Jewish and anti-Communist slogans into his writing as they did in all published articles. Stane was too young to realise that he was used. He joyously joined the Home guards and soon became their leader. Fifty years later, as he reached the higher echelons of Australian politics, the Yugoslav UDBA chose to inform the Jewish lobby in Australia that he was a Nazi criminal. As evidence they

produced the inserts Nazis added to his teenage writings. Stane's pogrom began. Forced out of politics he dropped out of social life completely, a bitter man.

Stane knew that most Slovenians resented his rise into Australian public life so there was no one with whom he could share the pain of rejection.

Stane realised long ago that strangers offer the least resistance on your way to the top. Strangers don't really care where you are going or what you are doing. To them you mean as little at the top as at the bottom. But your own people resist your rise and thwart your success because they don't want you to get away from them. Stane never counted on Slovenians to vote for him and he intentionally isolated himself from the triviality of their existence. When he received a video of the Slovenian Reconciliation mass held in Kocevski Rog on the eighth of July 1990, he wanted to share it with someone. Stane knew about the history of Miha's family and that Miha would want to see the place where his family was massacred and buried.

Stane and Joe sat next to Miha's bed as the three men watched the video in silence for the first time. Dark shadows of the pine forest surrounded the sunny clearing where people huddled together in reverence over the ravine where the bodies were buried.

As they watched it again, the three men reflected on the words spoken on the film.

The video showed Slovenian Premier Kucan, a former partisan and communist, standing side by side with the Bishop conducting the mass in the forest clearing near Kocevje. They erected and blessed the cross where thousands of Slovenian Home-guards were murdered after the communist victory in 1945.

"I can't understand it," said Miha, "Hitler killed for racial purity but why did Slovenians kill other Slovenians. Was it for communist purity? Was there a reason for it all. What were they scared of? Whose orders did they follow? Is it possible that they just succumbed to the lust for blood? Did they know what they were doing?"

"Now is the time for peace," said Kucan on the video. "Let us close the book on this shameful chapter in our history, let us bury the past, let us bury our weapons."

Stane spoke angrily, "They would not let me forget what I wrote as a teenager fifty years ago, yet they ask us to forget what they were doing until yesterday. They killed Slovenians to save the Yugoslav regime. And the bastards wouldn't let me forget the past they had manufactured for me. I wanted to forget the past. Now they are scared for their miserable lives so they order us to reconcile and forget. I have nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to forget. They want us to forget because they are ashamed of what they've done."

Miha spoke in a slow, tired, sad whisper: "I have hoped for the book of history to be written before they insisted it was closed for ever, dead and buried. It has never yet been opened. I would have liked to know who has done what and why, I would have liked to hear the killers explain or express some regret. After the war we were too scared to ask where our families were buried, now we know where they were buried but why don't we let the sunlight heal the wounds. The Bishop and the Premier pray together in the hope of ruling reconciled Slovenians. 'No-one is without sin, let's forgive,' they say. They want us to forget rather than forgive. They still want us to be ashamed of remembering. How can we forgive anyway, if we don't know who to forgive. When we learn the names of the guilty, we will

stop suspecting the innocent. Most are victims like us and the truth will clear them, we owe it to the innocent.”

“We will never know who is guilty. They were all under orders. Stalin ordered Tito, Tito ordered his generals, they ordered the soldiers. Dalmatian brigade was chosen to kill, but they were just soldiers. They were rewarded with ten days holiday in Bled for their heroic deed.

The soldiers’ commitment to the new regime grew because the soldiers were killers and they needed to believe that what they have done really amounted to a patriotic heroism. The communist leaders told the soldiers that what they have done was necessary and very good. The soldiers needed this assurance so they vowed to protect those that assured them and praised for their heinous acts. They needed the awards for bravery to dull the pain of remembering. Otherwise the brutality of it all was just too awful to remember. Some went crazy with killing and they did more than they were told to do. An atmosphere of fear and revenge made them howling mad.

After Stalin and Tito split in 1948, Tito’s friend Djilas wrote in disgust about the senseless acts of wrathful retribution but he was quickly reprimanded by Tito who was still afraid of what he had done.

“The derogatory term White guard or Home guard, taken from Russian revolution, marked half of Slovenian families like the mark of Cain. We have only now come to terms with those names. There is nothing wrong with being a White Guard or a Home guard or an anti-Communist. I know that now when it is too late,” said Miha.

Premier Kucan was speaking again on the video, “They were all fighting for what they believed in, for their truth.”

Miha sat up in bed and said: “During the war that might have been so, but the communists murdered their opposition after the war. The mistakes were made, and we are entitled to know who made them.” Joe shuddered as Miha coughed and wiped blood from his lips before he continued.

“I wish I could touch the ground where my family is buried. I’ll die without ever placing a flower on their grave..”

Miha was sad because there was something so painfully undone and unresolved in his soul. The generation chain seemed broken. The resting place of his ancestors was calling more urgently every day. He tried to grow roots into Australian soil but he became acutely aware that the graves of his own people would soon become forgotten. On their going home, at the end of life it would be comforting to rest with those that shared your life and history.

“A time for peace,” Premier Kucan continued on the video.

“There is a stigma attached to us who want to expose communist killers. Those that don’t reconcile as ordered, are rejected again,” said Stane.

Kucan read from the Bible, “For everything there is a season and a time for every purpose.”

“I would like to believe that the orders for murder came from Serbia or somewhere outside Slovenia. The clock is ticking for Yugoslavia, why do Slovenians hide the sinners? Unless they are our own people, of course, the fathers of the new democracy. Our streets, towns and

institutions still bear the names of the heroes of the revolution. I would like to see the names of the guilty removed," said Miha in a hoarse whisper.

"They are beginning to ask themselves what they were fighting for," said Stane. "Who for?"

"What was, should never happen again," said Kucan on the video.

"The history has to be written and agreed upon before peace can be achieved and future planned for. What can be repaired, should be repaired," wheezed Miha.

"Slovenians now worship Kucan because he told us to hate Serbs instead of communists." Stane laughed with the hollow laugh of one who is not used to jokes. "Slovenians are still following the orders of their communist commandant Kucan. The killers keep him in power. The secret list is the reason for our fragmented unity."

"It's an infected sore that is making the nation sick. We have to air the sore and make it heal. We are scared of our past and we don't like what we are. How can we have a vision for the future?" whispered Miha.

Stane did not attend Miha's funeral. "He won't be going to mine either," he said to Joe trying to crack a joke because he was terrified of graveyards.

Barbara brought out refreshments and Joe told them how Miha met Greta.

Greta's home in Austria was really a part of Slovenian Carinthia. After the first world war Austro-Hungarian Empire disintegrated and most Slovenians chose to join other Slavs in what was to become Yugoslavia. But Slovenians in the province of Carinthia were used to Austrian way of life and many prospered in it. Some were also afraid of South Slavs, they felt that they had nothing in common with the warring Serbs that pushed towards the north. These Northern Slovenians chose to stay under Austria. They could never even pretend to have any form of self determination under the Austrian government but they felt better off as a minority under the Austrian government than a part of newly formed Yugoslavia. By the referendum they decided that the cradle of the first Slovenian democracy remained in Austria.

Miha saw all the Slovenian names Germanised on the tombstones in the cemetery in Rozna Dolina. The majority of the population though had Slovenian origins and most were proud of them. Miha told Joe how Austrians hated being reminded that they occupied Slovenian land. Greta's family name was also Germanised from Slovenian origins but Miha never asked why they denied their origins and if they thought that there was something wrong with being Slovenian.

Miha settled with Greta's family. They treated him as a servant except for Greta who accepted him as her very own property. She was twenty two, a plain girl with a great need to own a man. She tried to lead Miha into Austrian society, she told him how to behave, she taught him to speak German.

Greta's parents were disappointed when Miha and Greta got married. For two years Greta tried unsuccessfully to gain acceptance for her husband by Austrians so in the end they both wanted to migrate. But Greta felt even more unhappy with her life in Australia, she felt like a foreigner in her own bed. Only her daughters shared their lives with her.

United and reconciled Slovenians even felt sorry for the lonely woman as they buried her husband.

*Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect*

*Misshapes the beauteous forms of things:
We murder to dissect.*

Wordsworth

LINDEN VALLEY

“We are going home, we are actually going home,” the words repeated themselves in Barbara’s mind as she drove towards the Blue Mountains in the cool late autumn afternoon in 1990. Barbara needed the solitude to re-read the letters from home.

People wanted to share the news about the enormous change Slovenia was experiencing. Barbara also needed to find out about her father and her daughter in Slovenia before she could go. Nobody knew how difficult it was for her to face the past she ran away from. She made an appointment to see doctor Mitja because she hoped that Mitja or his friend Boris would somehow help her. They had a way of making her see things from a new perspective. She told her husband Ivan that she made an appointment to see the doctor because she was getting pains in her stomach but she knew that the pain was only the fear that was twisting inside her..

Barbara enjoyed driving alone in the country with her favourite music playing loud into the silence of the bush. The warm wind brought her the scents of the trees through the open windows. The white gravel road, the blue gums and the smell of eucalyptus reminded her of her early days in Australian bush. The white, naked tree trunks were like ghosts keeping guard on the side of the track. The haunting beauty and the fresh innocence of the rocky countryside made an awesome impact on Barbara whenever she was alone in the Australian bush. The calls of the birds were bold, proud and loud like their country. The higher she came the softer the grass was and the flowers swayed unperturbed in the breeze. The country did not realise that it was autumn, the flowers here just flowered after every rain.

When her husband Ivan sat next to her as she drove, Barbara could not listen to the music or enjoy the scents and sights. He told her to drive slower, faster, more to the left or to the right, to overtake, to keep behind, to stop dithering and to be more decisive. On those occasions she stopped thinking, followed his orders and became confused and terrified of her confusion.

“You look like one of the boys now,” said Ivan uncertain about Barbara’s new looks. He liked her short hair cut higher at the back, jeans and joggers were sensible. But there was more to her change, she looked naughty in an indescribable way. She started the red Celica and put the windows down. It annoyed Ivan that she chose the wind rather than the air conditioner to keep her cool. She could adjust the temperature and the silent machine would provide just the right amount of coolness without the dust. He bought her the sleek sports car to show the others that she was a wife of a wealthy man.

Other Slovenian wives drove old second hand cars. Except Milena, of course, who bought a Jaguar many years ago and never changed it.

Barbara gradually abandoned high heel shoes together with her long curls and tight skirts only. "I should have done this long ago," she thought now. Soft, free flowing garments were in fashion, people in the eighties and nineties dressed for comfort and health. They impressed each other with what they were and what they knew. People communicated so much better. "Except Ivan and I," Barbara realised ruefully.

She remembered how concerned she used to be about looking good and how unhappy she was with the way she looked when she was young and looked her best. Now feeling good meant much more to her, feeling good was synonymous with accepting and liking herself. Liking herself was the first step to liking the world, she decided.

Sometimes Barbara prayed as she drove. Overwhelmed by the beauty of the countryside and the freedom of her solitude, the words just flowed in her mind. She felt so confidently that God, being so wonderfully wise and huge and clever, would understand and love her and maybe forgive her. Often during the last thirty years she was afraid that the god of her innocence would disappear forever. But he waited there in the Australian bush to delight her.

People changed and in their changing they changed the image of their god. She prayed to the god of her parents and felt comforted because her father and her mother were there with him and they loved her.

"God, I hope you don't mind if I don't believe as I used to. The hell and the heaven have changed for me. You know what I mean, I am sure, because, God, you have changed as much as I have since we came to Australia. God, I can see you here. You are not in heaven and the devil is not in hell; these are only the places in my heart. I am going home, can you hear that, God."

Barbara wasn't sure any longer if she knew God, if anyone knew God or even if God knew her. Maybe he wasn't interested in her, maybe he wasn't who she thought he was at all. Barbara wandered what happened to people who didn't believe in God. She really had no idea any more what God wanted from her and if he was still following her around.

About a year ago Marianne, her Australian friend, invited Barbara to a church discussion group where they talked about God like God wasn't even there listening. They wondered if Jesus was really born of a virgin, died on the cross and rose from death. Some even wondered if he really lived as a man or if he was just a myth. They talked like that right there in the church with the perpetual light shining in the corner.

Barbara was a little scared at first because all those people happily lined up for holy communion every Sunday. "If there is no God, I wasted all my prayers," thought Barbara and the idea frightened her because beyond god there was nothing.

People wanted to know what god looked like, they wanted to logically analyse god's activities, they weren't satisfied anymore with the mystery.

"We came a long way, you and I," she told her guardian angel. The picture of a guardian angel escorting a little girl across a narrow bridge was still imprinted in Barbara's memory. Her mum hung that angel above her bed and that angel became her personal protector. Maybe mum was right about that angel. Just before Barbara left home at the age of ten, mum sat her in her lap and pointed to the picture of the angel.

“Listen to your guardian angel and you will always know what you must do. It might be hard sometimes but in the end you will come to where you wanted to go.” Barbara wandered if she arrived where she wanted to be. She was happier every day, maybe where she was right now was not a place at all but a sense of certainty.

At the age of twelve Barbara was confirmed. Her sponsor was the lady she barely knew but she said that God lived in Barbara’s heart. “You have to love the God in you. You can never love others if you don’t love that part of yourself that is God. You must love yourself,” affirmed her sponsor. Maybe she knew that Barbara didn’t like herself because of the things happening in her life at that time. The words of long ago began to make sense now.

Barbara parked the car under the gum tree at the top of the hill about ten kilometres out of Linden. Standing on her favourite look-out she embraced the sights she learned to love. The green roof of her home could be seen nesting among the trees on the outskirts of the sleepy little town her husband built. There was nothing old in this town, the houses, the roads, the gardens, they were all planned by her husband and were well maintained by new home owners who needed to plant roots for their children.

“We are going home,” she said out loud not believing her own words. She stretched down into the grass and became acutely aware of the buzzing around her, of the flies tip-toeing on her and ants crawling into her socks. The breeze played with her hair, the bush scents found her nostrils. She was totally happy.

Something happened to Barbara every time she was alone in the bush. At home she felt the chains that fastened her to the cage, she clung to the life she chose, but she knew that that life wasn’t really her own. Only here, away from the reality of her existence, she experienced intensity of feeling and thought and of well-being. She felt that all her life she was crawling up like a fuzzy caterpillar but here her cocoon broke away as she spread her butterfly wings. The long suppressed tears ran down her face as she laughed with the mad kookaburras.

Barbara was free to remember the life she rejected and the child she gave away. She knew that she would do the same again. The gap between her two lives could never be bridged but she needed these moments to remember her daughter Renata. Barbara was afraid to hurt Renata with the truth of her birth. She was afraid of Ivan’s anger, of hurting their children and of herself getting hurt again.

Barbara wanted to go home and meet her people. She was a frightened little girl when she left but now she wanted to find out why they loved their land so much, why they worked so hard and prayed so much. Only maybe they did not do these things any more, maybe they never really did. Maybe she would find out why she wanted to run away.

The flowers around her grew out of the rocky earth core, their heads small, the petals and the pollen buds perfect, the dusty grey leaves protected against the sun. Crying into the silence of the bush made Barbara feel better. She wanted to cry when she first read the letters from home but she was afraid that someone would see her red eyes and her thoughts. She almost memorised the words of the letters because she secretly read them so many times before. Reading them here was different. She felt free to feel the full impact of the words.

“I keep thinking about you,” wrote Barbara’s brother Franc early in 1990. Franc lived in the house their father built in their hometown in Slovenia.

“Things are changing in Yugoslavia. I’d like to get to know you better and talk with you about it. Your son Janek and his bride Diana arrived safely and are enjoying their honeymoon here, in fact, they feel quite at home in Slovenia.” Both Ivan and Barbara read that letter. They began thinking about going home but they never shared their thoughts.

A week ago Franc wrote again:

“Do you remember my wife’s niece Renata? Her daughter Anica is getting married so Janek and Diana will probably stay for the wedding. She is getting married from our home, your own home. We would all like to have you at the wedding. Please come.”

Barbara wandered if Franc suspected that Renata was really her own daughter and that Anica was her own granddaughter. Barbara didn’t dare even think about Renata and Anica while her family was around her because nobody knew about them or how afraid she was to see them. Ivan knew, of course, but he did not want to remember.

Barbara’s son Janek also wrote from Slovenia.

“Dear mum and dad.

I extended my holidays because uncle Franc invited us to the wedding. His niece Anica will turn 18 on 6th of September which is to be her wedding day.

Slovenia is simply beautiful. Diana and I are learning Slovenian fast. Dad, I thought you’d like that. Diana’s relations want us to stay with them in Italy for the skiing season. They want to make us learn Italian of course and turn us into patriotic Italians. They live close to Cortina dam Peco, the famous ski-jump. We’ll try to get some casual work there. Not that we spend much with all the relations looking after us. They provided us with an old Fiat to drive around. Things are expensive in Europe though and wages aren’t so good, at least not in Slovenia. I don’t know how they can make ends meet, yet they eat good food and dress better than we do. They are all millionaires. You need a basket of dinars to buy a loaf of bread. Diana looked astonished the other day at the mountain of change she got from a ten dollar bill. The saleslady said: Isn’t it enough? Here, and she added a handful of bills. We laughed. Hope to see you soon. Love from Diana and Janek.

Barbara was hiding the letters in her pocket for days. She knew that they would open the old wounds, the memories they pushed away would come to haunt them. Neither Ivan nor Barbara knew how to talk about their past. Ivan might grab a newspaper or turn on the television to escape.

Renata kept haunting Barbara, she was lurking in her soul waiting to hurt her. To Barbara the only goal of Renata’s life was punishing her mother.

Barbara tried to convince herself that Renata wasn’t really her daughter. “I never loved her, I never changed her nappy or kissed her,” Barbara was scared of the words popping into her mind and of the fact that she never longed to hold her daughter in her arms. She ran to the end of the world to escape the memory of her. She handed that baby to Tereza to own and love but she could never forget the little pink bundle. Renata remained a baby in Barbara’s mind forever. Now Renata’s daughter was getting married. She will have children and the pain of it all would never end. “I get one go at life and I screw it,” Barbara cursed through tears.

Ivan and Barbara talked easily about the soil in the garden, about the camellias, roses and parsley, about the rooms in the big house, about the political events and about their friends. But Barbara felt sure that Ivan would simply turn off and stop talking, if she mentioned her daughter Renata. Even when she tried to talk about the disappearance of her father he found a reason to walk away. Her past was twisted and connected by so many events he did not wish to remember. Even when Barbara wanted to talk about the feelings of their children he found a reason for an argument, he found something about her to criticise and then removed himself into silence.

“Bastard,” she cursed him now into the silence of the mountain.

“I play hide and seek on my canvas where nobody can find me, catch me, scold me, I am painting pictures of my thoughts.” Angry about her inability to deal with her past Barbara felt the pain in her chest and the tears came fresh and warm to wash her hurt. She wanted to be rid of the past that intimidated her and made her follow Ivan’s every whim. “The bastard does not want to talk about it but he knows when to hint that he remembers.”

Barbara couldn’t rub out Renata’s name from the letters so she didn’t show them to Ivan. “Why should I give him the reason to punish me.” Looking down into Linden she tore the pages to bits and burned them on the roadside. Angry and sad she looked at the flames trying to catch on the autumn leaves scattered on the ground.

The letters from home were rare in the past. Christmas and Easter cards usually carried a few bits of news about their relations but since the gradual demise of communism in Slovenia they all became eager to communicate with the escaped members of their families. Barbara remembered other letters they received recently from Ivan’s family. Both of them read them and talked about them, there was nothing threatening in them.

Ivan’s eight years younger brother Martin wrote. Martin remained a boy in Ivan’s memory. “I actually brought him up after the war,” remembered Ivan.

Dear brother Ivan and family,

It’s spring here now and a busy time of the year for us. As you know, I bought back that land near the creek which the government took from us after the war. My two sons became very keen farmers. At least they are never short of food. Of course they go to work as well, you need money to run things, but they grow their own food.

Some people are saying that all the land they took from us will be returned. How could they turn back the clock. They will only complicate things.

People here are confused and angry because they are losing jobs since communism collapsed. One good thing about communism, everybody worked and had social security. We were all broke at the end of the month but we didn’t worry much. Now some are getting real rich while others have to cheat and scavenge to survive. I don’t know what to make of it, I suppose some will always have it easy. People feel lost though.”

“They brain-washed my little brother, he is a product of their school, what can I do,” said Ivan to Barbara. He wasn’t angry, he couldn’t blame his brother for believing what he believed about communism.

Ivan’s sister Marija also wrote. Just two years younger than Ivan she helped him look after their younger brothers, when their parents died. She always turned to Ivan for help and advice.

“I don’t know much about politics,” she wrote, “but with my pension I still can’t buy meat even once a week. They changed money again, for one million dinars we have one dinar now. It’s easier to count that’s all. We had the first armed bank robbery in Ljubljana last week. It must be a good sign if our money makes bank robbery worthwhile. I think we have the highest prices and the lowest wages in Europe and businesses are still going bankrupt. My son went out for dinner but between the time he ordered it and ate it the price of it went up. You pay straight away whatever you can afford to buy. My TV is out of action because I can’t pay the fee. I can barely pay for the stamp to write to you. What good is freedom, I ask you, if you can’t put bread on the table. My grand-children come but I can’t afford to buy a packet of biscuits for them. Poor people felt better in communism, they got used to being looked after.”

“What she means is that they weren’t allowed to look after themselves. If they were allowed to look after themselves they might have ended up rich and have some power,” said Ivan amused and a little annoyed by the letter. He sent money for his family and he wasn’t sure if they complained to make him send more or if they really needed it.

Ivan’s brother Matjaz lived in Germany for over twenty years. He has done well for himself and his family seemed contented.

“Everybody is getting ready for the first democratic elections in Slovenia,” wrote Matjaz who returned to Slovenia from Germany to witness the event. “Everybody is praying, people want to be seen at mass now just in case God is watching. They import flowers to decorate their churches. They import the clothes to show off at mass as well. Older people are amazed by the changes but children don’t understand what all the excitement is about. They are used to change fashions and trends. Nothing lasts forever, they say. Our generation believed that communism will never end.

I’d like to open some sort of business in Slovenia. My kids consider Germany their country, they don’t like the idea of leaving, but I don’t see much future for them in Germany. For Germans, Germans always come first. The blood thirsty power hungry German youths are shaving their heads and trying to imitate Hitler.

Would you like to join us, Ivan? Think about it.

I wanted to do some fishing while I was home but the rivers in Slovenia are dead, kids don’t swim in them anymore, they swim in the pools because rivers are polluted. Except Soca, of course, you can still fish for your giant trout there. Everybody does. I think every corner of Slovenia could be a tourist resort if they get rid of industry and its pollution. I think they plan to do something like that.”

“I wouldn’t mind to buy our old home back,” said Ivan suddenly.

“I like it where I am right now. I am scared of going home,” thought Barbara but she carefully said nothing.

Leon, their youngest son also wrote. He lived in Sydney with his family and rang every week so the letter was quite a surprise.

“Dear mum and dad.

“I thought I’ll startle you with a letter so you can read it really slowly,” he wrote. “You get overly excited on the phone. It’s not good for you at your age. Only joking, mum!!! I haven’t

heard from Janek lately, do you know when he is coming home? We are organising the Christening for somewhere in September or October. Being your first grandchild, we would like to have everybody present. We figured that we'd better have Johnny 'done' into a Christian before he is a year old and says something terribly sinful, don't you think. Helena will come from Perth but she would like to know in advance. My big sister is becoming quite famous."

"I wonder why Janek hasn't written so long," said Ivan. Barbara clutched at her pocket where Janek's letter was.

"We haven't seen Helena for years," she said side-stepping the question. They rarely mentioned their daughter Helena.

"I hope she isn't going to bring that man." Ivan never called their daughter's de-facto husband Richard by name, even Helena became 'she' since she chose to live in sin with a divorced man. Barbara said nothing. She knew how much Ivan missed his darling daughter and how much it pained him because his church would not let him forgive her. In his eyes she was condemned to live in hell all the days of her life and for all eternity.

Protecting each other from pain they got used to keeping painful things in the dark corners where they would hopefully die of neglect. "No use forcing issues," thought Barbara. "He is entitled to his views and so am I."

"I think Janek will be Johnny's Godfather. It would be nice to meet Janek and Diana in Slovenia," said Ivan quietly.

When Matjaz wrote that he will be home for the democratic elections, something stirred in Ivan's heart. He began longing to take a part in forming the destiny of his nation.

"Would you like to go home?" he asked Barbara.

"I don't mind," she answered cautiously.

"The mountains and the forests don't change. It is sad that rivers are not clean any longer. Clear water is like a pure person." Ivan stopped abruptly, embarrassed by his speech.

"Write to Janek then and say that we will come. We can return together. If you like," he added..

"Dear Diana and Janek," wrote Barbara. "I hope you will still be there when Dad and I come over on the 15th of September. We will stay for a month and hope to go back with you. Leon would like you to be Johnny's Godfather at the end of October. We will have a family reunion and catch up with the news. Helena is coming from Perth to be the Godmother."

"It's done." Barbara almost believed that the letters from Janek and Franc never arrived, letters get lost. "Thank God, my granddaughter's wedding will be over before we get there," she thought relieved that one hurdle in her life was again avoided.

"We better get ready then," smiled Ivan and they both started travelling the roads of their childhood so mysteriously glittering with memories that weren't memories at all. Caught in the time warp between the reality of their childhood and their present existence their hearts chose the memories regardless of the truth. They travelled home silently every night chasing the elusive truth about their lives until they almost believed that what they will find on their return will be a fulfilment of their childhood dreams.

The reality, of course, had no place in their dreaming. They travelled home silently to collect the hopes and loves where they left them. They constantly assimilated the events in their environment with their post war upbringing in far off Slovenia. The news had to be adjusted to the values and rules they learned as children in a country that has, unbeknown to them, changed in their absence. Their views grew among foreigners but they related to Slovenia they had known in the fifties. Slovenia was a magical place that never changed for them, it remained a simple, innocent fairy land.

Barbara wished that she could undo the events of her past since Ivan could not let her accept it. She was mercilessly thrown into the stormy river of life before she learned to swim.

Painting had given her a small measure of satisfaction and success during the last few years and she felt more contented with her life than ever before.

Barbara looked down at her new hometown with pride. The fields and farm lands reached towards Linden like meadows in full flower, almost like the fields of Europe. It had been a wet year and nature was celebrating its own spring. The land celebrated the sun and the rain that unannounced woke up the ground to spread new seeds, new life and a new future.

Down at the bottom near the river was a stretch of rain forest uncommon for these parts so far from the sea. Barbara remembered the Aboriginal woman on TV explaining it.

“For thousands of years Aborigines travelled from the seaside bringing mussel shells to their home along the river. They cooked them until they burst open, ate the flesh and deposited the shells on piles along the river. The kilometres of shell middens prove that. Aborigines also brought the seeds of the rain-forest on their feet and in the mud sticking to their bodies.” They started this peculiar stretch of lovely greenery thousands of years ago.

Now the river and the forest were in danger. Farmers sprayed the crops with chemicals that washed back into the river which they used for irrigation. The fish were being poisoned and the fishing almost stopped.

Barbara looked at the buildings half hidden among the newly planted trees of Linden. The new town was like a satellite into which people escaped when Sydney city lights were too much for them. Up on the slopes surrounding the valley were the little suburbs of Greeks and Italians and Slovenians, Croatians, Hungarians, a little Europe of mostly successful migrants looking down from where they'd climbed up. They arrived to Australia 20-30-40 years ago. Although they built beautiful homes they only felt at home here because they were amongst their own people who admired their efforts.

“My husband built this town,” thought Barbara with a sense of pride and gratitude. From their home on the outskirts of town they could see the whole town without being a part of the town. “My home stands out, you can't miss it,” thought Barbara. “It is like that with us, we love the country and the people but we sit on the fence looking back, looking in, looking out.” They were still testing the ground to grow roots into. The story their children learned at school was not really their story. They learned English history, they learned to honour foreign heroes. All migrant children and the natives learned the story of English forefathers who discovered Australia.

Barbara remembered a speech Ivan made many years ago when they first opened the Slovenian club in Sydney over twenty years ago.

“Slovenians celebrate with Slovenians, Italians stick to their own, so do Germans and Greeks. They don’t call us, we don’t call them, we know less about other migrants than we know about Australians. People will mix with people they like,” he said. “The public servants in Canberra with their good secure jobs, with their superannuation and insurance, they barely know any of us migrants, yet they would like to decide what we ought to believe and how we should behave. Sitting in their air-conditioned middle class environments they are figuring out how to blend us into Australian society. I tell you, they can’t make me mix with someone I have nothing in common with. I want to relax in my free time not blend into anything. I want to be with my people.”

Barbara wandered what really was Australian society. Was it the sum of the assimilated parts or was it just fragmented and broken parts of other societies put together?

After a couple of years Ivan wanted to leave the club he built in Sydney because the members argued about the political situation in Slovenia. He bought the land fifty kilometres out of Sydney and began to build a town of his own. He wanted to forget the bitter political divisions, but he missed the company and the arguments.

“We moved higher and higher up the hill to retire with the best view,” thought Barbara. Most of the houses Ivan built stood on elevated foundations, they were his monuments.

“We see better looking down,” joked Ivan when others commented about it.

After 20 years they became possessive about Linden, they called Linden valley ‘our valley’. They were called locals by newcomers who over the past 20 years also helped to recreate the European way of life within Linden Valley. “We built it, named it, changed it, populated and polluted it,” thought Barbara who remembered well the virgin land before the first bulldozers arrived.

“This is a virgin ground,” said Ivan as he brought her and their three children to show them what he bought

Later they learned that Kurries went walkabout there for thousands of years. Kurri, the very first man, the coastal Aborigine, left no marks. This was still the virgin ground when Ivan brought the bulldozers and the surveyors to subdivide the land twenty years ago. He’d bought a small farm cheaply. His family lived in a small caravan as they began to build a better future. Ivan never liked Sydney. “We are really peasants at heart,” he joked.

People from the country towns up North came later to be closer to the city, people from Sydney ran away from smog and the rat race to relax in the tranquillity of a country town so close to the big smoke.

“We came after the emus, kangaroos and Aborigines,” thought Barbara. She grew up with this town, with Vida and Andrej working in their restaurant, with Milan and Milena in their large warehouse, with Marjan and Robyn, with Joe and Hermina, Sonja and Vinko, Kristina and Peter, Ivanka, Mitja and Boris, Marko and Drago.” Invisible treads connected them with the past and brought them together. They barely noticed the other ten thousand people who also moved to Linden over the past twenty years.”

Barbara remembered the Aboriginal story teller’s words from the television program recently: “And the wise one said: I will create a special land. The people of this land will walk bare footed and even the animals will have soft padded feet. No sharp cloven hooves will

cut into the skin of this land. The land will by itself provide for its natives. There will be no rubbish in this land.”

The story teller and the wise one were wrong, of course, Barbara saw people search deeper and deeper into the unspoiled wilderness to build new homes and to till the land. People were happy as long as they could travel a little further, to solve another mystery, to conquer another bit of unspoiled ground. They cut down trees so they could make paper. Lately Barbara’s mail box was full of pamphlets telling her to want things she didn’t need.

During her first lonely years in Linden, Barbara often took her three children along the river in the evening to watch the native animals come for a drink. Kangaroos jumped gracefully, they flew over the fences like they carried no weight and leaned over the water to drink. Emus kneeled back on their feet extending only their necks into the water. Barbara marvelled at their graceful movements and noticed that native animals never stepped into the water. They left bird like tracks without injuring the land. The sheep and cattle and horses and feral pigs messed up the river bank with their sharp cloven feet, they made the muddy soup of the river and drank that. Maybe the native animals knew how precious the soil and the water were to this continent. Maybe like natives the animals instinctively understood that to survive they had to tread softly in this land.

Ivan planted the first linden tree on the farm soon after their arrival. There now grew hundreds of linden trees over the valley. Ivan himself planted them near most of the houses he built. The trees reminded him of the linden tree near his home in Slovenia.

One day Boris brought some plans he drew for Ivan and they sat in the shade of the linden tree near the BBQ.

“Slovenia is where Slovenians live,” said Ivan, “this is my Slovenia.”

“We still don’t know how to love Australia because we grieve for home,” said Boris, playing with the scented flower of the linden. “I hope our children will love Australia as we love Slovenia.” They discussed their plans for Linden but they longed for Slovenia.

People came to work for the builders, contractors and surveyors, friends and families followed. In the last few years the building boom finished and many became unemployed. There was no industry yet in Linden. Seasonal work on the land was taken by those unwilling to travel to Sydney to work in the factory.

Many families accepted the social security rather than move out. In the middle of the valley was a housing commission suburb with people mostly on welfare. Aborigines were fighting alcoholism, Vietnamese were fighting Lebanese, single mothers were fighting children’s fathers for support.

Barbara wondered why her son Janek chose to live with Asian newcomers, the unemployed Europeans and Aborigines.

Aborigines settled right in the middle of the valley near the river and they said that they always lived near the river, but it was another river, another time, another tribe, and another valley. They too were migrants in Linden, runaways in their own country.

Marko, his wife Edna and their children came a few years ago from up North where he lived with a gang of Aboriginal fencers and shearers. Ivan told Barbara how Marko boasted about the glorious times he had in Lightning Ridge as an opal miner. But Ivan didn’t take much

notice of the man who lived with a black woman, unmarried and on the welfare. Marko told Ivan about the money and the excitement of Lightning Ridge but Ivan dismissed the boasts of a man who made nothing in his life but a pile of black bastards.

Drago was even worse in Ivan's eyes because he left his family in Western Australia and moved in with Marko's lot.

Drago had nowhere to go when he arrived to Linden. He knew Marko from home so he moved in with him. Edna had cousin Ruth staying with them and soon Drago began sharing Ruth's bed. Both stayed. Slovenians had little to do with them. Ivan sometimes offered casual jobs and Marko soon became an agent for all his Aboriginal relations. Ivan used them because they came cheap and willing.

"They work to get some drinking money," grunted Ivan one day to his building supplier Milan as they watched them dig trenches for a shopping project.

"Birds of the feather, said Milan."

In the valley were also Croats, Serbs, Hungarians and Polacks who used common English words for objects and actions around them. They tied English nouns and verbs with an absurd mixture of Slavic languages. Australians usually referred to them as Yugoslavs although most of them hated the name Yugoslav. Tito united them by force but in their hearts they retained their national identity. Many escaped because they wanted to be known as Slovenians, Macedonians, Croatians or Serbs.

Slovenians carried their Yugoslavness as a specially heavy burden. It was imposed on them by force psychologically and physically. This aggression was an insult they feared and rebelled against. The Yugoslavness offered a lull of stability on the Balkan for victorious communists. Sick of war the world embraced this stability.

They rarely talked about it with Australians, they didn't want any trouble. The collective name made it easier for Australians who knew little about Yugoslavia and Tito.

The Europeans alone knew each other's country, they explained and fiercely defended their territorial uniqueness, because they alone understood the significance of it. All the distinguishing details and intrinsic characteristics were lost on an outsider of Anglo-Saxon origin.

"What can you expect from a kangaroo," migrants often said to show a little scorn for the way Australians cooked, dressed, socialised and brought up children.

Barbara watched Ivan work tirelessly for over thirty years to grow roots in Australia but she knew that his dreams were still of his first love Slovenia, left behind but never forgotten. He worked for the good of Linden valley but his heart was in another valley under the Triglav mountain.

Ivan became Linden Valley's first Shire councillor. By voting for him people acknowledged him as the developer of the town and also for the man he was.

The last of the original Aboriginal tribe from this area was hunted down by the first explorers and settlers. Other Aborigines moved to Linden more recently. When they started to fret for home they just upped and left to spread their wings in familiar places with familiar people.

Ivan and Barbara one day sat under the linden tree watching the colourful sunset.

“This is our home,” said Ivan almost to himself.

“We don’t need to go walkabout.” Barbara smiled but she knew that in his heart Ivan often went walkabout to his home in Slovenia.

Slovenians in Linden often met at Kristina’s vineyard to sing old sad ballads about their youth and their home. Barbara wondered where other people born in Sydney turned to in their walkabout moments.

“It’ll be twenty-one years at Christmas since we moved here,” said Ivan. It was almost a lifetime. There were other lifetimes, of course, they left hidden marks on them all.

Reminiscing alone in the bush above Linden, Barbara regretted that she did not paint every detail of their land before the bulldozers came in and ripped it open. The land changed with the people who lived on it.

The timber industry just started nearby to provide employment for the residents of Linden. Barbara was sad because she knew that the beautiful trees will fall and she could do nothing about it. People wanted jobs. Even the Kurries could not stop the progress. They also wanted the things industry provided.

“I’d better stop changing the world and get to Mitja’s place,” thought Barbara.

*An aged man is but a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick,
unless soul claps its hands and sings for every tatter in its mortal dress.*

Yeats

Mitja and Boris.

Boris and Mitja were in a festive mood as Barbara arrived. "God is looking after us," called Mitja from the veranda of his log cabin.

"We need a young girl to help us celebrate," said Boris. Mitja's isolated home blended into the mountain. It was painted eucalyptus green with bits of pink on the eaves. One side of it sat on the rocks while the other perched on the huge tree trunks looking towards the valley. Leaning on the rails of the veranda Mitja held a glass of wine to Barbara and toasted with a verse from Horace:

"Thou restorest hope to hearts distressed, and addest power and courage to the poor man, who after thee trembles not at the crowns of angry kings or soldiers' weapons." He was reciting the praise of wine, of course, but he also saluted Barbara.

"Alas! why lacked I as a lad the purpose that I have today? Or why to my present spirit do not my rosy cheeks return?" answered Boris with another verse showing how in tune he was with his lifelong friend.

"You look like a breath of spring," he said to Barbara. She reminded him of his wife Anushka who gave him love and the zest for living.

"She came to see me, you might as well go home now," laughed Mitja.

"Like flowers, love has to blossom every spring, to keep the hopes alive. Without the flames of love, life is but an empty thing," said Boris half jokingly to Barbara who became instantly embarrassed.

"The flowers blossom new with timeless beauty to provoke old fools like you and embarrass young girls like Barbara," countered Mitja to put Barbara at ease.

As they came in, Boris settled Barbara in the old leather lounge facing the window with the most mysterious view. The ghostly, still untouched, mountainside, basked in the warm autumn sun that was setting behind the white gum trunks.

"What are you celebrating?" asked Barbara as Mitja poured a glass of wine for her.

"See this suitcase," said Mitja pointing at the battered cardboard case full of old papers and photographs. "I bought it in Rome in 1955. I sold my own blood to the Red Cross and bought myself a suitcase. It reminds me of where I came from. It's 35 years to a day since my ship arrived from Napoli to Sydney."

Barbara began to browse through the old photographs. The old man in front of her became young, the young girls on the pictures were looking at him with hope and lust and love and Barbara felt embarrassed like she'd be caught peeping through the window of a stranger.

"I thought you celebrated the democracy in Slovenia like everybody else," Barbara tried to divert the men's attention as she looked through Mitja's past packed in the battered box of

a suitcase. She met Boris and Mitja at Milena's long ago when they all lived in Sydney. Mitja was Barbara's doctor since he established his private practice..

Mitja's ship arrived to Adelaide in 1956. He was luckier than most, he learned English at school and later during the war when he joined Allied British aviation as a doctor. But on arrival to Australia he had no papers, no money, no friends, no family.

Mitja turned to the small group of Slovenians who arrived to Australia before him as political refugees. They were suspicious of everybody and their information network checked Mitja out. They found that Mitja used to be a trusted communist doctor serving high political leaders in Belgrade. They unanimously accused him of spying. The varied stories of his past filtered through Slovenian clubs un-refuted and unconfirmed. Most agreed that he was hiding something. His own people rejected him until he re-established himself as a doctor and proved himself a trustworthy man.

Nobody ever found out exactly why Mitja escaped. Even now in 1990 he claimed that the agents of the secret police were still after him but people did not take that seriously. What would CIA and UDBA and KGB want of an old man? Unless he was a spy of course. Maybe he worked for the KGB. Who knows. He wasn't old when he first came to Australia. Put out by Mitja's aloofness people kept on guessing, they resented not knowing but they never asked directly.

Mitja and Boris met in Victoria as fruit pickers in 1958 while they studied for exams that would later establish them in their professions. Their friendship grew as they argued over the years. Both learned not to trust anybody and they invented stories and opinions until they began to believe them. They invented enemies who chased them because they were afraid of secrets they carried. They tried to outdo each other in their importance and hinted vaguely at their connections with people in high places. Neither was quite sure who the other was and they played the cat and mouse game to satisfy their need for recognition from each other.

Boris and Mitja held important positions in Yugoslav capital Belgrade just before they escaped. They met the same people, both were under strict security orders and aware of danger.

"It's amazing," said Mitja once to Barbara. "We were moving among the same people in Belgrade without knowing about each other."

"We were part of the plan to unite the warring Yugoslav nationalities. The almighty communist God moved key Slovenian personnel to Serbia and Serbs to Slovenia. We did not realise then that we were the key personnel. Workers and their families were meant to follow. We were Yugoslavs in the making," said Boris.

"My Serbian friend Jovo talked about this plan but I took no notice then," said Mitja. 'If you ever hear things about me,' said Jovo the day before he disappeared, 'please remember that I had no choice.' I never learned what he did, so I did not dare ask what happened to him. I heard rumours that Jovo spied for KGB after Tito split from the Soviet Union. His words stuck in my mind though, especially since I realised that none of us had any choice." Mitja never dared to tell even to Boris that he supplied vital information to Jovo.

Even with each other Boris and Mitja spoke in riddles. They repeated the stories so often that they found it difficult to separate the fact and the fiction of their lives.

Sometimes they felt that they suffocated each other with the repetitive nature of their friendship and they erupted into senseless arguments. Sustaining each other emotionally and intellectually they none the less parted angrily after many arguments.

Often during the restless full moon evenings they accused each other of vanity and treachery and stupidity before they severed all contact with angry words. After weeks or months the desire for the intimacy brought them together again. Refreshed, they exchanged their views again. They never needed to say sorry. Both believed that real friends never break up completely.

Both men learned to live with their secrets imbedded in their subconsciousness. Years passed before they found anyone they could share these events with and the events became more remote every year.

Mitja married first. His wife Irene came from Switzerland with her mother after her father was killed in the war. Their son was born nine months after they married. Irene needed a supportive husband but Mitja, ambitious to become a registered doctor, became more and more absorbed in his studies. Irene fell in love with a young French migrant. Before she left Mitja she explained that her father was also French. Mitja felt relieved rather than sad. Irene never meant much to him so their break-up left behind no pain or resentment. They remained friends and saw each other occasionally until Irene's new husband decided to take the family back to Europe. Mitja missed his son, he composed letters for him but he never sent them. They exchanged cards and phone calls occasionally. Mitja learned to live without the intimacy of the family but he wandered about his grandchildren often and planned in his lonely evenings to visit them.

People speculated why Mitja never married again but nobody asked and Mitja never told them. He never told anyone either how glad he was that Irene left him. Just before she left, he received the letter from the Supreme Court that his first wife Ada charged him with bigamy. Ada's father found out about his Australian marriage and filed a suit.

Mitja was a student during the war when he met Ada. Her father was Mitja's professor who became the commandant of the Liberation Force as the war started. Ada became pregnant by the end of the war. Ada's father arranged their marriage before he appointed Mitja to an important post in the capital Belgrade. Mitja never saw his wife or their daughter again. Presuming that she divorced him, he married again in Australia. The bigamy charges during puritanical fifties were serious for a new Australian doctor who wanted to establish his practice. It took all his money and the influence of newly found Australian colleagues to keep him out of jail.

Mitja had no close friends in Australia when Irene left, he had nobody close enough to tell about his marriages. He never considered Ada his wife and she had nothing to do with his escape. The snippets of information filtered from the Australian court reports to Slovenian community without his knowledge. Because nobody ever aired the facts, they became more and more sinister and changed. People said that he was a spy, an impostor, a genius, a madman, a bigamist, a saint and a crook. They wanted to ruffle his feathers and extract an explanation but he remained unconcerned and aloof.

Boris married Anushka, a happy, tall Russian girl with masses of blond curls flooding her face. They spoke Russian at the beginning and Slovenians began to whisper that Boris was a Russian spy.

“At last my Russian came useful,” laughed Boris trying to justify to Mitja the fact that he chose to speak his new wife’s language.

After the war everybody in Yugoslavia learned Russian as a second language. “You never know when it’ll come handy,” said Boris’ teacher who knew that many of his students would rather learn English or German. “He was a wise old man,” said Boris to Mitja when he first introduced Anushka to him.

They stopped teaching Russian in Yugoslavia abruptly in 1948 when Tito and Stalin ended their friendship. Some felt cheated because their Russian suddenly became a waste of time and they started to learn German and later English. But Boris realised now that knowledge was never a waste of time.

Jealous of their light-hearted romance, Mitja rejected them from the beginning and refused to speak Russian with Boris and Anushka. Anushka quickly learned Slovenian and she kept inviting Mitja to their home until he succumbed to her charm and became like an associate husband to the girl who loved his only friend. Both men tried to please Anushka so they learned many of the same mannerisms and behaviours. Over the many years the three of them got used to each other and found a common ground on most issues. They also reserved the right to disagree when they felt like.

Anushka stuck to her views despite their testing and teasing. Cheerful and compromising in many ways she never compromised her convictions and remained a worthy opponent. She always saw the other side of the coin. Both men liked to criticise people and events but Anushka managed to find goodness and beauty in everybody and everything. She never learned to become cynical or bitter and most people took to her.

Anushka told them how her parents escaped from Russia during the war with herself as a baby. She spoke about her parents with devotion and wonder.

Boris wanted to settle on the outskirts of Sydney so Anushka agreed to let their two daughters go to the boarding school from the age of twelve. They matured and married young.

After Anushka’s died from breast cancer in 1986, Boris retired and became obsessed with the building of his yacht.

Both men were devastated by Anushka’s death and they needed each other for comfort. Alone again, they often became annoyed with each other because in their old age they began to echo each other’s thoughts. Often they sat in silence with a glass of port listening to the music and longing to find a worthy opponent to argue with.

As soon as they began to relax in their precarious friendship, Mitja and Boris joined the Slovenian club in Sydney and began to enjoy Slovenian social life. When Ivan turned his farm into Linden town the two old men befriended Linden Slovenians and often joined them at Kristina’s which was half way between Mitja’s hideout and Linden.

Milena and Barbara became Mitja’s first Slovenian patients and Mitja held them in a special regard. Gradually the men became frequent, but still formal guests at their homes. Slovenians by now learned to call each other by their first name following Australian friendly intimacy but nobody else called Mitja and Boris by their first names, they remained mister and doctor.

When not present at Kristina's on Sunday afternoons, Slovenians liked to talk about the two elderly men. Ivan was proud to be the first Slovenian invited to inspect the boat Boris built. "He gave me a guided tour right to the last little poky cupboard he built in a smelly boat," said Ivan to make his boast less obvious.

"They are victims of their own egomania," said Milan. "I think they have a lot to hide." Mitja cursed priests as vehemently as communists. Yet he donated thousands of dollars towards the new church in Sydney. Nobody could predict the men's behaviour and that provoked suspicions."

"Mitja is as paranoid about showing off his books as he is about people touching them," said Milena, honoured to be shown every old dusty book in Mitja's library. He took time to explain each book's importance and uniqueness. She understood that, like the yacht, the library became an extension and a companion of a man, it's maker. People ridiculed the men because the men did not let them get close enough to know them.

"Mitja is a brilliant liar. He must be hiding something big," said Milan.

"Mitja is a brilliant doctor, there is no doubt about it," corrected Milena.

"I think he is afraid of who he is," said Ivan.

Barbara simply accepted what Mitja and Boris chose to tell her and did not search for their dark secrets. Boris always liked to be close to the sea but after the death of his wife he became passionately involved with his yacht and deep sea fishing which Mitja disliked.

"He thinks that he is Hamingway's old man catching the fish of his life," said Mitja to Barbara on one of her visits. Mitja became absorbed in his library and had a valuable collection of first editions which he showed to his special friends.

"He never reads any of them, but he protects his books like babies," Boris told Barbara as they were shown yet another new Mitja's acquisition.

Each man preened his own feathers while ruffling those of his friend. Mitja resented the yacht because it took so much of his friend's time.

The music, remote but soothing wafted through the room as Barbara tidied the photographs in the suitcase, smiling quietly at the faces in Mitja's life. He was a handsome impressive man long, long time ago. Even then there was an un-penetratingly cool about him. Among the photographs were snaps of Boris and Anushka always happily embraced. Boris reminded Barbara of Gregory Peck, timelessly romantic, proud and harmless in his remoteness.

Barbara never worried what these two men thought about her, she simply felt accepted. Mitja and Boris sat on the veranda with after dinner drinks when she rang earlier that day to make an appointment.

"You don't have to go," said Mitja to Boris. "She will probably be glad of your company," he winked at him. "Anyway she has no opinions to interfere with our thoughts."

"She is like a remote continent to be discovered," said Boris thoughtfully.

"And you would like to discover it," smiled Mitja. Both men liked Barbara, they were not jealous of each other, they were only afraid that some woman would take either of them away from the other.

"It's been a long time," said Boris. Both knew what he meant. The women used to come and go, they enjoyed their company, both toyed with the idea of remarriage but neither made that final step. There was no meeting of the souls and they would not take anything less. Through years of constant bickering the two old men grew dependant on each other.

Mitja was fond of Horace, he related to the two thousand year old poetry and laughed at the seriousness with which the youth of any generation attempted to unravel the mysteries of life and conquer the unconquerable. He recited Horace's odes to put in proper perspective thoughts and tempers of the moment. "Grant me, O Latona's son, to be contented with what I have, and, sound of body and of mind, to pass an old age lacking neither honour nor the lyre." Boris answered with another ode.

"To those who seek for much, much is ever lacking; blest is he whom the god with chary hand has given just enough," After years of passing to each other little bits of truth and beauty they encountered, Mitja and Boris understood each other better than anybody could ever understand them.

Less cynical, Boris still hoped for the warmth and oblivion in the arms of a cheerful female. In his mind he recited: "Men live, who day by day can say: I have lived today; tomorrow let the father fill the heaven with murky clouds or radiant sunshine! Yet will he not render whatever now is past."

It was easy for the two men wandering into their past to forget Barbara who by now sat on the floor with the suitcase at her feet.

"So you are not celebrating the victory of democracy in Slovenia," Barbara suddenly brought them all back to reality.

"Fools. The same people won, old chooks, new feathers." Mitja lifted his glass proposing a toast. "Here's to Australia."

"Bloody lovely," Boris joined in. "And to the end of Yugoslavia and Tito's brotherhood," said Boris in mock seriousness. "You don't love your own brother all the time, you must be allowed to hate him sometimes," he turned to Barbara.

"Slovenians are still building bloody brotherhood in Australia. According to the last census there are only five thousand Slovenians in Australia. The other twenty thousand registered themselves as Yugoslavs," thundered Mitja. "Poor bastards escaped to Australia so they could tell their children that they are Yugoslavs?"

"They whinge about Australian system, because Yugoslav is still a bloody taboo," said Boris.

"Look at their economy. There are no proprietors, no responsible guide-lines, no responsible management." said Mitja.

"All own everything and take what they can, when they can, do as little as they can get away with," said Boris.

"The economy is in the hands of trusted politicians who never produced or sold anything," echoed Mitja.

"When you own something you take care of it. In Yugoslavia the communist elite tells you that you have no right to call anything your own. You have to sacrifice your selfish needs for the greater good of the people," mocked Boris.

“You mean for the greater good of their leaders” agreed Mitja.

“Isn’t it rather immoral for some people to grow rich while others remain poor,” said Barbara so quietly that men stopped to look at her suddenly. To them she was just an audience. Caught in their stare she had to explain. “The religion is telling us to do unto the other as if you were the other. “

Mitja stopped her. “It would be nice, wouldn’t it.” Glad to have a dutiful pupil both men were eager to educate Barbara. They tried to outdo each other in explaining the same point of view. Jealously competitive in their youth they grew to become the same and they spoke the thoughts of the other like so many long time married people do.

“The almighty elite says that a collective good is all important and the individual good is immoral. The almighty elite does everything for their own good yet people still believe what the elite tells them. We hear and we see,” explained Boris pointing at his ears and eyes knowing that Barbara will understand.

“After the war they nationalised private property and became the managers and directors. The workers were blamed if the economy suffered while their directors built holiday resorts for themselves. That’s why they insisted that the means of production belonged to the workers. Since the communism destroyed itself those same directors bought the best national means of production. They passed the law of denationalisation. and returned to the rightful owners the property they were not interested in.”

“They built brotherhood of nations but they made us afraid of our neighbours, friends, sons, fathers, lovers,” said Boris turning to Barbara. “Now the unity suits them and they’ll forgive us if we say sorry. Bastards. They want us to be friends, after we had to escape, crawl underground, lie.”

“Their best weapon is human conscience,” said Mitja. “They made people feel guilty and ashamed of their rightful possessions and of their thoughts.”

“As long as you own something you are not totally dependent,” agreed Boris. “You only remain free as long as you can survive without them.”

“They don’t want free people. If you own nothing you are as much at their mercy as if they pointed a gun at you.” explained Mitja.

“The hunger and homelessness is an ever present threat to those who own nothing,” helped Boris.

“Maybe some people enjoy being looked after by the government, they might like to live from day to day. They save a bit for special occasions but what’s the point in having more than they need,” said Barbara.

“Everybody wants more than they need. Our politicians invest money in Western Europe but they expect us, migrants, to invest in their collapsed economy,” said Mitja.

“They count on our stupidity and homesickness,” said Boris.

“In principle they believe in democracy and capitalism, they are not that stupid; but they will have to reinvent exploitation. They are in turmoil because right now their power is threatened, they need to adjust and they will, dear Barbara. Nothing much will change but people will not be looked after as you say they were before,” Mitja patted Barbara’s hand.

“Where are the days when we believed in the ideal world and brotherhood,” said Boris almost sad that the romantic ideas they grew up with faded away.

“As a doctor for the party leaders I learned more about the system than about medicine while I worked in Belgrade,” Mitja explained to Barbara. “The Icarus factory in Zemun was the headquarters of Anglo-Russo intelligence where KGB agents exchanged information with British spies.”

Mitja looked at Barbara but she had no idea what he was talking about.

“Even during the war the spies gave false information about Tito to the BBC to impress Churchill. That’s why Churchill chose to support Tito, that’s why communist revolution succeeded in Yugoslavia. It has little to do with the will of the people.” Boris finished Mitja’s speech, they have rehearsed it often enough.

“Macmillan cleared Phillby even after Burgess and Maclean openly defected to Russia,” said Mitja. “Macmillan should be on trial but the bastard died.”

“I recently read his biography and apparently he was tried and punished by the women in his life. His domineering mother made him afraid and nervous and his unfaithful wife made him insecure and manipulative. Coming from an old Scottish family that expected much from him. He ploughed through by expediency and by hiding his insecurities behind the facade of bravery. Inside he was a frightened, confused man,” added Boris the latest bit of information. “Still he was a member of British establishment and as such had to be protected.

“I know that the CIA and the FBI never trusted the MI6,” said Mitja. “It is a known fact now that Yugoslavia was a channel for KGB and British spies. Both protected the channel because neither knew who was who or who was both. Most interpreters were themselves spies or counter spies.”

The men again forgot Barbara. She did not understand what they were talking about and she returned to the faces in Mitja’s suitcase.

“There is more than just the memory of Napoli’s blood-bank in this suitcase,” she thought.

“I’ll tell you,” said Mitja turning to Barbara suddenly. “In May 1945 your brother was sent back from Austria because Macmillan said so. He said so because he was dealing with Tito and Russians. There was co-operation between Russia and England until Harold Macmillan was forced to resign after the Profumo scandal in 1963. One day you will read about it.” Mitja knew about Barbara’s family.

“Field Marshal Alexander ordered that refugees should not be forcefully repatriated but Macmillan disobeyed the order,” explained Boris to Barbara. Mitja and Boris went through the same topic hundreds of times and every time they discovered a new angle of understanding.

“In 1944 Tito, Djilas and Kardelj made a deal with Macmillan in Egypt, they exchanged Carinthia and Trieste for the repatriation of refugees after the war. Austria connected Slovenian Carinthia and Italians took Trieste,” said Mitja.

“Tito was scared shitless of Home-guards. His army advanced into Carinthia, they were in the position to keep Slovenian Carinthia but Tito agreed to retreat if anti-Communist Yugoslav refugees were returned to his slaughter house,” said Boris.

“Djilas later wrote: The refugees’ only crime was a fear of communists, they panicked and fled,” said Mitja.

“Their fears were well justified because on their return they were murdered. That’s why Yugoslav brotherhood couldn’t succeed. It was built on a massacre. It will end in the massacre, mark my word. The documents are in Geneva,” said Boris turning to Barbara again.

“Things are changing, there is democracy now in Slovenia,” said Barbara remembering father Damian’s conversation with Ivan.

“One democratic election can’t fix what’s wrong with Yugoslavia,” said Boris. “America and England created Yugoslavia and when it will suit them they will let it fall apart but not a minute sooner. They will have to deal with Russia first, of course. Mark my word, Russia will stand by Serbia because they are brothers and because Serbia is Russia’s hope to reach into the Mediterranean.”

“The return of the refugees was the blood money the West paid Tito for co-operating,” said Mitja. “The bastards still don’t want to admit it. Remember the trial against Austrian president Curt Waldheim. He was accused of war crimes and acquitted. Do you know why he was acquitted?”

“They had no evidence,” tried Barbara.

“Bullshit, there is plenty of evidence only he has evidence too. In 1945 over seventy thousands of refugees from communist countries escaped to the British Zone in Austria. Macmillan ordered their return.”

“What has that to do with Waldheim,” asked Barbara.

“He has the lists of names of all the people who were residing in Austria in May 1945 and were returned to the communists. Austria has signatures of the people who signed the orders for their return. The list of names is still missing. Until this day the orders couldn’t be found, documents disappeared but Austria has originals.”

“Wouldn’t England and Russia have the copies?”

“They are not likely to produce them. There is a copy in Geneva archive but it will not be opened for seventy-five years, making sure that culprits die unpunished,” said Mitja.

“Most British files relevant to Yugoslav cases are classified for seventy-five years. They arranged it for bastards to escape,” agreed Boris.

“Are you saying that Curt is blackmailing the world?”

“Britain is ashamed to admit that they acted unjustly, brutally or unthinkingly. Maybe they were even ashamed then to put any such orders on paper but decisions were made.”

“I’ll tell you why I came to Australia,” Mitja turned to Barbara again. “Djilas was the smartest man Tito had. They were personal friends. He made the slogan: Tito-Stalin.” Barbara waited, she could not ask direct questions until the men were ready. “Djilas was also behind the breaking up with Stalin in 48.” Boris poured more wine for everybody as Mitja drifted into his disjointed memories.

“For a brief period Djilas was my patient in 53,” said Mitja.

“Stalin died in 53,” filled in Boris to help Barbara understand.

“Tito never slept easy until Stalin died,” said Mitja. “Djilas wrote for our biggest newspaper. After Stalin’s death he wrote that the communist party should now consider the opinions of the people.”

“That was blasphemy in those days,” said Boris.

“Only we did not know it. We thought that it was a new official party line coming from Djilas. He decided the party line,” said Mitja.

“We all welcomed the change,” explained Boris to Barbara. “Djilas was under Western influence and the West was promising money and freedom.”

“Tito just recovered from the fear of Stalin, now Djilas threatened with democracy. Tito knew that he could only hold the Yugoslav nations together by demanding complete obedience. The party leaders were given power and wealth to hold the people scared and to establish a total dictatorship.”

“Every tourist resort in Slovenia was permanently reserved for the party moguls. Tito’s residences all over the country were in permanent readiness with servants waiting for their leader. Tito also build the castles for his party bosses. He knew that they will all defend their castles with their lives. That’s why they defended him who lived in the biggest castle of them all,” explained Boris.

“Our leaders were afraid because of what they’ve done and of what they were doing to hold onto the power. Djilas was removed and later imprisoned. He published some works in the West. That was treason. And I was his doctor. As soon as he was imprisoned I was transferred closer to home,” remembered Mitja. “On the train home a policeman who knew me, whispered to me: They are going to shoot you. Run. He saved my life. I jumped from the speeding train into the scrub, waited until the night and climbed over the mountains into Italy.”

Mitja remembered things of long ago more and more vividly, the events made sense now. He was young and ambitious but scared then. He never told anyone about his childhood school mate Albin who became a policeman and saved his life on that train trip home. Mitja rushed to greet his dear friend but the seriousness of Albin’s face stopped him. Albin walked past him, whispered the warning and left the train compartment. After he settled in Australia Mitja tried to contact Albin but nobody knew about his whereabouts. There were rumours that he was arrested and shot while he tried to escape. Mitja believed that he was shot for saving his life and he carried this heavy burden silently.

“Remember the Dachau processes?” Boris wanted to tell his story again.

“What were they,” asked Barbara?

“During the war Germans discovered and mined uranium oxide near Ziri in Slovenia,” he explained patiently for Barbara’s benefit. “They transported it to Germany. Slovenian internees in Dachau and Mathausen knew about it. On their return they became engaged in the uranium project at home. For new year 1948 Kemotech demonstrated the success of their operation in front of the European Commission. This Anglo-Russo nuclear project

began operation in Slovenian village Gotenica. They used the Dachau internees because they were mostly academics and because they were presumed dead and wouldn't be missed. Nobody ever discovered who originally supplied the uranium oxide but war representatives blamed each other."

"Everybody was into nuclear weaponry and spying after the war," said Mitja.

Barbara had no idea what Boris was talking about but then Boris wasn't really talking to her. He was remembering the olden days. Drinking good wine and enjoying the company, Mitja and Boris knew exactly what they were remembering and that gave them comfort.

"I was never in Gotenica myself although I was involved with the plans for the project," continued Boris. "I have no idea what Gotenica is now but the huge underground project was built for their protection and safe keeping. Everything that happened to us was planned in Gotenica."

"Where is Gotenica," asked Barbara.

"In the hills near Kocevje," said Mitja. "They kept the repatriated internees to do all the work in the fortress underground. These experts worked for years hoping to buy their freedom. They never saw the light of day again," said Boris. "I was an engineer working in Belgrade for a project in Gotenica but I only learned later on in Germany that it was the uranium project. I was questioned about it by Americans and Germans. At home they sentenced me to death for stealing the plans for Gotenica although they knew that nobody could steal a hundred kilos of paper. Americans knew all about Gotenica without me."

Boris never boasted about his photographic memory that saved his life. When American soldiers caught him in Berlin they locked him away as the nuclear Russian spy. He told them everything he knew about the plans he drew and he discovered that by concentrating for silent hours in a solitary cell he could visualise the whole project and draw most of it on the already prepared sketch. He knew that he was buying his life and that his life will never be safe again.

"Bastards," said Mitja.

"I'll tell you why I escaped. I came home on a holiday from Belgrade in 1948," continued Boris. "As I walked through the forest I saw four men being shot. It was dangerous knowing anything like that, so I ran and kept on running for days until I came exhausted to the middle of Austria. They couldn't figure out why I escaped, nobody knew about me seeing those four men shot and buried in the forest."

Everybody knew that people disappeared after the war, but nobody dared ask about them" said Mitja. "Many were sent to Gotenica."

"What sort of people," asked Barbara.

"Any sort. If they wanted to get rid of someone for political reasons, or if they were personal enemies someone wanted to get rid of. Fifties were the most troublesome years in Yugoslavia," said Mitja.

"You were lucky, you were just a kid then," Boris patted Barbara's hand forgetting that she was a grown woman now.

"My father disappeared in 1954," said Barbara. She came here because she wanted Mitja and Boris to talk about the fifties.

"What could you know about those times," said Mitja looking at the fog lifting like a pale blue veil from the mountain peaks.

"Let them come here, bastards," he said hoarsely to himself. He drank in silence for a few moments then he turned to Barbara.

"You had one brother with partisans and the other was killed as a Home-guard," he summed up. "By the way what is your brother doing?"

"He has retired now but for many years he was a judge."

"How did your father get on with the judge?"

"Franc would not have his father killed. He was himself young then."

"Do you know anyone who would?"

"He was the nicest man I ever knew." Barbara wiped the tears ashamed that she still cried for her father. Boris poured more wine.

"Did anyone want to scare your family?"

"I don't know," whispered Barbara. She couldn't tell them about Karl and his threats. She knew that people liked Karl, maybe they were scared of him like she was. Karl adopted her, he became her father and the father of her first daughter Renata but Barbara still didn't dare mention his name or the name of their daughter. She was afraid to even think of Karl so she invented other thoughts. She often shuddered at the memory of her terrifying teenage experience.

"What did your brother say about your father's disappearance?" asked Boris gently, sensing Barbara's discomfort.

"Police came looking for my father. They said that he escaped to the rotten West. My brother believed them but I don't."

"Why not?"

"He wouldn't leave my mother. He would write."

"Would he leave you?"

"I was in Ljubljana then, going to high school."

"Who did you stay with?"

"Distant relatives." She couldn't tell them that Karl wasn't even a relative, that he was only her brother's friend.

"You could go home now, ask around, people seem eager to prosecute."

"How old would your father be?" asked Mitja realising that Barbara came seeking help from him.

"He'd be 90. I am sure he is dead but I want to find out how he died." Barbara believed that her father's death had something to do with Renata. She hoped to prove that it had not. She wanted to rub out the guilt she carried.

“So many Slovenians are scattered all over the world. Maybe someone knows about him,” said Mitja.

“There are many scattered dead in our forests at home quite forgotten. Maybe it is better that way. It would be hard to find out because bastards always cover up for other bastards.” Boris felt sorry for Barbara.

“I need to know,” whispered Barbara who needed to meet her daughter Renata as well.

“I am going home,” the words echoed inside her like a warning bell.

Earth's crammed with heaven
and every common bush afire with God.
Browning, Elizabeth Barrett.

Snowy Mountains

Ivan did not want to attend the reunion of the Men who built the Snowy Mountain Scheme years ago. Barbara watched a program on TV about the workers who attended the reunion and shared their memories. They were old men now. The mountain lakes they created, were scattered through the Snowy Mountains and surrounded by national parks they made attractive tourist destinations since the project finished in 1974.

The men recalled how thirty years ago in the sixties they built the giant project and how they made their first friendships in Australia. They diverted the mountain streams through the tunnels and created many small and large dams that now looked like natural lakes overgrown by native fauna.

Barbara looked back at her own early days in the bush and compared her life with the lives of those who, unbeknown to her, shared in the building of the Snowy Mountains Scheme. It was hard for her to believe that thirty years, since she first came to Cooma, passed so quickly.

In 1949 the Australian Prime Minister fired the first plug of dynamite to commemorate the start of The Snowy Mountains Scheme. This great engineering project fascinated Ivan. By diverting the head waters of the Snowy, Eucumbene and Murrumbidgee rivers through the mountains, extra water was made available for irrigation. But the water was first directed through a series of tunnels to power stations where it generated enormous amounts of electricity.

The scheme became a memorial to migrants of the sixties and most of those involved in it remembered it with pride. Men reminisced about the wild freedom of the bush, their drinking in the pub, the hunting and the fishing. Many travelled to Cooma or Sydney on their pay days to find girls, grog and gambling.

The first wave of non-English speaking migrants from Europe came to work on the gigantic hydro-electric project. Cooma, the sleepy Anglo-Saxon rural town at the bottom of the Snowy Mountains, soon became the multicultural metropolis of Australia. The smell of the cappuccino and salami wafting in the air on the main street was a welcome reminder of Europe for lonely men who had left behind their country, family and sweethearts. In Cooma one could hope to meet someone from home or at least from the same continent.

Early migrants had their travel to Australia paid by Australian government. In return they had to stay in Australia for two years. Most non-English speaking migrants were sent to the factories and shipyards or to work on the farms. Many stayed in their first job until they retired. Very few ever left Australia.

More adventurous quickly discovered that they did not have to go where they were given a job. As long as they could provide for themselves or find their own employment they were free to roam the vast continent. Although scattered all over Australia they all shared the memories of their first touchdown in Australia. Bonegilla migrant camp was the first stop in Australia for most.

Ivan met Hans on the ship coming to Australia in 1959. Fritz was waiting for Hans in Bonegilla. He was making eucalyptus oil near Snowy Mountains and he offered Ivan and Hans their first jobs in Australia.

Twenty years old Joe was thrilled when he first met Ivan in Cooma. The two young Slovenians met in 1961 in the pub where Ivan drank with his two German mates. Joe just arrived to Australia and Ivan, already feeling quite at home in the new country, told Joe about the production of eucalyptus oil in the bush near Bombala along the Snowy river.

“If you don’t mind sleeping in a tent,” said Ivan, “we don’t build camps because we keep on moving along the river. We cut the eucalyptus branches, separate the leaves and boil them in drums. It’s much like making slivovic, the oil and water we get from the leaves are separated through heating and cooling. All you really need is water, trees and drums.

“What do you do with the oil?”

“They use it in medicine and cosmetics, I think.”

“How many of you are there?”

“Hans and Fritz are working with me,” Ivan pointed to the men at the bar.

Joe came to Cooma from Bonegilla migrant camp because he heard about good wages earned on The Snowy mountains project. Glad to meet a friend, he changed his plans and joined Ivan on the eucalyptus. The gang shared an old ute to travel to Cooma, the two Germans and Ivan squeezed in the cabin while Joe had to hold on at the back for a two hour ride to their bush camp.

The vastness of the dusty, sleepy continent presented an enormous sense of freedom for the men but there were few women willing to live away from the shops and other women. Joe was surprised when he found Ivan’s wife Barbara cooking in front of the tent.

After Joe’s arrival, Barbara sometimes joined the men in the evening around the fire. Ivan, Hanz and Fritz usually spoke German while Joe and Barbara, who didn’t understand German, spoke Slovenian. They felt an enormous sense of gratitude for having the opportunity to be together, the feeling of well-being enveloped both as they shared the memories of their lives. They were free to remember what they wanted to remember, neither threatened the other with questions or made demands of any sort. Barbara found in Joe something that was an essential part of herself, the dreams and fears were reflected in their eyes and they became a little stronger together.

Joe liked Barbara and starved as both were they both were for love they began to dream of running away. Only at the end they always returned because there was nowhere else to run to.

Some months later, on a hot summer day, the men returned from their Cooma trip and a little under the weather they sang: Happy birthday dear Barbara.

“Happy twenty first, darling” Ivan embraced his wife and she unwrapped the big parcel, happy with the two huge gleaming aluminium pots he bought her. The Germans gave her a tea set and Joe, a little embarrassed, gave her a talcum powder and a soap.

It was Barbara’s first birthday party. At home they celebrated name days and birthdays were rarely mentioned. The men decided to have a BBQ so Barbara wouldn’t have to cook.

Barbara was grateful to see Ivan happy. Since Joe arrived Ivan had been finding fault with everything she did. "Something is missing," he would announce after a couple of bites. "Not enough salt, it's not the same putting salt on top of the food like Australians do. I want the salt cooked through the food. No taste with the salt on top of the meat. Could do with a bit of pepper, perhaps less tomato, a bit more fat, a bit less fat, a bit more cooked, a bit less cooked. "It doesn't taste the same," he announced simply when he couldn't decide what was wrong. It always took him a few moments to decide what was wrong. Sometimes, when he did not complain, Barbara asked him if he liked the food. "It's all right if you are hungry," he'd say grudgingly. Often he criticised her looks and behaviour. "You sounded stupid, you laughed too loud, you were pushy, too shy, you should do something with your hair, that dress is too short or too long. You acted like a servant, the men should respect you." Usually he only had to look at her and she would excuse herself and go after her chores. Barbara felt like an embarrassment to Ivan and got into a habit of saying sorry. Ivan was annoyed. "It's easy to say sorry, do something right instead. I don't want to hear you say sorry all the time."

"Sorry." she said, before she could stop herself.

"You are hopeless," he said.

Hanz and Fritz didn't understand these admonishments because Ivan spoke Slovenian with her, but Barbara felt ashamed when Ivan criticised her in front of Joe. She tried harder to please him but he found something wrong as soon as he looked at her. He also liked to ridicule Joe. Once he caught Joe arranging his hair carefully with the mirror stuck in the branch of the tree.

"Who are you preening yourself for," Ivan teased sarcastically. Joe and Barbara looked at each other a little scared and a little angry and a little belittled. Constantly chastised by Ivan both felt a bond between them growing.

"Not for you, that's for sure," laughed Joe, uneasy because he felt put down. He had to say something smart and funny because Ivan was becoming hostile towards him. But Ivan walked away seemingly unconcerned.

Tall and boyishly lanky, Joe developed a stoop so he could talk to people at eye level. He was awkwardly friendly but there was a sense of rebellion and adventure about him. Ivan's feet seemed firmly on the ground as his eyes held you in his stare but Joe appeared like he was constantly shifting his weight from one foot to the other in a dance like shuffle.

Barbara often laughed at silly little things Joe said but as Ivan approached, the laughter suddenly stopped.

Barbara rarely bought or did anything without asking Ivan's permission. "Why can't you think for yourself," he complained irritated but when she bought something without asking, he criticised her choice. She tried to make herself agreeable and when Ivan snapped his fingers, she ran. But she either ran too fast or too slow, she jumped too high or too low. Pleasing Ivan became a full time job for her. But he managed to make her more and more guilty and responsible for any irritation he felt. When he yelled at her he seemed hostile to Joe as well like both were his naughty children.

The heat and the beer made the men tired and Ivan decided that they should all take the rest of the day off in honour of Barbara's twenty first birthday. It wasn't usual for Ivan to be so demonstrative, he seldom drank enough to relax. "I want you to remember your

birthday," he whispered as they made love on the inflated mattress under the tent. Always afraid to upset Ivan, Barbara never relaxed enough to enjoy sex, her happiness was Ivan's happiness.

Ivan made love to Barbara so often that she could not possibly want anybody else, but deep down he knew that Barbara wasn't happy. He became angry and jealous of that unknown that he could not give her. He wanted to know her every thought, her every feeling but Barbara remained an enigma. She was always near him, obedient and faithful, he could make her cry, he could make her smile, he could make her angry or happy but he could not possess her. He tried to break down her defences.

People simply felt honoured to be in Ivan's company. Although not handsome in any special way he commanded their attention. His back swept forehead made his nose look larger than it was and his rounded chin was receding from the rest of the face. His well formed mouth looked generous but when he spoke his lips seemed tightly controlled at the corners. He made an impression of a big man without being very tall or fat. On meeting him people often stopped in mid-sentence, their laughter died as they shook hands. His big warm hands seemed to direct people to do his bidding but an arm over Ivan's shoulder would never look right. He created invisible barriers between himself and others, he never lost control, he never over-reacted or acted foolishly. Even close friends changed when Ivan joined them, they stopped chatting and began discussing.

Women were strangely drawn to Ivan. They wanted to break through his remoteness and make him vulnerable. They wanted to see behind the facade of his seemingly unhappy face, they wanted to caress and relax it into the soft lines of laughter. But he never learned to laugh loud and with open joy.

At home in Ljubljana he often went out at night to search for love in the shadows of the street lights like street walkers do. But he never in all his life paid a woman to have sex with him. He had affairs with women friends who liked and respected him but these women knew that they could only have him on his terms. Without fully realising it, he made love to them to punish Barbara for not surrendering to him.

Barbara lay in Ivan's arms now, warm, tired and sad. Sex was just a moment in the vast emptiness of her life, it left behind no tenderness. The intimacy sex created was finished as soon as the sex act finished. Ivan seemed fast asleep next to her so she got up to go for a swim in the nearby river. She saw the love bites in the pocket mirror and tried to cover them with the towel so Joe wouldn't see them. She saw Joe sitting on the river-bank with his head in his hands but she moved away quietly before he saw her. She didn't know that Ivan woke up and his eyes followed her every move from the distance. Ivan also felt let down after the intimacy of sex. He enjoyed sex but as soon as it was over he felt removed from Barbara again and unable to reach her.

Barbara never thought of Ivan being jealous. He owned her.

Looking at the muddy river Joe re-read the letter from his mother: "Thank God you are so happy in Australia. They came looking for you but we couldn't tell them anything."

Ivan once asked Joe if he did the army and Joe said that he wasn't called yet. He lied because the memory of the army humiliated him. He became afraid that someday someone would find out that he was lying. Now he could never tell his story without admitting that he was ashamed and that he lied to Ivan.

Every boy had to become a soldier before he could call himself a man in Yugoslavia. Joe was conscripted into the navy for three years. Undergoing an intensive physical and mental training, the young marines had to stay in the barrack for the first four months.

Martin was the only other Slovenian boy with Joe in the navy. Joe didn't even realise that Martin was a bad influence on him. He joked about the shiny revolution. He said that Slovenians were paying for the sporting complexes in the southern Yugoslav states. Underprivileged South had to have sport and Slovenians had to work for them. The two boys were caught singing a Slovenian song one Sunday afternoon sitting on the grass at the back of the barrack wall. The officer told them that grouping on ethnic grounds was anti-revolutionary. They had to mix and speak Serb- Croatian as the official Yugoslav language because they were building Yugoslav brotherhood.

Martin said sorry to the officer but Joe came from the communist family and he wasn't afraid. Joe's parents still attended church but his brother was big in the export-import business. He was so good that they send him on training in the special political school. Joe's brother had friends in high places so Joe back chatted the officer. He was placed on permanent guard for two weeks as a punishment. For two hours he had to guard the ammunition barrack, he slept for two hours and was up in readiness for the next two hours until the cycle started again. He got used to the night routine quickly but during the day sleeping was replaced with political studies and he became fatigued and confused as he listened to the army officer explaining Darwin's theory of evolution.

The village boys had to fast unlearn the catechism's creationism and instantly embrace the new dogma that man evolved from apes. "There is no difference between the animal world and human kind and there is no God, no heaven, no hell, only the common good of communism," preached the Serbian officer who could barely sign his name.

Joe stuck his hand up during question time. "Maybe you came from monkeys, but I didn't," he laughed. Punished for this insolence, Joe had to undergo a bizarre geography lesson given by his evolutionist educator. He was forced to push a suitcase with his head and travel under the beds of a two hundred bed dormitory. When the officer called stop Joe had to call the name of the station. He had to travel different pretend routes through Yugoslavia. If he made a mistake, the strap came down as his bottom emerged between the beds.

Joe soon became known as a rebel and the officers enjoyed teaching him subordination. In the middle of the night they came to check if his feet were washed and Joe argued with them. The officers enjoyed training him in the rain. "Down, run, down, run, left, right, stop." He was ordered face down into every muddy hole of the yard. Joe resented the semi-illiterate bastards, he began to hate everything they stood for.

On their first Sunday afternoon off, Joe went with three Dalmatians into the village vineyard and bought some wine from the farmer. Boarding the ship one of the boys pushed Joe in the water. Joe yelled for help but they were drunk and went to sleep. It was pitch dark and the waves kept Joe off shore for awhile until he was thrown out on the beach where the night patrols found him unconscious. He ended in hospital from where he escaped in the middle of the night.

It took Joe three days without food to come to the Austrian border where they caught him. He crossed the border and, looking back towards Yugoslavia, he yelled abuse at Yugoslav border patrols. He didn't know that the border was going zig zag down the mountain and he

stood again on Yugoslav territory. The guards from Montenegro handcuffed him and kicked him towards their post.

As punishment for deserting the army and trying to escape, Joe was sent South to the port of Sibenik where he had to load sea sand on the ships for six months. With other offenders he had to stand waist-high in the cold water shovelling sand day after day. Often they loaded too much and the ship sank too low so they had to unload again. They lived in the cement bunker and had no permission to go out. Children going to school stopped to look at them working and they yelled: "traitors". Some spat at them.

They reformed Joe during those six months. They succeeded in making him feel small, afraid, ashamed, weak, guilty and vulnerable. Believing him to be totally broken in, the officer told him about the special mission they wanted him to accomplish. Joe was eligible to visit his parents for the weekend, but the officer promised Joe one month holiday if he would promise to convince his parents to surrender their land and join the farmer's co-op.

"What if they don't want to?" asked Joe uncertain.

"In the end they will all be forced anyhow," said the officer. "But we want them to volunteer, to be an example for others. In fact, if your parents manage to convince other villagers to join I will personally help you to escape." The officer leaned close to Joe although there was no-one around them. Maybe he was scared of his own whispered promise. Joe didn't understand why it mattered so much to this Serbian officer working in Croatia what Joe's parents in far off Slovenia did in their little village. Joe never dared to repeat the whispered officer's promise of escape to anyone. It sounded too sinister for anyone to believe it anyway. But the escape became so much more attractive. Joe did not try to convince his parents about joining the co-op because he was too busy preparing for escape. He escaped over the Adriatic sea to Italy in a little fishing boat.

Joe often thought about those days. He unintentionally told Barbara about some of the more hilarious events from the navy, but he skipped those that humiliated him and those he was scared of. He asked Barbara not to tell Ivan that he was in the navy and the secret they so shared made them feel closer. He had to tell someone. Joe's mother never wrote about Joe's brother and how he reacted when he heard that Joe escaped.

Barbara liked to remember those rare trips to Cooma where they met Slovenian families working for the Snowy Mountains scheme. In 1962 they decided to hold a dance in the little town's hall to celebrate their first New Year's eve together.

Ivan and Joe hammered together the first two long tables and the benches for seats. Embroidered table-cloths with Slovenian motifs came out, women brought pots and pans to cook homemade kranskies and sauerkraut. Best plates were used for the famous Slovenian cakes. Men organised the drinks.

Peter and Kristina came to Cooma first. Peter found a job on the Snowy Mountains Scheme right at the beginning. By the time others arrived he was already a foreman and he helped the boss to hire and fire workers. He worked on the road at home and had experience blasting the tunnels through the mountains. Most newcomers turned to him to interpret for them. Peter knew who he wanted on his shift, the safety of the men's lives depended on his choice. Peter later gave a job to Ivan because he knew that he could depend on Ivan with his life.

Peter's wife Kristina talked all the time with women in the kitchen. Open and helpful, Kristina was impossible to dislike. She was a trained hairdresser from home and many Slovenian women had their first Australian perm done by her. Pampering her clients Kristina heard little secrets people only ever tell their doctor or a hairdresser. The word got out that Kristina could be trusted with anybody's secrets. Women needed someone to listen to them more than they needed their curls.

Dressing up for the dance brought a sense of romance into their lives. The party was a place where they could show the best of themselves and of their clothes. The mutual admiration strengthened the tender new friendships, dreams were born and memories were created.

Peter played the accordion and they all came alive singing Slovenian songs. Peter was the life of the party in those days; when he wasn't singing he hummed along with the dance like rhythm of a truly happy person. Generous and friendly, he never allowed anyone to be gloomy or alone for long. As he passed Barbara preparing salads for the party, he sang softly in her ear: "Cheer up, darling, spring is in the air, love is everywhere." She blushed and his words stayed with her forever.

Barbara later sat next to Ivan, smiled and exchanged greetings, careful not to embarrass her husband with any unseemly behaviour. His wide eyed stare always told her when she displeased him. She lowered her eyes and smiled sweetly, afraid of the harsh words. She remembered that on the way home he often reprimanded her and sometimes he stopped talking altogether.

Joe helped Barbara, both needed someone to lean on and their friendship became the first attachment to another human being for both since they arrived in Australia. They had no other people to fantasise about in their stark loneliness under the tents and, young as they were, both longed for love. Something in them became alive when they were together.

Joe and the Germans accepted Ivan as their boss, he could be relied on to guide, protect and correct them. Barbara tried desperately to keep him happy because his yelling made her cry and she didn't want Joe to see her crying. Ivan also started to punish her with silences, he simply refused to talk to Barbara without an explanation. She begged him to tell her how she offended him, she would go over and over in her mind to find out how she displeased him, she kept asking him for forgiveness for whatever she had done, she kissed him and made love to him. It was fine for a while. He turned over and slept. The next morning he would be quite normal, but the silences became more and more frequent. Barbara tried harder and harder and Ivan became more and more irritated with her. There was no-one she could talk to, so she put up with sex and was happy as long as Ivan wasn't upset.

Joe often went to Cooma with Hanz and Fritz at the weekends. "That's where their money goes," said Ivan winking at Barbara. "Sydney girls come and take the lot. How much did they leave you?" he teased Joe.

"You are jealous because you can't go," Joe laughed. "Women who run, will always be chased."

"Barbara would crawl after me." Ivan felt uncomfortable with Australian women, when a woman corrects your speech, you can't court or seduce her.

At the beginning most migrant men saved their money to go home and bring a bride, a childhood sweetheart or an innocent girl from the village they were born in. But time passed quickly and most formed short-lived and often unhappy unions with girls who could not find a boy from among their own people.

“The bird in the bag means little as long as there is one in the bush,” teased Hanz.

“The smart ones get away and keep on flying,” agreed Joe.

“And you run after them like dogs after car tyres,” said Ivan.

“Dogs do what dogs must do,” add lipped Fritz

“The woman in bed is worth ten on the street,” said Ivan and nobody wanted to argue about that.

Barbara gradually learned to love the aloneness. She couldn't make friends with people because there were no people in the bush. When men went out to work she often coaxed kangaroos to come closer and take bread from her hand. Emus terrified her because they stretched their long necks into her face and looked into her eyes unafraid, only centimetres away. She would throw the bread away and they would scuttle after it with their heavy bodies dingalinging like oversized bouncing footballs.

Spring was the time Barbara loved best. The forest was full of strange little flowers, blue, yellow, purple button heads swaying sensually in the wind. Barbara caressed the little blooms and wandered if anybody ever looked at these flowers before, if they had a name, if anybody has ever painted them. She wanted to draw them for her mother but there was no paper in the camp.

The cockatoos in flight impressed her with their defiant, naked power. Loud and unafraid they screeched over her. She laid on the prickly, scented ground, eyes shut, open to the sounds, and smells. Her heartbeat became synchronised with the pulse of the Earth and the screeching of the birds. Barbara had no words for all she felt but the joy of it brought tears to her eyes. Reborn into the land and less lonely she began to long for the solitude to re-live her intimacy with the land. The new life, the growth and the mating calls of the birds overwhelmed Barbara in the Australian bush.

The camp consisted of two tents, one for Ivan and Barbara and the other for the boys. In between the tents was a dining kitchen area. The boys spread a huge canvas over the four tree posts for the roof. The pots hung on the nails off the posts and the crockery was stacked in the crates one on top of the other. One day Barbara tore the empty cardboard box and sketched the emus coming towards the camp. She used the charcoal left from the night before for sketching and satisfied with her first picture she nailed it on the post.

“You are going to be an artist when you grow up,” predicted Joe half seriously.

Barbara didn't know whether Ivan laughed at the idea of her growing up or about her becoming an artist. She drew other animals and trees and flowers and doing so gave her much pleasure. Men noticed her pictures and Ivan didn't mind them hanging all over the posts of their dining area..

One day she sketched Ivan shaving. He had a mirror stuck in the branch of the tree and a magpie was looking into the mirror from behind. Ivan showed the picture around and

seemingly delighted with it he put it in the suitcase. Unfortunately the picture was rubbed off when he next took it out.

Sometimes in the evening Barbara watched spiders crocheting their lacy webs among the branches, absorbed in their hunt, in their survival. In the mornings spiders' hunting nets were gone. They carefully unwound their nets into a ball to have for the next hunt. Barbara wanted to follow the spiders' pattern of movement but they were too skilled and fast for her.

Less sad and homesick Barbara remembered her childhood with warm affection. Long, long ago she used to go fishing with her father. She could hear the words of the stories he whispered to her as they sat in the grass hidden behind the willows waiting quietly for the catfish to bite. In spring when saplings of the pussy willow were juicy under the skin, her father made flutes for Barbara out of them and taught her to play tunes.

Farmers called on her father to help when their animals were being born in spring. Barbara went along and seeing the baby animals born made her cry. Barbara believed that her father could do anything then.

Barbara was all her father had. Her two brothers did not return from the war. Barbara never knew how her brother Emil died and how her parents found out that he was dead, but she never forgot the day they found out.

The letters came during 1945 and Barbara's parents read those letters secretly. They smiled as they touched each other and their eyes shone. The anonymous messages and strange letters brought flickering sparks of light into Barbara's home but all hope died by the end of 1946. Barbara was about eight then and she felt the unspeakable cold that settled over her home. She knew that Emil was dead because her parents dawned their black mourning clothes one Sunday morning. Barbara did not dare speak Emil's name because she already learned at school that those killed were traitors. Emil must have been hiding somewhere and they eventually found him and secretly killed him.

Barbara felt safe during the war in her father's arms as the shots were echoing in the night and the bombs were falling. When the partisans came to raid their food supply he carried her in his arms and she wasn't afraid. But on that Sunday morning in 1946 her parents stopped responding to her, they aged beyond hope and the tears froze in their eyes. The despair entered their home, the singing died away forever and the fairy world of storytelling ended. The flowers died on the window sills, the garden became neglected, the silence fell over everything like death. Nobody told Barbara what happened but her parent's sadness penetrated her soul and she began searching for the warmth of love that she never found again.

When Barbara's brother Franc left with the partisans in 1943 Barbara's family became isolated. People knew that her parents had one son on each side so they couldn't be trusted.

When Franc returned in 1948 his parents ignored him. He was a communist. Later he and his friend Karl conspired to take Barbara into the city and have her educated. Barbara often wondered why her parents let her go at the age of ten with complete strangers. Were they afraid or beyond caring?

Barbara began school in the autumn 1945 and she learned the songs of the revolution. She adored her beautiful, kind, young teacher who was herself a glorious heroine of the revolution still wearing the Tito cap to school. One day the teacher inspected her students' books and noticed a page torn out of Barbara's reader. It was the first page under the hard cover and it had Tito's picture on it. Barbara was kept back after school and was questioned by the principal. She didn't know who tore out Tito's picture but she suspected her father. Afraid for him she lied that she tore the picture herself because she spilled ink on it by accident. The principal was writing something in his book and looked at her with suspicion.

Barbara remembered that first autumn after the war well because other frightening things were happening. One cold morning on her way to school she saw Jesus lying in the mud. A few hundred metres from her home on the edge of the forest was a tiny chapel with Jesus statue. People made a cross as they passed it, some stopped and said a prayer. Barbara sometimes looked into the eyes of Jesus and talked to him in her heart. Now her friend had a head broken and his body was splattered with mud on the footpath near the chapel. The gaping crack in the head made him look ridiculous, the exposed red heart on his chest was covered in dung. He was ripped off the cross and his legs remained crossed in the puddle. Scared Barbara fled, she did not know why, but she ran all the way to school and did not tell anyone about it. The image of broken Jesus remained in front of her until she came home.

"It is our Jesus," said mum simply.

"My grandfather built the chapel when his son returned from the first war," said Dad as he repaired Jesus' head. "That was grandfather's way to say thank you for my father." Barbara's dad made a wooden pedestal in the corner of the main room and carefully placed the statue on it. Mum washed and dried the life-sized clay Jesus and placed a flower pot near its feet. "They know not what they are doing," she said to herself.

Barbara became scared of the statue, she never again talked to it or made the cross. The unknown power of the night made the almighty Jesus powerless. He became one of them, frightened and silent, he was hiding in the corner of their room. She became afraid that someone would discover the refuge in the corner of their room and tell THEM. But nobody ever mentioned the empty chapel or the broken Jesus and she almost believed that it never happened. Much later someone placed a little statue of Mary on the floor of the chapel.

Barbara heard the whispers about the religious statues being destroyed but people were scared and nobody protested out loud. During the moments of her religious fervour sometimes Barbara dreamed of fighting for Jesus but she was ashamed to look superstitious and old fashioned.

Most of the crosses and the holy statues scattered across the countryside were destroyed and the pictures of Tito replaced the icons of the past. The confusing statements of people she liked stuck in Barbara's memory for ever.

"Religion is only a superstition for backward peasants," her lovely young teacher said. But Barbara's father warned: "Communists are afraid of God, because they know how much people need God. They want to destroy God but God will destroy them. Communists want to be God, they turned Tito into God but the time will come when his name will be mud and people will turn to God again."

The children gradually became ashamed of the god their parents worshipped, the shame of their superstitious parents seeped deeper and deeper. It became clear to everybody that

the children of the communist revolutionaries were somehow better and smarter. They received all the privileges at school, they had an opportunity to get ahead. People who did not believe in Tito's revolution were traitors.

It bothered Barbara that her parents failed to believe in Tito. They did not dare actually say so but Barbara knew. They went to church and they prayed which was clearly against Tito's teachings. Barbara read in her first reader that Tito was their greatest teacher and leader. He named good little children Tito's Cicibans. Later they became Tito's pioneers and like children everywhere Barbara wanted to belong to the parade. But all the time she knew that her parents did not approve.

Remembering these things Barbara still felt the fear and the guilt of her childhood. She felt no longing for her people because she knew that even in those early days she was separated from them.

Barbara's brother Emil also betrayed the revolution and Barbara had to be punished for the sins of her family. She shuddered remembering how she was taken away by Karl at the age of ten to become one of the revolutionaries. She faithfully recited the accepted slogan: For the country with Tito ahead. At the age of seventeen Ivan rescued her from Karl and Barbara became a part of Ivan.

Barbara wanted to talk to her father again about those tumultuous days after the war.

The words Hitler and Stalin, the symbols of good and bad, were imprinted on her mind. Barbara never learned in her history lessons that Stalin and Hitler as friends and allies attacked and destroyed Poland. Stalin was noble, poor, good and heroic, Hitler was a cruel murderer. Later Hitler became synonymous with the rotten foreign West that enticed people into slavery. Stalin was the benevolent leader promising people heaven on Earth. Things changed in 1948 when Tito broke up with Stalin, of course.

Barbara remembered how cross was her lovely teacher if children used Germanised Slovenian words at school. Germans were the enemy. Singing brotherhood songs in Serbo-Croatian language or even learning Russian songs was commendable. But that too changed now in 1990. Serbs became the enemy and the songs of brotherhood faded away. People became ashamed of anything that reminded them of brotherhood. The new young speak in Slovenia became international English.

Sometimes in those early days Barbara dreamed that one day her father would surprise her and she would show him these big colourful Australian birds and the soft grey-pink colours of the Australian bush. She could almost hear her father say that birds at home sing better. He could imitate most birds. In the fields before the sunrise he told her to listen to the larks announcing the day. He pointed out nightingales and blackbirds. He told her to listen to the cuckoo in spring. If you carried a coin when you first heard the cuckoo call you would have a prosperous year. Barbara's father always put a coin in her pocket at the right time.

As she watched the program about Snowy Mountains Scheme, Barbara remembered how shocked she was when she finally had to leave the bush that became her first home in Australia. She never had a chance to prepare for the changes people made in her life.

"We are leaving at the weekend. I am starting a job on Monday," announced Ivan unexpectedly one evening as they sat around the camp fire. Joe and Barbara looked at each other for a fleeting moment stunned by the news. They didn't notice Ivan watching their

reaction. Sad and guilty about their sadness they said nothing. They never said all the words they wanted to say to each other.

Planning his future carefully Ivan saved the money from the sale of the eucalyptus oil and bought their first car. Peter offered him a job with the Snowy Mountains Scheme. The pay was good and plenty of overtime was available. They moved into an abandoned farmhouse miles away from neighbours. This didn't worry Ivan because the neighbours were strangers anyway.

Barbara became pregnant soon after and Helena was born while Ivan worked in the tunnel. Ivan was delighted by his daughter. He told his workmates that she smiled at him when he first saw her in the hospital. Barbara was overwhelmed by the enormity of feelings. She wanted Ivan to love the baby like he loved his mother Helena. She also wanted to please Ivan by suggesting that they call their first child after his mother. Barbara wanted Ivan to love his daughter like he loved his mother Helena.

Most Sundays Ivan took his new family for outings along the rivers into the valleys and up to the mountains. He pointed out bird and fish and wild flowers to the delighted baby. Sometimes he carried Helena around his neck, chirping on his shoulders, she could see more. Exhausted from the fresh air and vigorous exercise they lay in the shade with their child and their food spread between them. They watched the clouds go by and felt at peace with the world.

When Ivan was at work Barbara and Helena prepared for daddy's return. Barbara told Helena about all the wonderful things they would do when daddy came back. They walked for miles to meet him coming home.

Janek was born a year later and Barbara wanted to honour Ivan by naming their first son after him. Ivan suggested that the baby be called Janez which is a variation of Ivan. In the end Helena changed Janez into Janek because z sound was still too hard for her. When he started school, Janek wanted to change the spelling of his name into Yanek so Australians would be able to pronounce it the way his parents did. But his father wouldn't let him.

Leon was born the following year and Ivan named their third child without ever explaining his choice of a name. Leon seemed a strong, manly name.

Ivan worked long hours for his family, he often worked double shifts and only returned home to sleep. Barbara took the children to the bush so they wouldn't wake up daddy who needed his rest. Playing with sticks and stones and dirt and water, much like she had done at home, they marvelled at animals, birds and insects, they lay in the grass, smelled the flowers, climbed the trees and looked at the clouds.

Barbara often became a tree for her children. Standing behind the tree trunk she changed her voice and turned into a mother tree, nanny tree, uncle tree, cousin trees, daddy tree. Her children asked her questions and they delighted with the different voices of the tree family. They caressed the branches and the trunks and they asked them all the questions they wanted. They gave the trees names and came to visit them as they all grew up together.

When Barbara was unhappy at home one or the other of her children tugged at her hand begging her to be a tree. She was a happy tree there among the tree friends and tree family touching branches with other trees.

Barbara cleaned the abandoned fibro dwelling and planted flowers as they moved in that first spring before Helena was born. But as the winter came she began to hate her new home. The rats and mice and cockroaches moved into the house for warmth as well. When she put children to sleep in the afternoon she watched mice playfully jump on the stove and in the sink looking for scraps. Sometimes a rat came out of the hole in the fibro wall and Barbara jumped to scare it, afraid that it would attack her babies. But the sight of cockroaches lurking in the corners terrified her.

The rainwater tank was full of half rotten debris and dead bird floated on top. Ivan emptied the water in drums and cleaned the tank to catch the next rain drops sliding on the dusty roof tops. They all became aware how precious water was in Australia. Ivan began to teach Helena to pray and she thanked God every night for the water as well. Once as they went to Cooma church Helena told daddy to take a bucket so god could give him some water while they were there.

The farmer who lived in the old farm house was well compensated for the land and the buildings and for the change of lifestyle when the government decided to use part of his farm and make it into the lake at the conclusion of the Snowy Mountains project. All the low laying land was to be covered in the water and the new farm houses, modern and made of sturdy red brick grew on the hills that later became the shore of the lake.

At weekends Ivan began to go fishing and hunting with his workmates. Barbara wanted to go with him but it was too dangerous for children on the rough river-bank. She rarely saw Ivan's workmates but Ivan brought their dirty clothes for her to wash on Fridays and he returned them washed and ironed on Monday. Barbara wanted to write home about the lovelessness of her existence but she didn't want to upset her mother. When her mother died, she had no-one to write to.

Their bank account and children grew fast.

Ivan applied for a building licence even before he left his job in the tunnel. He always planned ahead. Just before Helena started school he built a motel in Cooma so Barbara would have something to do while he was busy building houses. He borrowed money, interest rates were low, repayments were easy. His family moved in a little caretaker flat at the back of the motel near the laundry where Barbara washed the motel's bed linen. Barbara had no time to be bored. There were breakfasts to get ready, eight rooms to be cleaned, the garden to be kept, children to be sent to school.

Children found their first friends and Barbara was happy for them. People of all nationalities met on the main street of Cooma and Barbara felt less alone. things were getting better and better all the time.

Helena brought Dorothea Mackellar's poem from school to learn and Barbara recited with her: "I love the sunburnt country, the land of sweeping plains, of rugged mountain ranges, of droughts and sweeping rains." Helena translated the words the best she could and Barbara suddenly felt close to the poet because she also loved the sunburnt country. She had to love something.

Barbara tried hard to forget her last few months in Cooma, she wanted to rub out her last pregnancy, abortion, hysterectomy and her suicide attempt. She returned from Golbourn mental hospital and she wiped the unpleasant events from her consciousness. Ivan decided

that they should move on. He sold everything and the family resettled in Sydney to make another new start. They were lucky to still have each other.

A man has to protect his homeland from his enemies,

and his wife from his friends.

Zuhdija.

New friends and new homes

“The Australian dream is a quarter acre block on which you build your home.” Ivan never forgot these words spoken casually by his foreman in the Snowy Mountains tunnel. He resolved there and then to become a builder of the Australia’s dream homes.

Ivan built his own first home in Cabramatta, on the outskirts of Sydney. Barbara planted the garden and sewed the curtains. She used the left over curtain material to make cushions and place mats and by adding these touches of colour she made little inexpensive items in the house look decorative and interesting. People noticed her talents and Ivan explained that she was a professional interior decorator.

When he finished his next house, Ivan invited Barbara to help him choose the fittings. He criticised everything she picked and they returned home empty handed but Barbara noticed that later, on his own Ivan picked most of what she first chose. Both realised, of course, that Ivan picked what he knew was right.

They moved into house after house, because established houses sold better. They kept on moving to better, bigger, newer homes in Sydney without ever growing roots into any of them.

Other Slovenians also began to build their first homes in Australia, they built the best they could afford and they needed someone to admire their efforts. They began inviting each other home. All the homes seemed to be on display, proud housewives opened the doors to every room, their husbands took their guests to see the garden and the garage. Appropriate noises of appreciation were made by visitors, envy and criticisms were withheld.

Many houses had the embroidered Lord’s supper displayed prominently above the dining table, plastic flowers looked positively fresh, souvenirs from home shone on crocheted place-mats, starched table-cloths were spotless. Some had an eidelwise or a national costume in a plastic bag hanging on the wall. Men brought their hats with feathers stuck on the side of them, and they too were hanging on the wall.

The bathrooms were gleaming and smelled of roses, the soft towels were unsoiled and the fittings carefully chosen. The latest easy care materials were used for the building and all the houses had some wall to wall carpet. Laminex and lino matched and so did the tiles and walls.

The gardens were flourishing with vegetables, fruit trees and flowers. They gave each other gifts of garden produce. On the way home visitors discussed and criticised their friends’ choices, they planned on outdoing them by building better and bigger homes.

Ivan and Barbara were often invited to dinner by other Slovenians. Many men worked for Ivan and they considered it a privilege to have their employer as a guest. The food was superb. The women learned from their mothers to make tasty delicacies from meagre ingredients at home. In Australia they discovered that they could afford to buy the best of everything so they set out to outdo each other.

Ivan loved good food and fine service. Barbara became terrified that she would have to invite all these people to her place. There were so many traps and she didn't want to embarrass Ivan with her inadequate cooking. He realised that she never cooked for other people before so he offered to make a BBQ. Barbara felt relieved and grateful when Ivan was in charge and she happily followed his orders. While he cooked the meat he talked to his guests in an easy relaxed friendliness.

Women commented on how lucky Barbara was because Ivan did all the work and everybody praised his skills. BBQ was new to them, they had nothing to judge it by.

Buying electrical appliances in the busy shopping centre in Black Town, Ivan heard Slovenian music somewhere in the background.

"Where is that music coming from," he inquired casually from the elegant and helpful sales lady. That's how Ivan and Barbara met Milan and Milena who were the owners of the shop. Ivan introduced himself as a builder and made a substantial order of plumbing and kitchen appliances. There was almost an instant liking between Ivan and Milena. Usually reserved, both chatted casually as they made a deal on the purchases. Ivan was happy with the discount he got and Milena was happy with the sale she made.

Milan talked to Barbara as she browsed around, opening the fridge and oven doors on the appliances displayed in the showroom. He told her that he also imported Slovenian music, books and artefacts. Most Sydney Slovenians came to buy these things from him.

Soon after their first meeting Milena invited Ivan and his wife to dinner. For the first time in their lives Ivan suggested that Barbara should go to the hairdresser. They went shopping for her new dress and he saw a hairdressing saloon for ladies next to the barber. He had a haircut while he waited.

Barbara realised that this dinner was important. Ivan spent longer in the bathroom than ever before, he wanted to impress Milan and Milena. He also looked at Barbara from every angle before they got into the car.

Looking at the street directory Ivan discovered that they had quite a long way to go. It was still light as they drove from their Parramatta home to Mosman on the other side of Sydney. They drove through the busy streets for almost an hour. Ivan instructed Barbara to follow the streets in the directory because neither of them were familiar with this end of the city. The road winded on the edge of the ocean and the boats anchored in the bay were bouncing in the waves braking on the shore. The big, beautiful houses on the cliff edges along the water seemed cut into the hill. Barbara couldn't understand why anyone would want to build such beautiful places on this unsuitable rocky slope but Ivan explained that people wanted to have the view of the water.

It was getting dark as they entered the Prince Alfred street where their friends lived. It seemed odd to Barbara that the streets seemed totally deserted, no children or dogs or strollers could be seen. The maple trees from each side of the road almost met in the middle of the road and Barbara caught the smell of the jasmine mingling with roses from the leafy gardens.

As they stopped they could see the ocean from the little clearing between the houses. The white waves still glistened in the setting summer sun, rising and falling they licked at the sides of the boats. Barbara said that Ivan might like to go fishing in the boat like that.

"I don't like sea fishing, I prefer fresh water," said Ivan but he began to understand that people who were well off sometimes went fishing in their big boats and that owning a yacht somehow had more to do with being rich than with fishing.

None of the homes Ivan built was like Milan and Milena's place. Although other Slovenians owned beautiful homes, even Barbara noticed a difference. This rather large looking, split level house, was almost hidden behind the native trees. Only a huge red camellia near the entrance seemed planted into the natural landscape.

"So you found us at last," Milena greeted Ivan and Barbara from the entrance. A Dalmatian dog stood at her side and sniffed them discretely without moving or making a sound. The dog immediately became a centre of conversation and Ivan affectionately patted it. The dog led the way into the entrance hall where it lay in the basket bed. A large carved chest, brought from Kashmir, sat casually in the corner on the black slate floor next to the dog. Milena hung the visitor's coats on the black iron hooks. Shiny red wood surfaces of their living area came from the shops Barbara never saw before. The furniture looked old, the pieces may have been genuine antiques or imported replicas. A statue of Buddha was next to the piano and an old wooden crucifix hung on the wall next to an Aboriginal painting of mountain ranges. On the wall near the stairs was an abstract. A large oriental vase on the bench contained native shrubbery. The expensive rugs on the polished floors looked worn like well cared for old ladies.

While the other houses screamed with their newness Milan and Milena's house exuded a quiet, old elegance and confidence.

Barbara wandered what they were going to eat because there were no smells of cooking and Milena in her elegant white pant suit didn't look at all like she was sweating over a hot stove.

Milena possessed a wolfish, almost haunting beauty, her flawless, olive skin turned darker around the eyes. You couldn't imagine Milena blushing and her claim to elegant sophistication could never be questioned. The air of her smug arrogance made other women feel small and inadequate. Milena smiled with only the corner of her lips slightly lifted and this expression had an intimacy of a shared secret but Barbara could never read the message of the implied intimacy and she felt even less significant because of it. Milena's eyebrows had an upturned slant and Barbara felt under scrutiny of her deep set little brown eyes. She instinctively wanted to get back at Milena for making her feel small.

"Milena's long narrow chin sticks out to match her upturned nose," said Barbara to Ivan later on the way home but he did not even answer.

Milan asked them what they were going to drink and Ivan answered for both of them. "Whatever you are having." Barbara was grateful that she didn't have to choose, Ivan seemed to handle things well and the conversation soon turned to art and music and politics. Barbara seemed safely forgotten.

Milena served avocado on the little plates sprinkled with spring onions and spices. Barbara panicked because there were forks and spoons next to her plates and she wasn't sure which one to take. She waited for Ivan and followed everything he did.

Barbara remembered that at home the television was on most times as they ate and Ivan told everybody to be quiet because he was listening to the news. You couldn't even see a

television set in Milena's house, only a faint music mingled with their conversation. It wasn't a Slovenian song, it was a rather pleasant piano music without a clear tune.

The meal seemed simple to Barbara. The small portions of veal in a sauce were served in a lovely porcelain dish placed in the middle of the table. Whole, little potatoes sprinkled with parsley were on one side and the green salad decorated with bits of red capsicum and tomato sat on the other. Crusty buns were passed around and Ivan took one but Barbara was afraid of the crumbs making a mess and refused.

"I wouldn't mind to have a dog like Spot," said Ivan to Milena as they moved to the lounge room to have coffee.

"He hates dogs, he hates all animals," thought Barbara. When their children begged Ivan for a pet, any pet, he told them most sternly that pets are a nuisance and a waste of food.

Ivan and Milena talked about dogs a lot, they followed the antics of Spot and remembered the breeds and habits of royal dogs and show dogs.

Ivan toyed with the idea of getting a dog himself but common sense prevailed. He told Milena how busy he was establishing his organic garden and a dog might interfere with it. Organic gardens became status symbols like dogs and a naturally smelling manure became a preferred option to any chemically produced. Those who valued their family's health produced their vegetables naturally.

"She is such a docile little lamb flashing her big rabbit like eyes at you," said Milena to her husband after Ivan and Barbara left.

"She's got the bluest eyes," said Milan too quickly. "I mean I've never seen such blue eyes in a dark haired person." Barbara gave him an impression of round softness and vulnerability. Milan remembered her lips and thought mischievously that they would make a perfect kiss imprint. "Ivan has a good head for business," said Milena and both agreed that Ivan was a fine man. There was nothing to be jealous about because all were satisfied being what they were.

On the way home from their first visit to Milan and Milena both Ivan and Barbara were suitably impressed. Other people eventually had better houses but Milan and Milena stayed in their home until they moved to Linden. Their home had an air of impenetrable mystery and discretion.

"One day soon my family will live in the best and biggest house," said Ivan and Barbara realised that he made a promise to himself and intended to keep it. Other people strived for the best but Ivan simply had to have it.

Milan was a tall, dark, handsome, likeable man. His hazel eyes seemed to have a light dancing in them, his handshake was firm but less aggressive than Ivan's, his smile more relaxed. Ivan and Milan liked each other instantly, they considered themselves equals. Ideologically on the same side they complimented each other in business, there was no rivalry between them.

Milan was as casual about his work as Ivan pretended to be. Both believed that only personal effort brought them success. Confident in their chosen careers, they were making each other stronger. Milan had a knack of putting people at ease, he never put anyone down, he seemed to hold them up carefully and gently as he listened to them with what

appeared to be a genuine interest. Taller and slimmer than Ivan he moved like a dancer completely at ease without appearing in charge.

Milena wore elegant clothes and fine jewellery with an air of casual disregard.

Although he hated wasting money, Ivan wanted to see his wife look as elegant and happy as Milena. Barbara's past moods irritated him. He knew that she liked spending money, he knew that as long as he provided for her, she would cling to him and obey. But she rarely seemed happy, enthusiastic or grateful.

For Ivan the rules on propriety and decorum were important. He read profusely in his spare time, he never wasted time on silly TV shows like Barbara. Unless he learned something, his spare time wasn't well spent. He tried to find the meaning and the beauty in things like ballet, opera, classical music and art because Milena enjoyed those things and he didn't want to feel ignorant. Ignorance made him vulnerable and he could not bear to be vulnerable. He liked and respected Milena from the very beginning.

Ivan and Barbara came to Milena's shop often. Ivan said that he wanted Barbara to choose items for the houses he built. Once in the shop Milena and Ivan started talking and Barbara was soon forgotten.

Milena confidently explained business details to Ivan, while Milan paid a lot of attention to Barbara. He asked her what sort of music she liked, he often guided her around the shop, gently squeezing her arm, as Ivan and Milena discussed the appliances and prices. Milan made Barbara feel good and beautiful and clever. She was flattered and Ivan was proud of her ability to keep Milan entertained.

Milena often invited Ivan and Barbara for dinner. Their children stayed home, Helena and Janek were old enough to share the responsibility for baby-sitting Leon. In consideration of Milena's childlessness, children were rarely mentioned during those intimate little parties.

"How do you manage to do everything, you are in the shop all day," said Ivan in a way of a compliment. Milena enjoyed knowing that Ivan admired her, she was impressed by his knowledge, building skills and success.

"Work keeps us out of mischief," smiled Milena.

Milan paid Barbara compliments on everything she said or did as he playfully held her hand. Sometimes they travelled home together after work to have a drink and listen to a new record.

Barbara was grateful that nobody suspected her romance because romance was what she had. She loved the solitude of the bush long time ago, now she enjoyed the solitude of day dreaming about her romance with Milan. She invented reasons for being alone like other people invent reasons for having company. She needed to be loved so she weaved the fantasy around the man that was close, kind, safe and unavailable. In the solitude of her dreams she felt free to make up words for Milan to say to her, to beg her to leave Ivan and go with him and be happy for ever after.

Again and again she stood at the window and imagined herself in his arms and him telling her how he loved her, how he never knew what love was until he had met her, how he never knew anyone just so special. He made her believe that nothing else mattered, that he was thinking about her every moment of his life, that she was the whole reason for his

existence. She felt that forever and ever would never be long enough for them together. He made her feel young, white, soft and willing inside. She embraced the cold walls of her house and made them warm with love for Milan.

Milan and Barbara often met coming down the aisle from Holy Communion in the middle of the church followed by their partners and they exchanged the briefest look of love. Barbara relived all those moments at leisure, she closed her eyes to see him better, to enjoy the luxury of the pain as the electricity of his eyes sent shocks through her body. Unable to withstand the enormity of the sweet tingling emotion she often felt the tears coming. In love with her love, she became fully alive for the first time in Australia. Milan made her believe that she had something no other woman had.

Ivan noticed a change and liked the new, happy Barbara. He had never stopped hoping that she would one day realise how lucky she was and show some appreciation and gratitude. In the past Ivan complained that he had given Barbara the best anyone could, yet she failed to be happy. Ivan had felt powerless and angry because Barbara cried whenever he corrected her. She often said that she wanted to be dead because nobody loved her.

“What have I done to deserve this,” he thought. She wore a pained expression that made everybody feel guilty. Even the kids worried about her.

“Nobody worries about me, it’s always poor crying Barbara we have to think of. Thank God things changed. I suppose she needed another woman to talk to,” thought Ivan grateful for Milena’s friendship.

Milena discussed business and arts and dogs with Ivan while Barbara often leaned across the dinner table pretending to listen. Milan leaned over as well, his lips almost touching Barbara’s neck, his hands on Barbara’s arms, his knees hot on her legs under the table. Afraid that her voice would tremble and betray the pleasure she felt, Barbara remained silent. Grateful to Ivan for the completeness of her fantasy she endured the reality of her marriage. Glowing in her new sexuality Barbara considered Ivan’s lovemaking a small price to pay so she could enjoy her real love with Milan.

Staring into space she often searched for the image of Milan and embraced her chest aching from ecstasy. Ivan could still make her cry instantly by raising his voice but Barbara begged his forgiveness quickly and promised to do whatever he wanted of her. She owed it to Ivan.

Her lips formed Milan’s name in the mirror as she dressed carefully every morning in the hope that sometime during the day she would lock eyes with him. She had to be prepared. Other events of the day didn’t matter anymore. She escaped unnoticed into her dreams where everything was as she arranged it. In her fantasy Milan brought her little gifts of music, flowers and jewellery, he recited the lines of poetry as they walked among flowers, beside the cool mountain streams of her fantasy land.

In her dreams Milan played with Barbara’s children, he wanted to make them his own, he wanted children of their own. Barbara dreamed about having Milan’s children. The children bond people for life, she believed. It was only a dream because she sadly realised that she could not have any more children since her operation. She was forever bonded to Ivan and there was no escape.

Barbara constantly prepared for Milan’s coming. He would come tall and smiling in his leather sports jacket with the white silk scarf around his neck, after she put the last touches

to her face and turned the music on. There would be no-one else around and the touch of his skin would send shivers of pleasure through her body.

She relived the moments they were saying goodnight with Ivan and Milena next to them and their lips formed silent kisses for each other. At home, as she washed the dishes, she sometimes became touched by a memory of something Milan said and the tears of happiness fell into the dishwater. She felt deliciously warm all over and enormously sexy. Feeling virtuous and protected by her secure marriage, she dreamed about Milan begging her to come with him. She always said no in the end, she sacrificed her true love for the sake of her children. That also made her cry into the dishwater.

The fire of his eyes made her breasts rise, she almost experienced an orgasm seeing the reflection of her dreams melting into the fire of his eyes. The time and reality lost all meaning because she treasured in her heart the most delicious experience of perfect love.

The friendship between Ivan, Milan and Milena became ever more intimate over the years. They spent more and more time together. Only Barbara grew quieter. Possessed with love for Milan she often did not hear the words spoken around her, she looked at the television, but when someone asked her what she was watching she had to make up a story because she was just looking at Milan ever present in her mind. She nursed her love like a little sick baby on her chest.

Whenever anyone would ask: where have you been, she could truthfully answer: I was with Milan, I talked to Milan, I made love to Milan. Her fantasy became more real to her than the life with her family.

The children got fed and clothed because like a robot Barbara learned to do and say the right thing at the right time to please Ivan. She stopped cursing Ivan for upsetting her. After all, the poor bastard was punished enough by her love for Milan. Ivan and Barbara actually liked each other better since Barbara fell in love with Milan.

Barbara was cutting a chicken for lunch one day and the thought struck her that she never tasted the white meat of the chicken breast. Ivan liked the white meat so she carefully reserved the breast for him every time. Leon and Helena had a leg each and Janek liked wings. Barbara claimed that she liked the meat on the bones of the carcass best and she cleaned the bones so no morsel of the chicken was wasted. Ivan hated waste. Barbara never even considered liking the white breast meat of the chicken.

Ivan was served first every time and the choice pieces were placed on his plate. He picked the chair to sit on and the clothes and the towels and the colour of the fruit. He came first in everything and nobody ever questioned that. Barbara took what was left, she squeezed in, her job was to serve. Ivan was the only one allowed to complain, children had to be happy with what they got. They didn't even deserve all the good things the Lord and Ivan provided. Barbara had no one to complain to anyway, she was responsible for her home and the happiness of people in it. She could only blame herself for whatever went wrong because she it was up to her that everybody was happy and that their home was functioning properly. Ivan provided them with the home and they had to be grateful for that. Barbara wouldn't know how to complain anyway. After all Barbara couldn't blame someone else for her personal failure.

Barbara did not mind as long as Milan was there or as long as she knew that sooner or later he would come and exchange a brief sparkling hello with her.

Milan often nervously looked around, afraid that people would notice Barbara's loving glances, but nobody seemed aware of the game he played with his friend's wife. He carefully reached for Barbara's knees under the table, squeezed her breasts in passing, touched her as they met. But he never suggested that they should meet in private. Barbara believed that Milan was too honourable to suggest anything improper and she was grateful for that.

Ivan and Milan respected each other's capacity for hard work and determination to succeed. They became leaders in the Slovenian community. Both were regular church goers and they organised the building of the first Slovenian club in Sydney.

Milan even suggested to build a skiing lodge together in the Snowy Mountains. During hot summers they liked to go bush-walking and sometimes they all slept in a tent pitched in the mountains. Reminiscing under the stars they remembered common friends and acquaintances from home. Milan realised that Ivan was the only real friend he ever had.

Milena tolerated Barbara's simplicity and uncomplicated subservience. Barbara admired Milena's confidence, her house, fresh flowers in her vases, crisp expensive looking clothes she wore and her hair, permanently set in place.

Barbara and Milena were the same age but Barbara felt like a frumpy, frustrated child, silly and small compared to Milena. Inside she felt sadly inadequate and Milena's eyes seemed to pierce into the secret corners where even Barbara did not dare look. She kept apologising for the mess in her house, for stains on her clothes, for her lack of knowledge, for her unprofessional cooking, for unattractive crockery and cutlery for her children who often interrupted conversations, slammed the doors, wanted food, made noise and looked embarrassed.

Ivan grew tired of her apologising and told her to get her act together.

Ivan frequently reminded Barbara to ask Milena how things were done. Milena's food was always beautiful, her behaviour moderate and refined, she seemed untouchable. Barbara wanted to say that Milena had no children but she didn't want children blamed for her problems. She wanted to be so nice that people would have to love her and her children. She apologised for what she said and for being in the way. She apologised when she made Ivan annoyed with her, if someone bumped into her, if someone short-changed her.

Barbara never had to apologise to Milan. When children finally left for school, Barbara, like a teenager, began secretly experimenting with her first cosmetics. Ivan used to say that only the whores wore scent and make up so she was grateful that he ignored her blue coloured eyelids, red cheeks and lilies of the valley scent. She learned to tease her hair high and spray it into a balloon every morning.

Cheating on Milena and Ivan made Barbara feel stronger. If they were so clever how come they couldn't keep their partners happy?

Barbara learned to sit silently next to Ivan because he often shook his head when she said something and his frown sent her a message that she made a fool of herself. She knew that although polite and courteous in front of Milena, Ivan often berated and chastised her on the way home for sounding dumb.

Barbara had no-one to complain to, but then she simply didn't know how or what to complain about, she only had her experience of life to go on. When Ivan didn't want to

speak to her, she developed a knot in her chest. The pain grew and she desperately tried to relax. She learned to put up with his shouting and complaining but silences made her suffer terribly. She couldn't sleep when Ivan didn't say good night, she couldn't even indulge in her fantasies. Barbara desperately wanted to punish Ivan, she wanted him to develop a knot in his chest as well. She cursed the bastard and wished him dead in those moments.

Barbara always begged Ivan's forgiveness but peace never lasted long enough for her to relax. He always found something new to be upset about. To comfort herself she took a sleeping pill and imagined herself crying at his funeral. People showered her with sympathy and love and kindness as she cried for her dead husband.

Often these imaginings brought real tears to her eyes and she escaped into her dreams where Ivan could not reach her.

Barbara decided that her love for Milan was the only important thing that ever happened to her. She forgave Ivan his faults simply because he included Milan into her life. Convinced that Milan loved her desperately, she gently leaned on him as they danced with Ivan and Milena safely next to them. Barbara was afraid that Ivan would destroy her love with ugly, crude words so she tried ever harder to please him.

A new dream frequently entered Barbara's sleep at that time. She walked away on her own. Everything seemed good, the countryside was green and lush, the buildings were white and fresh and new, so she kept going. The mountains far away were clear and sunny but admiring them she suddenly realised that she was lost. There were no street signs, no writings on the walls and people ignored her. She was trying to find a way home, but ended on the gravel road into the quarry. The broken down houses around the quarry were deserted, there were dark holes where window panes should be. Scared she kept on running, but the more she ran the more lost she was. From the dark dirty houses people sneered at her menacingly and she remembered that her children were waiting at home, but she couldn't get to them until the despair of the dream woke her up.

Barbara tried to figure out what happened in her dreams, where she was running and why but in her consciousness the dream always faded away. The dream often woke her up in the middle of the night and she was sad in the darkness.

Milan felt that he wasn't unfaithful to Milena when he had sex with women who were asking for it. Women considered him sexy and that gave him an edge over other men. He had fantasies of a woman who would tame him with wickedness and fire. He wanted to conquer such a woman, make her soft and wet, open and vulnerable begging for more.

Barbara behaved like a little virgin, but he remembered that still waters go deep. Barbara's flushed cheeks and the fire in her eyes told him that she wanted him. But he did not go out of his way to make love to his best friend's wife. It was simply too dangerous. But the fear made it so much more tantalising and more and more often he found himself looking for Barbara.

Milan enjoyed making women happy, he women also scared him. He grew up scared of his mother who had his whole life planned for him. Milan never forgot how disappointed his mother was when he eloped with Milena and dropped out of university in his last year. She had it all arranged for him to marry her friend's daughter Andrea. His mother never realised that Andrea did not love him. Milan's mother loved Milan so much that it was inconceivable to her that any girl would not love her son.

Milan remembered a seventeen years old, excitable and romantic Andrea. She seemed eager to make love in the lover's lane behind the bushes, where you could hear other lovers make love. At nineteen it was Milan's first lovemaking. Excited and frightened he fumbled with their clothes and like a lightning the lovemaking was over before Andrea stopped resisting.

Milan ejaculated often before in the toilet, he learned to do it quickly because his mother was there waiting with breakfast, asking about his digestion and offering prunes to make him go easy. He never knew if Andrea was a virgin as well. Embarrassed he did not call her for weeks afterwards and she soon found herself a new boyfriend.

Milan was almost qualified as an electrical engineer when he left home and eloped with Milena. They opened a shop with electrical goods just when the first television station began experimenting in Ljubljana. Milan realised even at that time that electrics and electronics represented the future. Using the money his father placed in trust for him, he worked long hard hours to prove to his mum that he could do it. Milena was always an asset in business, they could have made lots of money if the communists didn't stop them.

"It was the government's duty to show that private business couldn't prosper," said Milan to Ivan soon after they first met in the late sixties. "I employed workers, while government sector employed office staff to cook coffee for other office staff.

"No wonder they couldn't manage." said Ivan.

Milan was sorry that he never said goodbye to his father before they escaped. He remembered him as a shadow behind the newspaper, who rarely said a word. After the war communist government nationalised their factory and home but his father walked out of his home in his slippers without a word. He must have been ready for it, he never argued, he just took the family to his friend's place. His father must have known in advance what was about to happen and he must have made provisions that nobody knew about. They soon recovered. By the time Milan grew up they were again prosperous.

Milan often wondered how his father really felt about his marriage to Milena? What were his political views, what was his life like? Was his dad just a simple man in charge of his little paper factory or did he hold strong opinions about any particular subject?

The paper factory was built by Milan's grandfather at the beginning of the century and it was running successfully well into the eighties. There was some talk about the de-nationalisation and Milan even planned on getting his share, when he heard that the factory went bankrupt. It was sold for a nominal sum to an Austrian Slovenian and it could never be denationalised.

Milan's mum was very outspoken and she made sure that everybody knew her opinions. Fanatically aware of her upper class background she derided the newly rich and the Jews and the communists. She ignored the poor. Her friends shared her views but young and idealistic Milan wanted to rebel against his mother. She was an opinionated, self-righteous snob.

Uncertain about his sexuality and proud of his obvious attractiveness Milan searched for a heroine that would restore his confidence and made him rejoice in his sexuality after his first sexual experience with Andrea. He was convinced that something was very faulty with the mechanism of his manhood. He contemplated his next conquests hoping to prove it to

himself that he was just as good as any other man. Grateful to women showing interest in him, he became a universal lover, committed to no one. Popular in the company of women, he paid attention and whispered compliments even to the women he did not try to seduce. He enjoyed being a wanted man, the loving glances of women gave him a thrill.

Milena neither enjoyed nor admired him but he respected her because she reflected his self doubts. Milan tried to convince himself, that he wanted to improve his technique for Milena because he felt guilty and sorry for her and he wanted to make her happy. He was grateful that she did not ask him to go to the doctors to see if his semen was faulty and couldn't produce pregnancy. He went on his own and told Milena that his sperm count was too low.

Milan didn't want to remember the episode just before he met Milena. He even couldn't remember who was bedding who at that drunken party, but a few days later he noticed the brownish discharge and became terrified. He rehearsed the story he was going to tell his doctor but fortunately the pus stopped before he gathered enough courage to go. Since that time he only had encounters with safe clean married women. Still he reasoned that his sperm count may have become affected.

Knowing how disappointed Milena must have been, he tried to find reassurance and comfort with women who didn't matter. Eventually he learned to maintain his erection as long as he wanted during the intercourse with Milena because Milena did not seem to worry about it. She rarely showed any pleasure at all, she barely put down the book she was reading or just closed her eyes and let it pass. He could go on thrusting in the slow rhythm for as long as he wanted.

Once in conversation Barbara mentioned her friend Andrea and Milan felt happy that they shared a memory of the person they both loved. Milena knew about Andrea and she suspected that Andrea was Milan's only real love. Milan was never sure how he really felt about Andrea, she was his first love and the only woman he couldn't have. In fairness to Milena he couldn't tell Barbara that he knew Andrea.

"Andrea was a silly immature bitch," Milena later told Barbara. "She thought that she could get any boy she wanted but she couldn't get mine."

Milan believed that he could make a uniquely unforgettable love to Barbara, that after him she would never think of another man.

One spring morning back in 1970 Milan came looking for Ivan but Ivan was already at work, and the children just left for school.

"Are you alone?" he whispered urgently.

"Yes," Barbara tried to pick the toys off the floor and had her hands full of children's things when he pressed her against the wall and the table. His big hand caressed her hair for a moment before it slipped down her neck and under her nightgown. She glanced at the door and the window and the table until she focused on the two bodies in the dining room mirror. Barbara felt suddenly cold and small and desperately scared as she watching herself wrestling with Milan against the wall. She was stunned by his strength and powerlessly speechless in his grip. This wasn't what she was waiting for.

The breakfast dishes were still on the table that was leaning dangerously under Milan's pressure as Barbara closed her eyes to be gently kissed. The dishes began to slide to the edge. "You drive me mad," Milan gasped. "I want you, I always wanted you," his voice was

hoarse and his hand was undoing his zipper. Barbara closed her eyes and suddenly wanted to cry for words of love she made for Milan. But Milan's lips were pressed on hers and she remembered that she hadn't brushed her teeth yet. Barbara pulled away terrified and the bodies in the mirror became remote and had nothing to do with her dining room or her loving.

The man in the mirror wanted to find something that wasn't there. Barbara remembered that she did not wash her face yet. The cup rolled off the table but thank God it didn't break on the carpet as they kissed. Her dressing gown fell to the floor and her short nighty was around her waist. Barbara caught the image of her bottom in the mirror and wished she had her best long silk nighty on. Milan did not warn her. He released her lips and bit her neck. She became alarmed.

"It's too dangerous," she tried. "Not here, please not here, someone might come." She noticed the spot of mud on his left shoe, he must have been on the building site, with Ivan perhaps. He often delivered appliances or building materials personally for Ivan first thing in the morning.

Milan was groping with her clothes and pressing her to the wall, struggling with her, when she let go off the toys to push him away. But he was holding on to her with all his strength now like he would never release her. After a couple of eternities he just as suddenly grew limp and slumped gasping into her arms. Barbara felt a wet trickle running down her legs.

"What's wrong," he smiled after a few seconds almost shy and apologetic. "You wanted it, I know you wanted it."

Barbara leaned on him now, hiding her face in his shoulder ashamed because she wasn't prepared for romance, she still had slippers on and her hair was a mess. She looked at the floor and saw a droplet like a spittle on the flowery pattern of the carpet. She stepped on it quickly and rubbed it out. He took a hanky and wiped his zipper. Barbara noticed that the white hanky was beautifully ironed and embroidered. She hoped that Milena wouldn't smell it, he should drop it in a bin somewhere.

"What if someone finds out," she whispered.

"Nobody will ever find out. We'll be careful," he reassured. Barbara dreamed about him saying that he wanted the whole world to know about them and she didn't want to let go of the dream yet. She wanted the world to know that Milan chose her out of all the women to love. Her heart was full of love words and her chest ached for the words to be spoken. Shy and a little ashamed she felt only guilt and fear. The hope of an everlasting love became so tiny that she could barely see it.

"I'll make it good for you next time," he promised somewhere in another world feeling like a boy who broke his favourite toy. The timing and the place were wrong.

Milan suddenly remembered Ivan saying long time ago that it was easier to find a woman than a friend, especially in Australia. A woman you take and leave but a friend was with you for life. They casually sat after lunch in Andrej's restaurant then and observed women at other tables. Neither of them taught consciously about their women but the words came back to Milan now.

"We'll go to a motel next time," he said absent-mindedly. "I'll get us a room. I promise you, nobody will ever know. You'll enjoy it. I'll make you enjoy it," he tried to convince both of

them. He seemed desperate somehow and Barbara became afraid of this changed man. He was almost begging, his worldly charm and assurance all gone, he wanted to bring back the promise they held for each other.

Milan felt uncomfortable, almost powerless and suddenly the whole scenario with Andrea replayed itself. He was too anxious to impress Barbara with his lovemaking and too scared that Ivan would return any moment. There was something about Barbara that reminded him of Andrea. Both girls, he still thought of Barbara as a girl, seemed to believe in love and all that staff books are made of. He realised that this quality first attracted him to both of them.

Barbara wanted him to comfort her. His words "I'll make you enjoy" sounded wrong.

The memory of Karl came haunting her. The words from her subconsciousness came to her for the first time. Karl told her that she would like it, that he would make her like it. He said that as he first raped her at the age of fourteen.

"I'd better go, I don't want to cause suspicion for nothing," said Milan lamely. He felt that Barbara expected much of him, he wanted to give her anything she wanted, only he didn't know what she wanted or if he had what she wanted.

After he left, Barbara tried desperately to repair the damaged romance like mother spider repairs her damaged web, doing and undoing it all over. She kept telling herself that he loved her, she assured herself that it will be romantic and sacred next time in the right place at the right time.

She hurried to remove all evidence of Milan's visit, she rubbed the carpet and soaped her body. She rubbed and rubbed herself with the towel to get rid of the memory. She lay on the bed and crying into the pillow she tried desperately to wash the memory of Milan because all she could remember were his clumsy fingers, his heavy breathing, his red face and the smell of bacon and eggs coming from his mouth. When she closed her eyes Milan became Karl, old and big and ugly.

Under the cushion Barbara found a little golden cross and grabbed for her necklace. It wasn't there. Terrified she searched and searched. She couldn't ask Milan, how could she go over and ask him in front of Milena if he took her necklace while they made love. She reasoned that they never made love, that they only struggled against the breakfast table and the lounge room wall. She couldn't explain that to anyone. It was an omen, a bad, bad omen. She kissed the cross Ivan gave her and called on God to do something. She hid the cross in her bag and pulled the jumper on, so her bare chest wouldn't show. Deep down Barbara tried to convince herself that she did not really commit a sin of adultery, that nothing really happened. It was nothing really. But only God would believe her. Or would he?

"You'll never guess what I found in the pocket of my jacket," Milan rang the next morning with the old charming confidence. He had to recover quickly and restore his position.

"Bring it back now," cried Barbara.

"Milena almost saw it," he teased. "She heard it fall on the floor as I laid the jacket on the chair. You are losing money under the bed again. You never pick it up, she said. So I bent down and found your necklace. I'd like to pin it back on you, somewhere safe in a motel room."

“Don’t joke about it, bring it back,” she begged. Milan wanted to sound light-hearted, he was relieved and wanted an opportunity to prove himself worthy to Barbara. He badly wanted to have a second chance.

“Milena asked me to invite you to dinner tonight. I could give it to you then.” He enjoyed the cat and mouse game, the danger, the fire.

Barbara was nervous all through dinner, she tried to please everybody, she felt Milan looking at her with a mischievous smile most of the night. As she undressed that night, the necklace fell out of her pocket. Wondering when he slipped it in, she felt gratefully safe again and she loved him for it.

“Why did you take that off,” asked Ivan.

“It broke while I was undressing, I had it with me to have it repaired.”

“Thank you, God,” she said that night, “I will never do anything like that again. I know this is a miracle and I thank you for it.”

Barbara became scared for her perfect fantasy so she avoided being alone with Milan. Lovemaking with Ivan left her overwhelmed, vulnerable and tired. The overpowering sensations did not offer everlasting joy and security. Sex seemed to take away her freedom to feel and do as she wanted. She could not dream of little chunks of time in a motel room with Milan where loving would begin and end. Ivan gave her moments of intense pleasure but as soon as his passion subsided, he cut her off. He seemed afraid of gentleness while Barbara needed the permanence of sharing the passion and compassion before and after. She came to conclusion that permanence could only be created in her mind.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,

now and forever.

The Bible.

Slovenian club

“There are three million people who were born overseas and have chosen to live in Australia,” said the Prime Minister of Australia in 1972.

“This is just an election campaign,” said Ivan to Milan as they watched the television news in the newly built Slovenian club in Sydney. Both realised that the Prime Minister was wooing the new-Australian voters.

They saw the faces of people who came from different countries. “We are one and we are many and from all the lands on earth we come. I am, you are, we are Australians. We share a dream, we are Australian,” they sang softly. For the first time the Australian government acknowledged that migrants were a part of the Australian nation.

“Finally we became Australians,” said Milena.

“Our children will blend in and nobody will know where they came from,” said Ivan who wasn’t happy about blending into anything. It was much more important to him to get Slovenian club going and for his children to remain what they were.

Marjan, Milan and Ivan were the foundation members of the club. They came from vastly different backgrounds so each carried the legacy of their early upbringing. Unaware of the impact their families had on their thinking they self-righteously professed what they, as boys, learned to believe.

Milan’s father rarely expressed an opinion in Milan’s presence but his mother never stopped talking and during her afternoon coffee sessions she berated Jewish bankers who controlled the international markets and trends. Every financial failure of her husband was conveniently blamed on the money hungry communist-Jews. The word Jew became a derogatory term in her circles. Milan didn’t like her bigoted attitudes but without realising it, he began to copy his outspoken mother as he grew older.

Ivan grew in a disciplined church going and God fearing family. After the war his father stopped going to church and began to drink and abuse his family. The misery that followed was attributed by Ivan’s mother to the lack of God and prayer in their house. Ivan believed that as long as he had God and the church behind him, his family was safe.

Marjan was well liked by almost everybody, he learned from his father to get along, to follow the trends. The memory of a popular, powerful man in a company car was much more attractive to the little boy than the memory of the silently suffering deserted mother who tried to teach Marjan right from wrong. Marjan wanted to go places like his father but the conscience he inherited from his mother often made him question his actions and words.

Australian migrants gradually became aware of themselves and of their potential political power. Thinkers and writers blossomed within every migrant group over the vast continent. They connected their people and represented them to the Australian mainstream. The writers never united ethnic groups, of course, but they made them alive with ideas.

The ideas needed a voice and the voice became a newspaper and ethnic newspapers began flooding the news-stands. The writers were aware that they could only capture a moment in Australian history. Their children became English readers and the older generation was dying.

Marjan began publishing a Literary circle, a semi academic magazine, in which a few people began to share their thoughts. Poetry and short prose appeared and the analysis of political developments at home were made by the amateur politicians.

Marjan recruited new writers through Slovenian associations all over Australia and he spent all his time and money on the first few editions. He had to become established before he could apply for financial assistance. Soon he had more contributions of writing than he could handle but it was hard to recruit new readers. Thinking was new to most hard working migrants who just managed to build the roof over their heads. Most couldn't relate to the modern poetry and the semi academic political jargon.

Ivan built the Slovenian club. He appealed to the people he employed as a builder, to donate their labour. He was a planner, a builder and the caretaker. He begged the shopkeepers, where he purchased his building materials, for donations and discounts, he nagged the government for subsidies and concessions. All Slovenians were remembered and called upon and they had no heart to refuse. They needed each other.

Milan, Barbara, Milena and Ivan came early to see that everything was ready for the annual ball that Saturday evening in 1972.. As a president Ivan was there to see that everything was as it should be. Milan was a treasurer and in charge of the music. Milena reluctantly accepted the position as a secretary because Ivan said that he would be lost without her.

Marjan was in charge of culture, he prepared programs, he organised children's drama, dance and choir group and now he became a publisher. Milan and Ivan talked about the articles in the Literary circle Marjan published.

"Full of Communist propaganda, they'll look after him," said Milan.

"I'll get my news from Misli, thank you very much. At least I know who is behind them," said Ivan. Misli (Thoughts) were a semi religious monthly magazine published by Slovenian Franciscan Fathers in Australia. It brought news about Slovenians in Australia, reports of births, marriages and deaths. Misli also reported on the important events at home and around the world. Most Slovenians subscribed to Misli and Misli became a spiritual link for them. One could read in Misli about babies being baptised young people getting married and when someone died.

Marjan's magazine brought an abstract impression of their reality. The poetry and the stories and the political comments were clouded in the language that was unfamiliar to most.

Milan introduced Vida and her husband Andrej as they walked in. Andrej did a couple of jobs for Ivan but they never met socially. Vida reminded Barbara of an over-decorated Christmas tree with her shiny gown and golden trinkets. Andrej, scrubbed and scented, enthusiastically praised everybody's efforts in building this magnificent place. This promised to be the very beginning of their magnificent social life.

“Look at that dress, someone should teach the woman how to dress for an evening out,” Vida leaned over Barbara pointing at the woman entering the club. The obviously proud wearer of the colourful flowery dress smiled across the room and Vida waved back.

“How would she know, she probably never went out in the evening before” said Andrej. “She knows how to dress for church or to pick potatoes in the paddock, not to go out in the evening.”

Barbara wandered anxiously what they thought about her evening attire. Ivan suggested that she buy the aqua Swiss cotton material with shiny silvery treads in it. He also chose the light grey shoes and a matching bag. She would have bought pale pink instead but she wasn't sure of her choice.

“I like your dress,” said Vida as if she could read Barbara's thoughts. “Did you make it?”

Barbara began to explain self-consciously that it was a last minute rushed job. “Did you make it” sounded down putting and she wasn't sure what Vida thought about her sewing. Ivan looked at Barbara moving his head from side to side because he knew how expensive the material was and how carefully Barbara made it. Over the last two weeks she agonised over the pattern and looked at herself and the material in the full length mirror. Her pretended modesty irritated Ivan as much as Vida's exaggerated interest in clothes. Vida's voice began to grate on his nerves and he excused himself and left for the office. Milan also looked for a way out and said that he had to help Ivan.

Marjan arrived and joined them and embraced everyone with his happy casual air of universal friendliness before he turned to Milena and they closed into an intimacy of friendship.

Vida and Andrej asked Barbara's permission to sit themselves at their table and Barbara referred them to Milena. Both Marjan and Milena nodded so Andrej and Vida attached themselves to Barbara. Pinned down by her new acquaintance Barbara listened. Vida told her about her friendship with Milan. Vida worked for Milan in his warehouse. Talking about Milan brought the two women closer. They kept glancing at Milena who was safely absorbed in conversation with Marjan. Vida wished she could tell someone about her brief affair with Milan, she hinted at how attractive he was but Barbara gratefully listened to the praises of her lover. It never entered her mind that Milan could love anyone but her.

Andrej was a contractor and employed two labourers who fixed people's gardens. He told Barbara that he had done some work for Ivan but Ivan never mentioned that to Barbara. Suddenly Barbara realised that Vida and Andrej tried to impress her. She became awkwardly embarrassed.

They looked over the ever increasing number of Slovenians arriving. Slovenian club in Sydney soon became known as home.

Ivan returned to the table to tell them that Slovenian radio program was on. He brought the radio and they listened to Milena's pre-recorded voice bringing the news.

Radio waves for the first time in Australia began to carry the voices of non-English speaking people. Half hour weekly was allocated to each ethnic group and the fighting began as to who will use this time to influence his people. Finally Milena took over the radio and tried to find the compromise between Milan's, Ivan's and Marjan's views. They accused each other

of having too much influence over her. Milena often chose to ignore their ideas. As a compromise Marjan and Milena began to broadcast a program once a fortnight each.

Later SBS ethnic television opened and it brought migrants of different accents and colour and beliefs right into the lounge rooms of Australian viewers. The Australian born people had a chance to look at newcomers closely without getting involved with them. They looked and listened and gradually they became less afraid of the unknown and foreign. Migrants also felt proud and more confident seeing beautiful people of their own on television.

Marjan was happy that migrants began to express and iron out their thoughts. Gradually their thoughts and feelings were recognised and they became a political force. Ethnic representatives were elected to talk to the government agencies on their behalf. Marjan spoke for Slovenians often and his statements were repeated and interpreted until he did not recognise them as his own any more.

Most non-English speaking migrants came to Australia in the late fifties and all through sixties. They worked silently until they established themselves. With their children at school and becoming financially comfortable they began to built their clubhouses in the late sixties and early seventies. Their clergy gathered them in the churches to baptise their children, to bring the good news of God and of home and specially of their own people in Australia.

Marjan organised the first Slovenian school. The children of all ages came on a Saturday morning and Marjan chose the stories and poems for them to read and recite. Kristina and Peter sang Slovenian songs with them. Vida sewed their first national costumes. Together they improvised the steps for the folklore dances and for Mother's day 1972 they had a concert to be proud of.

While the children attended Slovenian Saturday school, their parents socialised, listened to Slovenian records, sang Slovenian songs, and admired Slovenian artefacts and each other. They were aware that 'walls may have ears', so many refrained from discussing politics and religion. Both subjects were closest to their hearts but they dreamed about going home where such things were a taboo.

Marjan felt that keeping in touch with home developments and Yugoslav government was the only way to remain in touch with their reality. Ivan and Milan began calling for human rights for the first time in their lives. They demanded the freedom of speech and worship for their home country.

Soon most members clearly decided which side they were on and they sat during meetings with their friends on the opposite sides of the club which they built together. The right was known as clerical, conservative, anti-Communist, the left was pro-Yugoslav, communist. During the meetings they hurled abuse on each other and called for peace. In an attempt to achieve unity they banned politics and religion from the club, but they couldn't keep their own rules.

Boris, Anushka and Mitja watched from the dining room where they enjoyed the superb meals cooked by Slovenian women.

"They discovered freedom," said Boris.

"They started with whispers but now they yell out their grievances. Leaders are emerging like flowers on fresh piles of manure," said Mitja.

“What glorious manure it is,” said Boris. “It could sustain generations and generations of flowers.”

The carefully stored energy regenerated the minds that were ignored in Australia.

“We all love Slovenian food,” said Anushka bringing the men back to earth.

“And good wine,” said Boris.

“I am going to grow fat if we keep coming here,” said Anushka.

“Let’s drink to that,” said Mitja. He finally accepted his people and was fascinated with their blossoming. The leaders and their supporters worked for the glory and the power in the newly found kingdom of the clubhouse. They were never really willing to sacrifice themselves for the common good, they waited for the opportunity to lead and think and achieve. They were free to talk and produce and sell but nobody took notice of them. The escapees from the oppression of communism sadly realised, that their thoughts were dismissed by the free world. Most concentrated on getting rich but they soon realised that wealth in itself did not bring happiness.

“We all want something better all the time,” said Mitja in response to his thoughts.

“We want to be significant,” agreed Boris and the two friends understood what he meant.

“Slovenian club offers them an opportunity to be Kings in their little kingdom,” said Mitja looking at Slovenians in their finery.

“They became alive with the club elections,” said Boris. At home they chose between the government appointed candidates and the black box. They knew that the box could not be a president.

“The elections in the club give them a chance to cut down the poppies when they grow too tall on our community’s compost heap,” said Boris.

Slovenians kept turning the compost heap to find clever, innocent people who would unite and represent them and bring about their recognition. They searched for people who had no personal ambition but only the common good in their sights.

“Our people really believe that there is such a thing as a politician without personal interest,” laughed Mitja.

“Of course there are,” said Anushka. “Maybe not forever and ever but at the beginning most want to be good.”

The club members experienced the joy of real democracy as they voted out undeserving, selfish, vain, rich, power hungry individuals. All their anger and jealousy was poured into the ballot box.

“The election gives the sprouting chance to gentle and meek to become significant. After the elections the smell of the compost is replaced with the smell of roses,” said Mitja.

“Not for long. The stubborn weedy stalks grow fast and kill the gentle and meek unless they become tough, corrupt and ruthless,” said Boris.

Throughout the elections everybody grew a little stronger as they vented their feelings and made decisions. It really didn’t matter to most who was elected as long as they got even with the ones they voted out. Love and hate animated them with passion.

Some fearfully abstained from fighting, leaned over the bar and filled their emptiness with alcohol. But the ones that plotted and schemed were like sharp diamonds trying to cut into each other. The ideas emerged, the shiny babies of a thinking group pulled others along. The ideas created not only divisions but also the visions for the future, they gave the meaning to the lives that would wither meaningless in isolation.

Milena and Marjan often sat alone and observed the people they had little in common with. Both felt the cultural isolation painfully and the sharing of that isolation created an intimacy between them. They were cut away from those that would properly appreciate and love them. Marjan's wife Robyn was often on duty at the hospital and she didn't mind not being in the club. Robyn enjoyed Milena's friendship but she really had nothing in common with other Slovenians.

"I envy them their ignorance sometimes," said Milena looking over the crowd of people in their festive attire.

"Ignorance is bliss. Ignorant and greedy never lack company," said Marjan but he felt sad putting down his people. "I can't understand how they can exist as illiterates. Most of them are intelligent people but because of their poor English many sound stupid." Marjan wanted to apologise to Milena for putting himself above his people.

Marjan knew that he had to become fluent in English because in Australia everything was done in English despite the claims of multi-culturism. If you didn't think in English you remained an outsider. Marjan resented the fact that, although his English was perfect, he could not indulge in the little subtleties of the language. He could not use slang, phrases and double meaning expressions light-heartedly like those born in Australia did. Robyn never understood his unease in Australian company.

"For most it was either work or school. With young families the roof over their heads came first," reasoned Milena. But it was also most important for her to become fluent in English as fast as possible. She could not feel in charge otherwise.

"Mentally they live as they lived in Slovenia of the forties and fifties and sixties. Many quote their primary school teachers. I remember it clearly from school, they say, so it must be so. How depressing," said Marjan.

"It is rather depressing, in fact it is a health hazard. Not knowing the language causes social isolation, which in turn causes depression. You can't blame them for wanting to spend their free time with their family and friends though. School is a hostile territory. They accepted their illiteracy and isolated themselves from those that could expose their ignorance and hurt them. At school they would feel shamed. They are getting too old to learn new tricks." Milena saw the practicalities, dreams were good but practicalities were essential. She felt compassion for her people although she had little in common with them.

"They are strutting on the club's stage because they have no other stage to strut on," said Marjan.

"I suppose we all need a stage to grand-stand on, we both do our share of strutting," said Milena. Only in each other's company they felt free to laugh about themselves and their people.

"How dare they call the club a cultural centre. They crawl into Slovenian club for protection," said Marjan.

“Most people are not interested in your kind of philosophy. They find their own, less complicated, meaning. The club offers an exhibition of artefacts, there is a folklore and there is music,” reminded Milena.

“Artefacts and music and grog to pretend that somebody lives there.”

Andrej became a union representative and on one occasion he invited his union members to have a meeting in the club. Milena was in the dining room having lunch with Robyn and she couldn't help overhearing their speeches.

“I listened to Andrej at the union meeting,” said Milena to Marjan now. “I felt so humiliated and sorry for him. People did not listen to his ideas, I bet that in their minds they corrected the mistakes in his speech. ‘I no good at speech,’ he stuttered and then continued to address serious political issues with a kindergarten vocabulary. Getting red in the face, he raised his voice to make a point but he looked even more ridiculous.”

“He told me about it,” said Marjan. “He said that they clapped and the president congratulated him. Andrej works tirelessly for the union to get a little praise. An Australian man wouldn't give a damn for a little praise, he wouldn't crawl to any union steward for praise. But our people do,” Marjan became angry.

“Don't be too hard on them. Most Australians don't understand the political jargon either and most of our people would have nothing to do with politics if they stayed home. Some things are simply over their heads.”

“If you want a well paid jobs you have to be able to write,” reasoned Marjan.

“Our people must be smarter, they have done well without writing. Anyway don't we all do our share of crawling?” Milena lifted her eyebrows meaningfully.

“Presidents and deputies and treasuries and committee members, they try being alive because they are scared of their own death.” Marjan ignored Milena's insinuation about crawling.

“They are working hard,” defended Milena. “The so called academics in Slovenia are just as ineffective. They make themselves heroic by writing abstract political poems, aphorisms and graffiti.”

“We are all waiting for their ideas,” said Marjan.

“They whisper benign political jokes and these little gems travel to the far corners of the Earth to reach us,” admitted Milena. “But the jokers laugh at themselves, they say that they know how rotten the system is but they are too scared or lazy or comfortable to rock the boat.”

Marjan wanted to change things and be seen changing them. He wrote against the injustices of the world but his friends called him communist.

“They laugh at themselves to cover up the shame of their impotency. At least our men here speak out. They might be rough but I admire their gumption. They'd rock any boat.” Milena tried to remain loyal to Ivan because he was fighting for what he believed in.

Other migrants kept moving higher and higher into bigger and better houses because they measured their worth with the size of their homes. In communist Slovenia these blue collar workers were made to feel inferior to the office staff and were poorly paid. As they settled

in Australia of the sixties they simply couldn't stop climbing towards economic equality. Their trades offered them a chance of unlimited success and power. It was up to them how much they earned. Most were self-employed or employers, contractors and sub-contractors. Some were hard labourers during the day and the managers of their businesses in their spare time.

Marjan and Robyn were both wage earners and still lived in their first modest home. Marjan claimed that the trappings of wealth weren't important to him.

The leaders of the club looked out for those Slovenians they could argue with, convert and finally unite with themselves. Winning arguments was more satisfying than chatting about their monotonous lives.

During the early seventies the political split occurred in Slovenian clubs throughout Australia. Like an epidemic the fighting brought them together faster than friendship could. Those who showed no interest in politics and those who sat on the fence were ignored. Most took a position because those with fire in their bellies were more admired than the peacemakers.

Unable to discuss politics with strangers in a foreign language the newly born Slovenian elite treasured those that were willing to participate in the exchange of thoughts. In the process of fighting they became closer to their opponents than they were to those that blindly followed them.

Ivan and Marjan gradually became open rivals in the Slovenians club in Sydney.

During the 1970 Marjan proposed to bring a group of singers from Slovenia to tour Australia.

Ivan first heard about the group during the club meeting and the secrecy irked him. Why didn't Marjan discuss it with him privately first? Ivan didn't yet know that the Yugoslav Ambassador rang Marjan to discuss the visit with him. They needed someone to take responsibility for the tour. Marjan's subsequent visits to the embassy were seen by Ivan as a clear betrayal. It was vaguely understood at the time that Yugoslav embassy recruited spies to report on the activities of the clubs and to keep the members scared.

"So you are one of the embassy's informers," said Ivan after the meeting.

"What have I to inform about? They called me to talk about the tour," said Marjan.

"People are scared shitless," said Milan, "they want to go home and the regime has got the key. They want ransom blood from us. So people crawl to them."

"We live in a cultural vacuum," said Marjan. "All we have is houses, cars and bank accounts. We need them."

"THEM and collaborators like you," said Ivan bitterly.

"You are scared that the musicians from Slovenia will contaminate us?" snarled Marjan.

"We have to grow with people at home or we'll be left behind."

"Don't be naive," said Ivan, "Yugoslav government is not going to let you grow with them unless you accept their rule, they want to control us."

"You are bogged down in your hatred of communism," said Marjan. "Regimes come and go. We can use what little they are offering."

"I spent hundreds of hours working on the club so you and your embassy could be our cultural agent," said Ivan.

"We must use the club for the good of everybody, we all worked on it," corrected Marjan.

"Now the dirty work is done you will invite the embassy to bring us the communist performers if we pay and obey," yelled Ivan.

"Artists and writers are the conscience of the nation, you should not isolate yourself from them." Ivan resented Marjan's patronising words.

"You write to please communists. You are too scared to protest against the regime," said Milan.

"It's easy to protest against us, we have no guns," said Ivan.

The singing group came and grudgingly they all attended the concert.

Yugoslav ambassador invited Marjan as the editor of the Slovenian magazine to the banquet at the embassy. He introduced Marjan to other important guests and formally welcomed him.

The ambassador told them that the Embassy's employees had a duty to find out the needs of the migrants. They had to form links with the Slovenian community in Australia, monitor and report on their activities. It sounded like pastoral care but Marjan realised that Yugoslav government was still scared of dissidents and wanted to keep them under control. He knew there would be problems when his friends found out about his participation. He could never tell anyone about the visit. The memory of it lingered and made him feel guilty.

Marjan was aware of Embassy's activities and intentions but he promised himself that he would never compromise any of his friends. It was hard to explain to Ivan that he simply needed to exchange his thoughts. With his goals clear, he felt less guilty about going to the enemy who called on him more frequently from then on.

In 1971 a popular Slovenian playwright came to Sydney and the ambassador invited Marjan to the banquet in his honour.

"We know nothing about the life of Australian Slovenians, we need someone to write about it. It would make a good book. I am sure they would publish it in Ljubljana," said the visiting author.

Marjan imagined his name in print. He knew their story and he wanted to write it. They all liked him at the Embassy.

Marjan wanted to share the good news with someone but he knew that no-one would be happy for him. Vida and Andrej were regular visitors to the embassy but Marjan himself resented their involvement with the Yugoslav regime. He didn't want to be a spy like them. He reasoned that it was different for him, but he felt the slave's chains on his feet as he returned from the embassy. He remembered the old prayer: For the kingdom, the power and the glory.

Marjan reasoned that he was looking for the truth, for the meaning of things. Ivan and Milan seemed so certain about their mission, but Marjan was still looking. Unbeknown to each other though, the three men looked at each other in their moments of doubt, wandering if the other had the answer.

Marjan wasn't certain if they were right and he was wrong, if they were all wrong or all right. Did it matter at all who they were and what they did or say?"

A man from the Embassy rang Marjan a few days after the banquet: "I have some Slovenian books you could use for the club's library. Meet me at the club this afternoon." An unknown man approached Marjan in the club that day and insisted to be called by his first name Lazo.

"Aren't you going to introduce us," Robyn and Milena stood nearby sensing Marjan's discomfort.

"Sure. Milena, Robyn, Lazo," Marjan recited the names, "Lazo brought some books for the club." They shook hands and like old friends began to chat in English so Robyn would understand. At the embassy Marjan felt compelled to speak to Lazo in Serbo-Croatian but here he would feel embarrassed and compromised. He knew how Milan and Ivan despised any Slovenian who spoke Serbian, the official Yugo language, in the Slovenian club. Milena introduced Lazo to Milan. The books were left in the club for people to borrow them.

Before leaving, Lazo casually asked Marjan to sponsor him for the membership in the club. He took out of the pocket an application form from the ambassador himself for Marjan to endorse.

"You understand that members decide who to accept," cautioned Marjan.

"Of course," said Lazo winking at Marjan.

People chatted casually but Milena silently observed Marjan endorsing the application. She knew that something important was happening. Maybe even Marjan wasn't aware of what he was doing but she knew that Lazo came to the club with the mission.

Milena loved the idealistic romantic side of Marjan but she realised that he was also an ambitious dreamer and maybe willing to sacrifice his principles to realise his dreams. When it came to politics Milena returned to what she was, to the capitalist establishment she grew up with. She despised socialism and communism. It was nice to dream about an ideal world but one had to live with what was practical.

After Lazo left the club Milena excused herself and closed the office door behind her. She had to ring Ivan to tell him about Marjan and Lazo. She trusted Ivan and she knew that he would expect her to tell him. Ivan respected and admired her judgement. He simply had to know what was going on. He would know what to do about it.

At the next meeting in the club Ivan convinced the majority to vote against accepting embassy people as members.

Ivan and Marjan realised that they would have to be forever vigilant with each other and their cat and mouse game became a welcome challenge for both. Explaining the issues to their followers helped to hone their wits and they became better speakers with every contest.

"Lazo is Serb, the ambassador is Macedonian. Why don't they ask for membership in their respective clubs," reasoned Ivan during the general meeting.

"They are representatives of the regime we escaped from. They want to spy on us, to keep us scared," cautioned Milan.

“You accept Australians as members, why do you reject our Yugoslav representatives? They are our people,” reasoned Marjan.

“Australians don’t interfere with our lives, they don’t spy on us like Yugoslav Embassy does. Our members built the club they decide who to accept and who to reject,” protested Ivan.

“They decide what you tell them to decide,” said Marjan and the lines were drawn.

“You do what the embassy orders you,” yelled Ivan.

“Don’t expect to get the visa when you want to go home,” said Marjan. The threat was spoken and both friends felt sad about it.

“I am not going home while the communists are in power,” said Ivan bitterly.

“Ivan will come asking for visa when he wants to go home,” laughed the ambassador when Marjan brought the verdict.

By now everybody knew that Marjan and his friends reported to the Embassy. Sometimes the tape-recording of the meetings were made for them. In protest Ivan asked the Embassy to cancel his Yugoslav citizenship but they rejected his application. If he ever wanted to visit Slovenia, he would be treated as Yugoslav citizen without the protection of Australian government.

Ivan asked the Australian government to abolish dual citizenship. How did they expect him to be loyal to the queen and to Tito? He accepted Australian citizenship and demanded that his Yugoslav citizenship be cancelled. But Australians weren’t interested in the grievances of a small group of economic migrants. The Australian public didn’t want to be involved in the politics that should be left well alone in their home countries. Balkan troubles belonged to Balkan.

The slogan: for us or against us, emerged among Slovenians all over Australia.

A few months later Lazo came and Marjan signed him in. Lazo offered tapes: “You could use them in the club or for the ethnic radio hour. We could supply news from home and music,” said Lazo. They wanted to supply their news through him. Marjan understood what was happening but he accepted the tapes and played them. Marjan knew that the ambassador didn’t like Milena as a broadcaster because he knew that she would not be compromised like he was.

Six months later the ambassador himself invited Marjan to a party.

“They are finally ready,” he beamed.

“Who is?” asked Marjan.

“The Slovenian Ensemble is coming as we arranged together,” said the ambassador. Marjan realised that he did not arrange anything and that Yugoslav regime did not just send their artists to visit emigrants. He wondered what they really wanted.

After the first small group of singers came to test the emotions of Australian Slovenians, Lazo said to Marjan: “We must do this again.” Overwhelmed by the pleasant reception of the group Marjan agreed. Now they were ready.

“You organise the tour of all Slovenian clubs in Australia. We’ll pay your expenses of course. You get in contact with the club presidents, they can organise publicity, sell tickets, provide accommodation, look after things.”

Marjan knew that people would like the enormously popular visiting musicians but he also knew how suspicious Ivan and his friends would be.

“You won’t forget to invite us to the concert,” said the ambassador smiling as they finalised the arrangements. Marjan remembered the Faust story. “I sold my soul,” he said to himself suddenly frightened. He felt the coins of Judas dangling in his pockets and he walked with unease, afraid that others would hear the tingle of the silver. He felt cheated and he knew that there was no way back. He had no choice. They have chosen him as their representative and he responded. He planned what he would tell the club committee. Marjan knew that Ivan, Milan and Milena wouldn’t understand. They were his best friends.

“A member of the Ensemble is my old friend,” lied Marjan again, “he asked me to arrange the tour if you’d like to hear them.” Many were enthusiastic but Ivan wasn’t fooled.

When the Ensemble arrived Slovenians became excited. they forgot the argument as they gathered in their finery to celebrate. The musicians were accompanied by the secret police and the men from the embassy. As they were about to enter the club they looked at the old Slovenian flag above the club entrance. It had no communist star. They told Marjan that they were not allowed to enter if they don’t take the flag down. They could hang the official flag with the star. Many didn’t care about the flag, they wanted to enjoy the singing, others thought that the principle was at stake and didn’t budge. As a compromise they took the old flag down but they refused the one with the star.

“We built our club,” yelled Ivan, “it’s our home, we are paying for the performance, we’ll have the flag we want. Next they’ll come to my home here and tell me to take off the cross from the wall so they could enter. I pay money for their performance I offer hospitality but I do not compromise my beliefs. Did Tito ask the pope to take down the cross before he entered Vatican?”

Ivan and Marjan spoke like Brutus and Mark Anthony after the death of Caesar. They never learned to express their opinions freely because they grew up in the oppressive experiment that tried to control people’s thoughts. They weren’t Brutus and Mark Anthony at all, less polished and cunning, they were only able to paint a crude picture of a struggle that made them take different roads, to look from different perspectives.

“God forgive them because they know not what they are doing,” said Milan to Ivan later.

“I explained to them in Slovenia exactly how you feel,” said Andrej trying to reconcile them. “They understand your point of view.”

“How dare you explain anything for me,” yelled Ivan. “You have no idea how I feel and when I want them to know, I’ll tell them. They just want to keep us scared. I refuse to be scared.”

“This real good friend of mine, we went to school together, you know, he is a big shot director now, well, he invited us to his home,” Andrej glowed in the glory of his experience and blabbered on “he is in the party but he is just like us really. His friend works for the secret police and he was there too. We talked just like I talk to you. They are really interested, they want to know how we feel and how we cope here, they asked about

everybody. They look bad to you because you refuse to meet them, but they are just ordinary Slovenians.”

“They really are,” helped Vida.

“Oh, shut up,” said Milan unimpressed, “you’d sell your mother for an invitation to the director’s home.” Nobody considered Andrej and Vida seriously.

Ivan was seething with anger. Marjan knew that Ivan would find out about all of his activities eventually. They knew in Slovenia who Ivan was, they knew that people listened to him. They had to discredit him, to destroy his influence over others, push him out. Marjan knew the threat. He felt that he sold his friends and soiled his soul.

While the arguments went on in the Slovenian club in Sydney, Ivan secretly planned his next venture. For years he was completely absorbed in the building of the club, he prepared its constitution and brought the membership to the highest. He could do no more there, he needed a new challenge.

Half to forget the wandering and the pain,
half to remember days that have gone by,
and dream and dream that I am home again.

Flecker, James Elroy

A town for my people.

Ivan told Barbara that he bought a farm near Kristina's orchard out of Sydney. They bought a caravan together, packed their children and personal belongings and moved out of Sydney.

Barbara was shocked by a sudden decision. She also felt guilty about her affair with Milan so she followed Ivan without complaints. Her whole body ached as she tried to forget Milan. She only managed to forget the weird reality of their lovemaking but what they did had nothing to do with her love. She never wanted to have a love affair, in her fantasy she only surrendered to an everlasting happiness with Milan. She vaguely believed that one day he would come and make everything right somehow. She rubbed out all his imperfections and he came to her tall and fresh like trees and they embraced in a great orgasmic union that lasted forever. Their union had to be everlasting because there was nothing beyond it. Like god, it was the beginning and the end.

Ivan never explained to anybody his reasons for moving out of Sydney. Some presumed that the problems in the Slovenian club made him want to leave Sydney, some suspected marital problems, others again believed that he made a purely astute economic decision.

Ivan never told anyone about his secret dream because he realised that his dream was just that, a dream. When he first saw those paddocks under the blue Mountains near Sydney, he wanted to recreate there the village he was born into. He wanted to build a village where his family and friends would live together, protecting and supporting each other. Ivan wasn't a wanderer, he wanted to grow old among his own people.

Ivan was disappointed because Yugoslav regime extended its tentacles into the club he built in Sydney. He was annoyed when his children pointed out that other people were better parents, but above all he wanted to create a perfect town for his people. He also hoped that the generations after him would remember his family as the pioneers of the bush.

The idea was born soon after Milena told Ivan that Marjan sponsored Yugoslav ambassador for membership in the Slovenian club. Ivan, Milan and Milena planned the strategy for preventing their membership. Milan and Milena warned Slovenians coming to their shop against Embassy. Ivan personally visited those he wasn't sure of. He explained why they had to keep the representatives of the Yugoslav regime away.

Marjan openly lobbied for the Embassy. He wrote in his magazine that as civilised, intelligent people, Slovenians in Australia would exist only as long as they had their country behind them. They needed the co-operation and the support of the representatives of their country.

Some liked being called civilised and intelligent by Marjan. Many were still afraid of resisting the regime that instilled obedience in them. Marjan reasoned with them in a safe, familiar, patronising language they grew up with.

Many were weary of the challenge Ivan proposed. What could they change? What could a handful of people do? What would Yugoslav regime do to them if they resisted?

Everybody knew that Andrej and Vida sided with Marjan. Andrej openly boasted about his uncle who was a communist politician in Slovenia. Vinko and Sonja were always on Ivan's side, in fact most Slovenians who worked for Ivan also voted with him.

Most were decided one way or another before the elections. Both Marjan and Ivan had a fair idea how their vote will go but both kept on convincing people. It was an important decision and they told everybody about the issues people didn't fully understand.

Nobody ever knew how Peter and Kristina voted. They bought a little farm on the outskirts of the Blue Mountains before the troubles started in the club. Peter always wanted to return to the land and own a vineyard like his parents did. But they were still very much a part of the club.

A day before the crucial meeting in the club Ivan went to see Peter and Kristina. He explained how wrong it was for Yugoslav embassy to join the club and spy on them. Peter and Kristina nodded and smiled and agreed. Ivan was sure that he had convinced them.

On his way home, Ivan saw Marjan's car speeding towards Kristina's and he became less certain. So Marjan went to change their mind. Ivan could do nothing about it. He stopped and got out of the car. He wanted to make absolutely sure where Marjan was going. He stepped on the highest ridge along the way and looked at the road winding down into the valley. He followed Marjan's car as it climbed up another hill behind which Kristina and Peter's home was out of sight. There was no doubt where Marjan was going and why.

Ivan stood there mesmerised for a moment by a magnificent view. The evening serenity of the countryside overwhelmed him. He noticed a big yellow and black sign near the road saying: For Sale.

Ivan made a plan to build a town of his own in the valley below. The river with the dark stretch of forest reminded him of home. Ivan became overwhelmed with the vision of a wonderful future. He wanted to reach out and embrace the valley that inspired him so suddenly and so completely took his breath away. The vision was so precious that he did not share it with anybody until he bought the land and completed his plans.

Ivan was always grateful to Marjan for making him stop there and discover the future for himself and his people. The squabbles of the Slovenian club in Sydney suddenly became almost meaningless in the face of his discovery. The future of his family and his people was in Ivan's hands again and the embassy could do nothing about that.

Ivan didn't have to justify the merits of his actions to anyone. He was convinced that his friends will follow him, seek his advice and friendship. He missed his friends and his enemies although he told Barbara that they didn't need anybody as long as they had each other.

Ivan parked their caravan under an old Moreton fig tree and erected the provisional toilet and shower nearby.

"It won't be long before we have the best house in this valley," he said.

“This is the best house in the valley,” said Barbara and they laughed a little looking down the hill.

“There are no other houses,” observed ten years old Helena and they all laughed again with her. Kids seemed to enjoy romping in the wilderness, scaring rabbits and kangaroos.

Ivan became more and more involved with his new business as his dream town began to grow. Barbara needed the romance to put up with the isolation. The children grew and their demands for freedom grew twice as fast. When Ivan was away the kids were noisy, rowdy and forever hungry. Barbara begged, bribed and threatened to tell daddy but kids never took notice of poor Barbara. They wouldn't clean and do the chores. Ivan became more and more impatient with them. They had to ask his permission for everything. If they tried to reason, he yelled. If the boys disobeyed, they to kneel in front of him while he unbuckled his belt and administered a number of straps across their legs and bottoms. On rare occasions he lost his temper and clipped them around the ears while Barbara flinched back in fear.

Barbara went along with everything to stop Ivan from yelling. After school the whole family had to help him on the buildings. In the evenings Ivan listened to the news, children did their homework and Barbara prepared dinner. If the children's friends ever came, Ivan kept interrogating them about their families. He wanted to know everything about the family his children befriended. When Ivan yelled the kids ran home.

Helena learned to act cute with daddy, she was pretty, obedient, quiet, she made no demands, she had no extreme thoughts yet. The boys began complaining that they were treated like five years olds, that everybody else had more freedom and that all the other parents let their kids out.

“Don't even mention other parents to me, you live in my house, eat my bread, you'll do as I say,” said Ivan.

As a symbolic gesture Ivan invited Marjan to subdivide his valley for him. Nobody else knew how much that prophetic meeting on the way to Kristina's changed everything.

Milena and Marjan have unknowingly became responsible for the inspiration that was going to change all their lives.

Soon their Sydney friends one by one followed Ivan to help him build Linden. Ivan and Marjan sometimes shared a bottle of wine after work. They tried to make each other see things from their perspective and the anger erupted as they accused each other of narrow minded stubbornness. Although they argued bitterly they needed each other because together they could see things from different perspectives. Ivan and Marjan became closer to each other than they were to their friends.

Milan supplied materials for Ivan's ambitious building projects. Later he saw the opportunity for a new branch for his shop, so he opened a warehouse near Ivan's new home. After a year he closed his Sydney shop and moved to Linden.

“We can do a lot of business there,” said Milena. Both wanted to be close to Ivan and Barbara. Their friendship developed so many hidden facets that they simply felt less alive without each other. The four of them knew that they could count on each other.

Milan noticed the linden tree Ivan planted near his first modest home and he suggested that the place be called Linden.

Mitja moved to his Blue Mountain hideout in 1978. To go to Sydney he had to pass through Linden and he became used to the town he witnessed growing. He liked to stop with his people in Linden and gradually he became a part of them.

After Anushka died Boris bought a little apartment close to the sea where he began to build his beloved boat. Half way between Sydney and the blue Mountains, he was close enough to his work and to his friend Mitja. The building of the boat helped him get over the death of his wife. Both men were also close to Linden and gradually became attached to Linden's Slovenians.

Andrej and Vida opened the first little cafe which grew into a most prominent restaurant in Linden by 1990.

Peter and Kristina were busy planting trees and vines on the other side of the hill. They cleared more of the bush land to plant more vines. Peter stumbled on the protruding stump and became caught under the falling tree. The weight of the tree crushed his spine and left him a paraplegic. After Peter's accident all Linden Slovenians came to help out. Barbara was there most days with her children to water the young trees and vines. Ivan bulldozed the rest of the bush to clear it for the vineyard. Milan paid a man to put new seedlings in the ground and erect the fence. They felt good and united in the course of helping.

As Peter returned from the hospital they kept coming and Kristina served everybody with delicacies from her kitchen. Gradually her kitchen became a meeting place for ever increasing number of Linden Slovenians.

Kristina was a relaxed companion and an excellent cook. Grateful for their friendship she prepared and served delicious dishes for everybody. Gradually her visitors started to pay for her services. They came most Sunday afternoons, and Kristina's place became their retreat. She served home baked bread, cut home prepared smoked meats and poured homemade wine.

Peter played the accordion and they often sang Slovenian songs late into the night. It was almost like coming home. They all admired Kristina's loyalty to her crippled husband. She wrote short stories for Slovenian publications and people found themselves in these stories and understood and liked themselves a little better.

Slovenians in most Australian capitals built their clubs during the seventies. They organised activities and invited performers. They liked to celebrate and many travelled thousands of kilometres to share their experiences.

Ivan carefully followed the events from the sidelines.

In July 75 QUANTAS airline made its inaugural flight to Yugoslavia and offered free travel for a Slovenian singing group to visit Australia. Slovenians all over Australia were eager to hear the artists. The airline contacted the Yugoslav Embassy to organise the tour. The Embassy appointed the organisers who insisted that Embassy people should be invited along with the singing group. People didn't mind the Ambassador coming, some felt even honoured that a Serbian Ambassador wanted to listen to the Slovenian artists in Slovenian clubs all over Australia.

Ivan followed the events from Linden. He was dismayed seeing the scene he witnessed in his club in Sydney replayed in other capital cities. On the night of the concert the Embassy representatives accompanying the singers told the club presidents that they were not

allowed to enter if the old Slovenian flag wasn't taken down. The singers wanted to sing, the members wanted to listen and decisions had to be made. The singers did not dare go into the club without the embassy because they had to go home where the regime might choose to punish them for disloyalty. Slovenian migrants had to compromise. They became embroiled in the bitter fighting.

Both Embassy supporters and their anti-Communist opponents went from house to house canvassing support for their course. The Embassy gradually got a foot in most Slovenian clubs. The Ambassador found new contacts and became friendly with individuals throughout Australia. Some were scared of him, others felt honoured because he was such an important man and many didn't care one way or the other. People, who resisted them, were interrogated when they applied for a visa and later again if and when they went home. They knew that communists intentionally used scare tactics but they became scared all the same. As they applied for their visa, they were asked silly, irrelevant questions and they answered them. Most kept their embassy conversations secret, but the secrecy made it even more sinister. They felt guilty and afraid that they have inadvertently hurt their friends by talking.

Marjan refused to get involved in the fighting. He was working for Ivan and his friends were against the Embassy. Marjan still felt guilty about the role he played in Sydney.

Nobody knew that the people from the embassy kept in touch with Marjan. They occasionally invited him to their functions. Ambassador himself rang Marjan in 1981.

"There is a meeting of Slovenian authors in Ljubljana next month. We would like you to represent Australia? They want to make you the honorary member of the writer's association." Marjan was overwhelmed with the ambassador's offer and he couldn't refuse the invitation to the embassy. He couldn't respond without sounding too eager. The gratitude was choking him. Robyn came with him, but he couldn't even share with her the exhilaration he felt. The men at the Embassy excused themselves and spoke Serbo-Croatian with Marjan.

Robyn did not understand the men's language or the reason for their being there. Ambassador's secretary spoke English and Robyn chatted with her about the shopping, food and clothes. They discovered that they were both on the Pritickin diet and that gave them a lot to talk about.

"We'll pay the expenses, of course, we don't expect you to be out of pocket. Take your wife and make it into a holiday," suggested the Ambassador to Marjan over coffee. There was no way Marjan could refuse the offer but he realised that there was a price. He knew that the Ambassador wanted to make Marjan's voice a voice of the embassy because the ambassador believed that Marjan represented most of the Slovenians in Australia.

Although he spoke on the radio and wrote for the newspapers in the name of Australian Slovenians, Marjan doubted that he represented anyone. In his solitary moments he realised how lonely he really was. But he badly wanted to meet with the writers, some of them were his school friends. This was his only chance to become what he wanted to be.

"I'll get out of their claws," he promised himself.

"The others don't need to know, they might be jealous. You can plan the trip as your private holiday," advised the ambassador laughing a little. "It's up to you what you tell them."

Marjan became scared because he believed that they were reading his thoughts. He felt that he had no choice but to play it their way. The honour they bestowed on him suddenly meant little because he could not share it with the people he loved.

Marjan tried to convince himself that this was his only opportunity and he had to take it. But he felt the noose tightening. Marjan was afraid that his friends would see his price tag. He knew that he was paid for his co-operation.

Many prominent people invited Marjan and Robyn to parties while they were in Slovenia. He didn't know most of them but they told him casually that they heard of his good work. Every so often they focused on his Australian friends. They asked about Ivan, how was he doing these days? How many people worked for him? Was he paying well? How many Slovenians live in Linden? What was Barbara up to? Who are their friends? Who do they visit?

Marjan was cautious because these strangers were too friendly. What did they really want to know? Marjan tried to change the topic of the conversation often but after a few minutes they would be back asking about Milan. Was he still playing around? Who was at their party? What did they serve? Do they speak Slovenian? Did Milena like Slovenian musicians? Does she still go to the opera? Where do they go for holidays? Who goes to whose party? What presents they buy for each other? When do they plan to come home? Do they keep in touch with family and friends at home? What do they read and subscribe to?

It was all harmless really, they were enquiring about fellow Slovenians in a friendly way. Marjan wondered why they wanted to know silly things like that. He did not know that his interrogators did not know what to ask. They simply hoped that by fishing in the familiar harmless waters they would find some information that could be useful when any of the Linden Slovenians applied for the passport.

Milan and Ivan were considered political migrants and the police was paid to keep the vigil over the enemies of the communist regime. Yugoslav regime was not scared of traitors any more. They were scared of those that weren't scared of them and those that had influence over others. Out of the communist cage they were all potential dangerous elements. They made friends with Marjan to keep watch over those they could not buy. Just knowing their activities might help to intimidate them a little longer. Stalking after them all over the world, they tried to frighten them and they did most of the time..

Marjan came to see Ivan as soon as he returned from Slovenia because he was anxious to see that their precarious friendship still existed. They were glad to see each other but they knew where they stood. Marjan would have liked to tell Ivan and Milan and Milena about the splendid time he and Robyn had in Slovenia but he couldn't boast about the banquets Communists prepared for him because they wanted him to betray his friends.

When they all met at Kristina's Marjan reported about the new movement among the intellectuals in Slovenia. Serbian Premier Milosevic began to promote the new curriculum. He wanted the children of all Yugoslav nations to learn the same things and so assimilate into one culture dominated by Serbs. Slovenians realised that Milosevic wanted to destroy Slovenian identity so they began to push for democratisation and independence of Slovenia.

The Slovenian intelligentsia publicly expressed the need for Slovenian unity and it became important to get migrants on their side.

Ivan told them that old Slovenian communists simply had to change if they were to survive. In order to look reborn and changed it was wise for them to enlist the help of those who escaped from the old regime.

They certainly failed to fool Ivan.

Reminiscences make one feel so deliciously aged and sad.

George Bernard Shaw

Reminiscing

In March 1988 most Linden Slovenians came to celebrate the harvest in Kristina's vineyard. Slovenian music could be heard over the valley and the cars kept rolling in. Sitting under the grape trellis in front of Kristina's house they sampled the wines of the years past and the food Kristina lavishly prepared.

Andrej and Vida were choosing the players for Balinc, an Italian version of bowling. Andrej and his friends built the bowling alley at Kristina's years ago and they all looked forward to spending weekend afternoons competing against each other. Drago and Marko sometimes joined them and waited to be picked by the team leaders.

Barbara, sitting next to Milan, hummed the tunes that Peter quietly played on his battered accordion. Sonja and Kristina assured Barbara that they did not need help in the kitchen and Ivan was busy arguing with Marjan.

People told and retold the stories of their lives and specially of their escapes. The wine helped to open their hearts and the new facets of their stories were discovered with every telling. They came to understand themselves and each other more after every meeting.

Peter was among the first after war migrants. As a young marine in the Yugoslav army he was selected for Prague gymnastic festival in 1948 along with two hundred other chosen Yugoslav marines. He was a part of a huge pageant illustrating the revolution and the joy of the new born social order. The marines brought an illusion of the sea to the in-land Czechoslovakia. The event demonstrated that, as the satellites of the Soviet union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia shared the Adriatic sea. The slogans said: Our sea is your sea. Rising and falling in their dramatic costumes the marines moved like waves of the Adriatic.

After the festival marines were allowed to mingle among the people of friendly communist Czechoslovakia. Peter met a girl called Martina in Prague. It was spring and the twenty year olds fell in love easily. He was a hero of the revolution and she took him home to meet her parents. The next morning at assembly the marines were told that Soviet Union attacked Yugoslavia. Peter couldn't believe it, they called Tito- Stalin during the ceremonial the day before. How could people change so quickly? They were ordered to prepare for going home. They weren't allowed out of the barracks any more. Peter wanted to say good bye to Martina, so he escaped at night and walked for an hour to her place. But Martina and her family didn't even invite him in. By then everybody knew that Tito broke up with Stalin and it was dangerous for Czechs to associate with Stalin's enemies.

Confused and scared Peter escaped to Austria and from there to Italy. He met Kristina who was visiting relatives along the Slovenian- Austrian-Italian border. Both were ready for adventure and agreed to go as far away from home as possible.

Kristina came from an ever disputed village near Udine-Villach gap bordering on Italy and Austria. As she started school her village was under Italy. The Italian teachers hit those children who spoke Slovenian. Slovenians hated Italians as much as Italians hated

Slovenians. People didn't even dare sing Slovenian songs behind their closed doors. They hoped one day to belong to Slovenia.

After the war Kristina's village came under the American and British control. The villagers loved the taste of freedom, contraband made them prosperous, they never had it so good. Later the territory around Trieste was split into Zone A and Zone B. Kristina's village came under Zone B which became connected to Yugoslavia. Zone A went to Italy.

"Tito's communists treated us abominably, so we escaped into Zone A. We chose a fascist Italians to protect us against our own people," said Kristina.

Before Kristina escaped, Yugoslav government officials asked her father if his family wanted to migrate to New Zealand. They brought the forms and her father eagerly filled the application for migration. He was prepared to leave his land and his home just to take his family out of that hell-hole. Later they learned that the government only wanted to know who was happy in Yugoslavia and who wasn't. They had to watch those unhappy ones who applied for migration. By 1954 Zone B was almost deserted. Most Slovenians escaped to Italian zone A where they were treated as second class citizens but it was better than Yugoslavia."

Marjan couldn't relate to Kristina's story, the shifting loyalties of Slovenians along Italian border left him totally confused.

"We are lucky that the new Yugoslav Ambassador is a Slovenian," he said to Ivan. He wanted to speak about the changes his friends helped bring about. He also enjoyed provoking Ivan

"He had to be more Yugoslav than Yugoslavs for Yugoslav government to appoint him," yelled Ivan.

"Maybe in his heart he is more Slovenian than you. Anyway behind the scenes he can do more for us than you can," argued Marjan.

"Nobody knows what's in his heart and what is happening behind the scenes," said Milan in Ivan's defence. "He is feathering his nest not ours."

"I often wonder what communism has done for you," said Ivan.

"I keep an open mind," said Marjan.

"Actually I know what they've done for you. They published your stories as a reward, you wrote what they told you to write," ridiculed Ivan.

"Oh, leave him alone," Milena touched Ivan's hand and held it for a moment. She liked Marjan's weird stories and she also loved being loved by Ivan.

"We don't need to bow to mister ambassador. We don't need him in our club either. For years I begged people to donate labour or money for the club. We wanted to be independent," said Ivan.

"That's history," said Marjan.

"Yugoslav embassy became scared because we were doing so well without their help. They recruited you and the likes of you all over Australia to keep us scared. They paid you to write lies about us."

Barbara wondered if Ivan secretly read Marjan's stories. Milena offered the book to Ivan and Barbara read it but Ivan refused to. How could he say that Marjan wrote lies if he never read it. Maybe Ivan also kept some things to himself.

"Writers are bringing democracy to Slovenia now, not politicians," said Marjan. He finally felt that he belonged to the group of people that promoted democracy and independence for Slovenia. He longed to be redeemed and recognised by his friends. It would be great to share the joy and honour he felt by being appointed a honorary member of the Slovenian Literary Association. He hoped that nobody else knew that Yugoslav Embassy recommended him for membership.

"People never joined you because they wanted your kind of culture, they joined you because you managed to scare them like they were scared at home. They knew that you had big guns behind you. You traded with Yugoslav regime. I didn't escape to start negotiating with the Yugoslav Embassy here," yelled Ivan.

"You criticise Australian politicians but you aren't brave enough to question the Yugoslav representatives or the government at home," helped Milan. Ivan and Milan could always count on each other..

"That's rubbish and you know it. If you want to spit in your own dish, that's your problem. You keep telling everybody what a rotten nation we are. I simply refuse to do that," said Marjan.

"Governments everywhere promote culture in the hope that culture will promote them. Nine out of ten it does. Most real visionaries were rebels, who died in disgrace and poverty," observed Mitja in a quiet voice.

"Today's government promotes the abstract culture because they hope that nobody will be brave enough to criticise what they don't understand. Remember the Emperor in his invisible clothes. He walked naked and only a child was brave enough to say so. Since then they indoctrinate children as soon as they start talking. They are afraid that the innocents will tell the truth," said Boris.

"People never complained as much as they do now, they know that a dollar is not a dollar anymore," said Milan.

"People live longer and better than ever before but they don't know what more to want," said Marjan. They introduced new topics at random and jumped in to dispute each other.

"You can buy more bread and milk for an hour's work than you could at any time in the history. Only you are not happy because any bum on the street can buy any kind of bread his bleeding heart desires. Even sunshine loses its appeal when everybody can have as much as they want," said Andrej.

"I suppose you are right. If diamonds would be shared out equally I certainly would not carry their dead weight on my fingers," laughed Milena who rarely joined in the general conversation.

"We buy things simply because we can afford to. They'd be useless if everybody had them," said Boris.

"We keep on buying things but we are destroying what is really the most precious to us. The rivers are polluted and the forests are cut down to satisfy our greed," said Mitja quietly.

“The basic human need is to be better than the next person, that’s why communists wanted everybody, except themselves, to be a united proletariat. They want monopoly on superiority,” said Milan.

“You just can’t forget communists, they must have grown roots in your heart,” said Andrej.

“People like Milan always want more than they need,” said Marjan.

“Oh, shut up, we just established that we all want more than we need,” said Milena with an arm around Marjan’s shoulder.

“I could have been a millionaire in Slovenia,” said Milan, “Milena and I worked 14 hours a day seven days a week when we first started our business. My assistants were happy with lots of overtime. A school friend of mine was the technical supervisor on the government flats. He told me what the lowest tender for the job was and I’d go just under that price for the supply of materials.”

“I know,” said Ivan, “it was just a matter of knowing the right people.”

“If I didn’t do it someone else would. Later I could add as many extras as I wanted,” said Milan.

“And you call this honest,” said Andrej but Milan ignored him.

“It was the only way the system would let you live. At the end of the year the taxation people gave me a basic wage and ten percent of the profits. It wasn’t enough to pay all the bonuses and bribes.”

“I know. those that governed you needed ninety percent to keep you subservient,” said Ivan.

“I’d have the same if I didn’t lift a finger. If in the end I still managed to look prosperous they taxed me for the years past. I simply wasn’t allowed to prove that private sector works better. They barely tolerated it,” said Milan.

“Here you get to keep at least some of the profit you make,” said Ivan.

“Profit is everything to the likes of you,” said Andrej.

“You go to church every Sunday, they teach you not to lay up for yourself treasures upon the earth but that is all you do,” said Marjan.

“The birds don’t sow or reap or gather in the barns. Are you not much better than them,” mocked Andrej.

“I leave your religion alone and you leave mine,” said Ivan evenly and everybody stopped silent for a while. Barbara became afraid that a real argument would begin.

Behind the brave talk the uncertainty played tricks with the their emotions. They bargained with God and tried to evade the taxation department. They paid penance for the things they knew they did not do right by echoing each others’ conscience. The two masters called on them all the days of their lives. Born into Catholic families they learned to love thy neighbour as thyself and the Communists taught them to sacrifice themselves for the common good. But they saw their teachers getting rich and powerful and unashamed of taking from the poor. They also wanted to become powerful. The dollar became their master but when they prayed to gentle Jesus the shiny dollar lost its appeal. They realised

that one day soon they will have to leave their dollars behind and join gentle Jesus for the eternity. They were getting older.

“Give to the master what is his,” reminded Marjan. “If you believed what the church is teaching you would share your big house with the homeless.”

“I do more for the homeless and the hungry than you ever will.” Ivan was getting annoyed.

“We all get to hear about it too,” teased Marjan. “What about your left hand not knowing about the doings of your right one?”

“I don’t have to justify anything to the likes of you,” said Ivan, “we all know who your masters are.”

“We learned all our lives that we must give to our masters what is theirs. We learned that we must look after them in order to be happy,” said Mitja quietly and they pondered his words.

“They make us feel guilty for wanting to be a top dog and have things they have,” said Boris.

“I relied on common sense. More work, more money, more buying power, more security, I figured. But they made non-communists feel ashamed and guilty for being successful,” said Milan.

“I was once told in the taxation office that my husband is a rotten branch on the healthy tree of socialism,” said Milena looking at Ivan for support.

“They were jealous because my branch was the only one producing fruit,” said Milan.

“Workers have to protect themselves against sharks like you,” said Andrej. “Management keeps arranging their own wages and conditions but the worker never knows how long his job will last and he never makes enough to become financially independent. You can rely on worker’s subservience as long as he is poor. Unions make a worker strong.”

“Union makes union leaders strong,” said Ivan trying to stop Andrej. “The communists want to keep the worker poor. If people live from hand to mouth they don’t have time for thinking. United proletariat is easy to manipulate.”

“People who own nothing have nothing to lose. They can be very dangerous,” said Boris.

“In 1962 they arrested me in front of my employees,” said Milan. “Tito ordered the investigation of all private businesses. They appointed an auditor and he told me point blank that he was ordered to find something. It’s my job, he explained. I was in a solitary confinement while he searched my shop to find something illegal.”

Milan vividly remembered the taxation investigator. He could still see the little old bespectacled man with trouser legs pinned together for push bike riding. The wiry, old man parked his bike against the wall and walked in with the card in front of him like a shield. Did exorcist carry the cross like that to get rid of the devil? The card helped the man pass the customers and enter into Milan’s tiny back-room office. The customers scattered, they understood the danger of the card and the official. The little man sat uninvited into Milan’s chair behind the folders of invoices and said:

“I have an order to find something.” Milan almost felt sorry for the tired looking man who probably had a family to feed, a man who never prospered enough to buy a car. As the man began to leaf through the papers two uniformed police came and arrested Milan. He knew

that every eye behind the curtain of his street was watching. He realised that not one person would dare step out and say: "I know this man, he is innocent." Milan remembered how Christ was arrested and Peter, his best friend denied knowing him. Even when Milan returned, people kept the distance. The government man found what he had to find. He produced the list of companies Milan overcharged. The fine was enormous, the alternative was prison. Either way his business was finished. He tried to explain that he negotiated the price and the companies agreed to pay. But the government man had an order to find something.

"You never know how long a day is until you spent it in the solitary prison cell. And when you don't know how long they will choose to keep you there," told Milan.

"How long did they keep you," asked Andrej.

"After a week they let me share a cell with a young comedian. He asked on the stage which was the most expensive bird in Yugoslavia. His audience didn't even guess. Seagull, he said. Seagull was Tito's personal ship and the joke about it was old. At the end of his performance UDBA took him in and he got six months imprisonment. The comedian was a cheeky fellow. The judge asked him if he had anything to say and the comedian grinned: I know one that would get me at least a year.

"I don't mind these walls here, or the guards, or the food," said the comedian seriously to Milan. "I am unhappy because I can't sleep. You see while I am wonderfully alone, ideas come to me, wonderful little friends ideas. But they go away when I go to sleep and many of them never return. I try to put them to sleep in the little boxes of my head but many vanish like the dew drops in the morning. They are punishing me, they know how they are punishing me. Once a week they give me a pencil for ten minutes to write to my wife. The guard stands beside me waiting for the pen and the letter. I write little meaningless verses in ten minutes they allow me. Who knows what they make out of them, either they think that I am mad or they suspect me to be a spy. They want me to beg and bargain with them for the piece of paper and a pencil. They know that I have to write. They know how begging would make me feel ashamed and guilty and humble. I am training my memory instead. I polish my idea all day and in the evening I turn it into a rhyme. I can chant the rhyme in my mind until they give me a pencil and I write it for my wife. When I get out I will unwrap these rhymes and write down what they mean. The rhymes tell my wife more about me than any love letter would," said the comedian.

"I was young myself then and I thought him a nut-case but I am beginning to understand now," said Milan

Many still didn't know what Milan was talking about, they expected the punch line to laugh at, but Milan became thoughtful.

"While there is milk there will be cream on top of it," said Boris following his own thoughts.

"Once they make you believe that you have to serve a fellow man you become a slave to all who don't want to serve," said Mitja.

"You are not a free man until you at least try to change the system," said Boris.

"Yugoslav government made a five year plan for us to produce outdated things. We were always five years behind, but nobody told them so. They believed that the government knew best," said Mitja.

“The best is what works in the given circumstances. Only the circumstances change from time to time and from place to place,” said Boris.

“In the end our greed will get us all. Not a nuclear bomb, or Aids, or the hole in the ozone, it will be our greed,” said Marjan.

The unpleasant truth seeped into their consciences; they came to Australia because they wanted to get ahead and buy things the communism wouldn't let them buy in Slovenia.

“Communists tried to curb our greed,” agreed Andrej.

“They tried to stop us wanting more while they grabbed for themselves more than any royalty did before them,” said Mitja.

“It is always easier to change others,” agreed Boris.

“I hate politics. We only live once, we should enjoy ourselves,” responded Vida.

“We are all in the same boat anyhow,” said Andrej.

Vida left her village at the age of fifteen. A friend found her a job in textile factory in the city. The young girls shared a tiny room where they weren't allowed to cook or have visitors. They ate once a day in a cheap workers mess. Vida's friend bought a thermos and made coffee from the hot water system at the factory for their breakfast. Vida read somewhere that Australia was full of enormously rich, lonely pioneer farmers waiting with open arms for wives. Australia became a highly desirous continent and the girls decided that there was a big world waiting for them.

Vida arrived to Australia as a fresh twenty years old migrant. She found that most farmers were married. They failed to attract Vida anyway because they were sunburnt and sweaty, dirty and rough. She didn't like the way farmers wives lived either. Their isolated properties were dusty and hot and the work was back breaking. Vida escaped from farm work and she was ready for city life.

There were lots of young European boys in Australia to choose from and she chose the most handsome of them all. Vida and Andrej were much in love and their four children were born to complete their joy. The happiness of their family helped them forget the hardships of the harsh first years.

For their honeymoon Vida and Andrej travelled to Queensland and there they met sugar cutters of different nationalities. The hard work on the sugar cane fields seemed to pay well so Andrej decided to give it a go for a few months. The gangs were in the middle of the season and most didn't need cutters. Going from farm to farm they met a gang of Spanish boys working for a Spanish farmer. Neither spoke English but Andrej understood that they were willing to give him a go if his wife could cook Spanish food for them. Vida never cooked a meal before but she ate food and she knew that it was cooked. She nodded that she was a Spanish cook. The farmer's wife told her where to buy groceries and meat and how to use the stove. She spoke Spanish but her hands and eyes spoke an international language and Vida understood that boys liked soup, meat vegetables and sweets. The helpful farmer's wife stayed with Vida for the first meal and Vida learned fast. Later she improvised and gradually added things to her cooking.

Andrej worked despite bleeding blisters and scorching heat. When the sugar season ended they continued with their honeymoon into North Queensland. They came to tobacco farms

and stayed for six months until the sugar cane season started again. Andrej became a leader of the gang and in her second season Vida cooked for Italian boys. They lived in the hut with cockroaches and flies but they were young and had visions of a better future.

When they bought a house in Sydney Andrej started landscaping. Their children grew up fast and needed more money every day. Andrej and Vida wanted them to have the best.

Even now Andrej and Vida touched each other affectionately as they spoke with others. When they moved to Linden, Andrej found work with Ivan and Vida worked with Milan in his warehouse until they finally opened a restaurant. Vida became fascinated with food and could prepare Italian and French recipes as well as Slovenian.

Vida's younger sister Nada came from Slovenia for a month in 1982. Vida wanted to show her sister how happy she was, she wanted Nada to appreciate her success and tell them at home about it. Vida paid Nada's air ticket and gave her spending money. They took Nada around Australia showing her places Vida never saw before. Vida remembered how they slept in the car or the tent during their first holidays in Australia, Andrej and herself with their four young children. Now they took Nada to the best motels on the Sunshine coast.

Nada flicked her bikini top unceremoniously aside and sun-baked topless on the beach. Vida pretended not to notice but she watched her sister exposed like a common whore on the hot sand. She saw from under her sun-hat how Andrej's eyes turned to Nada's nipples defiantly sticking up for everyone to admire. Vida imagined Andrej and Nada dreaming of passionate lovemaking on the hot Queensland beach. The thought made Vida sick in the heart. She felt the bitter venom seeping into her veins. Other topless sunbathers did not bother Vida. Andrej ignored other girls, but this was a younger version of Vida exposed to Vida's husband. Vida thought that Andrej acted possessive towards Nada. He kept other men from paying attention to Nada. He said that Nada was young and had to be protected.

Nada playfully poked at Andrej's rounded tummy saying: "If my sister didn't feed you so well I could go for you." Vida felt hurt because Nada implied that Andrej wasn't sexy enough for her. She also noticed that Andrej pulled his tummy in.

Anrej and Vida spent lavishly because they wanted Nada to tell them at home how happy and wealthy they were. Vida was happy when her sister left. She wanted Nada to admire her life not take it away.

Vida worked hard for what she had and she was faithful to her husband but the idea of an affair became suddenly attractive. She wanted to pay Andrej back. He protected her naive, innocent young sister but Nada was thirty five years old divorced woman.

Vida needed to feel attractive and desired. Milan was there with her every day, charming, willing, safe and married. Vida felt young and attractive again and she started to arrange times alone with Milan. It was like dipping the toes in the cool stream knowing that sooner or later someone will push her right in, head on. The secret signals Milan and Vida were sending each other were thrilling. Neither pretended to be in love, they were playing an exciting game and both were game. A sense of revenge was sweet. Both felt that they weren't loved by their partners as they wanted and deserved to be loved.

Vida wanted to hurt that snobbish bitch, Milena, who acted so high and mighty. But Milena refused to notice her husband's affair. She almost caught Vida and Milan kissing as she came to the storeroom unexpectedly. She just said, excuse me, please, cool like a cucumber

she was as she searched for some item her customer wanted. The short lived affair ended right there because Milena refused to take notice of it. Andrej never seemed to notice it either.

Andrej liked to talk about the good old days when he worked hard.

“When the cane season ended, we went further North to pick tobacco. Tobacco was the pits though, it was a back braking job that didn’t pay well. Nobody works that hard these days,” said Andrej. “I don’t think the union would allow it.”

“But unions allow the sacking of workers which is worse,” said Vinko who found it hard to keep a steady job lately.

“Caligula sacked unwanted people. He tied them in a sack and dropped them in the river to drown,” explained Mitja but they could not relate to this information.

“Life is rotten without work,” said Peter. Sitting in the wheel chair he had time to think about it.

“We spent the best part of our life arguing, slaving, saving. We are comfortable now but so is everybody else. We are nothing in Australia,” said Vida. Nobody noticed Vida’s exquisite wardrobe because the world was full of well dressed fifty years old women

“At least in Slovenia they respect you,” agreed Andrej.

“Dog-shit, they respect your cash,” said Milan.

“Their representatives come here and we treat them like royalty but when we return home they don’t even remember us. They arrange their holidays at government expense to see us, but when we call on them at our expense they ask surprised: Who are you, have we met? They haven’t the time to eat with you,” said Vinko. He met the minister in Ljubljana and happily invited him for lunch but the man said: some other time, he did not smile or invite Vinko home. The meeting left a bitter taste to his holiday. Vinko took days off work to wine and dine and welcome that same minister in Sydney.

“When they don’t need you they don’t want to know you,” said Ivan.

“It’s the same here. My son went for a job interview but the boss gave a job to his friend’s son instead,” said Andrej.

“Wouldn’t you give it to my son rather than to a stranger,” asked Ivan.

“Bosses aren’t stupid, they take the best person for the job,” said Mitja.

“Slovenians have an excellent record as employees,” observed Boris.

“At home we were all considered criminals,” laughed Vinko. “I made more money smuggling cigarettes and nylon stockings from Italy than other people earned in their jobs. It was exciting.”

They longed to be like Slovenians at home but the attraction of a dollar was too great. Most had tasted poverty. Rich was better. They would have liked to have Slovenian culture but they were not ready to swap it for dollars. They often complained that they had no room for all the things they bought but they obediently bought the latest gadgets advertised on TV. Multinationals didn’t care for politics and ideologies, they just wanted to produce and sell. People were powerless against the greed of the multinationals.

Some bravely told political jokes and laughed at their fears and hopes. Most of the yarns came from Slovenia anyway so they were relatively safe. Even at home the government allowed people to play with words. The jokes released the tension in people and disarmed them. But many Slovenians still smiled cautiously in Australia.

“There were two policemen in Ljubljana talking and one asked the other: What do you think about the communist party? The other policeman said : Same as you. To which the first policeman said : In that case it is my duty to arrest you.” Milena rarely told jokes but she was brave enough to tell them and to laugh at them.

“Did you hear the one about a sparrow who escaped to Austria,” followed Milan. “They asked him if Slovenia wasn’t beautiful enough for him. It is the most beautiful country, said the sparrow, the food is good, the birds are nice only I wanted to do a bit of chirping.”

Andrej was waiting with his story about Tone and Jaka who heard that things changed in Slovenia. People told them that one could do and say what they liked and buy anything they wished. Tone decided to go first. If everything was true Tone was to write to Jaka with the blue pen. If it wasn’t true he would write with the red pen. Tone wrote back with the blue pen: “There is freedom and democracy in Slovenia and you can buy anything you want- accept the red pen.”

Even Marjan couldn’t resist the yarns. “When a prisoner was brought to Siberia, a guard asked him how long did he get. Ten years, said the prisoner. What did you do, asked the guard. Nothing, said the prisoner. The guard hit him: Liar, if you do nothing you only get five years.”

“They are boasting in Slovenia that their brains are being washed daily,” quipped Marjan.

Ivan ignored the jokes, he reflected on Vinko’s words: we were all considered criminals in Slovenia.

“On Sundays we often visited my uncle who had a vineyard in a little village. People liked to get together, an accordion was brought out, youngsters danced, oldies sang and a few dinars were paid to my uncle for the wine he served. Everybody watched the road, nobody was ever seen going to the police, There was no phone in the village, yet the police arrived every time. Out of the ten houses in the village someone spied for the police. Someone ran three kilometres through the forest to bring the police whenever a neighbour sold something to his neighbour?” said Ivan.

“It was our duty to dob each other in,” laughed Vinko. “I was interrogated for a month because my cousin escaped to Austria. They told me that it was my duty to tell the police if we knew of anyone who wanted to escape. I told them then that everybody wanted to get out.”

“How did your cousin escape,” asked Vida who must have been the only one who hadn’t heard the story before.

“He and his wife climbed the mountains over to Austria but they couldn’t take their two years old son. They hoped to get him over through the Red Cross later. They were waiting in the migrant camp in Vienna for six months and they heard that Austrians were going to return them, because they left the baby behind. He begged me to smuggle the boy over and I tried but they caught me. They took the toddler and kept him at the police station for a month until his grandmother managed to get him back. They told her that she must not give

the child to anyone. They would imprison her and took her home if she gave the child to anyone.”

“What happened to the boy?” asked Vida.

“My cousin wrote a letter to his mother and he told her that he was back home in Ljubljana and will come to get his son. He gave the letter to an Austrian traveller to post it in Slovenia. After a few days the traveller came to get the boy in the middle of the night. He said that her son was waiting in Ljubljana. The man gave the boy a sleeping pill. The springs were cut out in the back seat of his car where he hid the sleeping boy and brought him to Austria.”

“And what happened to you.’

“The bastards bashed me and sentenced me to 18 months imprisonment on Goli otok. (Barren Island). We had to carry stones from one end of the island to the other and back again day after day to learn obedience. Someone explained to me that the best way to crush a person is to give him endless, meaningless, useless tasks. They certainly knew what they were doing.

I met other escapes on Goli otok and they told me that we were the lucky ones. We were worth rehabilitation while many were interrogated and later taken back to the border to be shot at night. The police reported that they were shot while they tried to escape. I wouldn't mind it so much if they got me for smuggling but I became a political prisoner. They had me on record saying that everybody wanted to escape from Yugoslavia. As a twenty years old boy I had no idea or interest in politics, I was just saying what seemed obvious.”

Andrej found the memories amusing and had to add his own. “My aunt sold eggs. She carried a basket of eggs ten kilometres from her village to the city and when she arrived to the market, they often confiscated them. They accused her of profiteering. She was, she bought eggs from her neighbours hoping to make a bit of profit.”

“Whatever our past, we made a clean future in Australia. There are almost no Slovenians in Australian prisons,” said Milan.

By 1988 most families returned to Slovenia to see their families, they told Ivan that the police at home asked about him and about the club.

Whenever they went to the embassy to beg for a visa they asked them if Ivan still came to the Slovenian club in Sydney or if they still worked for Ivan.

“I've been out of Sydney for years and they still think that I run it.” Ivan was flattered by the idea that embassy considered him important enough to influence Slovenians in Sydney.

“Shows that they are afraid of you. If they weren't afraid of you they wouldn't try so hard to destroy you. You are a thorn in their heel, because you prospered and they failed,” said Milan.

“You can travel all over the world without a visa but you can't visit your mother in your own country without it. You are forced to remain Yugoslav citizen for life but they give you a single visa to come home, so every time you want to go out and come back again you go and bow and beg. They want our dollars but they make it sound like they are doing us a favour letting us in. I don't want to know about them,” said Ivan but he did want to know. He asked about Slovenia hoping someone there would be asking for him.

The memories united them. Barbara heard most of the stories before, they became almost a litany they had to go through. The stories of hardship and escape became romantic tales of heroism and endurance.

Barbara watched them all and she knew that they will end the day with their arms around each other singing. They always sang after a few drinks and they usually parted with the sad song about the youth that has passed and will never return. Even the stone that has fallen in the water sometimes turns, but their youth will never return, said the song. Changed and alone they sang the song about the days when they knew for certain who they were and where they came from. They looked into the old country for the sacred site to lay down their bodies for eternity but in the meantime the world changed them and their sacred site was lost. The kinships became weak and often on their return home they found that the ties have broken.

In her first passion woman loves her lover,

In all the others all she loves is love.

Byron

From Brotherhood road to Linden

Milena and Robyn met ages ago at a health clinic in Sydney. Milena underwent tests to find out what chances she had of becoming pregnant. A young nurse, Robyn, spoke little but her patients felt free to get the heaviness off their hearts. As they finished their story Robyn usually said something light and cheerful. She was a convenient stranger, a medical confidant like a doctor. Milena told her about her unfaithful husband and about the mess she made of her life. Milena cried desperately as Robyn patted her hand silently. Milena didn't count on seeing nurse Robyn ever again and she often regretted that first intimacy. Since their first meeting Milena and Robyn talked about other people and laughed at other people's idiosyncrasies.

"It's a small world," said Ivan as they all met that first time for dinner at Milena's. Marjan brought his new girlfriend Robyn. He was a building labourer then working for Ivan. At night he went to college to finish his studies. Robyn was doing a French pastry cooking course.

When Ivan later moved to Linden Marjan followed. He persuaded Robyn to resign from her job in Sydney and come along. Their daughter Naomi was born in the new Linden hospital where Robyn later became a matron. Milena and Milan were Naomi's godparents.

Robyn was a boarding school student and she grew away from home. She never learned to talk about herself but she listened well to others. There was always someone with a bigger problem and she enjoyed comforting people. She felt so lucky, her husband loved her, her patients appreciated her. She used to work as a nanny to the rich families in Europe before she came to Sydney. Her parents sent her to Europe to widen her horizons and improve her French. She worked for the family of Jewish scientists for a while, and later she stayed with a Japanese factory owner. Robyn's parents were most disappointed when she married Marjan.

Robyn's daughter, Naomi, went to a finishing school in Paris and she often sent catalogues for Milena and Robyn to choose their clothes from. Robyn provided Naomi with many addresses of people that could be useful to her.

Marjan and Milena liked each other from the very beginning. He often dropped in the shop and sometimes Milena made a cup of coffee as they reminisced in her cosy little office. Both came from Ljubljana, knew many of the same people, liked the same artists and went for the same outings.

Marjan told her that his father, a former partisan, was a director of a bicycle factory. He misappropriated a huge sum of money and smuggled it into a Swiss bank. He deserted his wife and his son when Marjan was twelve. Marjan heard whispers about his father going to jail and later to a sanatorium for mentally incompetent. After nine months he seemed miraculously rehabilitated and reinstated as a general manager of a shoe factory.

Marjan's mother never talked about his father. Marjan became troubled because he had to live with the mother, who was working in a textile factory to make the ends meet while his father drove around in a Mercedes with his girlfriends. In technical college at the age of seventeen Marjan fell desperately in love but the girl was just as hopelessly in love with a famous singer. He started writing poetry to ease the pain. Writing furiously most nights, he published a book of poems, started a magazine and met other budding authors. They organised literary evenings all over Slovenia but his studies suffered and he failed in his third year. His mother just remarried at the time and he simply couldn't spoil her life so he escaped to Austria.

Marjan was busy learning German because he tried to fit into Austrian life. Later he moved to Italy and even spent time in Paris before he finally came to Australia. He never became anything but Slovenian.

Determined to make a go of it in Australia, Marjan enrolled into Technical evening classes. At the end of the first semester the cookery department prepared a break up party. He was shy because his English was poor but Robyn, a pretty young student asked him where he came from and what languages he spoke. At the mention of French she became enthusiastic because she spoke it fluently. He explained that his French was just as bad as his English but she didn't mind. "It will give us both a chance to practice it," she said excitedly and they began dating.

Robyn was a third generation Australian and Marjan tried desperately to become a fair dinkum Aussie. Australians accepted him easily, but he could not accept them. He could not express himself in English as well as he could in Slovenian, he simply did not feel at ease. He was angry at them and at himself. Language was very important to Marjan. His Slovenian became poor because he rarely used it and he felt like he was performing an unnatural task when he spoke or wrote English. At home they shunned the writings of emigrants and Australians had enough of their own writers so Marjan started a paper for Slovenians in Australia. He spent all his spare time and money on his new magazine but only a few people read it.

At home most people read on the way to work, they read with their children, they read at night and on their holidays. But in Australia Slovenians stopped reading altogether except for the mass book in the church and the old folk song books in the club. Slovenians came to Australia to make money and most would be embarrassed to read a poem or even to listen to one. "A poet is never appreciated by his own people," remembered Marjan from somewhere. "Or was it a prophet?"

Marjan was grateful for Milena's friendship, he believed that both longed for something unattainable. They needed each other as they travelled in search for perfection. Milena was hard as nails around Milan and Ivan but he believed that underneath she was an idealist like himself.

Marjan had no proper respect for wealth and the wealthy had no proper respect for Marjan. His friends' successes in business meant as little to him as his poetry did to them. He wondered if they escaped the need to search for the invisible and unattainable in the same way he escaped the overwhelming need to own more than he needed. Ivan had no need for poetry, he found his God in the church where gods are supposed to live. Proud of his possessions, he appreciated certainty and simplicity. Milan too, was like a hawk enjoying

the flight and taking what he could. But Milena needed poetry in her life, she could hear a song when all was silent.

Marjan told Milena about his days building the brotherhood highway from the North to the South of Yugoslavia during school holidays in the fifties. All the students built the brotherhood road during hot summer months of their school holidays. Full of pride and enthusiasm they didn't yet realise that what they were meant to build was the brotherhood of Yugoslav nations.

"The communists knew that students were the future leaders of Yugoslavia. We were to bring about the real brotherhood," said Milena. Those were the intoxicating, energetic days, full of faith and hope and love. Many students found friends among students of other nations, indeed, working on the road many found their life partners.

"I saw the road as the vain joining the nations of Yugoslavia," said Marjan. "It was like river Sava flowing from Slovenia through Croatia to Serbia. It never occurred to me that there was something sinister about building one Yugoslav nation for Tito either." Marjan could never admit this to Ivan or Milan but he knew that Milena understood.

"They mixed students of different Yugoslav nations on the brotherhood road in the hope that they will fall in love, marry and have children called Yugoslavs." Marjan told Milena how they sat around the camp fire night after night, dancing to the popular love music, young people in love. The setting was there, the chemistry was working, the young hearts did not know about the nationality barriers and the gods that frowned on them.

"The heart knows reasons that reason doesn't know," Marjan pondered an old verse he read somewhere. He remembered writing his first verses on the brotherhood road. His first love chose to love the captain of his work brigade. Marjan worked hard to please this same captain. At the evening assembly that same captain recognised Marjan's efforts by calling his name and commending his work. They competed in patriotism and stamina and endurance. Young as he was, Marjan believed in Tito and his brotherhood. All he ever learned was that Yugoslav nations belonged together, that they were destined to have a rosy future together. Tito was well placed as a leader of a Yugoslav nation, half Slovenian, half Croatian, working in Serbia with Serbians, he was an example for them all. It only began to bother Marjan now that by becoming Yugoslav he betrayed his Slovenian nation.

"The highway we built is full of pot-holes now, just like our brotherhood," said Milena. "I was sent to the centre of Yugoslavia. We planted trees on mount Kozara in Bosnia that rainy summer. The mountain air made us light headed and light hearted, everybody was in love with each other and with the growth of the forest we were planting. It was the most romantic time in my life. Boys and girls fell in love, we never realised that we were meant to fall in love. We simply believed that we had a glorious duty to build a perfect future, that we created an ideal, a new Yugoslavia. When I went home years later I wanted to see my trees but Kozara mountain was again barren, the trees were cut and sold and nobody replanted them."

Milena couldn't tell Marjan how she fell in love with a Serbian boy Ivica on Mount Kozara. She often wandered what Ivica made of his life. In her memory he was still there playing his guitar. Sitting near the fire he sang sad ballads for her and their eyes glowed with the flames of their first love. When others fell asleep they tip-toed out of their tents the night before they parted, and made love under the stars on the highest peak of the mountain. The next

day they said goodbye but they wrote passionate love letters to each other until they, so far from each other again, found other people to love.

Milena often remembered Ivica in the lonely loveless nights of her marriage. She also remembered that her wiry hard grandmother cried when Milena told her about going to Kozara. Milena wondered what made the stubborn old lady cry. Did she perhaps realise then that she finally lost a grip on her granddaughter. Milena became too smart for gran and her God.

Gran told everyone that Milena turned after her father, an adventurer who abandoned Milena's mother and went to America. An illegitimate daughter of a prominent, rich family, Milena was brought up by her grandparents. Milena later learned that her loving grandmother paid her father to go to America, so her mother could marry a respectable man her grandmother chose for her. The lies and duplicity of people she used to trust confused Milena and she became determined to find out about her father.

Soon after she returned from Mount Kozara Milena met Milan who promised that one day they will go to America to find Milena's father. When they finally escaped to Austria they were told that America did not take migrants at that time. Many years later in Australia Milena found out that her father was killed fighting Hitler with American troops on the Adriatic coast. He was only twenty five years old and has lived two years in America before he was sent back to Yugoslavia to fight in the war.

Milena felt cheated, coming to Australia,. She tried to fit in with Milan's friends but she had nothing in common with these peasant Slovenians. Australia seemed backward to her.

Milena played the piano, read books, she was one of the few Slovenians in Linden who read the magazine Marjan published. Reading it, she felt close to him and to the romantic dreams of their youth.

Milena shared Marjan's dreams and was attracted to Ivan because he was invincible and dedicated, but Milena remained faithful to her unfaithful husband. She never wanted to give people cause to speculate about the stability or strength of her marriage.

"Not only did we build Yugoslav brotherhood, we built international communism," Marjan brought Milena back from where her thoughts took her.

"We were united proletariat singing Internationala with such ethos at morning assemblies," smiled Milena. "But we were not even proletariat.

"All the more important to be converted," smiled Marjan. "Our leaders now insist that we have nothing in common with Yugoslav nations and I feel sort of sad that our brotherhood died," admitted Marjan. Both wandered why it all sounded so evil now. It seemed right and beautiful and pure then.

"Isn't it funny how we follow the leaders all the time. We really are like sheep. We say that we see, but we only see what others point out to us. We only really see in retrospect," said Milena.

"We were meant to remove the ageless conflict of the Balkan and make one nation out of vastly different people," said Marjan. "I don't believe that we will ever bridge the differences but people will try again, I am sure."

“We were Tito’s children. There was never anything but Tito for us. As soon as we started school we were given a Tito hat and red scarf so they could call us Tito’s Cicibani. Later we became Tito’s Pioneers. As teenagers we became Tito’s youth. I remember how disgusted my grandmother was when I was chosen to carry the torch for Tito on his birthday. The greatest honour bestowed on me had no appeal for her,” said Milena.

“Tito wanted to destroy nationalism, in fact, he demanded that we forget everything that divided us. He banned religion and nationalism, he took from the rich and gave to the poor. He probably believed that equal masses will happily worship him. Many young people embraced Yugoslav nationality willingly.”

“Only there were old people who have lost their loved ones.

“Serbs remembered that Croats killed them during the war, Croats remembered that Serbs killed them after the war,” said Milena.

“And Slovenians remembered how they killed each other for Tito,” finished Marjan.

“Just before I went to Bosnia to work on Mount Kozara, the priest asked my grandmother that I join a group of girls devoting their lives to Mother Mary. The leader of Tito’s Youth movement at school asked me to join their group at the same time. I didn’t like the leader or the priest or my grandmother. I was a brat who wanted to be utterly other and frightfully mad at that stage. I never joined.

“I would have joined anything if my father stayed around long enough,” said Marjan.

“Remember how we sang those romantic Dalmatian love songs,” said Milena.

“We danced Serbian folklore dances to traditional Serbian music and we loved each other,” said Marjan.

“We were in love with life then,” said Milena wistfully.

“What’s wrong with their music now? It just grates on our ears like their language does. Why do I find it repulsive if I have to speak the Serbo-Croatian language now?” said Marjan remembering his Embassy visits.

“I don’t even think I could love a Serbian or Croatian man now. Something has happened in us. I don’t know if I even like this nationalism.”

“But it is easy for us to like English songs and English people,” said Marjan.

“Maybe it’s because we became English speaking people,” said Milena.

“I wonder if English speaking people see us as English speaking people,” said Marjan.

Milena, like Marjan, was an only child and she never learned to trust anyone completely. Often she lighted another cigarette defiantly because she felt that there simply was nobody in her life. Both Milena and Marjan felt better smoking together. Milan and Ivan kept reminding them about burning their lives away.

Smoking was the price Milena paid for her liberation. When she returned from Kozara, she was a changed person. Much in love and disillusioned with her grandmother, she tried to defy the value system gran’s establishment represented. Smoking set her free from her family and it later kept her calm, when she broke conventions and lived by her rules. She

smoked through the loneliness and the betrayals of her husband. The silver smoke screen covered things she couldn't cope with. When smoking became unfashionable she smoked in the privacy of her garden. Often she stopped in public toilets where nobody cast a judgmental eye on her smoking. Milena tried to quit without telling anyone. She began to worry about the scary unhealthy habit most people tried to get rid of.

When alone, Milena tried hard to convince herself how bad smoking was. She always needed one more smoke to extinguish the addiction to nicotine. It was like having one more day dream to stop yourself from day dreaming. It was one more kiss to stop yourself for wanting the fulfilment of true love. Sometimes she smoked continuously until she felt that she could not possibly ever want another cigarette.

Others told her how easy it was for them to quit and how much better they felt afterwards. She told them that she enjoyed an occasional cigarette but that she could go without if she wanted to. Milena hated those self-righteous preachers, so she began to abstain from smoking in their company. But in the privacy of her bathroom she puffed hungrily and sprayed her mouth with refresher before returning to the table.

Milena felt cheated by her mother and grandmother and Milan. The more she felt cheated the less she enjoyed sex. She would sometime dream of an imaginary man who would love her but she became certain that no man will ever love her as she wanted to be loved, so she loved no one man completely, she could not trust one man with all her loving.

Milena occasionally indulged in the memories of the New Year Eve's dance in the Slovenian club in Sydney. Ivan held her tightly and his cheek was hot on hers as he said: "If only we met before." She could still hear the intensity of his whisper. They surrendered to the music, their souls met in silence their bodies responded. But they had too much common sense to fall in love. Milena knew that Ivan would never leave his wife and their three children and Milena was not interested in being the other woman. Sometimes Milena wondered what it would be like being married to Ivan but she knew that Ivan was bound by the rules of the church and would never even consider a divorce. Milena was a Catholic, a social, sensible Catholic not tied down with the silly church rules. She might not be able to tolerate Ivan's god. The church had to keep the peasants under control but Milena made her own rules. Her god was an intelligent god, he could be reasoned with like all intelligent gods could.

Milena knew that Marjan liked her but Marjan like herself, was a dreamer, in love with love. They understood each other's needs but they had nothing to offer each other.

Milena wanted to look up to a man she loved but there was no available man she could look up to in the circle of her friends. Once, long ago, she looked up to Milan because all the other women were after him. He turned out to be a kind, simple man who couldn't say no to women. Milena decided that a woman of his character would be called a whore. She liked Milan until he became her whoring husband. To Milena a female whore was like a rabbit at the dog races. Dogs tear it up in the end. But men still seemed proud of their whoring.

Sometimes she wandered why she married Milan. Did she want to punish her grandmother? Did she later try to punish Milan for not finding her father? Milena wanted to know what her father was like, according to her grandmother he was just like Milena.

Milena was afraid that someone would discover her ugly thoughts. She remembered how long ago she cried and watched with envy every ugly, fat, pregnant woman on the street. In her fantasies she had snatched the baby from someone's pram and ran. But it wouldn't be her baby. She was thirty when they found out that Milan could not make her pregnant. She wished that the doctor didn't tell him so she could find a man and have a baby without going through the messy divorce.

At the same time Milena found Milan making love to Vida, their employee, a peasant wife of his Slovenian friend. He convinced her that it was the first and only time since they married, that it meant nothing, that it will not happen again. Milena broke down at the clinic as she told her story to Robyn.

At the time Milena seriously considered leaving Milan.

While she contemplated her next move Milena met Ivanka. Milena felt most unhappy at the time Ivanka came to the shop asking for a job. She sensed Ivanka's anxiety and she offered her a cup of coffee. Both were the same age, two Slovenian migrants without a soul they could confide in safely.

Ivanka soon broke down and told Milena why she left Sydney and why she needed a job. She sobbed uncontrollably and Milena comforted the distressed woman.

"Pepi, my husband, had a daughter Monika before we married," cried Ivanka. "He escaped so he would not have to pay maintenance. I felt guilty about the little girl so I sent her money sometimes. When we could not have children of our own I started saving ten dollars a week for Monika's visit. I wanted to surprise Pepi. I felt less guilty knowing that one day I will do this great kind act of bringing Pepi and his daughter together. In some sense it felt like I was expecting a child of our own. I paid a ticket for Monika and she came. A beautiful seventeen years old girl began to tell her daddy how much she loved him. She sat in his lap, she sat between the two of us spreading her hair over his face as she kissed him. Daddy was buying her gifts, he took her out to dinners.

I tried to compete with Pepi for Monika's love so I bought her expensive clothes, I gave her most of my jewellery. But she put my gifts aside. She was polite to me in front of daddy, but when Pepi went to work Monika ignored me. I tried to draw her into the conversation but it became obvious that we both felt too jealous to even attempt a friendship. I started to count the days before Monika's departure, I was determined to be friendly until the end. You see, I felt guilty because Pepi chose me and not Monika's mother, I felt guilty because Monika missed out on her daddy, I wanted to make up for the past. Pepi and Monika became lost in the childhood they missed out on, they went bush walking together, they played netball. Would you believe it, Pepi never played netball with anyone before and he was running like a boy after the ball. Two days before her departure Monika wrapped her hands around Pepi and cried: I want to stay with you daddy. She wasn't going home. Suddenly the reality hit me and I broke down. I realised that I could not be kind for the rest of my life. I accused Pepi of loving Monika too much and he laughed at me. You are jealous of my own daughter, how could a father not love his child. You have no idea how to be a mother, he said. I brought them together, I couldn't break them apart. I left the house I worked for, I left the husband I loved, I couldn't stand the hurt."

Ivanka suddenly wiped her face with a man sized hanky, she sniffed a long sigh and reached for the magazine on the table. "I need a new hairdo," she decided relieved and a bit

overwhelmed by her outburst. The words were building up in her and she had to get them out to hear them.

Milena smiled, glad with the change and an opportunity to say something ordinary and non-threatening.

“You should try Lindy’s, a layered bob would look elegant on you,” she suggested. Milena felt sad for Ivanka but she could never tell her about her own pain. She wasn’t as strong as Ivanka. She could take the pain but she couldn’t tolerate pity. People admired her cool and her strength. Would they find anything to admire if she proved to be weak and vulnerable.

Milena offered Ivanka a room and a job until she later found a job as a cleaner in the local hospital. The two women followed Pepi’s life. He took Monika to Slovenia to collect her things. While there he collected a new wife for himself as well. Monika soon moved out with a boyfriend and daddy lost interest in her.

Milena sometimes invited Ivanka into her office for a cup of coffee and Ivanka told her about her life. Ivanka never asked questions and Milena liked her for it. By sharing her painful memories Ivanka helped Milena decide about her own marriage.

During the war five years old Ivanka and her mother took cows for a drink in a nearby river. They saw a man drowning and her Mum broke a branch for him to grab. She pulled him out and he ran bleeding from the chest as two soldiers chased him. They took her mother away. Ivanka never heard from her parents again. Her Aunt brought her up.

At the age of seventeen Ivanka and her friend tried to cross the border to Austria. Ivanka carried a bundle of clothes and a mass book. In her mass book was a picture of bishop Rozman who confirmed her. The same bishop was accused of collaborating with Nazis during the war. Ivanka had no idea what collaborating meant but she got two years of hard labour for carrying Rozman’s picture. Her friend got two months. Ivanka had to cut timber and cart it from the forest. She caught pneumonia but they wouldn’t send her to a doctor. “I almost died there,” said Ivanka. She remembered the nights of burning fever in the middle of winter in the prison. She lost weight, she lost her periods, she was almost eighteen.

“That’s why I can’t have children,” she said, “that’s why I lost Pepi, that’s why I am here,” cried Ivanka.

“They called the bishop a Quisling. I had no idea what a quisling meant either.” Ivanka later learned that Quisling was a Norwegian Fascist party leader who appointed himself as a Prime Minister three days after the Germany invaded Norway. His name became a synonym for a traitor.

Milena observed how Pepi and his new wife became popular among Sydney Slovenians and people almost forgot about unassuming Ivanka who aimlessly plodded on. Milena realised that it was useless feeling sorry for herself she had to keep her head high and do the right thing for herself.

“The man is always forgiven,” thought Milena and abandoned her plans to divorce Milan. They would have to split the business and the house and Milan would be welcome into the arms of many women. His friends would support him and rejoice in pitying Milena who had no-one. Milan didn’t deserve to be so lucky. Milena toyed with the fantasy of his death. As a widow, she would be left with the business and the freedom, she could have the family, she

would choose better the second time. But Milan didn't die and Milena's child-bearing years passed as they prospered in their business.

Milena poured her energies into the business, she became more aloof, more professional, better groomed and less happy

Maybe her mother would understand, but Milena broke all ties with her long before her mother died of cancer. She had no one.

Often in the dark Milena felt her breasts for lumps, she became more and more scared of the short dry cough before sleep. Humiliated by her inability to quit smoking she began taking Valiums to quieten her nerves. Smoking began to haunt her but she could not talk to anyone about it without the fear of appearing weak and small.

"I have to have something to look forward to," she reasoned.

She wanted to love someone completely but there was no-one deserving of all her love.

Where there is marriage without love, there will be love without marriage.

Benjamin Franklin

Joe and Hermina.

Ivan and Barbara settled in their first modest three bedroom brick veneer home in Linden in 1972. Barbara watered the newly planted garden when she saw a car stop and a couple with three little girls approached her. There was something familiar about them as they stopped and looked at the place like they were uncertain about going ahead. They didn't notice Barbara from the side of the house but she saw a woman pushing the man's shirt in his pants and checking the girl's dresses as if she was anxious to make the right impression. It was only when she heard the man's voice that she recognised Joe. She called Ivan who was in the garage changing the oil of the little truck he used for work. He grumbled something but Barbara quickly explained who it was, she wanted Ivan to deal with the visitors.

He came out then, holding his oily, black hands in front of him.

"Hello, hello, do I know you," said Ivan approaching the visitors with hands extended but not able to shake Joe's. "Give me a minute to wash. Crikey, where have you come from. I haven't heard from you for what, ten years, or more."

"Has it been that long? This is my wife Hermina and my daughters. I wanted a son," Joe laughed awkwardly, "so we had three daughters in three years before we gave up."

"I knew you could never get it right the first time," teased Ivan as the women and children shook hands and made delighted noises about meeting each other.

Hermina made lovely identical blue dresses for the little girls, with bits of pink lace trimmings around the collar and cuffs. Barbara noticed that the pink edges of girl's socks also matched the pink of their ribbons.

Ivan called out for Helena and presented their daughter and the two boys who were only a little older than Joe's girls. The children wanted to go back to whatever they were doing at the back of their house and Barbara apologised about their dirty clothes and for their impoliteness. Joe's girls followed Barbara's children to the back of the house to see the swing they were making but Hermina warned them about getting dirty.

Shy at the beginning, the children, however, soon became firm friends like only children do. Hermina and Barbara smiled at each other and agreed that both had lovely families.

"You finally came out of the woodwork," said Ivan. He was cautiously glad to see his friend. He wondered if Joe came looking for work; people kept coming looking for work all the time since Ivan started building this town.

"We sold our place in Tumut. I worked with painters there," said Joe. So he was looking for work. Ivan remained uncommitted, giving himself time, knowing that Joe would be an employee first and a friend after.

"We bought a house in Linden. Maybe I can give you a hand sometimes with something." Joe would rather be invited but Ivan would never do that without thinking carefully first.

“Hermina is working already so there is no hurry,” Joe needed a job soon to meet the repayment on the house, but he couldn’t rush Ivan.

“Sure, I’ll let you know,” Ivan needed more time. “What are you going to have,” he looked at Barbara, giving her an indication that he was willing to entertain. She never asked people if they’d like a drink, Ivan had to give the first sign. They chatted casually about their families and work but barely mentioned the olden days in the bush. The familiarity of the old times may interfere with the job issue under consideration.

“Almost like the old times,” said Joe as they were leaving, but nobody knew what was almost like the old times.

“He seems happily married,” said Ivan testing Barbara’s reaction after they left.

“Lovely girls,” she said.

“She seems a hard working woman,” said Ivan.

Later Barbara learned that Hermina came from a poor family scratching their living from little pockets of land amongst the rocks in the hills near the Adriatic coast. The oldest of six children, she was fourteen when her father died. Her mother worked for other peasants who gave her food for the family. Hermina had to leave school and look after her brothers and sisters. They supplemented their food supply with the meagre produce from their own land. At the age of seventeen she started to work in a nearby glue factory. Her younger sister took over at home and Hermina sent them money for clothes. She shared a damp cellar room with a girl from the factory. During the winter rats came for the warmth the girls managed to generate. Both girls wanted something better for their children so they escaped to Italy. Hermina decided to forget her home for ever, there was nothing she wanted to remember. The stink of the glue could only compete with the smell of the rotting bones in the factory courtyard.

On arrival to Australia Hermina was introduced by father Damian to a few single Slovenian men looking for wives. She liked Joe who had a steady job and had already saved the deposit for a family home. They married quickly, both eager to begin a loving family life.

From Sydney they soon moved to Tumut where their daughters were born. On arrival to Linden, Hermina found a job as a general help in the restaurant. She worked from three in the afternoon until closing time which could be any time between ten and midnight. The owners of the restaurant were Polish people and Hermina learned enough Polish to understand what they wanted her to do.

Monika was translating for Mum when Hermina enrolled her in kindergarten. The teacher told Hermina that it would help her little girl if they spoke English at home. Hermina felt guilty about speaking Slovenian and not providing her children with the best chance in life. From that day on she spoke English only. She learned to communicate to her girls what she wanted them to do, she had no time for idle chatter anyway. It annoyed Joe because she stuttered in English with him as well.

“I want what is best for my children,” she explained to Joe. “The only reason I left home was so my children will not live in poverty. I don’t mind to work as long as my children will have everything I missed out on.”

They bought their first TV and Hermina discovered *The Days of our lives*. The fictional city of Salem on TV offered her more friends than the city of Sydney. Television friends were there

for her every day, open, undemanding, compassionate. The people on the show were kind, ordinary friends who talked about their problems, cried openly and comforted each other. Hermina had no need or time for other friends. Occasionally she stopped for a chat with Slovenians after Sunday Mass but they criticised her because she spoke English with her daughters. Enriched with the friends from the soap opera she happily finished the housework and the cooking. Her chores done, she dressed, made a cup of coffee and relaxed in the company of her television family for an hour before she went to work.

A week after their visit Ivan casually mentioned that he had a little job for Joe if he was interested. Of course Joe was interested but Ivan failed to ever make any permanent work arrangement with Joe. He introduced every new house as a little job rather than a permanent employment.

Slovenian women made Hermina feel inadequate, she felt that for some reason they didn't want her and looked down on her. They made themselves look smart and rich and special. At the beginning she went to Ivan's place with Joe but neither Ivan nor Barbara made her feel really welcome or at ease. Ivan said that she is spoiling her daughters. Barbara ignored her, she stood there next to her important husband without ever making a stand for herself.

People from *The Days of our lives* didn't interfere with Hermina's life. Open and sincere they talked about things people hide in real life, they agonised, cried, schemed, plotted, killed.

"I learn English from the show," said Hermina to Joe.

Increasingly embarrassed by their mother's English her growing daughters wished she would speak Slovenian so their friends wouldn't hear her dreadful mistakes. Hermina was determined to spare her children the shame and humiliation of poverty, she wanted to make them proud of her attempts at English but, she never imagined that they would be ashamed of her English. They didn't have the heart to tell her.

Hermina did not want the girls helping around the house on weekends. "I will work for my children," she said to Joe, "they are tired from school, they have homework to do."

Hermina sewed, she grew all her vegetables and most of the fruit, she was a good cook and her house was spotless. People admired her for her hard work.

"I don't need you any more now I have my family," she said half jokingly to Joe. He didn't wake her up when he went to work in the morning and she did not wake him up when she returned late at night. At weekends she was busy with housework and gardening. Joe couldn't explain to other Slovenians why he didn't teach his girls Slovenian. He wanted to be like Ivan who boasted that he never spoke a word of English in his home and that his children understood and spoke Slovenian perfectly.

"They grow rich because they don't pay you enough," complained Hermina, "Ivan is using you, Barbara can afford the best clothes because you slave for them."

"Ivan could get other painters," argued Joe angry with Hermina and Ivan and mainly with himself. He felt that he didn't measure up to Ivan, he wanted to pretend that they were best friends but sometimes he felt that they didn't even like each other.

Years later Ivan's sons Janek and Leon sat with the men after work and Joe offered them a beer. It was hot, they helped cleaning the brickwork and looked thirsty. Leon refused but Janek took a sip. The next day Ivan said in an authoritative, cold voice to Joe:

"Don't you ever again push alcohol to my boys. Keep it for your family."

"They are old enough to decide if they want to drink," laughed Joe but he never forgot Ivan's words.

"Neither of them is yet eighteen but never mind whatever their age, you just remember what I said." Joe felt chastised, he didn't know that Ivan was afraid for his children. Ivan heard people say that alcoholism was in people's genes. Nobody knew that Ivan's father died drunk on his way home from the pub.

Joe tried to hide his drinking from Ivan and Milan. He'd have a double brandy at the bar before bringing drinks to the table at the club. People knew about his drinking and they laughed about him trying to hide it.

"They are all no hoppers," Joe said once to Ivan about his drinking mates. "Some have wives who don't understand them, some have Australian wives, some have none."

"Alcoholics always find an excuse for drinking," said Ivan. The words stung Joe, because they were the words of his father. He tried to tell Ivan about his family, why he was drinking, why he was sad. But Ivan wouldn't want to know.

Joe could never speak with anyone about things that were in his heart. He was kind and willing to help but people ignored Joe when they did not need his kindness. Even Barbara chose to love Milan who was ruthless and cold.

Joe and Barbara shared the memories of the first exhilarating desperate years in Australian bush. They had faith and hope for the future then and they both fell in love with the bush because they found each other there. The friendship between them remained but that something that they found under the stars, was gone forever. There was the call of the wild under the open sky and they wanted to reach for the stars then. Joe wondered why everybody longed to be loved by those who longed to be loved by someone else. He felt rejected and it hurt him to see Barbara and Milan looking at each other.

Ivan could never accept that his son Janek drank and smoked regularly. He didn't want to acknowledge his failure to make his son live by his rules. He was also afraid that his son will squander what he created.

Alcohol was a catalyst of Ivan's life. When Barbara told him that Karl raped her, Ivan felt numb. He promised to forget and forgive but when the shock wore off, Ivan ached. He went fishing and took with him a bottle of slivovic. As the sun set on the river he couldn't go home. He leaned on a haystack in the meadow and drank until he fell asleep in a drunken stupor. When he opened his eyes the full moon stared at him and Ivan accused the moon of laughing at his misery. The moon knew that his father died in the snow on his way home one full moon night after drinking. Was the moon laughing then? Was his father trying to numb his pain with alcohol? Is that why he chose to bring the shame to his family? Ivan got up and washed his face in the river before he returned home. He realised that alcohol wasn't the answer, he wanted to make himself proud.

Joe got staggering drunk one night and people sniggered at him. Hermina bought an airline ticket for Monika's eighteenth birthday. She wanted Monika to travel around the world before she went to uni. Joe was hurt because Hermina didn't tell him about it.

"I would like a holiday myself," he said lamely.

"I can do as I like with my money," said Hermina.

"What about my money?" yelled Joe.

"Your money provides for the family, I do all the housework and what I earn beside is mine. I spent your money to pay the bills. Man is supposed to provide for the family. If I want to go to work, that's my choice. We don't live in the dark ages anymore," said Hermina.

"You can do your garden as well," said Joe, switched off the lawn-mower and went to the club. He needed a drink and at closing time he needed a bottle.

Recovering from hangover Joe reasoned that he disliked his wife. He wandered what he should do about it. The church would not allow the divorce. He'd have to start all over again since the bitch would keep the house. There were no single Slovenian women and he couldn't get used to an Australian wife. Maybe he couldn't even find one.

Joe once told Ivan and Milan that he does not have anything to do with Hermina; he wanted to ask their advise, he needed to talk to someone. It wasn't something he could talk to Barbara about.

"If the man is not a boss in his own home, he is not a man," laughed Milan. Joe hated Milan. He took his best friends away from him and now he laughed at his marriage. There were other men Joe could have as friends but he rejected them.

Vinko came to Linden to be close to Joe. Father Damian visited Roxby Downs and told Vinko about Slovenian people in Linden. Vinko wanted to surprise his old school friend but Joe didn't want anyone to remind him of home. When Joe's sister wrote that mum died, he never even answered the letter, he locked his past away.

Vinko and Sonja tried to get along with all Slovenians, they invited everybody over to admire their garden. They enthusiastically grew everything from chestnuts to plums, from capsicum to parsley, from eggs to ducks. They offered whatever surplus they produced and people liked to visit them. "I don't know what I've done to deserve all this good luck," said Sonja seriously. She sent regular parcels of vegetables to the old people's home that has just opened in Linden. "Maybe when I am old someone will do something for me," she said as an excuse. Both Vinko and Sonja were sad that Joe rejected them but they never knew why.

On arrival to Australia Vinko became an adventurer looking for a treasure. First he went searching for gold in Western Australia, later he became an opal miner at the Andamooka opal fields. He earned good money as a shearer on the Andamooka sheep station but he never considered shearing his job. When the children needed to go to school the family settled in Roxby Downs and Vinko got a well paid job uranium mining. The rocks contained gold and silver but people became concerned about the minute proportion of uranium in them. Vinko wasn't keen on staying down the 300 metre mine and Sonja heard that the shiny green rocks with yellowish stripes caused cancer.

Sonja willingly followed her husband and she managed to find work wherever they stopped. They saved enough to buy a house on a large block of land near Linden in 1980.

“At least we have enough water for a bath. In Roxby we had to buy water from Woomera,” she explained to Hermina. “I could not have a garden, I used the water carefully, first I washed in it, then I washed the clothes and last came the floors.” Vinko and Sonja seemed constantly in love, they were liked for their friendliness.

Hermina liked Sonja and Vinko but Joe simply drove past his home if he saw their car in his driveway. they reminded him that he was miserable with his family.

“This is good garden soil and there is plenty of water,” said Vinko, when they arrived to Linden Valley. It didn’t take much to make Sonja happy, she knew what suffering was.

“During the war the Germans had occupied our village,” she told, “they took the food and the wagons and the young boys. My brother joined partisans while my father helped Homeguards. One day a young soldier came with my brother and demanded that we tell him where dad was. We did not know where dad was. The partisan pointed a gun at my brother who fell to his knees begging for mercy but the young partisan shot him in front of us. Mum fell over her only son and the partisan hit her with the rifle butt again and again. She died a few days later. Dad never returned either.” Sonja was ten and her sisters were sixteen and eighteen by the end of the war. She walked to school bare-footed while she saw the kids of the victorious communist families get free shoes. They got cheese and milk for lunch as well and she didn’t. It was American aid but it was for communist kids only. They made her ashamed. The girls escaped to Italy as soon as they could. The older sisters became house maids in Trieste for a few years before they went to Canada. Sonja met Vinko there and they came to Australia.

Vinko and Sonja went on holidays in 1985. They wanted to surprise Joe so they brought pictures of his home, his father and his step mother.

Joe looked at the pictures on one of his fishing trips before he tore them up and let the pieces float down the Tumut river. Joe looked after the torn pieces of paper that were much like his life. He saw the bits of it from a distance but he could not touch it flowing with the water beyond reach. Born on the edge of the city he grew up on the edge of his family, afraid and envious of the success his brothers and sisters enjoyed. They faithfully served the party and were suitably promoted but Joe blew his chance and remained a downtrodden labourer.

Sonja and Vinko had no way of knowing why Joe was avoiding them. They held hands as they talked to Joe. Their happiness and love for each other was so obvious that it made Joe envious. Vinko was a rival from their school days and he seemed so better off now. Vinko and Sonja seemed to make one huge happy person out of their unity and this made Joe feel even smaller.

Ivan told Joe that it was up to him to make the marriage work. He hoped that his sons Janek or Leon would find Joe’s girls attractive. There weren’t that many suitable Slovenian girls around for them to choose from. Joe was also dreaming that one of his daughters would marry Barbara’s son. That would make it all worthwhile. Maybe Hermina was right providing their girls with the best chance.

“They can’t be expected to find the right friends if they don’t go out with the right company,” said Hermina who made sure the girls dressed well and were seen in expensive places.

Joe always complained about their bathroom being stacked with potions. Do they smell so bad that they need all this muck. Where do they get the money for it? What's wrong with a natural smell?"

Hermina explained to him that a woman in Australia would not step on the road without her underarm spray. Hermina carried her Impulse faithfully in her purse because she knew how Australians felt about perspiration and she perspired profusely working in the restaurant.

Girls deferred university studies to give themselves time to decide what they'd like to do with their lives. They had board at home but they found casual jobs to earn spending money.

"I had to go to work when I was fourteen but my grown up kids are still deciding which job will offer them job satisfaction. None of the jobs ever offered me any satisfaction. I worked to earn the money to bring up my ungrateful kids."

"That's why it is important that they make the right choice. If we cook for two it doesn't cost much more to cook for five," said Hermina.

"They should be made to pay something," said Joe.

"They barely earn enough to keep the cars running."

"They should not run them so much. Look at other families," said Joe, "their kids have to provide for themselves."

"It's because their parents only think of themselves. They push their kids out of their big houses. I want my children to live at home until they get married," said Hermina. "I don't want to live alone like Barbara and Ivan in their big empty house."

Ivan has just completed the home of his dream and people in Linden were envious. It was only a small town and the house stood out removed from the rest like Ivan himself.

Joe didn't go home if he had anywhere else to go for the weekend. After the girls finished school Joe more and more often returned to Tumut to camp under the poplars and remember whatever good there was in the good old days in the bush.

After Ivan and Barbara suddenly left their eucalyptus venture in Bombala there was nothing left for Joe there either. He bought his first car and drove towards Snowy mountains to see them. There he met a friend who told him that Ivan's wife just had a baby. That's when Joe turned and went to Sydney where he met Hermina. They met after mass, Father Damian knew how lonely these Slovenian men were so he introduced Joe to Hermina who just arrived to Australia.

Joe wanted to follow Ivan and Barbara and find work with the Snowy mountains Authority near Cooma, but Hermina refused to live in the bush. She liked Tumut, a little town on the edge of the mountains. The rich black soil looked promising so they leased a little farm with an old farm house. She planted tomatoes and capsicums, beans and corn for the local market. In her spare time she renovated the house and gave birth to their three girls. There were other Yugoslavs in Tumut, the weather and the country side looked much like home to Hermina.

Joe decided that he never really liked to work on the land so he became a painter. He learned on the job from the painters who worked for the local builders.

In the early days Hermina sometimes came with him fishing in Tumut river. Soon she became tired of it and began to complain about the mosquitoes, ants, flies, heat rash and thorns in her feet. She resented Joe's time away. Has supposed to help on the farm. They couldn't eat all the trout he caught anyway. She began to hate fish.

Joe was almost grateful that she stayed away. Sometimes he lied to Hermina that he worked late and to his workmates he lied that he wanted to go fishing after work. The mighty Tumut river was full of trout and sometimes he stayed overnight and camped on the river bank. He liked to go to the bush to be away from the prying eyes of his loved ones.

The chirping birds in the poplars and the sound of the river rushing by calmed Joe. Sitting on the river bank, he watched the moon's reflection in the water. Laying in the tent, he looked at the stars in the brilliantly clear sky.

Joe fell in love with the wholesomeness of the untouched bush. He tuned in with the sounds and the silence while watching the birds building nests on the river bank protected by raspberry and rosehip bushes. The ducks scattered as he approached, but the platypus waded unperturbed in the deep of the cool clear water. The bush around Tumut created a sanctuary for platypus. The huge white gum trunks hollowed by termites were teeming with life. Termites rarely killed the trees, the birds nesting in the hollows fertilised the shell of the tree with their droppings and the tree stood invincible. The young trees surrounded the healthy mature ones and saplings grew out of the dying trunks. In an everlasting undisturbed cycle of reincarnation they swayed in the breeze. The wallabies and wombats looked for food and white cockatoos and galahs screeched into the silence without disturbing anyone.

Joe remembered Barbara as she was when they first met in Bombala. He wanted to show the untouched bush of this mountain to her before it was eaten away by progress. He knew how she also loved the bush.

Gradually the hills around Tumut became orchards of apples, pears, chestnuts and walnuts. The sheep paddocks along the Tumut river were ploughed into the fields of corn and other vegetables, the little Europe was created for ambitious hard working Europeans. The weeping willows along the river and the poplars along the road were planted by Europeans who built houses in the valley nestling among the hills. In the last century they made a stamp on the land where Aborigines lived for thousands of years without disturbing or changing anything.

Only the few scattered trees were left and those were eaten by stock to a metre off the ground. These trees looked like lonely ballerinas dancing over the dead logs that farmers ring barked to clear the land for more cattle and sheep. The farmers cut deeper and deeper into the bush. The clearings, scattered with fallen trunks, looked like a battlefield with massacred tree bodies.

In dry summers sheep and cattle ate into the roots of the new growth and the hills became brown and desert like as the wind lifted the soil that accumulated there through millenniums. Seeing the changes over the last twenty years Joe realised that the past has gone forever.

Close to Canberra and Sydney Tumut was full of European history. During the last two hundred years many back-packers walked along Tumut river in search of riches. In the middle of the nineteenth century the nearby Kiandra and Adelong yielded tons of gold. The abandoned mines now blended into the eternity of the bush and added to the picturesque beauty. The waterfalls and over two hundred caves provided the mysterious, sacred spirituality for the countryside.

The hills covered with snow in winter protected the valley from cold and wind. Skiing in Australia began in the middle of nineteenth century in Kiandra near Tumut. The European gold miners first used skiing as a mode of transport but later it began to be the main entertainment for gold diggers during the long harsh winters.

“Tumut offers fun for the whole family all year round,” said the advertisement. The bush flowers were trampled on by the bush walkers now, the birds and wallabies were scared away, the platypus was hiding in the water holes.

The mighty Tumut river was still cool, clear and deep in 1990 but the river bank was covered by tents, caravans, cars and people. The surrounding lakes also enticed the tourists who enjoyed water skiing, wind surfing, boating, yachting and fishing.

The trips to Tumut became a pilgrimage for Joe. During the last few years he escaped to it more and more often. He met many of the same people, only there were more of them every year. He was sad watching the developers cash on the natural beauty by building hotels and motels where he remembered the virgin bush.

He bought a boat and took his work mates from Linden along sometimes, they told yarns, drank and smoked, they teased each other and boasted about the fish each caught.

“They only go because you have the boat and buy the grog,” said Hermina.

“There are fishermen and other men,” said Joe’s friend. “You sure are the best pretend fisherman I ever saw.”

“What do you mean?” asked Joe.

“For one, you carry your stick like a fly swat, you just haven’t got the primeval instinct, I guess.”

“What would you know about it,” laughed Joe

“Men love the smell of fish,” said his mate. “There are two things that smell like fish and one is fish. Fishermen like the smell of fish and other men like the smell.”

“I like both,” laughed Joe.

“The way fishermen talk about the one that got away and the one that fought the most, you’d think they are talking about a woman,” said another mate.

“Man is a primeval hunter, I suppose, it doesn’t matter much what the prey is,” said Joe feeling less of a man for lacking the killer instinct.

“You either are or you aren’t. You got it or you don’t. You never even told us about the one that got away,” said his mate who freely admitted that he wasn’t a fisherman either. He came to get drunk away from kids.

“Fishermen hold sacred gatherings to remember the big ones and the ones that got away. The fish grows with every remembering,” said his mate.

“The real fisherman likes to fish on his own,” admitted Joe. He once asked a fisherman what he thought about when waiting on the river bank.

“I wonder where I’d hide if I were a fish,” said the fisherman and Joe realised that he could never think like that.”

“Some men think about sex when they go fishing but the real fisherman thinks about fishing when he has sex,” teased Joe’s mate. They realised that they came to escape the rat race, their children, wives and bosses.

It was easy to like Joe, he went along, he had no strong views. Australian workmates and neighbours liked him but Joe felt that he didn’t have a real friend. He was searching for someone who would know him as he really was. The men’s cutting remarks about sex rang in his memory. Joe and Hermina went through the motions of sex in the past while he was dreaming about going to Tumut. But they have long stopped making love. Joe longed for the intimacy of sexual contact in his lonely moments in Tumut like people long for home they escaped from. Every day it was easier to get by without it but nostalgia remained.

On rare occasions Joe still desperately needed to escape into his beloved Snowy mountains. Living the car in Cabramurra, Australian highest village, he went on a bush track. He liked the smell of the wild rosemary, he watched the daisies of all colours and sizes with their open unspoiled smiling faces looking for the sun. Exotic scents of shrubs were mingling in the untouched mountain air. Joe surrendered to the sun and the breezes as he wondered about god and creation and himself. Here he became free and fully alive, not afraid of criticism or failure. He touched the trees and the petals of flowers with his long delicate fingers. Like the nature around him he was as god intended him to be. Unashamed he did not need to achieve or run or hide any more. This country was the most romantic spot he ever knew. The moss covered ground was sprinkled with tiny flowers, the bigger ones grew up over them. He noticed violets everywhere and the longer he looked the more varieties he saw. Did god walk over this mountain scattering seeds and sprinkling them with morning dew. Did he come and create mountain streams to feed the mighty Tooma river. Joe remembered Barbara because he needed to share his feelings with someone at least in his thoughts. Barbara made him feel good, she looked out for him, she never put him down. Laying on the moss, his eyes closed to the sun, he let his fantasies take over. Scared and a little ashamed of his romanticism Joe carried a fishing stick and pretended to fish in the little streams coming down the mountain between every dome shaped flowery slope.

Joe felt the healing power of the mountain as he came home to cope with those he knew he should love and work for. He could put up with life for another term.

Hermina spent more and more time on her own at weekends tending her garden and polishing her antiseptically clean house. Her daughters were doing their own things and her husband was away most of the time. One spring Sunday afternoon she looked at the blooms of her flower beds and suddenly the loneliness hit her. She went in and turned the channels of the TV only to find that there was golf and football and a concert. She turned it off and wandered into the garden again with the tears in her eyes.

The music from far away wafted among the flowers, the sunshine was warm on her skin but she had no-one to talk to, no-one to love. There was no-one to point out the colours and

the smells of the spring and Hermina became frightened of her aloneness. Leaning on the fence she wiped away the tears when an elderly Australian couple she knew vaguely, stopped by to say what a lovely garden she had.

God touched Hermina then and she never forgot that moment of profound awareness. The woman and the man praised Hermina's work, they admired her garden and praised the God who made all this possible. All agreed that they were indeed lucky to live in Australia. Hermina invited them into the garden and they sat on a hard wooden bench while she brought out refreshments. Her new friends continued to praise the Lord and they told Hermina about the imminent coming of the Christ to judge the living and the dead.

Hermina never paid much attention to religion, she went to church most Sundays as part of her obligation towards the teachings of her mother. Catholic Church offered no intimacy, warmth and direction to Hermina. The priests preached vaguely about love and forgiveness and mercy, parishioners greeted each other in an offhand politeness before they returned again into separate compartments of Linden social life. Hermina exchanged greetings with Vida and Sonja, nodded to Barbara and Milena, but all these niceties were like confetti one shakes off after the wedding. There was no real closeness.

The two strangers in her garden suddenly made Hermina realise that she was chosen by the Holy Spirit to become a member of the chosen people called Born Again Christians. The couple later invited her to a quiet little meeting where they introduced Hermina to a group of people who warmly welcomed her. They placed their hands on her and prayed for her, they thanked God for bringing them together. No-one ever before accepted her like that for what she was. They told her that she was special and greatly loved by them.

She poured out her story and they listened attentively. They encouraged her to empty all the sorrows of the past and make room for the Holy spirit. They presented her with the Bible in which they marked the chapters she should read to discover that by the Word of God the Born Again Christians indeed held the salvation of her soul. They held Hermina's hand and called on her frequently.

For the first time in her life Hermina felt significant, wanted and needed. Overwhelmed by her new status she felt the urgency to comply with the wishes of her new friends in order to gain even greater significance and love. Like an addict she wanted to consume more of the substance that elated her and elevated her life, she wanted to spread the Gospel wherever she went. She spread the message that the Bible was theirs to interpret. All people needed was the guidance of Born Again Christians.

"Praise be to the Lord that you came to see and understand," said the leader of the group with tears in his eyes as he placed his hands on Hermina.

"When God touched me I cried all night because the Holy Spirit made me clean and full of mercy," continued the leader and his tears fell unchecked on the table as the rest of the group held hands and chanted: "Glory, glory to God." Many cried with their leader. Mesmerised by the words and the tears Hermina fell to the ground and they all knelt around her and placed their hands on her as they called the Holy spirit. They chanted words during the prolonged baptismal gathering. They all held hands to keep the intensity of the emotion high and charged with the feelings their bodies vibrated until the sounds of the words broke into an orchestra of individual syllables. the experience left everybody drained, tired, purified and empty. after baptismal ceremony the members of the family

usually went to their homes and many cried fervently grateful for the god's mercy and acceptance.

Hermina rose up changed, she became a Born Again Christian and her new family praised the Lord for the change. She was baptised by the immersion in the water and she spoke the words they dictated to her with which she accepted Jesus as her Saviour.

Hermina was grateful for the final recognition of her life on Earth and for the promise of everlasting life with her chosen friends. The words: praise the Lord were often on her lips. She began to exude an aura of blissful contentment. People couldn't really fault her behaviour but when she told them that Catholic church was a harlot serving devil, they objected and laughed at her. Impassioned by her new beliefs Hermina attempted to convert Joe and her daughters but they dismissed her new faith as utter stupidity. Her Born Again Christians assured her that with constant prayer God will help them see the light and they continued to pray to remedy the souls of her family. They told Hermina that suffering for her faith will bring her the greatest rewards.

Joe went to church on Sundays because Ivan and Barbara were there but God did not seem worried if he came or not.

Hermina became more willing to join in Slovenian gatherings since she found god. She learned the friendly mannerisms of the new sect and she silently hoped to spread the message of the Christ's imminent coming. She came to the Slovenian club in Sydney for 1990 New year's celebration. Joe was amazed to see her going from one family to the next and chat with people she never before wanted to meet. Most Slovenians dismissed Hermina's sudden conversion as a joke but Ivan told Joe that the whole circus was his fault. Joe made it clear from the start that he had nothing to do with Hermina's new involvement but he became the butt of many jokes all the same. Hermina knew that some ridiculed her faith and laughed behind her back but suffering for Jesus was her salvation.

Hermina told Slovenians about Doctor Percy Collett, a member of the sect, who was a living testimony of the living God. Collett wrote a pamphlet about his five and a half day stay in heaven where he met God and spoke to Jesus who was there preparing the dwelling place for the believers. Collett described in minute detail the heavenly people, the angels and the buildings, the food they ate and the clothing they wore and he talked about the glorious beauty of God's throne. Collett described the rooms and the activities in heaven, he repeated the conversations he had with God and Jesus, he cried often as he remembered the sweetness, attractiveness and charm of the everlasting life. One wouldn't want to miss out on such gifts just because one stubbornly refused to be baptised.

Born Again Christians touched the core of Hermina's being like no-one ever did before. She believed that God heard her call of despair and chose her to enter the heaven where the golden streets were paved with diamonds and precious stones, where there was no conflict or sadness or loneliness. The end of the world was coming and Hermina accepted the time of waiting on Earth as preparation. The bigger the hurdles of her daily life the greater the rewards in heaven. She told Slovenians that soon the bodies of the believers will change and live for evermore, while others will suffer and die before the judgement day on the New Year 2000.

Many of her listeners considered Hermina mad but she welcomed their jeering. She never watched Days of our lives on TV since her immersion in the baptismal water in 1985. She

was too busy reading the Bible and every verse and chapter underlined in the book proclaimed what Born Again Christians told her. "I was deaf and blind to the Word of God, I did not know Jesus until he turned the light in my heart," thought Hermina a little frightened and enormously grateful and relieved that she now indeed could see and hear the God's message.

Vinko and Sonja also returned changed from their trip to Slovenia in 1985. They went on a pilgrimage to Medjigorje where Mother Mary appeared to the children and told them that people should pray and do penance. Jesus and his mother Mary instructed the seers to speak in their names. The people just had to listen to the seers and obey their commands in order to be saved.

"My dear children I love you enormously but you have to pray and obey my message," said mother Mary through the seers.

"The more you suffer for me the more joy I will prepare for you," Jesus told the crowds through the children.

Vinko and Sonja embraced the message of Medjigorje and promised to spread it among their friends. They had many friends because they simply thought of people as friends. People often invited them to celebrate with their families. Sonja grew vegetables and flowers in her garden and took them to everybody she knew. Their children found Australian friends at school and Sonja and Vinko accepted children's parents as their friends. They were so grateful for the good life they found in Linden that they felt the need to pay God back for their good fortune. They were rich beyond their dreams, they had more food than they could eat and more clothes than they could wear so they gave to the poor.

The Medjigorje seers recommended fasting for forgiveness of sins so Vinko and Sonja joyously began their sparse new vegetarian diet. On weekends they only consumed bread and water to please Mother Mary. Some people ridiculed their new found faith but Vinko and Sonja welcomed the pain of ridicule for Jesus sake..

Vinko and Sonja tried even harder to make friends with Joe's family. Joe, after all, was the reason for their coming to Linden. They could never understand why Joe didn't like them.

Sonja invited friends to her house for dinner because she wanted to lead them into a prayer for the salvation of the world. Hermina came because she had the burning message of her own to spread. Ivan and Barbara, Milan and Milena and Vida and Andrej came because they all liked Sonja and Vinko.

Sonja explained the strict rules Virgin Mary imposed on people through the young seers. At the mention of Mother Mary Hermina stood up and told the small congregation that they were so very wrong worshipping the mother of Jesus. Didn't Jesus himself tell them to leave their mothers and fathers and follow him? Once Hermina began to speak she couldn't be stopped. She told them to prepare for the final judgement because the end was nigh. In a few more years only the chosen ones will be spared.

"Nobody will know the day or the hour," quoted Ivan from the Bible.

"Just read the bible," said Hermina.

"You keep quoting a handful of verses from the Bible to baffle poor people but every word of the Bible is equally sacred. Nobody could learn to recite every word of the bible," said

Ivan because it annoyed him how these newly baked Christians selected a few Bible lines and claimed to know it all.

Confused and uncertain they tried to explain to each other what they believed was their God. They hoped to convert each other but they only grew further apart. They needed to belong and be told how to live their lives because they grew up being told what to do and believe. Faced with all the choices of life they became afraid. The good life was frightening, they needed the guidelines and prohibitions. Ivan hasn't decided yet what to believe about Medjigorje. He suspected that communists wanted to cash on the faith of the people. He hadn't been to Medjigorje yet to make a final decision but he seemed fascinated by the events.

"The whole hocus pocus doesn't do anything for me," said Milena bravely.

"Don't you think it's possible that we are being warned by mother Mary," pleaded Sonja.

"I am being warned whenever I do something crooked," laughed Milena.

"Of course it is possible. If god created the universe and life and atomic structure, he would have no problem inventing a little warning sign," ridiculed Milan.

"Miracles are for people who have doubts. Where is your faith? You want god to come and give you a personal little sign that he really exists. You are like Satan who tempted Jesus to jump off the mountain and change stone into bread to prove that he was a son of god. You doubt that god exists. You hear no warnings of your conscience," said Milena seriously.

Nobody disputed Milena but nobody dared agree with her either. The older they were the more aware they became of god and their mortality.

"Our people are born followers," said Ivan. The new religious groups all over Australia offered simple, clear instruction for salvation.

"That's our people," said Milan. "If the leader says that black is white they will accept it."

"I will not. And neither will you," said Milena.

Sonja and Vinko joined the Charismatic movement, they began to pray in tongues and they moved their bodies in the fervour of the prayer much like Hermina's Born again Christians did. Both groups claimed to be the chosen ones inspired by the Holy ghost. The only thing keeping them apart was the devotion to the Virgin Mary.

Both Sonja and Hermina tried to convert Barbara but, afraid of Ivan, Barbara refused to even listen to them. Ivan was a pillar of the Catholic Church and Barbara wasn't to have any part in the madness of these new beliefs.

Joe became jealous of Hermina's peace of mind and of her new found assurance. Maybe there was more to life maybe Hermina really found what he was looking for.

*When I was young I used to think that money was the most important thing in life,
Now that I am old, I know it is.*

Oscar Wilde

Janez and Olga

Milan invited Ivan and Barbara to their 1990 Christmas party. Milena's intimate dinner parties became the talk of Linden. She always invited an important or interesting person to impress her close friends.

Milan hated the pretentious snobs so he made sure that Ivan and Barbara were invited. Milan enjoyed simple people and simple pleasures. He looked forward to an occasional card night with Ivan, Marjan and Joe. "Life is too short to worry about being what you are not, I hate the pretence of it," he said to Ivan.

"There is barely enough time to be who you are," agreed Ivan.

Marjan and Robyn were grateful that Milena organised their social activities, they could all rely on Milena to prepare an interesting time. Mitja and Boris with their eccentric, off beat behaviour were an added attraction. They disregarded conventions and taboos and always found an unexpected perspective to startle others with.

Milena's home in Linden was set against the bush landscape of gums, banksias and jacarandas. Milena actually called their backyard a paddock because in reality it extended into the sheep farm on the other side of the back fence. The only patch of lawn was at the front where the extended roof structure almost covered it. The builders filled the ground with good soil to make this part into a flat fertile ground against the stony hillside. A miniature spice garden was boxed on the side of the entrance and its scent permeated the late afternoon air. Milena ushered her guests in with an appropriate friendliness and enthusiasm. She knew exactly how much of her friendliness each person deserved.

The inside of the house was pleasantly cool and barely a whisper of the air conditioner could be felt. Barbara relaxed in Milena's house because there were so many interesting things to look at. Nobody expected Barbara to join in the conversation and she felt free to listen, observe and admire. The latest magazines were scattered on the coffee table, the book case contained the old favourites as well as important new editions. Pots and pans hanging on the wall looked natural in Milena's kitchen and the pottery mugs on the wooden kitchen shelf seemed warm and inviting. Milena didn't even have a customary starched white tablecloth on the white wooden dining table. The flax woven place mats matched the cane furniture. Barbara remembered the dark, rich and somehow old interior of Milena's house in Sydney. She liked this friendly setting better. The details of the house were highlighted by the rays of sunlight filtered through cream coloured blinds. The oval white carpet of the lounge room with its faint green pattern on the edge matched the green of the lounge cushions.

It was tacitly understood that Janez and Olga were guests of honour at this gathering. Olga greeted other guests with relaxed casualness as they settled themselves at the table. Her blue hat matched her shoes and the light perfume she wore was just right for the semi

formal occasion. The immaculately groomed couple were often pictured in the Sydney's social pages, but Barbara never before met this rich Slovenian entrepreneurs from Sydney. She noticed for the first time how Milena tried to please and show off. Olga and Janez hobnobbed with Australian high society and Milena wanted to experience the heartbeat of this foreign elite.

Sometimes Milena invited a local doctor, an accountant, perhaps a politician or an entertainer of some sort but she never tried to please them as she tried to please Olga and Janez. Milena wore white, silky, pyjama like suit, her hands were decorated with expensive looking rings and the colour of her fingernails matched her lipstick.

Ivanka was hired as a chef but Milena prepared the menu carefully herself. She tasted all the dishes beforehand so she could expect the response of her guests. The red salmon was served with the pre-dinner drinks. As they were seated Milena presented an Eastern salad of avocado and grapefruit. She noticed how the grapefruit washed away the creaminess of the avocado and the tang of it left a pleasant freshness in the mouth to stimulate the appetite. An Italian dish of pasta followed decorated with tomato and oregano. The minute portions of fillet steak in wine sauce were eaten next with hot dinner buns. A simple cheese cake glazed with pine nuts and honey was served for deserts. The mints and liqueurs were brought unceremoniously during the conversations. Milena chose the drinks carefully, she found a wine shop where an old wine buff advised her exactly what should be served and when.

Barbara complimented Milena on a simple heavy glass vase with a bunch of wheat stalks but she was really impressed by the paintings of Slovenian naiveté artists. This art form mingled with the impressionist style became also Barbara's favourite medium. Unsure of herself Barbara never talked about her work or about art in general.

Australian artists were represented by the original of Arthur Boyd. One side of the wall was almost taken by the huge collage of natural bush materials. The pods and seeds and leaves and gravel created the impression of the farm that was there before Ivan began building houses in Linden. The exposed wooden beams of the ceiling and the polished floors matched. One got the impression that the house was made entirely of unpainted brick and wood. Milena lit the candles on the dining table and this light competed with the last of the summer rays coming through the window.

"Every time I come to Linden I get mad at these atrocities your architects are designing," Olga had another go at the architecture of Linden. She complimented Milan on the design of their house but how could they bear to live so close to the kitschy mixture of the houses close to them. Sitting close to the large window they could actually see most of the town bellow.

"This is a beautiful collection of international nostalgia," chided Boris.

"People recreated their childhood dreams," helped Mitja.

"That would account for the Alpine lodge next to a Spanish villa," laughed Janez.

"I suppose it does reflect the people who live here," conceded Olga.

"They allow anyone to have a go at anything in Australia," said Janez

"So obvious," said Olga.

“English homes are as boring as their faces,” said Boris.

“The stiff upper lip of architecture,” agreed Mitja.

“English don’t dare laugh at a yarn or cry at funerals, they couldn’t create something so delightfully frivolous,” said Milan.

Ivan and Milan felt responsible for the architecture of the town and both felt reprimanded by Olga. Grateful to Mitja for their free defence, they winked at each other but before they could defend themselves further, Olga changed the subject.

“I saw this divine musical last night, I am sure you’d adore it.” She spoke to Milena but everybody had to listen because Olga’s voice embraced them all and her hands seemed to hover over everybody. “The costumes were out of this world. It was an all Italian cast with a French conductor. The audience loved them.” Olga and Janez graciously agreed sometimes to travel from their home in Sydney’s Potts Point to attend Milena’s parties. Their presence was a gift.

“You must come and see me sometimes,” said Olga to Milena’s guests often but accept for Milena, none of them ever stepped inside Olga’s house. You needed a personal invitation and Olga never really had the time to extend one.

Barbara remembered much of the conversation, the words people spoke echoed in her mind and heart. Listening required no effort and it caused no regrets. They were all trying to change the world, nobody was quite satisfied with it.

Later in the club Barbara heard other Slovenians talking about Olga and Janez. She felt chastised for being singled out by Milena and invited to the party.

“They wouldn’t come if I invited them,” said Vida. “Not that I would want to. I am not attracted by money.”

“Women are ashamed to say that they are attracted by money,” laughed Joe. “They have no trouble admitting that they are attracted by a man’s bottom, but they would never admit to be attracted by his wallet?”

“What’s wrong with the big wallet, after all you might have sex for an hour a day but there are twenty three left for other interesting things one could do with a nice fat wallet,” laughed Vida.

“A clever girl marries money and a prostitute works for it,” helped Andrej.

“Why are we so bloody ashamed of sex and money!!,” asked Vida.

“Money and sex,” said Joe, “we hate rich people because they have more of both.”

“Isn’t money the root of all evil?” asked Sonja.

“No, the lack of money is the root of all evil,” corrected Andrej.

“The rich are just so smart,” mimicked Vida. “Milena just adores smart people.”

“You don’t worry about them being smart as long as they are rich,” said Joe.

“If they aren’t smart they won’t be rich for long. The two are twins,” said Andrej. “If one twin dies the other is no longer a twin.”

“I’ll settle for the poor,” said Joe. “They haven’t stolen much.”

“Show me a rich man and I’ll show you a miser,” said Andrej.

“I wonder why they came to Australia in the first place,” said Hermina. They realised that they will never know because Olga was much too busy to come knocking on their ordinary door to tell them.

Janez and Olga allowed themselves to be entertained by the likes of Milena and Milan who had class.

“This food is heavenly,” said Janez picking at slivers of red salmon.

“I hate shoddy Australian restaurants. They know nothing about presentation.” Olga was not afraid to correct anyone, she knew the etiquette, she knew who was who, she called people by their first names, important people. Olga could sort out anybody’s problems.

“There is something wonderfully affable about Australians . They call their leaders and superiors by their first names. They lack the stuffy European reverence for status,” said Mitja.

“We might not all be rich and famous but Australians tolerate each other more than people do anywhere else in the world,” echoed Boris.

“The temperature slows the blood, they simply can’t be bothered with intolerance,” said Olga.

“Europeans take themselves too seriously,” said Milan.

“What will happen in Europe now,” Janez addressed the men vaguely waiting for them to seek his opinion.

“Slovenians would rather starve than quit political games,” said Olga.

“Now they boast how they always opposed communism but I remember when I was a black sheep because I criticised it,” said Ivan.

“They pretend to be victims like us, they keep on scrubbing away their old allegiances,” said Milan.

“Slovenia has the coast, mountains, fertile land, minerals, forests, vineyards, energy, waters. Serbs don’t want to let us go because we are rich, industrious and subservient,” said Ivan.

“That is true, our people are hard working and smart,” helped Marjan who at that moment felt closer to his opponent, Ivan, than to anyone else in the room.

“The lazy and the incompetent keep telling us that we should feel ashamed and guilty for producing and thinking and getting rich. Bureaucracy forced themselves on top to suck on us,” said Olga. The senseless masses simply existed outside Olga’s intellectual orbit, she was busy resisting those that wanted to climb over her and take the place that was rightfully hers.

“Our economy was bugged by communism,” said Ivan.

“Isms were created by suckers who want to manipulate us and steal our ideas and our products,” said Olga.

“We should help our children become smart and prosperous, they should be made proud of their minds and labour,” helped Janez. “When they succeed among foreigners, they will be in a position to boost Slovenia.”

“Essentially you believe in the jungle law of the fittest,” tested Marjan.

“Never mind what we believe, the strong will make the nation survive, the no-hopers will run it down,” said Olga.

“The equality is the essence of democracy even here, one man one voice,” Marjan tried to trap Olga.

“The lazy and incompetent invented democracy to make themselves equal with those who think and produce. When I exchange my carrots for your cabbage we don’t need the bureaucracy to tell us that we are equal. We know we are. If we choose to sell our produce we expect to buy someone else’s produce without interference of those who don’t produce,” said Olga.

“You’d dump the weak on the scrap heap,” said Marjan.

“I’d make it worth their while to think and work,” said Olga.

“Some can’t.”

“Some will die.”

“You’d let them die.”

“We all die when we can’t exercise any longer. Anyway if they let me exercise, I will produce more than I need and they will also be able to survive. But first I have to take care of myself, I should not be made ashamed of being strong and clever and hard working.”

“You should love your neighbour as yourself?” Marjan tried to enlist Ivan’s sense of Christian justice and fairness.

“But if you don’t love yourself first, you never love anyone. Your first duty is to yourself. When you are forced to slave for those that don’t like slaving you neither like yourself nor those you slave for. When you work hard for yourself you expect others to do the same.” It wasn’t easy to make Olga feel guilty.

“The rich sometimes become too greedy and forget about those they left behind.” Ivan tried to find the middle ground between his own desire for wealth and fairness.

“They lust for what we have, we don’t lust for what they have. They call us greedy because that is how they feel,” countered Janez.

“They are laying the quilt on us so that we will share with them what we worked for,” said Olga.

“When the bureaucracy makes it impossible to trade honestly, the traders leave their trades and join the bureaucracy. They place themselves on top of the welfare rubbish dump and talk about evil multinationals, sacrifice, national pride and such garbage,” said Janez.

“Somebody should curb the greed of those on top. Somebody should look after the little guy,” said Marjan.

“Multi-culture in Australia pretends to look after the little guy. They let migrants live separate lives in their ethnic groups, ignorant and powerless. They don’t want us to invade their ivory towers. Singing nostalgic Slovenian songs will get us nowhere,” said Janez.

“Nationalism is only an illusion like all other isms,” Marjan liked to put himself above politics, nationality, religion and money. His wife Robyn pretended to listen with interest although nobody expected her to share in their identity struggle. She learned a bit of Slovenian over the years but she couldn’t follow their conversation.

“You aren’t missing much,” said Milena sitting next to her. Milena tried to translate some juicier parts and they occasionally giggled quietly.

“Nationalism is the cause of much evil,” said Olga. “When you think of a nation you immediately start begging your patriotic God to protect that certain group from all the other people. It causes hatred. Can you imagine God fighting Irish against English, Croatians against Serbs, Iraqis against Kuwaitis. Would you really like God to take sides like that?”

“Patriotism and prejudice are brothers,” agreed Boris.

“As soon as one puts himself above, all want to be above,” said Mitja.

“We should make Slovenia into a tourist paradise.” Olga was always practical. She was never confused or lost for words, if she ever made a blunder nobody was the wiser. Slovenians hated her guts but when they needed an introduction or advice they turned to her sheepishly. She had connections. She had no personal friends, she picked people like she picked the best of everything else. Janez and Olga made millions. Both came from the hard working, rich old families back home. After the war communists nationalised their wealth but they soon recovered among foreigners. Being rich was in their blood.

“We are talking about independence and democracy,” said Ivan.

Ivanka was bringing beautifully prepared food, she exchanged silent messages with Milena but as a hired help, Ivanka never entered into the conversation.

“All this talk about identity is rubbish,” said Janez. “People want to identify with their herd to lose personal responsibility. It is a typical bureaucratic language without a personal name or pronoun.”

“You die on your own,” Ivan said the words but he could not explain them.

“You have to belong to be able to love and be loved, to be gentle and warm and artistic,” the words carried a message from Marjan’s heart but he could not explain it either.

“That’s it,” said Janez. “We want to be loved and followed and worshipped and obeyed. We are afraid to stand on our own. But we don’t belong to Slovenia any more, like it or lump it, we are Australians.”

“I talked to Palestinians in Jerusalem last month, they never had it so good,” said Olga.

“Their kids go to Hebrew schools, they have modern accommodation. Those that panicked and escaped would be just as happy if they could live in Palestine with Jews, like Jews. Forget nationality, people fight for a better life.” Janez and Olga had business interests all over the world. Some said that Olga was Jewish anyway and that was meant to be a derogatory term but Olga would surely make it into a mark of distinction.

“I wouldn’t want to live as a Jew,” said Milan.

“They are strong because they keep their Sabbath alive,” said Ivan.

“Sabbath keeps them, they don’t keep it,” said Milan.

“They make intelligent decision,” said Milena.

“We are yet to see if people will be happier in Slovenia than they were in Yugoslavia,” said Marjan bringing them back to Slovenia.

“You love the part of the world called home,” said Ivan, “That part of the planet is holding your soul. That’s what nationalism is to me. You try to save your home, you protect the nation you belong to. The wars are also saving the planet.” They became silent, some felt a little embarrassed by Ivan’s speech but they couldn’t ignore it. Ivan believed in what he was saying and it wasn’t a laughing matter.

“Hitler succeeded because he inspired a sense of national pride,” said Mitja. “He restored the old myths and pageantry to the German people. People started to march to the tune that tugged at their heart strings.”

“That’s what I mean, playing with emotions can be dangerous. emotionally charged people become irresponsible,” said Olga.

“Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin, the sons of proletariat, told the proletariat the same story: Our country is different and best, our people are better than other people, our leaders deserve most glory, love and respect. And people followed their heart mindlessly,” said Janez.

“It is a life and death emotion really, this longing for homeland,” said Marjan. “The poorer the land the greater is the love it inspires. I read the poems of Kras poets who worship the stark, hot, stony landscape that couldn’t sustain them.”

“People long to be buried at home, maybe our souls can’t settle anywhere else,” Ivan tried to sound light hearted.

“A tribal culture is only a generation away for most people. Tribal culture is the essence of the small town living. A pack of wolves is always more dangerous than a lone wolf,” said Milena skirting between Olga and Ivan.

“It is dangerous to become separated from the pack and try to survive on your own but here we are,” said Olga acknowledging Milena’s support.

Barbara felt separated from her people but she did not remember ever being a part of any tribe. What was this longing for the unknown, was the tribe calling her?

“It’s all a matter of having your cake and eating it too. Things that are readily available are never longed for. We just don’t want to pay the price for some things so we long for them. We can go and stay home any old time. But we don’t want to leave the good life we have here,” said Janez.

“If you want to be different don’t complain if you find yourself separated, isolated or even despised,” said Olga. “Do you mix with Turks, or Chinese or Greeks. No, they are different, they want to be different.”

“I believe,” said Boris, “in being at peace with the whole universe.”

“Would you like to meet the first democratically elected Slovenian Minister,” said Ivan to Janez. “He is coming to meet our people in Australia.”

“Looking for funds, no doubt,” said Olga.

“Many would gladly abandon democracy,” said Boris looking at Mitja, “if only someone would make things work.”

“It is reassuring if you can even hope that someone will make things work. It becomes frightening when people hope that YOU are the one to make things work and you have no one to show you the way,” answered Mitja always in tune with Boris’ thoughts.

“Party decisions take away individual responsibility,” said Boris.

“Tell me one good reason why I should meet the minister,” said Janez to Ivan. “We had the Premier for dinner last week and I know that he is the one I can turn to if I need something.”

“I am not saying that the Minister is going to help you, no, I am asking YOU to help Slovenia,” said Ivan slowly, thoughtfully. “Didn’t Kennedy in America say: ask yourself what you can do for your country.”

“This is my country, Sydney is my kids’ hometown. The Premier is the one they will vote for,” said Janez.

“Sure, romantic love for our hometown keeps us together but the question is: where does it keep us. Down and out. We can fall in love with our own prison. we made a break with our home so we have to make another break into Australian society. otherwise you sit on the fence and get nowhere,” said Olga.

“We are the fence,” said Ivan. “My children need to know where they came from, I am that fence for them, I have to stay here because I was the one who made a decision to cross the border.”

“Now is the historic time for Slovenian nation, the Minister is our hope for the future,” tried Ivan.

“He has nothing to do with my family or our future. My kids speak English, they think like Australians do, they are Australians,” said Janez

“We are just people,” said Olga.

“The world will never let you be just people, slaves are just people,” said Ivan. “When someone will call you a bastard, he will call you a Slovenian bastard, a new Australian bastard or a Yugoslav bastard. You will never be just a bastard. When they need you, you are one of them but when they hate you, you become one of us.”

“You can be a scientist or a labourer or nurse, you are what you do, not what your ancestors were,” said Janez.

“I visited my Aunt in America last year. She was ninety four,” said Boris. “She came to America as an eighteen years old bride to a boy next door who emigrated before her. They had five children before the depression hit America. Her husband could not find work, he started to drink and died at the age of thirty six. She kept going from house to house to find work. She never had time even to think about going home. She sent us parcels after the war, we thought that we had a rich Aunt in America.

I asked her if she would like to go home. The little old lady was half asleep in an oversized armchair but she opened her pale grey eyes and looked at me: O, sure, I’d like to go home. I

could see the light and feel the warmth of her face as she said it. She rarely joined in the conversation, she had her eyes closed as she travelled the realms of her thoughts. She died a few weeks later. Now her granddaughter Sharon, who is a university lecturer in Washington DC came to me and asked for some books to learn Slovenian. I told her to go to Slovenia for six months, so she could learn it in the context of the whole culture. You have to stay on the land, with the people, that's where you will find roots, I said. Now Sharon has it all in America but something called her home. I cannot say that it is nationality, I only know what I saw."

"How did her children feel about being Slovenian?" asked Marjan.

"Her oldest son was 16 when she made his first jacket so he could go into the navy to learn a trade. She told him to return the jacket as soon as they will give him a marine uniform. She had another son to send to marines in the same jacket. The boy was waiting for his first uniform on Hawaii island when Japan attacked Pearl Harbour. His ship was hit and he was injured. It took him three years before he was well enough to return home. In the meantime his brother was sent to war near Alaska. When they both returned they were old men in their twenties. Their mother worked all through the war to feed the three young daughters. When boys returned they quickly found jobs and bought a family home. They told me that they were never young. They also said that they never knew who they were."

"You can't stop being what you are," said Ivan sadly not knowing why he felt a loss. "If you are not Slovenian you are nothing. People will ask you what nationality you are and you will have to answer."

"We are people, just people, Australians if you like," said Janez.

"Electronic media dissolved the geographical borders, people who watch the same channel on TV hear, see, feel the same things. Iranians and Belgians and Slovenians grow up on what is on TV, said Olga. "Nationality is a relic for historians."

"The multinationals want us to forget nationality and religion and family because they want to dominate a mass of drones, who can be directed by the same media signals in the New World Order," said Milan.

"When times are tough you need to belong and identify with a group," tried Ivan to explain something he didn't understand himself.

"Tito planned to melt the Balkan nations into a Yugoslav nation, he wanted them to be just people," said Boris.

"What's wrong with that anyway," said Olga half seriously, "it would be much more economical to have all Slavic nations speak one language."

"Esperanto would be even better," laughed Janez.

"They are different people, they worship differently, it's inconceivable to make one nation after all the bloody wars between them," said Ivan.

"We are not Sicilians," said Janez, "we don't carry vendettas."

"That's what I mean, people invented religions to separate themselves. There is one god and one heaven," said Olga.

“You would like to have one world government and one world religion?” said Milan neither approving nor disapproving. “But who would administer it?”

“Maybe we don’t need to go so far,” reasoned Olga. “But we have to face the reality. Television and other electronic media is bringing English into every home and bit by bit people learn new words and accept them as their own. How do stop this and more importantly why should we stop it?”

“I agree that this will take its toll on smaller languages everywhere, but with the renewed nationalism people will want to remain unique. The language may become a tool to trade with but I hope nations will preserve their thoughts in their language.”

“I wonder why God didn’t make birds all the same colour,” said Mitja, “it would be so much easier to identify them, so much more economical.”

“I like violins but I also like other instruments in the orchestra,” laughed Boris.

“It is hard to explain,” said Ivan. “You are doing all right, you don’t need anybody now, but we don’t live from bread alone.”

“We spend more on Slovenian art than any other Slovenian here,” said Olga. “We pay for our musicians to come, our people carry them around on their hands, we pay dearly but they have no manners to say thank you. When we come home they want our money, when they come here they want our money. we mean nothing to them without money.”

“I’d just like you to meet our new Minister. I’d like you to make our people proud of themselves, I’d like you to enjoy yourself with us,” tried Ivan not knowing why he wanted Janez and Olga to be there.

“I have a business to attend to,” said Janez. “Others like to pose as politicians for a bunch of hopeless drunks but I have no time.”

“They remember us when they want to secure their positions,” said Olga.

“We have to give them a chance,” said Marjan.

“Slovenians want to see the change in their lifetimes, we all want to get somewhere fast,” said Mitja thoughtfully. “We keep running away and dream about returning. I suppose we have to know our way back, we have to remember who we are, where we came from.”

“Australians are nomads, they spoil one place and move to another. They are not sentimental about any place, they don’t love any place,” said Boris. “Without national roots we just use the land.”

“Nobody exploits it more than communists exploited their own homelands,” said Milan.

“I hope my children will care for Linden like I care for my hometown,” said Ivan.”

“You know what the fox said when she found the rosary,” said Olga. “They are just words, the fox said.”

“Maybe,” said Ivan. “British settlers killed a few natives in Australia and hoisted the flag to claim the continent. They pretend to celebrate Australian day but they don’t feel anything because they never suffered for this country. Aborigines suffered, that’s why they fiercely defend their Aboriginality, people celebrate their survival.”

“What does the nationality mean to you two?” asked Milan.

“Nothing,” said Olga for both of them with the felicity of a complete confidence.

“What will your children celebrate? The Bible celebrates Jewish history, every nation has its heroes, its sacred sites, its battles, its taboos. There was a nomadic Chinese tribe who carried the bones of their ancestors to bury them before they settled on the new ground for the night. They celebrated history.” Ivan was convinced that belonging to a nation was the most important thing, yet he had no words to explain why.

“Something is pushing us to the finishing line,” said Boris. “We keep on looking for the home of our fathers while we are getting further and further away from it.”

“My children know no other home,” said Janez.

“The words ‘my father’s house’ mean so much to us, my hometown is a theme in art and music and literature,” said Mitja.

“Our songs make you cry,” said Barbara a little embarrassed by her words.

“That’s what I mean,” said Janez, “we are silly sentimentalists. We cry for cherry blossoms and spring and lost youth, we cry for people and places we ran away from. We cry easily that’s all.”

“It’s our nature,” said Milena. “We cry with songs about going home yet we couldn’t be bothered going, let alone staying there. We know when we are well off.”

“We are well off, but are we happy?” asked Ivan.

“Is one ever happy?” countered Mitja.

“We would cry much harder if we were forced to live in the house of our fathers. We would cry for freedom, for our modern conveniences, for appliances, for spacious, air conditioned rooms. I’d much rather stay here and cry for the house of my father,” said Olga.

“One day our children will want to celebrate their history,” said Ivan stubbornly. “When they have everything else they will want to have a soul as well, they will want to belong to a nation. It will be important to them what nation they belong to. Sooner or later they will want to make a contribution to the destiny of their people.”

“Tell me,” said Janez, “what would Slovenians lose if they suddenly started speaking English. Many large nations in Africa and Asia accepted English and prospered, while others who retained their governments and language are left behind.”

“Before you accept another culture as your own you have to become a slave, deny your heritage, become inferior. You have to deny yourself in order to become the other,” said Ivan not sure that he knew what he was saying.

“So what,” said Janez. “Our children are English speaking Australians, they have nothing to identify them as Slovenians.”

“Yes they have,” said Ivan. “We, the first generation are weakened, we had to deny our heritage and assimilate. The second generation is ashamed of parental shame, the third generation will have nothing to celebrate. The celebration is remembering national days of glory. All indigenous people are returning to their roots to regain strength.”

“If you have skills and money you feel at home anywhere,” said Olga.

“What really makes one feel at home,” wondered Boris. Although different in every way, these people were his people, their views showed him the things he would never see, the

reasoning he would never reason. The class difference proved easier to overcome than the cultural difference, whatever that may be. This unidentifiable something united them, made them stand apart, stand together.

“No Slovenian fails to know Preseren, Cankar, Avseniki, Martin Krpan, Trubar. These names mean nothing to an Australian,” reasoned Mitja.

“Maybe this knowing makes us one.” Boris never told anyone that he personally painted the name Linden on the side of his yacht. He felt embarrassed by this expression of belonging. He couldn’t resist to draw a leaf of the linden tree next to the name Linden and felt an unspoken, ordinary, everyday intimacy with his people in Linden. He felt at home with Slovenians.

Boris remembered the sweet, loving intimacy he used to have with Anushka. He wanted to be close to their two daughters but they chose to live their lives far away from him. He exchanged Christmas cards and occasional phone call with his children. The name Linden would mean nothing to Anushka or to his daughters. They didn’t come with him from Slovenia.

Boris shared with Mitja the mysterious world of the universe and life and death. Horace, Shakespeare, Dostojevski and other old masters gave them the strength to dismiss the trivialities of everyday existence. Both tried to ignore the loneliness that came at night.

“What makes us Slovenian?” asked Boris of no-one in particular.

“We are a group of people with nothing in common,” said Janez.

“We have no identity. Throughout history we were busy assimilating to other nations. Our people don’t trust Slovenians made, they want imported goods and rulers,” said Olga.

“It’s true,” helped Janez. “We travelled through Slovenia and filmed the historic sites. Two teenage boys watched us and one said to the other: They must be some film experts. The other boy heard us talking and he corrected his friend: They are no experts, they speak Slovenian. When even young Slovenians think like that what hope is there for Slovenia.”

“Maybe what we have in common is uncompromising differentness. Maybe that is the reason for our fragmentation. Maybe a compromise is necessary for a nation,” said Mitja more to himself than to his audience.

For words, like Nature, half reveal,
and half conceal the Soul within.
Tennyson

BARBARA

By 1990 their children left home and Ivan and Barbara spend more time together. On Sunday afternoons they often read papers and magazines. Barbara usually turned to the horoscope first, then she looked at the pictures of the rich and famous before she read the letters of unhappy readers trying to find solutions to their emotional and medical problems. She scanned the rest of the paper to satisfy Ivan because sometimes he wanted to talk about an article he read. He followed the changing world events.

"Australians are going mad," he said suddenly. "They signed the convention on children's rights. Parents are not allowed to bring up their children the way they want, they are only allowed to work for them."

The older generation in general despaired at the behaviour and the attitudes of the children. The parents and the teachers were told that they no longer had the right to make the children believe what they believed and the children had to choose for themselves what to believe. Ivan wondered who were THEY to tell him what his children were to do and learn and be. Who gave THEM the right to indoctrinate the teachers and the parents? He sometimes wondered if there was someone out there at the top, who tried to get rid of Christianity and everything else he believed in. Every weird belief was promoted in Australia and Christian values seemed ridiculed. Was someone somewhere trying to change who Australians came to be? More and more children were roaming on the streets without a home to go to. They could not be punished for anything they did until they committed murder. It was a murder the way they brought up kids in Australia. Parents didn't know what they were supposed to do. In despair Ivan often wished he was back in his village where everybody knew what to do and believe.

Ivan was conscious of the fact that he had chosen to live within the British Empire. He liked Australia he chose this country but the madness of the new generation frightened him.

"1990 is the year of the child, I think," said Barbara because Ivan expected her to respond.

"Children are divorcing their parents," said Ivan horrified. "Is that the year of the child? Children need parents. They have the right to have parents and family. They have the right to be taught and disciplined. Parents should stick around and teach their children right from wrong. They say that they love kids but they neglect their upbringing. Parents are the teaches kids should trust."

"Sometimes they don't." Barbara suddenly stopped. She had no intention to start an argument.

"What do you mean?"

"Some parents abuse them," said Barbara.

"You think I abused my kids when I thought them right from wrong," said Ivan.

"I didn't mean you. Some parents sexually abuse their kids. Some fathers beat them when they are drunk," said Barbara carefully.

“They teach them at school that it’s all right to be poofers. The teachers tell them that any sex is good. They give them a licence to do as they like just when their hormones begin jumping up and down.”

“I wonder who is right and who is wrong,” said Barbara just to say something but Ivan did not like her wishy washy attitude.

“What’s wrong with the way we brought up our children, they became honest, hard working, responsible adults.” Ivan evidently wanted to talk and Barbara could choose where their conversation would lead.

“I wonder how far back can a person really remember. Would Helena remember any of the stories I used to tell her when we walked to meet you from work. She just started to walk. When you were doing a day shift in the tunnel Helena and I walked a long way every day to meet you coming home.”

“She was only a baby,” Ivan liked the memories of their baby daughter and he soon forgot about his anger..

“I was expecting Janek then.” Barbara remembered holding Helena’s hand for comfort when she couldn’t sleep while Ivan worked nights. Terrified of the loneliness and of the stillness of the night, she listened for the sounds coming from far away and for the movements within her as baby Janek grew ready to be born.

During the day Barbara and a two year old Helena wandered in the bushes and watched rabbits nibble the grass and kangaroos sitting still their heads high ready for flight. Barbara told Helena about her own childhood and the people at home talking, singing, working together. Helena was so interested in everything, she wanted to hear things over and over. She learned little songs to surprise daddy when he came home because daddy loved his clever little baby.

More and more often Barbara remembered the good old days when they were poor and they longed for the home of their own. The poor had the longing and the longing was hope and the hope made them alive and happy. The poor had what she dreamed about.

Barbara believed that she failed her children by choosing to live so far from home and without the people who loved her. She could never talk about her feelings to Ivan because even now he refused to remember things he didn’t like.

Barbara read a story of a young boy sexually abused by his step father. More and more people told the stories of how they as children silently suffered the abuse. Barbara realised that she could never tell anyone about herself, she did not want anyone to know that she was abused because she was still afraid of the memory. She was afraid of Ivan remembering.

Barbara could never forget that she left her daughter Renata unprotected and that she never longed to have her back. Deep down she felt a hollow pain of guilt that could never be shared or rubbed out. She tried to forgive herself for being abused because by now she realised that she was an unprotected child herself then. But she was afraid to relax with Ivan and become vulnerable, because he knew about her past.

“What are you thinking”, said Ivan folding the newspaper.

“Nothing really. I just read a story about a little boy.” Barbara rarely told Ivan what she was thinking.

She wandered if he ever told her his innermost thoughts. Thoughts and day dreams and feelings were Barbara’s only playground. The dreams of the subconscious, the dark horrifying nightmares were something else again.

Barbara dreamt about babies; she neglected the baby, forgot to feed it, sometimes she left it playing in the bath and it drowned. She’d jump to pick the baby lying on its back, eyes open under the water, its body rigid. Clutching the cold, shrivelled body to her breasts she tried to make it alive again but her breasts were dry and the baby was never happy, it was barely alive sometimes. Through the years the baby died in hundreds of different ways. She often woke up in shock as she saw the little dried up yellow body. The memory of her latest dream made her shudder. She vigorously cut the little white baby with the blunt knife and the baby wouldn’t stop moving until she woke up in a cold sweat, scared and alone unable to tell anyone about the madness of her dreaming. No-one could protect her from these dreams so she took pills to push them back into the darkness where they belonged.

Sometimes in her dreams her children ran away crying and she couldn’t catch them to comfort them and Ivan caught them and hurt them. Barbara woke up with the hollow pain inside her and carefully moved out of Ivan’s embrace to sob quietly without waking him. Ivan usually moved after her, half asleep, trying to keep her body in place, he caressed her skin and woke up ready for the lovemaking. Barbara couldn’t tell him about running away in her nightmares. She often dreamed about being naked and lost in the crowd where no-one responded to her crying. People walked past her as she frantically tried to cover up her shame but nobody took any notice of her or her shame.

Barbara learned to live with Ivan in harmony so she invented day-dreams to play with and to escape into. When people hurt her, she dreamed that she was dead and saw her enemies crying because they were sorry for what they have done to her. She wanted to be happily dead, painlessly laid down for all eternity, at peace with the soil and the sun and the air, to stop being an energy moving around. She learned at school that energy could not be destroyed and that frightened her. She couldn’t talk about things like that with Ivan. A wish to die is a sure sign of madness, she believed and recoiled into her shell.

Did life come from the brain or the heart, was the force of life in her mind, heart or body? The irrational dimensions of God and love and longing and lust, where did they come from? Were they the product of the grey brain cells or was there some invisible rational force or energy completely independent of the body. She often wondered if there was God and what God intended her to become.

To ban the ugly pictures from her head, Barbara indulged in fantasies. Sometimes she even succeeded to bring her fantasies into her real dreams. In the early years she often saw the boy from her childhood looking at her from the distance. Longing to be close they tried to get together but she always woke up before they embraced and kissed. She woke up longing to go back to sleep to recapture the dream, to have a few moments with David, but the dream faded away.

Barbara liked to play with the memories about David. Memories never changed, they were warm and alive because she chose them and she rubbed out the rough spots. David was in

the same class when she first came to Ljubljana and they often played in the park Tivoli. In the hills they picked blueberries and rode bikes in the forest the way children do, enjoying the growing up and the changing of the seasons. Once they rolled in the grass and laid down exhausted on the ground to watch the colourful autumn leaves falling on them. The white clouds were like little people scattered in the heavens.

“When I grow up I will marry you,” said David and at thirteen the idea touched their still unopened hearts with longing. The children used to call their best friends brothers and sisters. David and Barbara became brother and sister and they play kissed when they said goodbye. The kisses were like butterflies on flowers with wings in flight. Standing on the street corners they didn’t speak of love yet, but they both knew the sweet pain of loving. They believed that the stars shone for them alone.

Girls at school asked Barbara if a man ever kissed her and she nodded. They teased her if it was a French kiss but not knowing what a French kiss was, she nodded again. They wanted to know his name and she invented the name and became scared that they would find out about her lying.

Barbara didn’t kiss David goodbye when she had to go away at fifteen and when she returned six months later they were different people and both already 16. He was angry because she didn’t tell him why she left and where she went. He invited her to go to the pictures once after she returned from the holidays. Both were shy about it because they sensed that something new was happening. Barbara longed to be with David but she changed her mind at the last moment and did not go on her first date.

Barbara dreamed about that first date thousands of times. It was the most romantic romance ever, she made the date into the love of her life as she kept adding to the excitement of David’s first real kiss with his arms strong but gentle around her. She often rearranged the setting with the smells of the forest and moonlight, the soft grass, music and flowers. Tortured by the recollection of its sweetness, its innocence and its excitement, she turned back the clock and recaptured it all again and again.

Barbara knew Ivan since she first came to Ljubljana at the age of ten. He was an apprentice carpenter then and came with other workers to build the house next to her place. To Barbara he was just an older man, because he must have been at least seventeen. Later she found out that he lived nearby and that he wasn’t a carpenter any more. He drove a car and worked in an office. He sometimes offered her a lift to school and seemed to like her.

When at the age of sixteen Barbara returned from her long holidays, she told Ivan that she was sick of school and wanted to find a job. Ivan found her a job and a place to move into. The room was a little closet in the attic, the job was in the textile factory but Barbara was happy about both and grateful to Ivan for setting her free. Alone in the city, Barbara started to depend on Ivan and they enjoyed each other’s company. She was sorry that she felt nothing when he kissed her.

Other boys asked Barbara for a date, she promised to go, she dreamed about going but she never did. As long as she kept saying no, she felt in control of her life. But she couldn’t say no to Ivan, she owed him for standing by her. It wouldn’t be fair. Soon he told her that he loved her more than his life and couldn’t imagine himself without her because he knew that he could never love anyone else.

Barbara hated Ivan's love because it replaced their friendship in which she felt secure and protected. He demanded her surrender and she gradually surrendered mentally and physically but there was a little hidden spirit in her that Ivan could never trap. She recoiled into her shell like a frightened snail licking her door shut.

Barbara often wondered what would happen to her if she did not marry Ivan. But how could she not marry a man who loved her and showered her with gifts of gold and flowers before they got married. Barbara wanted someone to smell the flowers and admire the gold but deep down she was ashamed of roses and carnations and shiny trinkets because she vaguely understood that she was to pay the price and surrender to Ivan.

Ivan began touching Barbara, she always thought of his advances as touching. Barbara would have liked to go home and tell her mum that she fell in love with a boy, only she did not feel in love with Ivan. He took her to dine in beautiful restaurants and drove her to romantic countryside. Once he took her cold hands in his big warm ones and he realised that she was scared. Her vulnerable innocence and youth appealed to him.

"Don't be afraid of me, I can wait until after we are married," said Ivan and her heart skipped the beat. "Did you think that I wasn't going to marry you," he tried to reassure her. The tears stung her eyes as he produced a ring and put it on her finger: "Until I put a wedding ring next to it," he said kissing her fingers. Something in her cried: "No, no, no." But it wasn't strong enough and anyway it was too late.

She accepted that his love will be enough for both. "Maybe I just don't like being touched," she concluded.

Her body was cold, she shivered all the time. Ivan often put a coat over her shoulders and embraced her to keep her warm. But inside she still shivered. Feeling trapped, she looked out of her cage, but didn't dare fly out because she was also scared of freedom.

Ivan promised most solemnly that he will always look after her. His brothers and sisters grew up and got married, he was free to live his own life. He needed someone to look after. On the first Sunday after Easter as Barbara became legally allowed to, at eighteen, they got married. Barbara was saying goodbye to the past, she got herself out of the mess, out of the attic, out of the factory, she was free to look forward to the future but she looked back to see that the ghosts weren't following.

"Ivan saved me," she thought, "he will protect me against the world."

Ivan's brothers and sister were the only witnesses at the wedding. Barbara's father disappeared and her mother was in mourning for him and for her son Emil.

As she dressed in white for the wedding she remembered her father saying that she was as beautiful as a Snow White.

"He should see me now," smiled Barbara to herself through tears as she stood in front of the altar with Ivan in an elegant blue suit. Only she felt ashamed and guilty and sorry and ugly, and so utterly alone that she cried like brides do, remembering.

Barbara wished that she could invite Andrea, but she didn't want Andrea to know that she married someone she did not love. Barbara never wore things Ivan gave her when she met her best friend Andrea before her wedding. Andrea was rich and beautiful and free. She often took Barbara home like children take a stray dog. They walked along the river and

talked about the boys that were in love with Andrea. She recited poetry for Barbara as they ran with the wind and stood under the willows.

Andrea was enormously popular but she wrote on her photograph: "To my best friend Barbara forever." Barbara needed a best friend when Andrea wrote those words for her, every teenage girl needs a best friend. Maybe Andrea wrote that for other people but Barbara believed that she was specially loved by Andrea who had as many friends as she wanted.

Andrea did not know the real Barbara at all and she would not be right at her wedding. She might ask Barbara if she loved Ivan.

Barbara could not tell Andrea about Ivan like she could never tell her about Karl. In the light of day there was nothing to tell. She had no words, she did not dare even think about it or cry because she was scared that someone would see the ugly pictures in her head.

For a long time Barbara believed that she was punished for thinking about David so she prayed and confessed her sinful thoughts. She had no words to tell about Karl because she had no words for the body parts that were never mentioned, shameful, dirty parts. Men used swear words for those parts and she couldn't repeat swear words. There were no nice words to tell about her shame. She never saw what was happening, she only felt Karl's hands pushing her down, spreading her legs, pumping, pushing. She felt the wetness on her legs and on her tummy as she struggled to get away. With her eyes shut tight she never saw anything. His hand was pressing her chest and her skirt was over her face. He squeezed her breasts but he never touched her face.

Barbara hoped that Ivan would take her away from the memories, that he would take care of the past as well as of the future. After she married him, Ivan told Barbara to leave the factory and do an interior decorating course. He noticed that she was good at arranging objects, playing with colour and light, creating images. She saw things others didn't notice until she presented them in certain light or setting. She could rearrange things, gaze at them, bring them to life and draw them for hours. She looked forward to her new job because she hated the mindless work in the factory and needed something to occupy her mind.

She learned to put up with sex and learned many cunning little ways to avoid it. She dreamed of love while Ivan had sex. Barbara liked Ivan holding her in his arms but it always ended in sex and she was happy when it was over, happy until the next time.

Barbara was thanking God that nobody knew about Renata. She was forever sorry that she later told Ivan because he used the knowledge as a power over her. To rub out her secrets she often wished him dead. "I only want the past to die," she told God as she prayed for forgiveness of sins.

Ivan lived in the second story of the government block of flats amongst other privileged people working for the government. The view from the small living room was over the railway. You could see the trains disappear far into the forest and the hill. Barbara watched the constant coming and going of trains, people lugging heavy suitcases, embracing, kissing and crying in anticipation of a new beginning. Barbara often imagined herself walking with a suitcase in hand alone and free on a journey to the future.

On their first wedding anniversary Barbara cried, desperately unhappy. "You can trust me. I will always love you no matter what. I am your friend," Ivan promised and she tried to tell him.

It all started when she was 10 and Franc, her brother, got married to Jana. Jana's sister Tereza came to the wedding and later her husband Karl played with the kids and thought them to swim in the river. Barbara hated him teaching her. Telling Ivan about it she began to cry. Ivan was holding her tightly and urged her to go on.

Even now Barbara remembered every word of her confession to Ivan a lifetime ago. The words like her shame were imprinted on her memory and could not be erased.

"His hand was under my belly and his finger slipped between my legs under my pants," she said before the crying stopped her.

"Did you tell your mother or father?"

"Tell what?"

"That he was touching you between your legs."

"They were there watching. I told them that I didn't want to swim. Everybody told me not to be silly, they pushed me in the water. Every child should learn to swim, they said. Be a big, brave girl, they told me. His fingers reached into my pants for a moment and he let go quickly, like it was an accident. I knew it wasn't. But why was he doing it? I was sure that they all saw it, I felt shamed and powerless." Barbara cried in Ivan's arms.

"Once Karl took me into the forest. Mum told me to show him the places where the mushrooms grew. He pushed me on the moss and fell on me. He started shaking terribly and I thought he was sick. His face changed and it scared me. I struggled to get away but he was holding on to my dress until I pulled away with all my strength. He moaned on the ground and called me. I didn't know what to do. "That's better" he said and after a few seconds he laughed, "Let's go home," he caught up with me, took my hand and asked: "What were you scared of?" I felt ashamed for being scared. He was just playing with me. I was only imagining that something was wrong. I insisted that I wasn't scared. We laughed and returned home."

Karl and Tereza arranged with Barbara's parents and her brother Franc to take Barbara with them. They could not have children of their own and they wanted to look after Barbara.

"We have a big house, she can go to high school and later to university," Karl insisted.

"They can give her the best chance in life," said her brother Franc. Karl and Franc were friends during the war. They were only boys then, but they became the heroes of the communist revolution. Both were studying and learning to become the leaders of the new society. Both wanted Barbara to have an exciting future, to become a lawyer or a doctor.

Karl and Tereza praised Barbara for being tidy, shy, obedient, helpful and intelligent. But inside Barbara felt a mess.

Her parents never said much when Franc and Karl were around. Her father stayed with the cattle in the stable, Mum looked down on her sewing and the house felt cold. Barbara wondered if they knew, if they thought that it was all right, if they blamed her for going away. Other people said that Karl treated her like she was his own daughter but her parents said nothing.

Karl was considered a generous man, people had respect for him. He went red in the face and couldn't breathe when he chased Barbara. He used to shake all over sometimes. He never tried to kiss her, he just slipped his hand on her thighs, pinched her, squeezed her and tugged at her skirt.

"At night he came and covered me up, he checked if I was asleep. I always knew when he came, he crawled on the ground and slipped his hand under cover. Sometimes I jumped up to frighten him, sometimes I turned away, thrashed away from him. I always pretended to be asleep because I felt ignorant and ashamed not knowing what to say, what to do. I could hear his breath, I jumped as if I'd had a fright, he laid on the floor beside the bed waiting like a monster." To Barbara Karl looked old and huge when she was twelve and he was thirty. She didn't know what to say but she lay half awake most nights."

"Why didn't Tereza say something?"

"She didn't know. Maybe she didn't want to know. How could she not know that he got out of her bed every night to crouch near mine. In the mornings everything seemed unreal, it did not happen. We ate breakfast together laughing. There were no shadows during the day, not with Tereza around. In all the years not a word was spoken about it. Not until it was too late."

"What did he do?" Ivan's body went limp and his hands became cold. The light went out of his eyes and his face was grey. They still sat on the same coach but felt miles away.

"I am mad about you, he said one day. He caught at my skirt as I was going out. Tereza was out shopping, I pulled away, terrified. He grabbed at my breast roughly and it hurt."

Barbara remembered how everybody told her that she was lucky and should be grateful. She didn't want to upset her parents.

Barbara wanted to make her parents proud and become someone important. She wanted to see them smile again. Tereza told her friends that Barbara came first in class, that she could become anything she wanted."

Ivan was waiting for her to go on but Barbara was already sorry that she started. They were both enormously sorry.

"I wished I could lock my room but I did not know how to explain why I needed the lock. I was 12," sobbed Barbara but Ivan looked through the window by then and his face was grey. She remembered the venom in his voice as he demanded that she tells him everything. That's how it was from then on. He never again tried to keep Barbara warm and protected, he made love to her to satisfy himself but there was no tenderness or words of love from him.

Barbara suddenly remembered feeling alone like that when at the age of twelve she felt wet between her legs on the way from school. It was blood. She thought that she was dying. She knew that people who had TB and coughed up blood, were dying. They were dying, everybody in the village knew that. Nobody ever explained about menstruation. Tereza probably forgot, Mum counted on Tereza. Aunt Maria mentioned it when Barbara was sixteen and already had a baby.

Karl and Tereza laughed at Barbara because she was going to church. She was called superstitious but God was the only person she could trust, he wouldn't tell or laugh. The

teachers said that he didn't even exist. People worked on Christmas day, they were ashamed to believe in Jesus, they were even scared to eat Christmas cakes in public. God was in the same disgrace as Barbara.

"Just come to the point," said Ivan and she became afraid because all the caring was gone and his hands were holding the edge of the chair in a tight grip.

"I was fourteen then," Barbara returned to her story. "One day Tereza went to her mother's for a few days. I was alone with him." Barbara started to cry and through tears she told Ivan how Karl pushed her on the bed, how he threatened, how he begged, how he forced. He fell on her as he pulled at her pants, pressed her throat, covered her eyes with the blanket and pushed into her stomach. She struggled to escape but she could not breathe, or yell. Suddenly something slimy was spread on her legs, he rubbed it off, buttoned his fly and laughed. It wasn't that bad, was it, he said. Nothing to be scared of. Be a good girl and I might buy you a bike, he promised as Barbara lay on her bed violated and totally disgraced.

"So you didn't tell," said Ivan. "You wanted a bike."

Barbara knew that telling Ivan was a mistake, she cried unable to tell him about the agony that followed, how she wanted to die, how she prayed in church, how she prayed everywhere all the time for God to forgive her, how she cried herself to sleep every night. Karl arranged opportunities to be alone with her, he threatened to kill her if she ever told anyone. He told her angrily that she wanted it, that he will tell her parents how she wanted it. He warned her to remember what happened to her brother Emil. She did not know what happened to Emil, nobody knew, but there were ominous whispers that he was tortured and killed.

Barbara didn't even realise that she was pregnant. Tereza was the first to notice that something was wrong. She told Karl because she never suspected that he had anything to do with it. Karl told Barbara that he will tell everyone, that she was willing if she ever told who the father of the baby was. He said that he will have her and her baby killed, like he had Emil killed after the war. He instructed her to say that the boy on the beach forced her. To Tereza specially. He told his wife that they could keep the baby and say that it was theirs, if Tereza wanted to have a baby, of course. He arranged it with the doctor. Tereza and Barbara spent the last four months of the pregnancy in their seaside home. When they returned, Karl and Tereza were proud parents of a baby daughter.

Barbara finished her story and exhausted from crying she hoped that Ivan would comfort her. Both wished that she never told him.

She didn't trust Ivan after that, she never again told anyone about herself. She began to believe that they would all blame her and think that she wanted it. Maybe it really was her fault.

Barbara stayed with her friend Andrea for a month after they returned from the seaside. She began searching for a job and a room to stay. Ivan helped her.

Before they escaped to Austria Barbara went to see Renata. Hiding behind bushes she watched her three year old daughter play happily in the sand-pit with Karl and Tereza. The three of them looked like a normal, happy family while Barbara felt like a criminal. Karl brushed the sand off Renata before he took her in his arms and kissed her. His hand slipped

under Renata's dress to brush the sand off her skin and Barbara shuddered as she watched behind the bushes.

Ever since that day Barbara went to sleep thinking that she should have told someone, that she should have protected her daughter.

Barbara thought seriously about becoming a nun before she married Ivan. She had no idea if convents still existed, if it was still possible to become a nun and if they would take her. Maybe they had a way of finding out, her mother said that nothing is hidden before god.

Both wanted to escape from the past after Barbara told Ivan about her daughter. Ivan insisted that they couldn't say goodbye to anyone, everyone being a potential enemy. If they were interrogated they might tell, admit knowing about their planned escape. They would be punished for not informing the police. You could not trust anyone not to inform the police. It was their duty to keep the police informed about traitors. Everybody knew someone imprisoned for trying to escape, everybody knew someone doing hard labour and bringing disgrace to the rest of the family.

When they came to Austria in 1958 the police asked them why they escaped. Friends advised them to ask for a political asylum so Ivan told them that he was persecuted by communists but he needed evidence of persecution.

He tried for the economic asylum but how could they with secure, well paid jobs. In the end Ivan's trade saved them. Ivan was a carpenter before he finished tech and became an inspector. Australia needed carpenters. Barbara was an interior decorator, she might be an asset to him.

Barbara wrote to her mother from Australia. To keep her happy she wrote about the land of hope and promise and freedom, She promised to visit, she kept Mum hoping, but she never came. Mum died in 1970. Neither Mum nor Barbara ever found out what happened to Dad. Barbara wanted to go to her mum's funeral but Ivan wouldn't let her.

"It's no use now," he said, "it's too late, it's a waste of money and anyway the children need you here."

*Man's love is of man's life a thing apart,
'tis woman's whole existence.*
Byron.

IVAN

Seeing the poverty and despair his family had to endure, young Ivan dreamed of grandeur, power and influence. As a boy he read somewhere that in nature, like in life itself, one finds what one is looking for. He was determined to find all his father never found. He wanted a big house that would set him apart and he saw himself driving a shiny big car past the memories and friends of his poor childhood. People show respect if you own things they desire. He needed respect, and the right wife to share his achievements. He carefully planned for the marriage to someone special, someone exclusively his, untainted by the touch of other man. He was determined to marry a virgin.

Ivan broke up with Vesna years ago; he met many girls but he loved no one like he foolishly thought he loved Vesna. Feverishly in love, Ivan and Vesna made love on their second date near the lake late into the night. Like zombies they searched impetuously for the opportunities to be alone all that summer. The smell of hay and wild flowers, like god's aphrodisiac in the warm air, made them abandon reason and doubt as they delighted each other with lovemaking.

Both lived with their families so there was nowhere to go and make love in bed in those days. In the hotel you had to produce an identification showing that you were married. Vesna was Ivan's first love, she loved him with vigour and unashamed devotion, she blossomed in his arms as they shared the pleasures of sex. For two years they only had eyes for each other and Ivan thought about marrying.

"You are a lucky fellow," he heard other boys say. Ivan was proud of Vesna and he never needed to question her loyalty. To him she was the most beautiful and desirable girl on earth.

Ivan travelled to work in the nearby city every day and boys talked about girls. Everybody knew about the girls they slept with but nobody talked about Vesna because they knew how serious Ivan was about her.

Even in those days his peers respected Ivan. He met his neighbour Anton on the train one day. Anton was about five years older than Ivan so the two men were never peers. Anton was working in Germany for the last two years and he was coming home on his first holiday.

"How is Vesna? Is she married yet?" asked Anton.

"No." Ivan didn't like this casual talk about his girl but Anton didn't know that Vesna and Ivan planned to marry.

"She wanted me to get married after she became pregnant, you know," confessed Anton. "How would I know who she was pregnant with. Most boys shared her bed. I heard that she had an abortion after I left for Germany."

The words hit Ivan. Shocked, he said nothing.

"I missed her though, she was the best," said Anton.

Ivan stood up and went to the window to think before he said anything. In the end he said nothing and the two villagers returned to their homes.

After a week Anton returned to Germany but his words about Vesna remained in Ivan's head every moment of every day. He tried to forget them but he realised that he never would be able to. He had to erase every memory of his involvement with Vesna.

He asked Vesna to show him all the gifts he ever gave her. He packed those gifts in a paper bag. "Let's go to the lake," he said. "I'll show you something special." He took the bag, Vesna couldn't argue, not with her parents listening in the other room, she was pale, she knew that something was wrong as she followed Ivan. He built a small fire near the water. They made love on the wet cold grass. It was sad vigorous lovemaking and at the end as they lay beside each other, Vesna had tears in her eyes.

"Which of your boyfriends was the best?" Ivan wanted to humiliate Vesna and she saw the tears in his eyes as well.

He emptied the bag on the fire. "You will have no proof of my stupidity. Men will not be laughing behind my back, you whore."

"There was no one else, not since we started," she cried. Beautiful flames came from the colourful fabrics, green and purple and blue mixed with red fire flames. They burned quickly like synthetics do and Vesna sat on the tree stump looking at the ashes. There was a crook of her red umbrella, a buckle of her bag, the soles of her shoes. They were all Ivan's presents. He dropped the pendant cross and the ring in the water.

The cross was to be a blessing, it was the first item of gold Ivan ever had in his hands. The ring was specially made for Vesna. People didn't get engaged then, they were too poor to have two celebrations. Ivan and Vesna celebrated on their own. Ivan's friend gave them a flat while he was away for the weekend. They brought food with them, they stayed in bed from Saturday night until Monday morning and Ivan placed a ring on Vesna's hand.

Now the cross and the ring were gone.

The break hurt Ivan but he never showed it or admitted it to anyone. He agonised about going back to ask forgiveness, but he was strong. So that was why boys said that he was lucky. They all knew what she was like. He never told Vesna how he found out. because he wouldn't allow anyone to laugh at his stupidity.

Soon after their break Vesna escaped to Germany and Ivan never saw her again. After Vesna, sex became a quick dirty release for him. He did not want to get trapped again. It took all his self control and discipline to succeed in everything he tried. Ivan often sang or hummed a Russian song and the words gave him strength.

"If you are happy and you laugh good things will cross your path and whatever is your wish in the end will be your dish."

Ivan's father built the restaurant with the same determination before the war. The whole big family spent every spare moment working in the restaurant. Just as it started to pay off, Germans came and moved his family to a concentration camp in Coblenz. Ivan was lucky really to be with his family. He was almost 16 and at that age some boys became soldiers fighting in the war. In the camp they separated him from his family and he began working with men delivering coal to the nearby homes.

His Mum got TB in the camp from the cold and starvation.

Luckily his parents were soon moved out to work on the big farm near the river Rhine where Ivan joined them. Just before the end of the war they found bombs in the big farm house and they had to be detonated. About a hundred people who worked on the farm moved into the rock bunker cut into a cliff near the river for safety. From the bunker they saw the Germans retreating from the allied forces, swimming and walking over the river Rhine, drowning with their horses and packs. People in the bunker were terrified of the SS, of American bombs, of Russians, of starvation and sickness. They were waiting, barricaded day after day for almost a month. Ivan remembered going out at night to dig under the snow for turnips, potatoes and beet root lost in the fields. Every night he brought a bucket of water from a spring at the foot of the hill. Young, strong and resourceful, he had to take care of the family. The war was over but they couldn't go home because there was no transport available for the next six months. Those that came under the Americans were happy to stay in Germany and had to be forced home. Many of those that came under the Russians escaped from the camps to walk hundreds of kilometres to Slovenia.

Ivan liked American soldiers, they brought food and clothes, they gave him the first piece of chocolate he ever tasted. Ivan's neighbour, who escaped from Russians in Berlin told about their cruelty, how he begged for food and searched the fields for lost bits of harvest as he crossed the Europe walking home.

Mum was getting sicker, Dad looked like a skeleton as they returned home with six young children in October 1945. The winter was coming and there was no food, no animals, no wood for warmth. The Germans have taken what was in the home and now the communists had turned their property into state property. Ivan's family lost their land and restaurant and his father started to drink.

He was an angry drunk hitting his children and his wife. Before mum died in 1948, she found a bale of black cotton in the attic. It was rescued from the burning store by someone during the war so she made clothes for the whole family. She hated the second hand clothes they had to wear in the concentration camp, clothes collected from the Jews who were taken into the gas chambers. They smelled of death. When she died her family was all appropriately dressed in black for her funeral. She was only forty six, but she looked worn out. His father was eighteen years older but in Ivan's memory he was strong and ageless. Ivan blamed his father, in fact he blamed his whole family for his mother's death. Ivan accepted the punishment kids got for being disobedient but he hated his father for hitting his sick mother.

Ivan's mother never complained, she seemed too weak to do so and too busy organising the household without the energy or money. She made them all feel guilty, suffering in silence, they would've felt better if she had yelled.

A year after his mother's death, his father was found beside the road frozen one winter morning. He was drunk and didn't make it home. Ivan was ashamed of his father but he felt guilty because nobody cried at his small funeral. His two sisters and three brothers aged between ten and seventeen looked at nineteen years old Ivan for direction and protection. And Ivan wasn't crying.

Ivan had to be strong for them all, now it was up to him to bring up the rest of the family. He yelled and frightened his brothers and sisters into submission. Someone had to. He

made them do the right thing, learn a trade, find the job. They gradually accepted him as a second father. When he hit them, they didn't dare hit back, they learned to respect him. He really took over even before Mum died, to take some of the pressure off Dad and to spare Mum. After mum's death his father gave up, he drank and slept and growled.

Ivan and his seventeen years old sister Marija looked after the four younger children until they finished school. They became the mother and the father to them. Ivan became a carpenter and continued studying at night.

Since his mother died Ivan grew closer to his grandmother, asking her for help and advice on housekeeping. He felt love and revulsion for his grandmother, both feelings being mixed into an unpleasant mess. He was about twelve when he heard two old men talk about her.

"She talks to herself and farts," said one. Ivan felt ashamed of his grandmother then and angry with the man. He remembered gran from his early childhood; whenever visitors came and someone gave a lolly to gran, the old woman in long dark skirt put it inside her toothless mouth and saved it for little Ivan. Nesting in the hollow of her mouth it was almost untouched and he took it eagerly and sucked on it. He hated himself now for wanting the lolly so bad but he was only a little boy then. Anyway, only gran and Ivan knew how they both waited for visitors to go, so the lolly would pass from her mouth into his.

Ivan also remembered gran talking to his sister Marija as they sat on the bench under the linden tree. They didn't know that he was sitting hidden up high on a branch. "Be careful of boys," warned gran, "they just want to empty themselves, to shake their balls and leave when it's finished. Boys despise girls who let them, they tell each other about it. All boys want to marry virgins. Never let them touch you when you are alone with them. A girl who once let them have their way is like a cow going into the corn field, she will go every time. You can tell girls like that, they have dark sunken eyes and look worn out. Boys can smell girls like that." Ivan was sixteen then and Marija was fourteen.

Soon after his grandmother died he had his first wet dream and felt disgusted by the whitish, acrid mess on his legs. His love for Vesna made him change his feelings about sex. But Vesna betrayed him, she didn't tell him that she enjoyed sex with other boys.

After the war in Slovenia the slogans on the walls proclaimed loudly that all work was honourable and all people were equal. They wrote that in the socialism there was a freedom of speech. Everybody knew that it was all a lie, but nobody trusted anybody with what they knew.

Everybody knew that no office worker associated with a manual worker and that they were all scared to speak out.

Ivan became a building inspector and gained many friends. He knew the people who passed plans, gave permits, typed documents. People in the building industry turned to Ivan for help and advice, they brought gifts. They put money in his Swiss account. Later he heard threats and became scared. He didn't sleep well any more. He bought the land to build himself a house, he submitted plans hoping that his friends in the urban planning and the shire would pass them. But they wanted a bribe even from Ivan. He felt disappointed, sad, cheated. There was no friendship, just lies and bribes.

Ivan moved to Ljubljana after his brothers and sisters began to work for themselves and he became a building inspector. He first met shy little Barbara when she was ten. She grew up

close to where Ivan lived. He was sure that she was a virgin at sixteen when he began courting her. He would have heard it from other boys if she wasn't. He knew that Barbara would make a good wife, she respected and obeyed him. He found her a job and a room to live in when she wanted to leave school, she needed him and he loved her. Ivan promised himself that he will never hit his wife.

Ivan and Barbara got married as she turned eighteen. Ivan did not know that Barbara wasn't a virgin even after they were married. She was so scared of sex and he just thought of the ways to please her, to protect her. After she told him about Renata, he promised to help her forget the past. He was determined to wipe out the memory of Renata out of Barbara's mind forever, because Renata reminded him of a man that took away his wife's virginity.

He thanked God that nobody knew, that he married a dud. He hated the idea of anyone finding out that he bought a cat in a bag. Fool's gold. Ivan hated Karl who knew his wife and he hoped that he would forget about him somewhere far away.

Ivan craved a happy family life like his parents had before the war.

He had a couple of harmless little affairs before they escaped. Subconsciously he wanted to punish Barbara and rub out the memory of it. He always believed that for a man, sex was sex and nothing more, but a woman having sex, was likely to fall in love and wreck her family."

In the course of his work Ivan met Ada, a wife of an army officer. Her husband travelled to the West often and Ivan spent many hours with Ada and sometimes they slept together. Neither of them spoke of love, they were doing business, she brought gold for Ivan from Italy. Ivan sold the gold to his dentist. It was dangerous having a private dentist making caps and bridges with smuggled gold. Ivan also sold gold to his friends and sent them to the dentist. They were all in it, gold smugglers deep in danger. Anyone could crack under interrogation. People were supposed to use public health services. Doctors were paid wages to look after the sick. So were the dentists. But those that had contacts and money still found their own.

The gap between workers and managers was growing. Workers were busy surviving, managers were busy cashing in on their positions while they grew scared. They had to have political credibility in order to be safe. The slogan: "For the country and Tito", was at the end of every communication. One had to be careful to keep the right company.

One day Ada came to see Ivan at home, frightened she came to warn him. Her Serbian husband was the commandant of the army barrack in Ljubljana and his superiors found a block of gold, he brought from Italy for her, in his work desk. They investigated all their contacts. Ada and her husband were transferred to Serbia as punishment but Ivan became scared. Barbara started to understand that there were limits to Ivan's power and she felt less secure. They started to whisper about escaping. America sounded good. They heard a lot about rotten capitalism in the Western Europe. Ivan didn't like the sound of Germany, remembering the unhappy war experiences. They liked the smiling faces of American relatives from the glossy photographs.

Soon after Ivan got married he paid a guide to help them escape. It took all his savings because guides were risking their lives in 58.

Years later Ivan wrote to the guide from Australia but guide's brother sent a message that the guide was captured with his next escapee and was serving a five year jail sentence. Ivan promised to send money when he came out but the guide died in jail.

"Even if we have to sweep the roads there," promised Barbara enthusiastically as they crossed the border. Sweeping roads was the lowest rung one could fall on the social ladder. Many years later Ivan warned his children to work hard at school so they will not become road sweepers. Nobody wanted to know the road sweeper.

Ivan never forgot the war and the years after the war. "Waste not, want not," became his motto early in life, he considered WASTE a sin. He demanded that not a morsel of food was left on the plate, not a rag was thrown away, that the lights and water were turned off when not in use. He told his children how as children they had to kiss the bread if it fell on the ground, kiss it and eat it. Ivan could not understand or tolerate children's wastefulness.

"Grain on grain makes bread, stone on stone a house. We have to provide for our old age," insisted Ivan.

"We'll live on a pension in our old age like everybody else," laughed his children.

The fear of poverty still haunted Ivan. The hunger of his childhood stayed with him for the rest of his life. The memory of once having been poor never left him. Afraid to slide back Ivan was always mindful of his next step. To provide for his family he relied on no-one and he trusted nobody with his affairs. "I don't want to pay other people to make mistakes for me," he often said when others suggested later that he needed a manager for his vast undertakings.

Ivan hated mediocrity. In Australia he found that educators stifled students who wanted to get ahead of others. The competition was out, everybody had to become equal to those who showed no drive and initiative.

Ivan was annoyed because Australians treated migrants like fragile, helpless, dumb creatures. He realised that a migrant was a hardened, cunning animal who always landed on his feet. The more you held him down the stronger he grew. He wanted his children to strive for excellence, he made them work on everything with diligence.

Ivan was angry later on when welfare provided for those that weren't willing to scratch for their living. The government penalised those that tried to build something, they had to wait and let the lazy and incompetent catch up.

Realising that schools will not teach his children what they needed to learn Ivan set himself as an example to his children. He promised himself never to become a slave to drinking or smoking because he remembered his father who hit his mother when he was drunk. He became nervous and he slapped her when he didn't have wine or cigarettes. Ivan also promised himself never to hit a woman. Seeing other men hit their wives he muttered indignantly that the bastards should pick on their own size.

Unable to reason or argue with his Australian superiors and workmates, Ivan argued with his family. When he got angry, he smashed things. He threw a plate once at TV, because Barbara watched a stupid soapy and didn't hear him coming home from work.

She apologised and cried, she crawled on the floor picking broken bits of the TV screen, wiping, hoping to cover up so the children wouldn't know when they returned from school. But he told them, he told them every time, so they will learn to respect their father.

Barbara learned not to provoke Ivan and if she ever displeased him unintentionally, she always apologised in bed afterwards. Ivan jokingly told his friends that making up after an argument was the best part of the marriage.

Ivan considered Barbara very lucky, she was at home with her children, protected and provided for, she had no idea what he had to go through every day. She wasted her time telling her children fairy tales while he tried to teach them how to survive.

"What good could Snow white and Little Red Riding Hood do for the boys?" he criticised.

"Stories are like cushions," said Barbara.

"Rubbish," said Ivan.

She also encouraged kissing before bedtime. She said that everybody should kiss someone every day. She watched too many soap stories on the television. The boys worked with him while Helena learned to do housework with Barbara. The kids had to learn discipline, they have to learn to obey if they were to survive.

Ivan remembered how he thought them discipline in the early days. The boys had to pick tools and bits of building material before they went home from the building site. Often they carelessly forgot the tool or a chunks of wood. One day Ivan told Leon to pick every tool while Janek had to pick all the wood. When Ivan checked there were six items left around the buildings. Both had to kneel down and take three straps each to learn the discipline, to be more thorough.

"I get no joy out of it, it's for their own good," he said to Barbara but she couldn't understand that, she cried and that made it worse for the boys. She had no idea about bringing up children.

"We should always present a united front," he said. "One day they'll start swearing, they'll hit you like Australian kids do."

"All growing kids rebel a bit, it means nothing," she said.

"What have my kids to rebel against, I ask you. Don't I do enough for them. All I want from them is to work and save for their own future. I won't be here forever. I want the best for my family, I do my best and give my best. Nobody ever did anything for me, I got it the hard way and people always looked up to me." Ivan chose his friends carefully. He wanted good Christian company for his family. He wanted to teach his kids proper values.

Ivan learned early in life that everybody had a price, everybody on the line expected to be paid. Some were paid to do things, others not to tell about them doing things. You could never afford to make enemies but you never had real friends either where work was concerned.

When Barbara eventually told him about Renata, Ivan felt betrayed. He knew that his valueless diamond looked pretty, that others were fooled by its brightness but he wasn't fooled any more. The nagging thought, that she used him often entered his mind. He wanted to lay the earth before his wife and treat her like a queen but she disappointed him. He reasoned that it wasn't so bad since nobody else knew about it. She was not likely to

play up after she told him. He tried to convince himself that it didn't really matter how she felt about him as long as she obeyed and behaved respectfully.

Barbara became eager enough to please him, she did not resist Ivan in bed any more after she told him but he liked her better when she resisted. Ivan assumed that she always enjoyed sex and only pretended to make him think how innocent she was. The thought that she used and cheated him made him bitter and something died in him. He promised to understand and tried to keep his promise, but he never forgot. He just pushed it out of his mind.

When they arrived in Australia Ivan felt devastated. Suddenly he became a nobody, he was without influence and authority and he had no friends. He had to prove himself all over again because he just couldn't stand being nobody for long. He worked and worked and saved and saved.

When he worked in the Snowy Mountains he offered to help with the repairs of the church in Cooma. Fellow parishioners appreciated his building skills and called him to their homes to do jobs. That's how he met first Australians. Often he became angry and felt powerless because he could not argue with foreigners. He didn't know the words, so he smiled and they considered him friendly.

The word prejudice cropped up, other migrants mentioned that Australians hated wogs. Ivan said nothing, one can do nothing about others, he concluded. One can only change and learn to become better than those calling him names. Nobody ever uttered a word 'wog' in his presence because Ivan spoke with authority and others listened. He spoke little.

Discrimination and prejudice became the household words later on. Everybody wanted to get onto the anti-discrimination wagon. The reporters tried to pry open the minds and hearts of the migrants to find the hurt, to expose the bleeding hearts and to thrill the viewers. They explained the intricate slights of the majority against the minorities so nobody would miss out on the ill intent of the hurtful people. Trying to sound righteous the reporters often uncovered the hurts and vulnerabilities people wanted to hide because they wanted to look strong and invincible despite the knocks they suffered.

The reporters wrote about THEM being prejudiced, but who was them, didn't everybody want to be them? Ivan hated all the fuzz they made.

Australians made no difference to their lives really until kids started school and began their complaints with: why can everybody else--.

"I don't care what Australians do or say," yelled Ivan. He began to organise Slovenian gatherings. They remembered the old times and talked about familiar places in their own language. The children had nothing to remember, of course, but they enjoyed playing together as much as children of any family do. They started to build clubs to make their growing children feel more at home, but kids wanted to be like their school peers, like Australians who were allowed to do everything. Janek complained that unlike Ivan, Australians never treated their growing up children as five years olds. Janek just became a teenager and thought he knew everything.

Ivan had enough problems as he worked for Snowy Mountains scheme. Some people annoyed him severely. Like that Hungarian bastard Pista. Ivan wanted a chisel but didn't know the English name for it. Pista knew what Ivan wanted but he taunted him. Ivan would

have hit him but didn't want to risk his job so he swallowed his pride and assisted the jerk in constructing the frame for cementing the tunnel. Pista knew nothing about framing but for the first time in Australia the jerk enjoyed superiority at Ivan's expense, because he spoke a little bit of English.

"He'll get his," promised Ivan. The law of the boomerang will catch up with him. Ivan read a story about the magic boomerang in Janek's school book. The boomerang always came back.

Pista kept yelling at a Greek electrician Dimitri: "sparky, sparky." Dimitri didn't know that Pista meant him, that sparky meant electrician. He kept on working until Pista leaned on him and yelled in his ear: "sparky." Dimitri turned around suddenly and dropped him with one blow. He pounded on Pista, he'd have killed him as he kept saying: "me Dimitri, me electrician, me no sparky, you sparky bastard." Everybody roared laughing. They had to restrain Dimitri and pick up Pista off the ground. Both were marched to the office and Dimitri was sacked. He had no way of explaining why he attacked Pista who was now bleeding all over the place. Others told Ivan later that Pista was shouting at the hotel. Ivan wanted to see why Pista was shouting, but Pista wasn't shouting at all, he just bought beer for everybody so he could boast how he fixed the poor Greek bastard. "That kind of shouting," realised Ivan.

Ivan remembered how he learned the word bastard. Someone called him a poor bastard, because he didn't understand what he had to do. He looked the word up in the dictionary and never spoke to the man again. Later he learned that everybody could be a bit of a bastard. There was a despicable bastard as well as a bloody bastard and a poor bastard and the bastard from the bush but all the bastards related more to the person's character or situation than to the legitimacy of his birth.

Ivan wandered how one can become a fair dinkum Aussie. He heard the phrase often, being a fair dinkum sounded good but he never asked what it meant. If you were fair dinkum or dinki-di you were true and honest or worthy, but what was dinkum. Much later someone told him that in the gold rush days Chinese men looked for gold and called out dinkum which for them meant gold. "Fair dinkum," said Ivan to himself. "I bet not many fair dinkum Aussies know where the word came from."

Ivan was determined to learn English fast so he could start on his own.

Ivan never took a day off like Australians did. Feeling sick and feverish one day he took a break for a few minutes and sat on the cold stones of the tunnel. A foreman came to him saying: "Why don't you chuck a sickie?" Ivan understood that the foreman wanted him to give up his job if he couldn't work, he felt insulted and staggered on. Later on he learned that all the other workers chucked a sickie once a month, they had a right to one sick day off.

There was a real rat race of desperate migrants in the tunnel. Australians were narrow minded but they were also childishly kind, naive and innocent. They believed that a gang of non-English speaking slaves would do anything and say yes sir forever. They did it only because they did not understand what the boss was saying. Australians knew nothing about the cunning that comes with surviving the war, communism, migration, assimilation and integration. Migrants were world wise and Australian democracy was a child's play for most. Nothing could stop an Asian refuge. He'd have survived bloodshed, regimes, starvation,

death of the family, cannibalism on the boat. Australia was a nursery game for a veteran like that. No wonder Australians got a bit resentful of all the attention given to these tough newcomers.

Ivan worked hard, he worked long hours, he had to struggle harder to remain ahead of those that stopped struggling. In the evenings kids wanted to play with Ivan but he just wanted to relax and listen to the news. Sometimes he played with Helena because she was quiet, gentle and beautiful, she alone seemed to be lovingly waiting for him to come home. The boys were fighting most of the time, they were closer to Mum anyway, she was always protecting them. He felt that the three of them were against him. Janek annoyed little Leon and Leon squealed: "Janek hit me, Janek pulled a face at me, Janek broke my car, Janek pinched me, pulled my hair." Why couldn't they play like normal kids. Ivan watched his bank account grow and the children grew up almost unnoticed. They put up with things but Barbara often cried.

"I come home from a 12 hour shift and you cry," Ivan complained. "You are sitting at home playing with kids, while I have to work in the dirt to save for our home. I don't work for myself you know, I work for you, for my family.

The unemployment began in the seventies and they blamed the government for bringing too many migrants into the country.

Ivan and Milan created a lot of the welcome employment in Linden at that time. People looked up to them because they offered security. Milan and Ivan often talked about Australian economy. Janek and Leon welcomed the break and the chance to join in the conversation.

"They should have learned something from the rabbits. Rabbits were brought into this country for sport and food but the little bunny liked it here and has almost eaten them out of the farming land. They made millions of holes in the ground and they eat any grass that is still growing. We'll never get rid of them."

"The friendly toad took over Queensland," said Milan. "It was brought to eat the grubs that ate the roots of the sugar cane. The toad wasn't meant to multiply and take over the whole country. I visited friends on the coast and they arranged for everybody to go toad hunting in the evening. Each was given a bucket, a torch and the gloves. The little toads jump like grasshoppers on the lawn. The big ones look revolting and they are poisonous. Any animal eating the toad dies."

"The introduced species have almost wiped the native flora and fauna of Australia. A little tubby cat killed the native birds, the trout ate native fish," explained Ivan's son Leon. he only entered high school and already he understood what Ivan was saying.

"Australians imported the fox for sport, but the fox outfoxed them and is doing her own hunting now" agreed Ivan glad that at least one of his children saw things his way.

"Even Australian dingo is not really Australian," said Milan.

"Australian is what fits with its eco system," said Leon. "One thing depends on another. A marsupial bunny called bandicoot used to bury tree seeds in the ground, now the bandicoot has gone and so have the trees."

“The emu bush almost disappeared. Its seed has to be first swallowed by an emu to digest the hard shell before it is planted with emu droppings,” said Milan.

“Australians are bringing more and more diverse Asian migrants into Australia. Old pensioners bring young Filipino brides to start families at government expense,” said Ivan.

“People without work get bored, they miss their extended family, they demand family reunions,” said Milan. “Every new family member coming to Australia has his own next of kin. When they come here they settle down in the government house with the dole that is better than the wages in their own countries. Once settled they sponsor next of kin from their own country to join them.”

“Business migration is even worse,” said Ivan. “Crooks who made money in their poor countries are allowed to come. They send money back home for other crooks to have a chance to come to Australia. Criminals send their money back to recruit new partners.”

“How would you choose new migrants,” asked Janek.

“We don’t need new migrants,” said Ivan abruptly.

“The church needs more good Catholics, multinational companies want more consumers, politicians want more votes, pop stars want a bigger applause. We need more people. We’ll multiply and buy until we get buried in our own rubbish.” Janek had to oppose his bigoted father, at fifteen he already felt that he had a duty to speak out for the underprivileged. He also became interested in the land conservation since the Green movement started. He was against development and progress and favoured recycling and perma-culture.

“I wish Australia kept the White Australia policy,” said Milan ignoring Janek’s interruption.

“Nixon said that US troops wouldn’t protect us anymore, so our politicians started to make friends in Asia. After the war in Vietnam we took in the first refugees and the flood gates opened,” explained Ivan.

“They are all God’s people,” mocked Janek.

Ivan resented the fact that his son had no apparent drive, for Janek the initiative and hard, honest work counted for little. During the seventies and eighties things changed everywhere. A person surviving on his ability and determination gained no more respect than the one living on the welfare. Ivan was unhappy with the new democratic Australia, he despised multi-culturism and all the soft options of the welfare government. The media glorified the unproductive no-hopers, the government promoted un-competitiveness, the multinationals wanted everybody to become hooked on their products. The weirdoes of all sorts held the balance of power. The little fringe groups became Australian dictators.

“There are too many Asian criminals already here,” said Milan sensing Ivan’s unrest.

“Asian people came from the killing fields, they are cunning, they learned to survive. They learned to tread lightly because they walked on the minefields. They watched for the bombs coming with the sunshine. They couldn’t trust people when every bush was alive with enemies,” reasoned Janek. Ivan knew that his son learned all this propaganda at school. He was just a parrot repeating what they want him to repeat.

“They’ll squeeze us out, you’ll see,” said Ivan.

“He’s right, Janek, one of them is nice at your table but there are billions waiting to share what we have,” said Milan to keep peace in

When Ivan arrived to Australia he drove himself hard towards his goals. Rather than face rejection of the society Ivan stepped out and lived on the edge of it, in the safety of self-imposed isolation. He looked at Australian strange silly ways, he tasted their tasteless food, listened to their loud music, dressed in their casual clothes, adopted their casual words. Ivan was happy with the way he provided for his family and gradually he began to understand Australians as well. It came as a revelation to Ivan that they didn't invent their strange ways and laws and customs to annoy him and make him different. Their ways weren't there to shame his ways. Australians weren't different on purpose. Their customs evolved before Ivan arrived. Ivan was what he was, there were many of them and it was easier for Ivan to learn their ways. Ivan’s ways were unknown to them, they knew only what he showed them .

They laughed because they were happy, they felt right at home, they knew ins and outs, they knew all the words they needed, all the facts. Ivan understood that it wasn’t really their fault that he didn’t feel at home here. They weren’t smart just to annoy him. Maybe they believed that migrants wanted to be left alone, maybe they even felt threatened by them. Ivan also realised that there were many who spoke English but didn’t know half of what he knew.

“I think I’ll retire from the council at the next election,” said Ivan at the beginning of 1990. He became a shire councillor during the building boom in the seventies. “I need a rest,” he said to Barbara one Sunday afternoon. But he never crossed his name from the nomination form.

“You are the longest serving councillor in Linden,” said Barbara. She knew that Ivan enjoyed every minute of it and would be most disappointed if he wasn’t re-elected.

Ivan remembered looking at the plaque in the Council hall. His name was at the top of all the other people who ever served Linden Valley. A thought came to him: “I made a mark, maybe my grandchildren will point out my name to their friends and say: my grandfather was the first. The people of Linden will remember.”

Ivan sometimes joined other councillors in the local RSL club for lunch after council meetings. They talked about local problems, about politics, they complained about kids and bludgers. They told yarns but they rarely mentioned wives or homes, they never invited each other home.

Ivan learned to enjoy the privacy of his own counsel. Gradually Australian strange ways became less threatening, he accepted them as they were but he remained proud of who he was, of his ability and power to make a difference. They had the safety of the numbers, they were there before him but he patiently and consistently demonstrated to them that he stood for something. He didn’t want to be one of them he stood on his own.

Ivan needed something to get up for in the morning, something to succeed at. He loved competition and making money. He didn’t spend much, but he liked the security money offered.

“I am glad you and mum stayed together,” said Leon during 1989. We might bring home grandchildren for you to look after.”

“Why shouldn’t we stay together?” asked Ivan.

“I was only joking,” said Leon.

So Kim was pregnant, Leon was the youngest and got married the first. Ivan looked forward to having grandchildren around. He missed the challenge of working, work was the only thing he knew, the only thing he was good at.

“Why do we rush,” asked Barbara. “What’s the point?”

“You have to do something.”

“What for?” she laughed. “Nobody really cares what we do, what we have.”

“I care. I care about the future of Slovenia.” Ivan believed that Slovenia needed him, he was always first to respond when Slovenia needed help. “I have to be an example to others,” he said to Barbara.

“To show off,” thought Barbara.

Now all his efforts were paying off. In 1990 they all agreed that communism was bad. They didn’t need Ivan to tell them so. He suddenly realised how dispensable he was and the realisation saddened him.

“It is our Christian duty to forget and forgive,” Ivan said but he wasn’t convinced.

“Do you feel betrayed,” asked Barbara.

“Why should I,” he said. “No matter what others do or say they can never take away from me what I have done for Slovenians in Australia. I worked for years, I begged and organised while others criticised. I know that nobody can even come near to what I have done.”

“Why aren’t you happy then?” asked Barbara.

“She is reading my mind again, we do that more and more,” thought Ivan.

“I am happy,” he said but they both knew that he wasn’t, the fight was taken out of his hands, he wasn’t needed any more.

Ivan collected for earthquakes in Slovenia, for floods, for democratic elections, he supported Slovenian publications, churches, conservative politicians. “If I don’t give, nobody will. People look up to me,” he said.

“You like your name in the paper,” joked Barbara.

“You have no idea what it’s all about. You have no national pride, you are nobody. You stick with your Australian friends, you cook for them, that’s the only reason they come, you mean nothing to them.” Ivan couldn’t understand Barbara. She liked to explore with new friends, go unfamiliar places, she drifted about, browsed, touched clothes, tried them on aimlessly wandering from shop to shop. Ivan spent little, when he needed clothes he bought them and wore them until he wore them out.

“If you need that, buy it,” he said knowing that she did not need it, she knew that he knew that she could go without.

“I only want to look,” she said feeling guilty.

The Bible was a source of strength for Ivan. He read the Lenten liturgy about Jesus transfigured on the mountain. Ivan felt that he too was coming to his mountain, he too was becoming transfigured, changed. “We all want to be changed, to be utterly other on the mountain of our life,” thought Ivan accepting his suffering, work and deprivations as his

cross. The Christ on the Mount Olive wore the white robes of tranquillity, but it was difficult for Ivan to surrender and find peace within himself. He still had to reach his goal to achieve contentment, he still felt pain and sadness, he was still struggling. He believed in the ultimate transfiguration on the mountain while he contentedly built his castle, flying all the time towards the better future. He couldn't understand why his family didn't rejoice in his flight.

Barbara told Ivan that he did too much for Slovenia. "After all neither you nor your children ever intend to live there." But Ivan believed that deep within his children there was something so sacred, so very Slovenian, that it will open up one day and declare itself loud and clear. Maybe one day they will want to go home.

"I want my children to be proud of what they are," he said. "I want them to accept their background and build on it. They don't know it yet, but one day they will tell their own children about being Slovenian. One day they'll want to look back and I want them to be proud of what they find." Ivan believed, that part of Slovenia belonged to him and his family. He wanted to claim that part.

*Now may the God of patience and comfort
grant you to be like minded toward one another.*

It is difficult to imagine that a handful of residents of a small planet circling an insignificant star in a small galaxy has as their aim a complete understanding of the entire universe, a small spec of creation truly believing it is capable of comprehending the whole.

Murray Gell-Mann, physicist.

Fortune hunters

Marko came to Lightning Ridge a few days after he came to Australia in 1963. He came to make his fortune in opal.

Marko was a son of a peasant family in Slovenia and he grew up acutely aware of his poverty . One of five children he was often hungry and waiting for his mother to bring home food for her family. She worked on the fields for other peasants and when she returned, tired, in the evening, the kids jumped to untie her apron. They thought only of their hunger and blamed mum if she didn't bring enough or if she came late. They never even considered how mum felt. Marko believed that as the oldest, he should have helped her.

Marko's father worked in the vineyard and often came home drunk, singing through the forest. He chased mum through the house and sometimes he caught her in an embrace to dance with him to his song. Mum often ran out of the house to feed pigs or chooks, so he chased the kids. He hugged them and bounced them on his knees and they laughed delighted because that was the only nice thing that happened to them. Dad sang silly songs and the tears rolled down his eyes and they asked for more. Mum was always busy, she nagged them to help her but dad told her that kids should have fun.

As he grew up, Marko heard the whispers about his father and another woman. They were heard singing in the vineyard's storage room. Kids teased Marko about that but he was strong and he hit them to shut them up. He became aware that people avoided his parents. Barbara's dad looked the other way if he had to meet Marko's dad. People changed direction or crossed the road to avoid his father.

Marko became ashamed of his parents. One day he went to the vineyard to get some grapes for mum. He heard the laughter from the storage room above the vineyard. He saw a fancy basket full of grapes and red peaches under the peach tree outside. He realised that the basket belonged to a woman who laughed with his dad inside. He grabbed the basket and ran home to his mother with it. His mother ran to the vineyard and abused the woman who was drunk with her husband's wine. They yelled at each other and other wine growers came out of their places to listen. Marko hated mum's loud shrieks, but she quickly got rid of the other woman who was much younger and prettier. Mum kept the basket and whenever Marko saw it he remembered and was sorry for bringing it home.

Marko began to swear and went out of his way to annoy people who seemed to stare at him. He got in trouble at home and at school. Some kids were afraid of him and followed him obediently, others even saw him as their hero, but Marko always wanted to be with those that avoided him.

When Barbara left the village to go to school in Ljubljana, Marko was already half grown up and suddenly he felt ready to leave home as well. In Ljubljana he found a job in the textile

Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like minded toward one another.

factory. It was impossible to find accommodation so he slept on the railway station's bench. He once met Barbara on the street but she was a student with lots of other students around her and he was alone. She lived in a fancy house and he slept on the railway station's bench.

During the second spring in Ljubljana Marko met Alenka, a sweet young factory worker. Their romance made both forget the unpleasantness of everyday reality. The spring flowers carried the hope of the rosy future for them. They spent every spare moment together right through the following summer.

In the autumn when it became too cold to sleep on the bench the police chased Marko away. It wouldn't do to have him freeze in the night. Marko and Alenka decided to get married and move in with Alenka's family on the outskirts of the city. That's where problems started again; her family tried to boss him around and turn Alenka against him. Their son Martin was born soon after and Marko felt trapped. He wanted to be somebody, live in his own house, make his son proud.

Marko escaped over the border to Austria. Austria transported the able bodied people further out to other countries. Marko arrived to Australia by Qantas aeroplane and met migrants of many nationalities coming on the same plane. He landed in Sydney on his twenty second birthday. On the long bus journey from Sydney to a migrant camp in Bonegilla, he sat next to Nikola. This Croatian migrant told him that his cousin Stipe will pick him up and take him opal mining in Lightning Ridge. Stipe later told them that there was money, lots of money in opal if you were lucky. Black opal from Lightning Ridge was the most precious and beautiful gem in the world.

Marko eagerly joined the two men believing that he was due for some luck.

The road to Lightning Ridge seemed endless to Marko but he was happy because the monotonous scenery took him away from everything he wanted to forget. The trees ahead promised to turn into forests but they were really just scattered clumps of shade for the thousands of sheep. The country side had no landmarks that he could remember but he welcomed the distance and the aloneness. The mirages on the flat country encircled everything within into a pretend ocean. The trees in the distance seemed to grow out of the glistening water. The water turned into dry parched, cracked dirt as they came near. Everything seemed unreal to Marko.

The dirt road brought them to a small dusty settlement with mullock heaps of opal dirt around the miner's camps. Cut away from the ghosts of the past, Marko was determined to make a go of it. The old miners told him that in Lightning Ridge everyone had an equal chance and fortunes were made overnight. People who were nobodies one day became millionaires the next.

There was a story about Paul, a poor Hungarian Gypsy, who built a humpy in the bush. As he dug a hole for the toilet he bottomed on opal and became rich. Miners came to seek Paul's advice about finding opal, Paul became an expert in everything, overnight he became well known, respected and loved and sought. The dreams were made of true stories like that.

Among strangers Marko learned to speak English fast. The mining vocabulary did not require too many words and all were related to opal. Tourists often enquired about the meanings of the local expressions. Marko felt good explaining to them about angel stones, gouging, fossicking, puddling, specking, propping, about the biscuit bend and tailings and bottoming.

Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like minded toward one another.

Marko was fascinated by the name Lightning Ridge. His Australian partner Bill liked to explain about the town's history.

At the turn of the century a shepherd grazed his sheep on the spot where the town stood now. Being the highest spot for hundreds of miles a lightning once struck it and killed a shepherd, his dog and six hundred sheep. The place remained known as Lightning Ridge.

Shepherds found colourful silica flushed out by erosion and washed by floods. Fascinated by the shiny stones the shepherds sunk the first shafts in 1901. The first miners came to Lightning Ridge soon after. They were obstructed and persecuted by land owners who wanted to stop these vagabonds trespassing on their land. When the graziers could not break the miners' spirit they fenced off the water and then poisoned the water with an excuse that they wanted to exterminate the rabbits. Without the water and with their horses impounded, the miners paid heavy tolls on food supplies.

"Those men really had a lot more grit than we have today," remembered Bill. But the serious mining only started in the sixties. New machinery was invented from old bits of steel often found at the tip. Every miner became an inventor of the tools he used.

Lightning Ridge was a good town in the sixties when Marko arrived. Nobody locked their camps, there was no stealing or thieving, miners could leave their opal and equipment on the field and it would not be touched.

Books were written about Lightning Ridge and each writer coloured his story by an individual experience to weave a rainbow of truth and fiction, secrets and myths. Touched by the miracle of the stone, writers were moved to tell their story and the theories about the way to find opal. They called opal a sun kissed beauty, a wondrous rainbow, the joy to the spirit, the peace to the mind. The splendour in the palette of opal colours caused the grown men to cry, tremble and shout.

Miners chose and surveyed their fifty by fifty metres claim, drew a map and paid a small fee to register it in their name.

The experts agreed that there was no way to tell where opal deposits were hiding, yet some miners still tried to divine opal by holding two wires in front of them. They marched into the bush and the wires sometimes crossed in front of them. The diviners assured the newcomers that opal was underneath. The old miners laughed at them because the diviners never found opal for themselves. Others looked for the signs above ground, they tried to guess the spot by the vegetation or the stars above them.

People liked to peg their claims next to those who found opal and most seemed to be right next to the big guys who found millions. It was like they were standing in line for lady luck to smile on them, right next in line to be touched by providence.

They dug shafts by pick and shovel at the beginning, later they used jack hammers, and in the eighties everybody hired the drilling rig to drill the holes for them. In the nineties they sunk little mechanised diggers and loaders into the shaft to do the manual work.

There was never a dull moment in Lightning Ridge for the miners in the Diggers Rest hotel. There was always music and a happy story going around to keep the hopes alive.

Sometimes miners bottomed on the opal dirt but often it was a false level and all the work was in vain. Even if the level was good, more often than not, it did not carry opal. "You

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don't really know what you've got until you cut it," warned Bill. "And you don't know what's it worth until you sell it.

People held their breath while their opal was cut. Sometimes the surprise under the patch was excitingly pleasant but more often a flaw killed the stone. Sand was often imbedded in the middle of the brightly coloured stone and it reduced the value of it drastically. One theory said that opal was formed where there was a fault in the earth formation and the water pierced the ground and continually sipped through the sand stone.

The bush around the tiny township was surrounded by camps. Some were made from old tin and Hessian, lime and iron stone made stronger homes, log huts were pretty. Later in the eighties many brought their caravans and built shacks around them.

The rain water tanks often ran out in hot summers and only few miners could afford to run a generator for electricity. Most had dirt floors and candle lights, many brought water in large containers and used it sparingly.

The dust didn't worry the men as much as the floods that turned the black soil into a greasy mess impossible to drive through. They had to abandon mining and many went specking. They looked over the field if the rain that washed the dirt away had uncovered a speck of colour. The stories were told of the tourists who found a fortune specking after the rain, everybody knew someone lucky and the stories became the myths.

Thousands of hopeful tourists descended on Lightning Ridge every school holiday or long weekend and many returned regularly or stayed until they ran out of money.

Stipe introduced Nikola and Marko to pig chasing. The flood waters brought hundreds of pigs from the farms up North. The pigs became feral and, hiding in the huge wheat paddocks most of the time, they were hard to spot except when they ventured along the bore drain to get a drink. Farmers welcomed hunters who got rid of the menace as long as they kept the gates shut and didn't disturb other stock.

Showing off his exuberance and skills Stipe drove his old ute into the bush over the logs and drains. The boys and the pig dogs tried to hold on at the back. He didn't want the sows because they were always pregnant so he directed the dogs towards the chosen boars. When they mustered the pig, the dog jumped out and caught it by the ear and then the men followed. They pulled the pig's tail, kicked his hind legs in to make it fall on its back before they put it in a cage. They brought home eight wild boars that first evening. At home Stipe grabbed the tail of the one at the cage door and pulled it out and onto his back. "Grab the back legs," he yelled. They pushed the boar, head first, into the steel frame, so it couldn't move. Stipe quickly cut into the flesh and castrated the pig. "Catch," he yelled. Nikola wanted to have a go next, he wielded a knife towards the other men asking them if he could perhaps practice first on either of them since they had no use for their balls here in the bush.

"You would have a go if it was whiskey we drowned you in afterwards," laughed Stipe pouring the antiseptic over the pig's wound. "Now comes the bath," he said as he poured kerosene over the bleeding boar to kill the lice before he released it into the sty. "In a couple of days they'll want to eat again and then I'll clean their guts out with the dewormer. Once on grain they'll grow fat in no time."

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Marko pretended to enjoy the sport and grabbed the tail of the boar. Stipe spread its legs to let Nikola get the balls. But Marko made a mistake and patted the boar's ear. Like a flash of lightning the boar twisted its head and slashed Marko's hand with its protruding tusk. He let go and the pig bolted with half his manhood intact. "Get him," yelled Nikola and Stipe joined him chasing the pig into the scrub.

Terrified, Marko poured detol over his gaping wound and wrapped the hand into his shirt. "That's the last of cutting balls for me," he said to himself. At least he had an excuse because he couldn't tell them that he felt sorry for the animals and couldn't cut them.

"Two months will see them fat. In the middle of winter we'll kill them," said Stipe. In July most Yugoslavs in Lightning Ridge came to Stipe's place. They brought cartons of beer and bottles of whiskey to recreate their memories. Marko was the only Slovenian among them. Nationalities forgotten they all spoke Serbo-Croatian as directed by their Yugoslav government at home. They needed the unity, a dozen or so men lost in the bush among strangers. Marko thought that the winter in Lightning Ridge was much like summer at home.

Aboriginal girls came and got drunk with the men. They provided a lot of fun and didn't mind the men's boisterous sexual advances.

They killed eight fat boars and selected pieces for smoking. The rest they minced for sausages, arguing all the time about the recipes used in their homes. Girls were generous with their help but they followed men's instructions for the cuisine they were unaccustomed to.

Yugoslavs preferred pork to lamb and mutton, they even preferred rabbits but most rabbits were poisoned now. The farmers spread the poison throughout their land because the rabbits dug into the ground and spread the obnoxious weeds into the waterways and so into the outback. Like the wild rabbit, domestic animals introduced to Australia also adopted to warm conditions quickly. Without natural predators they easily competed with the native fauna for natural resources. There were no fences in the early days and many pigs, horses and buffaloes escaped into the bush where they bred uncontrollably. The graziers were afraid that ferals would bring foot and mouth disease to the continent.

The farmers who cleared and ploughed miles of land were afraid that pigs would destroy their crops. The golden grain paddocks swayed in the wind as far as the eye could see during the wet season but during the drought the land was bare and the feral animals dug for roots into the scorched ground. As the wind came it lifted the precious soil and made enormous dust-bowls out of the country. The thin layer of the soil was becoming thinner and the desert was spreading.

Flies bothered Marko in the bush. Trying to cook on the camp fire he could not compete with millions of flies descending on any spot touched by food. The newly introduced cattle, sheep and pigs produced tons of manure for flies to breed on in the hot summers. Flies had no natural enemy in Australia until they brought the African beetle to digest the piles of manure scattered in the bush. But the flies persisted and Australians trying to cope with them invented hats with fly screens and corks bobbing down around their faces. Gradually they sprayed the flies dead with mortein. Now they only appeared in spring and autumn unable to resist the warmth and the dung smell. There were no flies in the heat of summer or in the cold of winter.

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On his arrival Marko wandered around opal fields and spotted an unusual concrete structure. He stopped next to the sign Bush Observatory, visitors welcome. He was amazed seeing the rooms dedicated to philosophers, astronomers and scientists. In the concrete was written a story and as Marko began to read, Bill came out of his shack and explained. Bill was a scientist once and he was wrongfully accused of murder. He spent four years in jail before he was pardoned but he never wanted to join the rat race again. The observatory was his monument, his dream. He mined for opal but mining was just a hobby, something to do when he wasn't building. Money wasn't important to Bill, he lived cheaply and spent most of his money on the steel and the cement for the astrological and astronomical structures in the middle of the bush. Marko liked the old man and decided to work with him on percentage because Bill had his own equipment.

"There is a story behind every man in the bush," said Bill with a twinkle in his eye. The camps of bushmen stretched into the virgin bush land and Marko suddenly rejoiced in becoming a bushman. The men accepted each other's anonymity and shared of themselves only what they wanted to share. The anxieties and fears of the past were replaced with dreams for the future. Marko felt equal to his fellow men for the first time in his life. The men's language was as strange to him as his was to them and so were their customs but diversity was welcome in the bush. Marko became one of the boys with his story safely tucked away. The events from the past could be recalled at random and leisure. He could pretend to be who he wanted to be. Everybody had a story and a dream in Lightning Ridge.

During the working day Bill spoke in rare monosyllabic words but as they sat around the camp-fire in the evening he wondered about Greek philosophers and famous astronomers as he looked at the sky sprinkled with most brilliant stars. On dry hot summer nights most miners slept outside on makeshift beds to catch the breeze but during wet periods voracious hordes of mosquitoes forced them inside. They were reluctant to go outside even to cook.

Marko remembered Bill donning a woollen balaclava on his head as he rushed to his small camp-fire to get the billy can to make tea. That was Marko's second visit to the old miner and he stopped with Bill in his camp until he built his own.

The magic of Bill's words and the silence of the bush brought back pleasant memories. Marko worked hard because he planned to go home and bring Alenka with him. She sent him a photo of his son Martin holding a puppy. Alenka wrote that his son started to say daddy. Marko looked at the photo of his wife and his son often and the image of them waiting had imprinted itself into his mind like a colourful rainbow.

Marko tried to save money to bring out Alenka and his son. He met Edna, exciting, willing and beautiful Aboriginal girl who welcomed him into her large family. He told her about Alenka and his son and Edna seemed pleased to share in Marko's fertility with the white woman in Slovenia.

Marko put off going home, Edna had a baby daughter and he relaxed with her family. They mined together and shared their resources in an easy undemanding mateship. They all looked up to him and tried to please him.

Bill and Marko were lucky, they sold some nice stones from a patch they dug together in the first month. Being new on the field, Marko knew nothing about opal but he always remembered Bill's words: "It is easier to find opal than to find a partner. As long as you are

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not after the same thing you can trust your friend or your brother, but on opal we are all greedy for the same thing. Many friendships are broken on account of opal. People start off trusting each other, they couldn't be bothered with contracts, they work happily until they find money, but then most look again at their vague verbal agreement and try to get more for themselves out of the partnership. Bill liked to sit in the Diggers rest hotel telling stories about the gems he found and saw. When others argued about the power of politics and religion Bill insisted that the power of man's greed wins hands down every time.

Marko and Bill found a huge nobby of opal weighing almost half a kilo. Bill showed it in the pub and it passed from hand to hand and from lips to lips as his mates licked it to examine it for any traces of colour. A bluish-green lines were noticed on the grey background but there was no commercial value in the colour. It was an interesting specimen and Bill's fellow drinker, offered a hundred pounds for it. That was a lot of money in those days for a colourless stone. He wanted it as a birthday present for a friend. His friend, a local shopkeeper, used it as a paper-weight on the counter of his shop.

An opal buyer spotted the nobby some months later and paid two hundred pounds for it. He took it to Japan to serve as the background piece for his opal exhibition. His Japanese business partner was fascinated by the large ugly looking blob of grey potch. He wanted to buy the piece to contrast with his colourful opal collection. As the nobby was passed into his hands it fell on the marble floor of the exhibition hall and it chipped at the end. The opal buyer picked it up and his face changed as he slowly kneeled onto the floor to cover the stone. The heart of the paper-weight nobby was a pure red on black gem. Scooping the broken stone he excused himself and went into his room where he looked into the mass of red fire, where purple, violet and green flames moved like flamenco dancers.

"This is, this is," he stuttered as he searched for the name that would be able to portray some of the beauty the stone carried. "This is a bleeding broken heart," he named the stone as he made a booking for the first plane to take him back to Lightning Ridge.

The local cutter quietly locked the workshop after he glanced at the nobby. He took out a bottle of whiskey and they sipped slowly as the nobby passed again and again from hand to hand. They held it to the eye, under the table, far away, under the light and magnifying glass and finally they left it on the table to look at them.

"What are we going to do with it," asked the cutter as the daylight faded.

"We'll decide tomorrow," said the buyer exhausted from the admiration.

The next day they talked and decided. One large heart shaped stone to keep and enough little ones to make the man a millionaire. The cutter got a generous commission and both men agreed to keep the story of the stone a secret. But no story of this proportion could be kept secret for long. You can't hide a fire, there will be smoke and the heat and rumours. Nobody knew how it got out, it just boiled over, people simply had to share their knowledge of that rare beauty. When Marko finally heard about it he felt sad and let down by Bill.

"You should have known, You had been in the Ridge for ages, you know everything about opal," he accused

"Sometimes you have to break the heart to see what's in it," said Bill almost unconcerned.

"Go and see the buyer," said Edna. "He might give you a share."

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But Marko was too sick at heart for the beauty he had and lost. "You can't be that lucky twice," he said as he left the partnership with Bill to start on his own.

A group of singers came from Slovenia at that time. They toured Australia and they wanted to see the bush. Marko was happy to show them underground, he took them all over dirt roads in the opal field. He told them about the million dollar stone he found and gave away. The story about his lost opal fascinated them. Busy amateur film maker heard the part about Marko finding the stone worth millions of dollars. He narrated the story into the camera about Marko who became a millionaire overnight. Marko never saw the film which was taken to Slovenia and was shown on television in Ljubljana.

During the next year Marko received letters from people who claimed to be his distant relatives. Neighbours and friends wrote and wished him well. They all wanted to hear from him. Pleasantly surprised, Marko planned his trip home, when he received a letter from Alenka. His son Martin also wrote the first letter to his father. He told Marko that he loved him and that he was hoping to buy a motor bike soon. Marko wanted to go home and surprise Alenka and Martin with a new motor bike.

A few weeks later his mother wrote and she told Marko that everybody was talking about him and how selfish he was for not sending money to his family. They all saw him on television and knew about his millions. Marko was bitterly disappointed. He realised that all the well wishers were after the millions he never had. He never wrote a single letter home since.

Marko never worried about being poor since them either. He decided that the only people worth knowing were those who stopped with him while he had nothing. But deep down he also knew that poor only stopped with the poor because the rich did not want them.

Edna volunteered to go mining with Marko and they began to share their fortunes and their camp. Just as well Marko bought his own compressor and jack-pick. They dug a thirty metre long trench without finding a trace. Edna filled the wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow and tipped the dirt into the bucket to be lifted out by the hoist. When the truck was full they took the clay dirt to the puddler to wash. As they waited, they sat in the dirt, drank beer and smoked in expectation. Going through the tailings was always exciting as the colourful silica shone in the clay mud. But they found nothing after they drove for over thirty metres into the dirt.

"That's it," said Marko one day and climbed out of the mine to switch off the compressor. Edna wanted to see how hard jacking was, she lifted the jack pick and pressed it into the grey dirt on the side of the dead trench just before Marko switched off the compressor. The glassy sound told her that she drilled into the opal even before she saw the rainbow coloured chips on the dirt. Dropping the jack she yelled for Marko. Tears were in their eyes as they embraced.

"There is more, must be more," whispered Marko in awe. But there wasn't. They cut a few tiny red stones from the chips on the ground and feverishly followed the direction of the trace for another twenty metres. The red stone, only centimetres from the surface was the only stone but the story of it spread like stories do in Lightning Ridge. "It could have been a twenty carat of red on black," they said. "You could ask any money for a stone like that. And there were lots of little ones."

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Twice unlucky, Marko expected the third chance but it never came. As his family grew he relied on odd jobs to provide for them and only mined to pursue his dream. He found insignificant green and blue stones but never again anything that would warm his heart.

Edna and Marko had seven children in ten years. The oldest boy Kevin often came with Marko on the field and played there with his dogs. He picked lumps of dirt and threw them for the dogs to fetch. Once a dog returned a fair sized lump of dirt and, wet from the dog's saliva, it exposed a speck of red colour through the dusty surface. Kevin showed it to his dad and they went to the cutter to see what was inside. To their amazement they found a stone which sold for two thousand dollars. Marko banked the money for Kevin. A few days later he heard about a boy who found a ten thousand dollar stone just like that on top. Kevin's story spread and became bigger and better with every telling. Marko's family didn't mind, they became a celebrity.

One day in the pub a miner was telling a story to some tourists: "This little black bastard found a fifty thousand dollar stone on top of the mine and threw it to a dog to lick." People laughed in amazement. Neither the story teller nor his audience associated Marko with the little black bastard. Marko ignored them, he knew that they said things about his kids behind his back anyway. What's the use protesting.

The opal became scarce so Marko had to look for work on the nearby farms. There was no unemployment benefit in Lightning Ridge until the eighties; you couldn't say that you were looking for work if you lived in Lightning Ridge because there was no work other than mining. You were there on your own with your luck.

Marko took a gang of Aborigines into the bush fencing, shearing and grid making. They camped, cooked on the open fire, boiled their billy, baked their damper, and barbecued the meat farmers provided. They used bore water for everything.

Marko often told how he had to fill his hat with water and put it under the tree to cool before he could drink it. But at least water was available since they drilled the artesian bore. They looked for oil and found water. Trenches were made on the nearby farms to use the water for stock. Hot water from almost thousand metres deep Artesian Basin provided also the free water for the bore bath where people of Lightning Ridge met after work to soak their tired bodies while socialising.

Marko never told anyone how he hated the dust and the dirt and the flies of the Australian bush life. Often all the family joined him as he went cotton chipping and stick picking at Wee Waa. That wasn't too bad but Marko hated to work with animals. When he first went mulesing, he held the sheep while Edna's cousin cut the skin off the sheep's bum, spread the mulesing powder on the bleeding wound and let go. Marko almost passed out. "Have to be cruel to be kind," said the grazier. "We cut the skin off their bum so the wool won't grow and the shit won't stick to it and flies won't lay maggots." Marko also hated dehorning. Young calves cried as he cut their horns and Marko felt a hollow pain in his stomach.

"They get caught in the fences if the horns are left growing, they fight and damage their skin, the flies attack the wounds," explained the grazier. It had to be done. Marko didn't mind shearing, crutching, drenching. He talked to sheep as he shaved their faces and feet so the burrs didn't stick in the wool.

Marko hated inflicting pain on dumb animals but he had to cut their tails and balls. The others showed him how to put the sheep down with its front legs opened wide around Marko's neck while he cut the tail and then the purse. He held the open purse with two

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fingers and pulled the balls out with his teeth and spat them out. He splashed a bit of disinfectant dip on the wound and let the animal go.

Marko kept repeating to himself that they all did it this way and it had to be done, To do a calf you needed two blokes, one to hold the head and the other to throw it on the ground from the back.

“Our people know nothing of the back-breaking jobs with animals,” thought Marko. He heard people say that people on the land had it easy in Australia, that they just let the sheep loose in the paddock and let the wool and meat grow.

Marko caught himself talking Slovenian sometimes as he walked alone in the bush. He started by humming familiar tunes of love songs he sang to girls at home. Later he checked that nobody was within an earshot and then he sang out at the top of his voice. Talking out came gradually. First he felt weird saying things out loud to sheep and kangaroos and stupid galahs but lately he said things to fences and bushes. His words were the only Slovenian words he heard for years. The half forgotten language brought back the chosen memories from his childhood and the longing for familiar people and places. There was no need for embarrassment since no one knew or cared that he even existed within the vastness of the outback. There was no need to tell anyone about this either since no-body would want to know or even be surprised. people accepted others as they were in lightning Ridge.

Marko realised that farmers around Lightning Ridge were gamblers like opal miners. They were taking a gamble on the weather. They hoped that the right amount of rain would fall at least once in every four years but nothing was certain on the land. Dry spells sometimes lasted for years and the land cracked and not a blade of grass could be found. The farmer once said that it was a season of shear and shoot. They sheared the sheep and shot it afterwards. Sometimes a wet followed and the water covered the farms for months. The weakened animals drowned or got bogged in the dirt.

Marko was out in the scrub mending the fence one hot afternoon when he saw a lamb stuck. The head of the half born lamb was hanging behind the ewe, which was restlessly baaing for relief. Marko often watched the lambs being born, the head between the lamb's legs, coming out in a gentle glorious swoosh. Distressed, Marko wanted to end this ewe's agony with a hard hit on the head, but he couldn't. The eyes of the ewe followed him with a dumb tearless sadness and he just couldn't walk away. The memory would haunt him. Marko reasoned that they were not his sheep and not his problem. But there was just a suffering ewe and the dying lamb and him and he had to do it. He chased the baaing ewe begging her gently to stop and let him help her. The flies were all over the sticky bloody mess protruding from the sheep's bum and Marko was covered in burrs as he chased the poor creature into a fence and grabbed her for the wool with all his strength. “I should be in the pub with my mates,” he told the future mother. “It's forty five bloody degrees hell here.” He talked to the ewe to remain sane and think of something to do. He remembered that lambs are born with front feet first, so he closed his eyes as he pushed the bloody head into the ewe and began searching inside for its legs. As he started pulling out the legs the ewe gave a tired pelvic push and the lamb came sliding out. Staggering on the ground, tripping over itself, it slowly found its way to the mother's head and they became acquainted and sniffed over.

Marko, exhausted from the birth, wiped the blood of his hands but the flies followed him as he stumbled home. The tears washed the blood and sweat off his face as he looked back to see the lamb finding its mother's milk. Suddenly he felt so alone and so close to God that he

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cried openly and loudly for the first time since he was a little boy. He was there when he was needed and he felt proud and happy in the bush that offered him a chance to be God. But he felt so alone and out of control.

The time stood still in the bush. The seasons were barely noticed by the slight change of temperature. People in Lightning Ridge remembered the times of droughts and the times of floods. In their eternity things happened either before or after that dry or that wet.

Marko looked at the dry parched land. The crops were dead, the farmers were sad watching the stock die and the land crack. They long ago stopped scrub cutting. There was only so much scrub and more sheep. The sheep and cattle held onto the meagre growth along the road, the trees were grey with dust. The willie-willie rose and, unsure of its path, it darted this way and that. Rollie pollies, blown by the dry hot air, wrapped themselves on trees. In the remote aloneness of the bush Marko cried for himself and his children.

As soon as Marko learned enough English to make the deals with the farmers, he became the boss of his Aboriginal gang. Farmers and graziers called on him and he gave quotes for miles of fencing, or water tank building or whatever needed doing. He brought out workers, collected the pay, checked the job. Aborigines complained about the hard work, they threatened to leave Marko as soon as they got paid but on a pay-day Marko brought a ute full of drinks and smokes and food to the bush. They all celebrated, spent their money and had no option but to stay. If they had any money left they lost it at night as they played cards around the fire.

The law designed to protect Aborigines, prohibited whites to consort with them during the sixties. The alcohol introduced by whites was killing Aborigines and making them useless. The government considered Aborigines a dying race so the Government officials tried to smooth the pillow for the dying natives. They established the Aboriginal Protection Board to monitor their movements and record their behaviour. They rounded up the dispersed groups of unrelated Aborigines and brought them into the settlements called Aboriginal reserves. Religious groups also tried to save the wretched nomads so they gathered them into missions for their protection. They wanted to teach them about the mercy of God and the justice of British judicial system. They also taught Aborigines to live and work like whites.

Aborigines weren't counted in the census until white settlers allowed them to become Australian citizens in 1967 referendum. Aborigines weren't there as far as whites were concerned, Aborigines existed as half hunters-gatherers, half farm labourers. Most of the Australians have never seen an Aborigine until they first saw the nomadic tribes on TV during the sixties.

Whites weren't allowed on the mission, except for people like Marko who lived with them. Marko often took his family to Wilcania, Brewarrina and Walgett missions because Edna had relations there.

Farmers took Aboriginal boys to teach them how to work on the land and look after the animals, girls were taught to cook and keep the house in order. Once they learned to live and work like Europeans they became valuable workers in the outback where the labour was scarce. During the gold rush times in the middle of the nineteenth century the labour was particularly scarce. Everybody rushed towards the riches gold diggings promised.

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Many Aborigines lived with whites in small country towns or on the fringes of towns. Lightning Ridge in the sixties was just such a place, a place of bush camps with a mixture of adventurers from all over the world. They built camps in the bush, Aborigines and Europeans, doctors and illiterates, policemen and criminals. They brought their picks and shovels, rope ladders, and candles and they looked for opals, for colourful silica imbedded from five to twenty metres deep in the clay beneath the sandstone of Lightning Ridge. In the making for millions of years the rainbow stone only made its debut in the early sixties, when Marko came to look for it. The world recognised its unique beauty and paid for it. The shells impregnated with specks of colour were proof that there was an ocean here long time ago. The skeletons of dinosaurs dug with the opal dirt also told about the timeless history of the life in Lightning Ridge.

Only a small percentage of miners made a fortune in opals, most had to supplement their income with casual work on the nearby properties. Many went to work in the city, saved money and returned. The lure of opal was too strong for them.

A Swiss psychiatrist came to try his luck with opal and he commented in the pub that Lightning Ridge was much like the mental hospital he used to work in. "The only difference is that people here walk free and do their own cooking."

"You really think that we are all mad?" Marko asked a little uncertain. Nobody had any idea what their fellow miners should look like or how they should properly behave. Like opals they came individuals who never blended.

"It helps," said the doctor with a twinkle in his eye. He knew that he was mad to stay with these illiterate beer guzzlers and talk about opal. But they tried to outsmart each other and find it. Opal was the only leveller.

The people of all races had the same dream in Lightning Ridge, the same working method, the same thirst. They met in the pub and compared their finds with the complete trust. When anyone found a better stone, he invited everybody to a BBQ. The stone was passed around for inspection. They licked it and spat on it to make it shine better in its unpolished state. The miners predicted the weight of the polished stone and the price per carat. People counted on each other and in an emergency they were all willing to look after their mates. Nobody felt neglected because they all knew that they could count on each other.

Sometimes Marko felt despondent in the evenings after kids went to bed and Edna busied herself with jobs inside their camp. He watched the sunsets and realised that only the glorious colourful sunsets of Lightning Ridge could ever compete with the beauty of its opal. In the peaceful end of the day he remembered the home he ran away from and he remembered his wife and his son, his mother and father and brothers and sisters and the people who laughed at him when he was a boy. The bitter sweet memories almost made him cry inside. He sometimes dreamed about his wife Alenka and his son Martin waiting for him to return. Alenka re-married of course but in Marko's dreams she was where he left her with tears in her eyes and more beautiful every year. He couldn't go home, his black children didn't speak a word of Slovenian, he didn't have the money anyway. School shoes and school clothes were needed all the time.

The Labour government was keen to help Aborigines since 1975. They spent a lot of money on housing, education and health for Aborigines. Marko could have moved into a town house in Lightning Ridge because he had an Aboriginal wife but he was too proud, the

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mateship and equality with other miners was more important to him than a new house. Soon he realised that the mateship and equality with Aborigines had gone forever. White miners resented the government decision that camping in the bush wasn't good enough for Aborigines. When they built houses in town for Aborigines they gave a message to the rest of them that the way they chose to live wasn't good enough. The new policy also told the miners that Aborigines were more important than any other miners.

Rogues, rascals and visionaries came to Lightning Ridge and they all seemed redeemed under the clean opal dirt using their brawn and their cunning in the pursuit of the elusive colourful gem.

Marko heard about Linden from people who came to look for opal in Lightning Ridge during their holidays. They told him that he would be entitled to a pension and a nice housing commission home in Linden because he had a large Aboriginal family. Marko moved to Linden in 1979, he wanted to retire among people who did not know him.

In Linden he met Ivan while looking for work on the building sites. Ivan paid cash and Marko could provide lots of cheap labour for cash. Other Aboriginal families moved down to be near Marko's wife Edna. While on social security, men looked for seasonal labour for cash and women looked after the babies.

Unemployment hit in 1976, Aborigines got Land Rights, life on the welfare became an acceptable alternative. Marko was advised by his doctor to apply for an invalid pension because his liver and his lungs were troubling him. He wasn't getting any younger and the jobs were getting scarcer.

Marko heard about Barbara, he hoped to talk about olden days with her, to remember their home together, the hills and creeks and fields and people. As neighbours from a small village near Bled, in the heart of Slovenia, both treasured the memories of their innocence, but both were also afraid of memories that made them first aware of their fear and shame.

Barbara was never at the door when Marko called to see Ivan about jobs and Marko felt shy about asking for her because Ivan never called him in.

"She doesn't want to talk to me because I live with blacks," concluded Marko feeling powerless, angry and shamed somehow. Barbara watched Marko through the window but she knew that Ivan wouldn't approve of his company.

Marko felt prejudiced against, he realised that people were prejudiced against the poor, against the Aborigines, against the migrants and his family was all of those things. He remembered Lightning Ridge fondly because there he felt accepted and liked. The colour of the skin under the clean prehistoric opal dirt didn't matter. People of all colours and nationalities were covered in the same dirt and had the same chance to make a fortune.

Remembering the adventures of his early years in Australia Marko sometimes returned to Lightning Ridge to find the spirit of the hard working, hard drinking pioneers of the bush. He was saddened because the new population of unemployed refugees had no spirit, survival skills or the will to make a go. They came because the existence in a bush camp was cheap. Here they hoped not to be frowned on as dole bludgers because they pretended to be miners of the exotic elusive gem. The peaceful opal fields became alive with thousands of misfits. Marko couldn't find what he came looking for, the old pioneers were long replaced

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with welfare recipients. The Social Security began providing payments to the miners who had no luck. Since then many who were lucky claimed that they found nothing. Lying made them unhappy and suspicious of others who were probably lying as well. Miners stopped flashing their opal around, they were hiding their diggings. The doors where they cut opal were locked, they closed their hearts to each other as well because they stopped trusting. People from the new air-conditioned houses talked to each other on the phone as they watched videos and drank on their own. Marko longed for old friendly ways but they were gone forever. He met miners in the club but it wasn't the same. The Bowling club grew and prospered. Marko heard a miner say that the club made him feel that he was in bloody Cold Coast not in the bush. The miner said that with regret and amazement.

Prejudice started in Lightning Ridge when the Aboriginal Land council built the first houses for Aborigines. Aborigines were singled out by politicians to be positively compensated for previous injustices. Miners, who made Aborigines equal for the first and only time in their lives, resented them now. A special Department of Aboriginal Affairs was created and the local Aboriginal Land councils were allocated funds for the housing. Most Aborigines moved from the opal fields into the new houses in town while many whites still camped on the fields. Whites became jealous of the Aboriginal privilege and they started to hate them. The equality was replaced with prejudice and discrimination.

"The government began paying the ransom for their past sins and the ransom is rising," complained white miners who were getting poorer and aware of their poverty in the face of Aborigine's good fortune.

"Every black bastard wants to be Aborigine now even if he is only one percent Aborigine because there is money in it," grumbled whites hurt because the old friendly comradeship with Aborigines was gone forever.

"Their leaders became distributors of government money and they want to increase the number of Aborigines dependent on their handouts," Marko heard people say in the pub. He became ashamed of his family and angry at whites. Lightning Ridge lost all magic for him.

The local council provided modern tourist facilities and services in Lightning Ridge but the tourists were also disillusioned because they came to find the outback haven of colourful eccentrics, artists, dreamers and vagabonds.

Marko remembered his pig chasing adventures but feral pigs like rabbits and foxes were poisoned now, because they interfered with the echo system. Only the kangaroos, cockatoos and EMU's multiplied freely to annoy farmers.

There was nothing for Marko at the Ridge any more. One had to have half a million worth of machinery if he wanted to compete with the big guys now. In the olden days you needed a rope ladder, a candle and a pick and shovel, maybe a wheelbarrow and a hand windless. Everybody had an equal chance. People camped on the claim and worked when they felt like it. You could drop in to see a mate at home or working down the shaft at any time but now you had to have an invitation because everybody was bloody scared of strangers.

The Lightning Ridge of the nineties became a refuge town for the unemployed. Many former Yugoslavs came to the town that doubled its population to ten thousand in a few of years since the unemployment hit in the eighties. Down at the hot bore baths the mixture of Slavic languages sounded more and more like Yugoslavia. The migrants from former Yugoslavia didn't love each other anymore but at least they hated each other's guts now.

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Ignored by other nationalities they developed a range of emotional attachments according to the political development at home. In order to argue with each other, most still spoke the common Serbo-Croatian mixture, the official language of the communist Yugoslavia from which they escaped.

The poor built their pretentious houses in Lightning Ridge, while the rich often lived in the crude camps to look poor. The Taxation Department and the government in general looked everywhere for sources of revenue. The bureaucracy demanded more and more. They seeped their powers into the opal industry that used to be free for almost a century. It demanded as much from the poor as it did from the rich and mining became too expensive for many. The Tax-man began visiting the fields and people became secretive. The government needed money to give to the unemployed and the homeless.

When Marko arrived to Linden, he met his old friend Drago there. Drago came from the little Slovenian village near Hungarian border. He first met Marko on the railway station bench when he came to Ljubljana to find work. They shared the bench all those summer nights and became friends. The police sometimes chased them away but they returned after a while because they had nowhere else to go. It was almost impossible to find accommodation in the city where they worked.

Drago met Marko's sister Brigita on Thursday afternoons when she had her half a day off. She worked as a domestic for a doctor's family. Brigita and Drago made plans to get married. Before Drago escaped he promised Brigita to bring her over when he settled, but it took him a long time and Brigita got married at home. Both Marko and Drago were enormously happy to find a first real friend in each other.

While working in Western Australia Drago heard about gold and diamonds in the Kimberly's, he was on his way there when he found a job in the Wittenoom asbestos mine. He found Croats and Bosnians there, they worked together, talked, often they fell asleep on the asbestos dust after work. They had a few drinks to wash down the dust and relax. They enjoyed the drink and the company. It was nine kilometres to the town and most had no cars so they waited for a company bus to get them home. Drago learned about explosives in the army. Here he found a chance to earn good money blasting asbestos.

Drago married Zdravka, a sister of his Bosnian mate. She didn't like the idea of going after the elusive gold and diamonds because she liked the good wages Drago brought home and she liked the security of Drago's job,. She didn't want to wander in the bush chasing gold, she had to be close to the hospital where their two children were born.

Drago became scared of asbestos, two of his workmates died young, they were diagnosed as having Mesothelioma, the asbestos related lung cancer. People started to leave and their houses were left empty. The company suggested that they wear masks, they increased the wages, but Drago felt more and more unhappy going down three hundred metres deep shaft into the blue woolly mess they were mining. Zdravka urged him to stay. "If it is good enough for others it should be good enough for you. In a couple more years we can buy a house anywhere," she insisted. When Drago started to drink, she finally left and settled in Kalgoorlie to punish him.

Free at last, Drago left. He wandered into Linden where he met Marko and moved in with him. Drago was broke when he took Edna's cousin Ruth for a wife. Zdravka took what money they had, she needed it for the children. The mining company paid millions in

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compensation to those who suffered bad health because of asbestos related illness but Drago only had a fear of cancer and the fear cannot be diagnosed. It could only be removed in good company with a few drinks. The doctor told him that he had white scars on the lungs but no cancer. Not yet. He coughed, but that was from smoking, he wheezed but that was old age. He was forty six when he came to Linden in 1984.

In 1990 Drago read somewhere about a young woman who grew up near Wittenoom and inhaled asbestos as a child. The woman was a friend of Drago's own daughter. The fear that cancer might affect his children made Drago angry. The woman's father worked for CSR with Drago.

Drago was happy to find a friend in Linden. Marko resigned himself to living with Edna, her family respected him and tried to please him. His old Croatian friends Stipe and Ante came often to Marko's parties. You didn't need an invitation to go to Marko's place. They drank and sang and took girls to bed in the same friendly way that they took their drinks.

Stipe, Drago and Marko met at old Ante's place every Friday night for a game of cards. Each of the players had a jar full of dollar coins that were changing hands from week to week. The cards passed from hands to hands as the men shared thoughts and memories, hopes and plans. They remembered what they wanted to remember as they argued about trumps played on the table. Friday nights became the high point of their existence. The jokes were rude, the wine was strong and the memories tender. In a smoke filled room they did not have to be afraid of the world passing judgements on their lifestyle.

They travelled back into their familiar childhoods and they never ceased to discover new little facets to each other's personality. The light kept turning on the long forgotten events as they opened their hearts to each other.

Marko and Drago joined Slovenians at Kristina's some Sunday afternoons, but nobody ever specially called for them. They enjoyed playing balinc but they were usually the last chosen as partners. Here at Ante's they were the main players.

Ante claimed to be Slovenian on his mother's side and Croatian by his father, born on the Slovenian Croatian border near Somobor. He sang sad ballads and often they saw tears in his eyes. On his eightieth birthday in 1990 he told them about his war.

Ante rejoiced when Hitler allowed Croatia to become independent and he joined Ustashi fighting Serbs and communists. He was with the Ustashi until 1944. He saw the atrocities committed by Ustashi and his conscience began to trouble him. He saw his Croatian friends dismember the bodies of young Serbian soldiers, he saw them brutally killing children and raping their mothers. A friend convinced him to go with the partisans and for eight months he was fighting with them in the mountains.

In May 1945 a few days after the liberation Ante was called for a special assignment. "You have a bus driver's licence, we need you to transfer the patients from Zagreb hospital to a new hospital," ordered the military officer who led Ante into the bush near Zumberak.

"I stopped the bus," said Ante. "About fifty patients in their pyjamas followed the officer from the bus in the orderly line. Their hands were tied at the back. The officer shot them one by one while the two other men pushed the bodies into the narrow neck of the cave. The boys, I noticed then, that patients were all twenty to thirty year old wounded boys, they never moved out of the line, they waited knowing that they will be next. I can't

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understand it, why didn't they move? It took them half a day to get rid of the bodies and the boys never moved or protested," smiled Ante and wiped his eyes. He was shivering. "As I had to wait for the officers, I remembered how years ago I read about the killings in Russia after the Bolshevik revolution. I knew then that we had Bolshevik in our country. I couldn't sleep after that, I told them that I was sick, I couldn't take it, I couldn't tell anyone. They had to make me do it so that I paid for my Ustashi involvement. they couldn't trust me until they made me involved in the killing."

Ante told them about the video made of the cave. He saw the video in the Croatian club in Sydney. They uncovered the cave and found hundreds of remains. The bones, the skulls with neat holes at the back, the wrists still tied together with wire. Ante had been running all his life to escape the pictures that come to him during sleepless nights, the pictures of boys waiting quietly to be shot.

Stipe and Ante made their own wine, strong red wine like they have in Dalmatia. They claimed that it went well with Dalmatian songs. Often they drank and sang late in the night. With the words of the songs they told each other about the sadness of their lives, about the longing to return to where they belonged, where they were first loved. They remembered and remembering made them feel truly alive.

Marko met Barbara's son Janek who taught his children in his special opportunity class. Janek often came to visit and had meals with them but Marko never told Janek that he knew his mother because he felt ashamed of her rejection. He liked Janek instantly because he seemed to really care about his students.

Edna's mother told Janek about the olden days when they lived on the mission. "We were supposed to speak English but we used to speak in our lingo when the manager wasn't around. The English land-owners were so stuck up they never talked to us, how could we learn their lingo. Men took our girls for the night but they never married them. Balks started coming in the fifties, they were friendly though. I often wondered where they came from, these Balks, and where their families were. They were nice fellas. Maybe they were lonely as well, because they took wives of Aboriginal girls and looked after their kids, they weren't flash like English."

Janek wondered if she knew that Balks were from the Balkan, that they were his people, that some spoke Slovenian when nobody was listening. Some of them also felt that English were a bit flash.

Perhaps Edna talked about Balts not Balks, perhaps both were the same to her. Balts were the first non-English speaking migrants in Australia, coming from the Baltic countries of Northern Europe, they may have given the name to all European non-English speaking new Australians. Or maybe Edna heard about the Balkan war so she renamed Balts with Balks.

Edna's old mum told Janek about her Aboriginal mother and her English father who came from England and bought the land where her mother's people camped. He spotted the pretty young girl on the river. In the evening he tied a string to her toe. When others in the girl's camp slept he tugged at the string and the girl came out and came with him to the house for the night. She had eight children by him but he never married her. During the day she was allowed into the house to sweep and wash but her children never came into his house. Edna's mum insisted that he was good to the kids, he taught them how to work on the farm and they always had jobs and food.

*Now may the God of patience and comfort
grant you to be like minded toward one another.*

Janek knew that his family resented his involvement with Aborigines so he never talked about fascinating things he learned from them.

Barbara never knew that Marko and her son became friends. Janek never knew that his mother and Marko grew up together.

*Now may the God of patience and comfort
grant you to be like minded toward one another.*

*To me the meanest flower that blows can give
the thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears*

Wordsworth

JANEK

In March 1990 twenty eight years old Janek and twenty four years old Diana got married under a flowering gum tree in the little park near the river on the outskirts of Linden. They chose a simple ceremony witnessed by their families and close friends.

Janek's father Ivan, bought the newlyweds an airline ticket to Slovenia for their honeymoon. He was happy that Janek chose a good catholic girl for a bride and that he invited Slovenian priest, father Damian, to marry them. Barbara was happy because everybody smiled and Ivan beamed with excitement.

The speeches followed the brief wedding ceremony and the picnic lunch the newlyweds chose to have.

Janek's brother Leon, as a best man, recounted the long list of events from Janek's past and people laughed at the incidents of Janek's life which Leon made sound particularly witty.

The speakers praised the characters of the newlyweds. Diana's father warned Janek not to take his new wife for granted and to get used to obeying her. Ivan interjected and reminded his son not to forget that a man wears the trousers in Slovenian families. They all laughed at that.

Ivan also spoke seriously about the importance of the family. "I hope to have many grandchildren who will speak Slovenian as well as Janek," he concluded.

Standing hand in hand with his new wife Janek remembered his past and tried to rub out the resentments and the hurts from it. The fact that his father actually praised him, brought a smile to his face.

Janek returned from Sydney as a teacher and accepted his first appointment in Linden in 1984. There were things he needed to do in Linden. He wanted to get back at those who took the Mickey out of him when he was a child. He also hoped to make the kids of his bigoted mates a little more tolerant. He wanted to smack those that needed smacking.

"I must have been insane to come home," he said to his parents. Janek could never get along with his parents but subconsciously he hoped to repair that relationship as well. He was offered a job in Sydney but he chose to come home.

The Linden school principal asked him to take a special Opportunity class because Janek knew the local environment best. His students ranged from seven to thirteen and his special education class was known by other kids as dummy class. It was understood by everybody that his students were problem children.

Loud, big, unmanageable kids were sent to his room because their belligerent behaviour caused trouble in the straight classes. Some had expressionless faces, others had unnaturally polite manners and worked hard. Many were involved in stealing, extortion, fighting, even drugs. One ten years old Aboriginal boy often came to school drunk. Janek

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had no idea how to keep the class orderly and quiet but he muddled through his lessons. Nobody seemed concerned about the goings on in his class, anyway.

“There is so much I know nothing about,” he told Diana soon after they first met in 1985.

Janek couldn't even tell apart Korean from Vietnamese from Chinese from Taiwanese let alone understand their languages or their behaviour. He didn't know how they happened to be there, what they ate, how they lived. Many didn't even speak English so they couldn't tell him, might not have wanted to tell him. He tried to make them play with other Asian looking kids but they didn't understand each other either. They didn't even like other Asian kids.

“I don't know who is who in their families, they are guarding their privacy and give nothing away,” said Janek. These kids were probably told by their parents and by Australians to be grateful for a chance in the lucky country. Even Aborigines didn't take to them. Migrants and Aborigines stared at each other. Both groups were offended by staring and they giggled nervously before they started to fight.

“They know that you like them,” said Diana as if that was enough to make things right.

As Janek walked to school in the cool of the morning he saw white people rush to their jobs, heads high, their hair still slightly wet from the morning shower, smelling of cologne, after-shave and powder, their steps were brisk and confident, their clothes ironed, clean. By nine they disappeared from the streets, they sat at their desks, used their tools, felt important and useful.

Distrustful Asians were rarely seen on the streets. New in Linden, they prepared for a new day inside their shops.

Aborigines swaggered in like shadows looking for a sunny spot to sit on. Janek played in Aboriginal homes as a child and ate their food sometimes so Aborigines stopped him on the way now and talked to him like he was their mob.

Fred came towards Janek and shook his hand before he embraced him like drunks do. Fred used to come to school to carve emu eggs, make artefacts and teach corroborees. Now he was in ‘horrors’ almost every day. Like many others, he developed diabetics from drinking and the doctor cut his leg off after it became infected. They told him that he had no liver left.

Fred's son Stewart and Janek were in high school together. Stewart was a talented painter then and Janek wanted him to paint a mural on the toilet wall at school. The graffiti had to be scrubbed off the wall almost every morning so Janek hoped that a mural would stop the graffiti artists.

Janek remembered Stewart telling their teacher: “When I grow up I will get a pension key like my mother has.” He was talking about the post office box key because the pension check was the only mail they ever had. He also wrote: “I hate my father because he is a drunk, he spends the money on grog and us kids go hungry. If the good fairy came to town I'd have her burn down all the wine shops and pubs.”

Janek now often found Stewart waiting with his one legged dad for the wine shop to open. He was on the pension, he had his pension key and fits and diabetics.

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Stewart's mother Latoya told Janek that Stewart shot through because police was after him. He bashed his wife and Latoya worried about his kids, grandmothers always worried about the kids. Latoya went on about good old days when people knew right from wrong and men used to go to work, times when there was no grog and no court, times when everybody knew and obeyed the law.

"They is killing us with grog," she said. "Kids eat lunches out of a paper bags on the steps of the pub instead of being around the table with their family." What would Latoya know, she lived in a tin shed all her life. But she proudly reminded everybody that she knew how to keep house because for two years she was put in service with the farmer at the age of ten.

Latoya had the first of her twelve children at the age of fifteen. Latoya's oldest daughter died when her boyfriend pushed her in a drunken brawl. She split her head open on the garbage bin. There were eight children left alone after her boyfriend went to jail for murder. Latoya took the kids. Stewart was the last of her twelve children still living with her in their two bedroom house. With his father always drunk Stewart became the man of the family.

Janek remembered his teacher asking them for the ideas on how to help the starving people in Kampuchea back then. Stewart knew all about scavenging for food and things.

"I would send them a phone so they could ring for their tucker," wrote Stewart. White kids laughed and Stewart hit them after school for laughing. They didn't know that Stewart often had to ring for tucker, the welfare people told him to ring when kids got hungry.

Stewart left school at the age of twelve and had a son at the age of fifteen. At twenty six he had four of his children living with Latoya. With him in jail and with their mother in hospital, what could Latoya do. Older kids took care of younger ones while Latoya cooked.

As he came to school Janek closed the staff room door so his students wouldn't see him smoking. They knew he smoked, he knew that they knew because he heard them whisper: I saw sir smoking. Their parents smoked but that was different. Janek was trying to hide it and the kids seemed to know that he felt guilty about it.

He also felt guilty yelling at them to keep them quiet but he had to make himself heard amidst the noise. Aboriginal kids were used to growling in their own overcrowded homes, but the yelling frightened Asian kids who most of the time did not understand what the yelling was about. Little Chinese boy often burst out in silent tears. Aboriginal kids first laughed hysterically and then crowded poor Chinaman and comforted him like mother hens, gently crooning over him.

Janek's class was a confusion of cultures, abilities and feelings. Smiling, Janek pointed things out and listened, he was careful not to do or say the wrong thing so he did and said little. He went to meet the parents of his children and sometimes somewhere he got a message, a few casual words were said to make him believe that he was doing the right thing.

Janek searched for strengths in his students and he pointed their little talents out to them to brighten their apparently miserable lives. Often he could see how, empowered, they rejoiced in the knowledge that their skills and achievements were recognised. Janek did not plan this approach by any psychological deduction, he genuinely wanted to make them confident and successful. In many strange ways kids let him know that they liked him.

"My mum likes you sir, because you don't talk flash white fellah talk. Mum named our new baby after you," said an Aboriginal boy. The baby was a girl but the little boy meant no

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harm and it probably wasn't true at all. Aborigines, like migrants, resented the educated English class with their flash talk which was nothing but a system of words that only they understood. It put outsiders at a disadvantage. Their slang and phrases baffled foreigners.

Seven years old Tammy brought flowers to school for Janek because sir loved them black kids. The flowers were stolen from the cemetery and the white lady came to school yelling that Aboriginal bastards destroyed her husband's grave. Tammy often went to the cemetery since her dear grandmother died. She told Janek how everybody loved her grandmother and that all the kids used to steal the grog for her before she died. They knew that she would have passed out first when drinking with her sons and other men. She would not have had her fair share. "I always carried beer bottles home under my dress so Nan would have something for the next day. She was the best Nan in the world," Tammy told Janek as she followed him on the school playground.

During the morning news time Tammy told the class that her brother was in jail because he bashed his missus. Her sister Peggy split up with her boyfriend. Mum took Peggy to hospital to have a baby.

Janek asked Tammy what she will do when she grew up.

"I'll have a baby and live on my own," said Tammy.

Babies meant excitement and new hope. The Government gave her sister Peggy a house with fancy air-conditioning when she had her first baby at the age of fourteen. The kids broke off the air-conditioning buttons before the summer heat started so they never tried it.

Every day Janek discovered something new about his students and knowing them better, he began to like them more.

He remembered the religious lesson: "Do you know who Jesus was," he asked.

"He is the one that was supposed to look after me, when I was drowning. But he was never there when I needed him. Mum came instead," said Tammy.

"You know, sir, how some people are born on their birthdays," said an Aboriginal boy.

"Everybody is born on their birthday," said Janek. "Not my brother, sir, my brother was born on Christmas day." Some laughed, some wondered what was funny. The boy was bewildered and looked out for a fight. He felt that others laughed at him because he was Aboriginal.

Janek carefully explained the Colombo's discovery of America. He told them how Colombo believed that he arrived to India.

"Why did Colombo call the natives of America, Indians," asked Janek to test their understanding.

"He saw that they had feathers around their heads," explained Tammy.

An Asian looking girl, wrote a story: If I was very rich, I would buy my own caravan. All the people would love me and want my money. Janek had to suppress a smile at her ancient wisdom.

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A little curly Aboriginal girl wrote: "I was fretting for mum." Janek corrected: "You were homesick." She growled angrily: "I wasn't home sick, I was fretting for mum." Janek had no idea what the kids were laughing at.

A boy wrote about heaven: "In heaven everything is nice and quiet, the kids don't swear and fight and sir doesn't have to growl all the time."

"Is that what I am doing," thought Janek horrified, but nobody else was surprised by the boy's point of view.

Other kids laughed about the way Aborigines talked, even Janek found it fascinating how they dropped the initial h sound and yet they added it to words beginning with a vowel. HAT became AT while AT became HAT. Janek wanted to fix that.

"What do I do when I jump on one foot," he asked hoping for the answer 'hop'.

"You fall over," said Tammy flatly.

"What have we got on our heads," he tried again, hoping to get the answer 'hat'.

"Nits," said the little Aboriginal boy.

"I don't understand them," said Janek to Diana.

"They probably don't want you to understand, it's enough that you do the right thing by them." said Diana.

"Thank you miss sensible," laughed Janek.

Diana was annoyingly practical. She was also beautiful and Janek believed that she could get any man she wanted.

"Why does she want me," the question nagged at Janek who tried hard to impress Diana from the beginning.

As the speakers of their wedding party listed cheerful, funny, happy events from his long courtship with Diana, Janek remembered the snippets of past conversations with Diana that made him anxious.

He took Diana to expensive restaurants but she failed to be impressed.

"We could've had a hamburger in the park, it's more romantic," she said on one occasion. Next time he bought her a lovely silk blouse and a bunch of roses and gave them to her as they met in the park.

"You don't have to buy me," she said.

"I like buying presents, it's my money, I'll do as I like with it. Why the hell aren't you ever happy with what I do for you? I pay for dinners, open the door for women, pull out chairs for them, buy them presents, but they are never happy?" Janek was angry with Diana.

"I hope you only do that for me because I'll be your wife and the mother to your children." She snuggled to him and kissed him.

"I want to be fair to everybody," said Janek, "what's wrong with that?"

"You are not fair to yourself, to us. You always reach for the bill. Your friends never put a hand in their pockets when the bill is placed on the table," scolded Diana.

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“They are paying off their mortgages, they can’t afford to pay.”

“We haven’t even got a mortgage yet, one day we’ll need the deposit. That’s something you should be thinking about.” Janek could hear Diane’s mother saying these things and he thought that her mother had a calculator in her chest.

When Janek took Diana for a drive in his new car she said: “You drive too fast.”

“You want to teach me to drive. Why don’t you buy your own wheels?” said Janek.

“You’d rather that I didn’t come,” Diana was suddenly crying.

“You drive me crazy with your feminist ideas.”

“I don’t know what you mean but if we get married we’ll both drive. If you won’t let me drive your car I’ll have to buy my own. I expect I’ll have to go to work anyway. When I have a family I will stay home and still want to drive. That has nothing to do with feminist ideas.

“I might decide to stay home with the children,” teased Janek.

“That’s OK with me,” said Diana, “if you promise to carry, deliver and breast-feed them. But if I have to do these trivial things I might as well stay home and do the lot. And I don’t intend to apologise for it like your mother did. I want at least a dozen kids,” she laughed just as suddenly through tears still fresh on her rosy cheeks, “you know how we Italians are.”

Diana grew up with her three sisters secure under the wings of her protective Scottish mother Mary, who succeeded in everything she tried. Diana’s Italian father Gino couldn’t speak English so Mary learned Italian. She learned to cook spaghetti and risotto and pizza as a native Italian would, but she never lost her Scottish shrewdness and her enormous self-confidence. Tall and wiry she seemed to bend easily with changes. By becoming Italian she just added another dimension to her achievements. If Gino drove a bulldozer she would want to beat him at it. Her daughters grew up self reliant, they didn’t need a man to make them whole.

Diana felt a sad kindness for her hard working father who went along with whatever the girls decided.

Diana invited Janek home and her sisters competed for his attention. He was a handsome, eligible man, a teacher and the son of the prominent builder. Diana made him feel important and very special. In love, both believed like lovers do, that a new life was waiting for them all rosy and that the past had magically disappeared.

Janek felt more at home at Diana’s than at his parents’ place. One day they watched footy on TV and Janek snapped his fingers to get Diana’s attention. Ivan snapped his fingers to get Barbara’s attention. Diana stood up and Janek asked her for a beer. Diana went towards the fridge when her mother yelled out: sit! Diana sat down obediently. Janek looked at them confused and mockingly said a magic word: please. Nothing happened. “Don’t you ever let a man snap his fingers to make you jump,” Diana’s mum ordered. Janek went to the kitchen to get the beer. There was Diana’s father washing the dishes.

“How come you are washing the dishes, you have five women in the house,” said Janek astonished.

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"It's too fucking late to do anything about it now. You have to train them from the start. I let her do it to me, I let my women do it to me and I don't know how to change it now," said Gino.

"Diana is not like her mother, she would wash if her mother asked her to," insisted Gino who wanted Diana to marry this nice boy. "She cooks and I wash," Gino muttered.

"I don't want to be like my father either," thought Janek but he became suddenly careful.

Janek met Diana during the New year's celebration in the Slovenian club Triglav in Sydney soon after he returned to Linden. He made plans to go to the Gold coast with his friends but his mother persuaded him to come with the family. For twenty years he spent every New Years Eve with his family so he conceded grudgingly. His brother Leon was there with Kim but his sister Helena was away for the second time and Janek knew how miserable everybody was the year before because she wasn't with them.

"I wonder if misery is contagious," said Janek to his mum. "As long as one of our family isn't happy nobody is allowed to be."

But Diana changed everything that night. She came with her Slovenian friends and she danced the night away with Janek. By midnight they both realised that they will become very special to each other. They walked out and under the stars they kissed wishing each other a happy new year.

Diana made Janek feel special. He wanted her to need him, to cling to him but Diana didn't understand his need, she never explained why she loved him. She enjoyed herself in his company but she did not cling. Janek was scared that one day she'll get sick of him. "When she does not need me anymore. But she does not need me now," he reasoned, jealous of her independence.

"You resent people because they take advantage of you but you let them use you. Friends are supposed to make you happy," said Diana. With her pink lips and pale complexion, with soft blond curls over her blue eyes, why was she such a know all?

"Nobody really understands how I feel," said Janek defiantly.

"But Janek," said Diana, "feelings are not facts, how could anyone understand something that is uniquely yours. They know when you are happy or angry or upset but they have no way of knowing why. I wonder if you always know. I can't read your feelings, we have to talk about them."

"Nobody wants to know how I feel," Janek felt embarrassed by his confession.

"I want to know, remember that I always want to know," Diana suddenly became serious. "My dad never told mum how he felt and he hated her for a long time because she took over his life. Now he realises that it was as much his fault as hers. He said to me: 'Don't let your feelings make you unhappy, tell your partner what you need and how you feel or he will never know.' You could cut the unspoken anger with the knife in our house when I grew up. Mum is still bossing dad, she enjoys it but dad does not hate her for it anymore."

"It's easy for him to preach what he doesn't practice," said Janek.

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"It gets easier every time you do it. You have to trust me, I know it is scary to lay yourself open but I lay myself open to you because I know that you love me. I trust you and I hope that you trust me," both knew that Diana lay the foundations for their relationship.

Diana did what she liked, she went out with her sisters or her friends, she bought what she liked, said what she meant and meant what she said.

"My Mum never once went out without my father," argued Janek when Diana informed him that she was going out for dinner with her friends.

"And your grandmother never voted either," Diana laughed.

"Dad never dried a dish in his life," said Janek, "let alone wash one."

"Your Mum never went to work in her life," Diana reminded him. "My mum worked most of her life."

"I'll look after the car and the lawn, when we get married," conceded Janek. That's what his father did.

"I'll look after my car and do my share of gardening," said Diana.

"Why do you want to go out on your own, anyway?"

"We are not even engaged and you want to supervise my every move." Diana waved good bye and Janek was left home angry and confused.

Janek wanted to do the right thing but what was the right thing by women? Maybe he was getting to be just like his father. He'd hate to be like his father. Women no longer knew what they wanted. They talked about the new age sensitive guy. They wanted an equal human being but they still expected the guy to take the rubbish out, pay for the outings, open the door, carry the groceries, feed the baby, be a gentlemen, be equal, dig a hole, protect the weak, kill the burglar, squash the cockroach, go to war, stand in the mud, pay the price, whatever the price is for being a man these days.

Saying that a woman is sexy constituted sexual harassment, ignoring them meant that a man was a pooker. If a man made decisions he was a chauvinist pig, if he didn't he was a wimp. If he asked for a cup of coffee he was to do it himself but if he refused to go down on his knees and dirty himself repairing the car for any female he was not a gentleman. Liberated females refused to do anything for a man. Women always knocked men as evil oppressors. They painted themselves as vanquished victims. All men got branded as bastards but no bastard would dare brand all women as bitches. Women manipulated a man until he was nothing. Yet men had no shoulder to cry on. When would a man be liberated?

"I need a drink," thought Janek as he dressed. He slammed the door behind him but there was nowhere to go and he hated going home. He searched for a smoke, he needed a smoke badly. He still never smoked at home although Mum knew that he smoked and Dad did too, probably.

"I just don't feel like smoking when I am at home," he said when Helena teased him about it long time ago. She used to smoke at home when Janek was still at high school. Dad yelled at her and at Mum for letting her. It was all mum's fault for letting them, for not sticking with him.

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“She is working for herself now and she can do as she likes,” said Dad after Helena left home. She stopped smoking then. “It’s bad for my complexion,” she laughed. She only rebelled against dad and when dad wasn’t there she had no-one to rebel against.

Janek knew that Leon was home from Sydney. He told Leon that Diane went out but he could not tell him how angry and sad he was that Diana wanted to go by herself.

“Diana will always do what she likes,” said Leon.

“She is too smart,” said Janek carefully.

“A smart girl won’t act like a headless chook when problems come,” said Leon. “I like smart girls.”

“I like them pretty and feminine,” said Janek.

“Pretty girls look in the mirror all day long to see if they are still the prettiest in the kingdom,” said Leon. “They’re likely to forget your dinner and your kids. Don’t expect them to dip their beautifully painted fingernails into the dishwater.”

“We’ll get a dishwasher,” snapped Janek.

“Painted ladies don’t worry over the dirt in the hidden corners. They need time to put their faces on. How is Diana going to change baby’s nappies without stabbing their poor bottoms with her fingernails?” laughed Leon

Janek felt suddenly protective towards Diana. Even his mum complained that Diana never helped with chores. Diana flashed her smiles and elegantly waved her beautifully painted fingernails and people did things for her.

“She is Mary and Kim is a Martha,” said Ivan taken in by happy Diana who was listening to him nodding her pretty head. People commented on her good looks and made Ivan proud.

Janek knew that his father was disappointed when Leon first brought his girlfriend, Kim, home. His handsome, smart boy’s choice was a plain girl, short and freckled, she had beady eyes and red hair. Ivan’s confident son acted like a servant to a girl Ivan would never pick for a wife. Both Ivan and Barbara wondered what Leon saw in her, what power she possessed for him to treat her with so much deference. Realising that any criticism of Kim was out of order, they simply fell into the pattern of pleasing her. Leon’s subservience to this self-assured scrap of a girl bothered Ivan and Barbara.

Their friends also searched for qualities in Kim because obviously they could see none. They asked if she worked as if they doubted that she would be capable of anything. Ivan and Barbara said that she was doing something to science and computers and that seemed mysteriously important enough to make up for Kim’s lack of looking like something important.

“She must be awfully smart to catch a fellow like Leon,” said Vida who had little knowledge of computers and science and even less respect for them.

“She has the smallest fish mouth I’ve ever seen,” said Ivan to Barbara. He was disturbed by the commanding sharpness of Kim’s voice and concluded that despite his upbringing his sons inherited Barbara’s submissive nature.

Ivan wanted to find perfect partners for his children and it pained him to look at their imperfect choices. He knew that people who achieved nothing will eventually get an equal

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share of his accomplishments. What was more these people didn't even try or want to achieve. He tried to ignore the insignificance of his daughters in law and concentrate on their qualities. He refused to even think of Richard, his daughter's boyfriend. In Ivan's eyes, Richard was a married man who stole his daughter. He was surrounded by beautiful models and was probably unfaithful to Helena already.

Ivan never discussed his family with anyone. Barbara had rare glimpses into his thoughts by the remarks he made. People failed to impress Ivan. Barbara was sad because she believed that Ivan made his children subservient by his dominance. Leon never cried or complained but he never talked about himself either. He closed the door and nobody seemed to know what was behind his cool exterior. Maybe he told Kim who unconcerned carried herself with such ease and dignity that both Ivan and Barbara had to admire and like her eventually. Kim set herself to any task needing her attention and what she did she did well.

Ivan thought about their darling daughter Helena more and more often. He never admitted it to Barbara but he began to appreciate Helena's rebellious nature. She was a fighter like himself, she had the spirit. Ivan hoped that they would reconcile soon but he would never suggest it. He never asked about her. Since she left for Perth she was on his mind daily but he acted like he completely forgot about her.

At least Diana's affectionate beauty was obvious to all.

Janek still came home for lunch most Sundays. Leon came sometimes and their girls came when they felt like it.

Barbara sensed Janek's unhappiness, she knew that a wrong word could ignite an instant argument because many arguments have started when one of the family was hiding the bitterness he couldn't talk about. Many arguments have spoiled her dinners in the past.

To divert the conversation onto the safer ground, Barbara told the boys about Lee, the old Chinese man down the road, who died during the week. His wife died a few months earlier. In his old age his wife became everything to Lee. He lost a will to live when she died. A couple of old Chinese men came a few times to see Lee. His daughter Ela rang most days but she was too busy to come. She came for a day to organise her dad's funeral. She held a quick garage sale to get rid of the junk her parents collected and left to her. The crystal and silver was brought to the table at the front of the house. The silver tea set was still gleaming. Barbara saw Ella's mother polish it the week before she died. She told Barbara that the set was passed down from her mother, so she wanted Ela to have it and pass it on to her children.

Barbara realised that people didn't pass things on any more, there was no room for storing things from the past. The neighbours bought the microwave, the TV and the fridge quickly and they lingered on browsing among the personal things. Impatient, Ela put the sign on: Make an offer. People paid their left over dollar coins for little things of sentimental value, like children pay the leftover coins for lollies they didn't really want. Coins burn holes in the pockets. Barbara paid two dollars for the tea set that was to be passed on.

"It's your own people that take care of you in the end," said Ivan. "When you are young you can be everybody's friend but when you are old and sick and dead you only have your own people to rely on."

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Janek did not want to go to his empty house but here in his parents' home he remembered all the things his mum wanted to forget. When dad and Leon left after lunch Janek teased mum because there was bitterness in him and he needed to share it and get rid of it.

"Remember those cups with little flowers, Dad gave them to you. He broke them then, didn't he, and you cried. You cried on your bed but when I asked you if you were crying you lied that you had a cold. I was about four but I remember."

"Why do you have to remember silly things like that," she said.

"I remember the time you ran out in the bush. Dad stopped the car to smack me because I threw Leon's rattle out. I didn't mean to and you cried for Dad to stop hitting me but he didn't. I ran after you, Dad drove away, we stopped another car to take us home. You made me apologise to Leon and to Dad. You apologised to Dad. He said that we will never be any good if you two don't stick together. So you told me about bad fathers who don't even work for their families, you said that our Dad worked for us so we had to obey him. But you were scared all the time. I must have been five because I remember being in kindy.

You remember that day when you took us three kids in a the bush and you cried until we all cried because it was getting dark and we were getting hungry. And the next day you went away on a holiday all by yourself. Why did you leave us then, Mum?" Janek noticed the trembling in Barbara's face but she smiled and pretended that everything was all right.

There were also things Janek did not want to talk about. He remembered his first school days in Cooma. Dad took care of the school grounds in his spare time, he yelled at kids to put their papers in the bin. He only knew a few English words and the children dropped papers on the ground with glee to make him yell again. Janek was horrified to see other kids defy his dad.

Janek was smacked the first day in kindy because he did not understand what the teacher wanted him to do. It was just a little smack to get him into the line in front of the classroom but Janek remembered that his teacher's face was serious and angry and he did not know why. Kids laughed and he didn't know why. They called him a dummy but he didn't even know what a dummy was.

Next year in St. Therese's school in Sydney he met many migrant kids who didn't speak any English at all. He felt clever helping them.

Janek came to Linden when he was in year three but there were no migrant children. As a new migrant boy he had to travel to the city on a school bus full of country landowners' children whose families knew each other for generations.

Janek never forgot the first day on the Linden school bus. They lived in an old caravan then and the bus collected students along the country road. Kids scrambled on the bus quickly to get the seat they wanted. Janek pushed at the end of the line, scared to be left behind. The bus driver yelled out something but Janek did not hear him. The big man pushed Janek out and yelled: "Get the mud off your shoes." Kids laughed. "Bloody wog," muttered the driver to himself and the kids giggled some more.

Janek stood there outside the bus, he did not cry or laugh, he did not swear or argue, he just stood still. The man yelled to him: hurry up, get in. But Janek just stood there, he felt that his family was attacked, indeed the whole of his people. He had no idea why it was so, he did not know what he could do about it. He was eight then and he stood there until the

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driver became impatient and all the kids urged him to get in. The driver wasn't worried about Janek's shoes any more, he had to bring the kids to school on time. "Just get in," he yelled, but Janek did not move. Nobody laughed now, everybody seemed to understand that something more important than muddy shoes was at stake. The driver moved out and took Janek's hand to pull him up, but Janek did not move. The driver then put his arm over Janek's shoulder and said: I am sorry. Both knew why he said it. Janek quietly cleaned his shoes and boarded the bus.

Janek could never tell anyone about this incident. He couldn't tell his parents that he was protecting them against the world. They were all attacked because he had muddy shoes, but Janek knew that something was wrong with his parents as well. It was in the words and in the eyes of the bus driver.

Janek remembered the word wog from Cooma. He was five and Timmy in his class invited everybody to his fifth birthday party. It was Janek's first party and he loved to play with Timmy's toys. When other kids were picked up by their parents after the party, Janek still played happily with the cars. Timmy's father said to Timmy's mother: "Get that wog kid home." Janek never heard the word wog before but it had a sting in it and Janek knew that he wasn't wanted. He went home silently and suddenly sad.

When his school friend had his tenth birthday party he told Janek that mum only invited the family over. Janek watched as the cars kept rolling down the dusty road to the farmhouse near Linden. Suddenly he felt jealous because his friend's family was so big.

On his tenth birthday Ivan decided that Janek was a grown up boy who didn't have to kiss his parents goodnight any more. Helena learned to place her cheek ladylike on one side and she never stopped being kissed, she was Daddy's little girl until she left home. Leon was cuddled and kissed as babies are, the youngest, he remained a baby of the family long after his tenth birthday. Janek felt vaguely rejected, he had to grow up fast and he had no-one to talk to about his feelings.

"What would you do, if I called you a wog?" Janek remembered his best friend teasing him as they started high school. Their mothers went to church together, they were supposed to be good friends but his friend wanted to see the reaction on Janek's face. "You wouldn't," said Janek, because he did not know what else to say. He remembered the rhyme: Sticks and stones will hurt my bones but names will never hurt me. What a silly rhyme, the names hurt more than sticks and stones because you couldn't tell anybody about the pain. He wanted to smash the living daylight out of his friend. He never considered him a friend again. He couldn't tell Mum because she too might be considered a wog and might get hurt. He couldn't tell the teacher because she might herself have considered his whole family as wogs.

They enthusiastically read William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* at school then and everybody tried to copy the characters from the book because they admired cruelty during their first teenage years. There was something magnetically attractive about power, it was exciting to be arrogant and daring. The kids used to stick to those that tormented them like moths buzzing around the light, getting their wings singed.

Janek observed that baddies always came first and nobody had time for the goody. It was charming to be a teaser, they respected a bully. Janek never knew how to be a bully although his brother Leon was a natural bully. Janek wanted so much to be like them and so

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sad because he did not know how to be like them. He ran out of the class when kids laughed at him and he cried hiding in the toilet but kids found him and told the principal who told Janek not to be silly.

Janek learned to laugh a lot at high school and teachers told him to grow up and act his age. He laughed when boys called him a garlic muncher, he laughed with them, what else could he do. He wasn't going to cry because he didn't want mum to come to school, or dad. Aborigines also laughed at themselves like that, so nobody would notice if they hurt.

When Linden High opened Janek played footy with Aboriginal kids. They liked him, maybe they sensed that he felt just as out of place as they did. They mucked up, giggled a lot and got in trouble often.

At high school students had to do projects on current affairs for Social studies, they were told to read the papers and listen to the news. Only in Aboriginal homes there were no books.

Janek's dad ordered Slovenian publications and Slovenian music and insisted that the two languages his children had to learn remain separate. Their school provided them with their English while he provided them with Slovenian. Dad hated mangled mixture of languages many migrants used. He insisted that his children speak clean Slovenian. they never dared to speak a word of English with him. When the children grew up he sometimes slipped from Slovenian into English but his children never followed. Teachers during seventies insisted that migrant parents speak English at home to help their children, but Janek's father never did and his mother never dared.

Janek remembered Dad's hair cutting, he was thirteen then and long hair was a sign of liberation. He begged and cried to be allowed long hair. Dad promised to cut just a little, but the machine slipped to Janek's skin and he ended with a crew-cut. "It was an accident because you wouldn't sit still," said Dad. Dad blamed others, he never once admitted that he made a mistake. Leon had the same haircut so Janek would not feel alone. Leon laughed about it, he let kids touch his head and he laughed with them. His boldy head almost turned into a status symbol. Janek put a cap on and the kids laughed when the teacher pulled it off.

"Dad was a bastard," said Janek now and Mum became horrified of his blaspheme.

"Remember how Leon and I wanted to go to the pictures that Sunday when we first came to Linden. Everybody went to the pictures on Sundays except us. He was mean, calculating, old bastard. You never helped us either, mum, you never told him what a bastard he was. You just let him have his way with everybody. We begged him all that Saturday to let us go to the pictures on Sunday and in the evening he promised to let us go if we split the load of wood and stacked it in the shed first. Leon and I got up at dawn and by lunch time we finished. I put out my hand for the money but he looked surprised,: You can go, I said nothing about the money. He laughed. I was waiting, foolishly thinking that he was joking. Only he wasn't. He didn't give us the money."

Barbara wanted to say something that would take Janek's hurt away, but she did not know what. They sat in silence as they tiptoed through the past.

Janek remembered how Leon left him there waiting for money; Leon seemed to accept the betrayal easily. Both Janek and his mum remembered how Ivan laughed and teased as big tears welled up in Janek's eyes and rolled freely down his face.

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“Now, now, you are too big to cry. What would your friends say if they saw you crying?” said dad. Janek was thirteen and he burst out crying then in long, loud sobs, ashamed of tears and afraid of his own anger because he wanted to kill his father then. He wanted to smash the laughing face of the old shit fart and he was afraid of the words and the feelings inside him.

Barbara remembered her own pain and how she begged Ivan to give the money to the boys but he said that he will decide where his children will go and what they will see.

Janek remembered how Mum cried a little with him, hiding her tears because she was afraid of dad. But she did not help. Following dad into the bedroom she sobbed while Janek stood there on his own and with nowhere to go.

Janek heard Dad say to mum: “I have to harden the boy, it’s for his own good, you know, he is a boy and I don’t want him to grow into a woman. I will thank you not to interfere. They’d swear and hit you if I wasn’t here to protect you.”

Janek wondered if mum was afraid of her own kids. Janek swore in his mind real dirty at the old fart then because that was the only thing he could do. And he stole his first cigarette from Helena’s bag and lit it in the garden. He smoked secretly and felt guilty about it ever since.

Helena was allowed to stay with Vida’s kids and they went to the pictures together. It wasn’t fair, Janek hated his sister for it, but it wasn’t really her fault. He hated Leon because Leon did not cry.

Janek remembered how he tried to kill himself that evening. He never told anyone about it. He wasn’t sure anymore if he really wanted to die or just show dad how sad he was, how he needed his love and sympathy. He still couldn’t talk about it. Janek took mum’s headache tablets and a few sleeping pills as he went to bed that evening. He swallowed the lot to punish dad. Much later he heard dad’s voice in the distance. “What do you think you are doing,” dad yelled, “it’s nine o’clock.” So it was morning. “Who cares.” thought Janek in semi-consciousness, only he couldn’t formulate words. Dad was pulling the blankets off him and shaking him but Janek couldn’t open his eyes. He felt safe in his distance. Mum put her cold shaky hand on his forehead and said to dad that Janek seemed sick and that his head was burning and that he should stay in bed. Dad did not even touch Janek’s head, he went to work and did not return until the evening. Janek slept most of the day but by the evening his head cleared and he felt sad and ashamed. He was afraid that someone would find out because they should be able to find out. Dad probably didn’t know that mum needed tablets to sleep so she couldn’t tell him that they were missing. Did she know what happened? Maybe dad hated Janek because he failed to harden him. Or did he?

Janek returned home from Sydney Teachers College and they still treated him as a child. Mum still tidied whatever he touched. When he was a boy his dad used to come into his room to look under the bed and empty his drawers and his pockets. All the rubbish had to go. The books on the shelf had to be like soldiers in the army, tidy surfaces had to shine everywhere. Janek never had a space of his own. Mum would come after dad, she dropped in the bin all the interesting things he collected. She wanted to please Dad so she wiped and wiped. Janek would have liked a little hidden untidy corner that nobody could ever touch, but they would never let him.

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“What little Johnny learns, big John does,” said Dad, “The young sapling bends the old branch breaks, if you let the boy play he will play as a man.” Dad knew all the old irrelevant sayings.

Janek wandered why he returned home and why couldn't he break away. He hated this town, he always wanted to run away from home.

Janek found a house near school right next to Aborigines and rented it with two other teachers. He spent most Saturday mornings coaching soccer and football. Parents brought their boys and cheered them on. He remembered how other parents came out to cheer their kids at footy when he was still at school. He was the best football player at high school, yet his parents never once came, they were always too busy. Maybe they knew how he'd hate them coming anyway. He looked out sometimes hoping to see someone who would call his name, but he couldn't stand his father or mother cheering him. Only they should have come. People called out names of their kids, but nobody called out Janek. Maybe they would call if his name was Jim or Jack or Nigel or Kevin. Maybe they couldn't pronounce Janek.

Janek was there on his own trying to win games, friends and girlfriends. He brought home merit cards for his school work but they all ended in the bin. They never read them, they didn't know that he was called out at the assembly to receive the card and so make his parents proud. They should have tried. When Janek ran to Dad to tell him that he came second in year 12 dad asked: “Why not first?” Dad had to be first, to be in control and in charge of everyone around him. “You will never be as good as I am, you will never know what I know,” dad used to say to Janek.

Blond with graceful feminine movements Janek played most sports well but mum never showed his trophies with pride to anyone like other mothers did. When he brought them home his dad complained: “You won't earn your keep kicking the ball.” Janek put the trophies on the top shelf where mum couldn't reach to wipe the dust. They were out of sight if dad came, safe from his rages, he couldn't sweep them with his arm and break them like he broke other things. High up they held shining memories of the boys and girls who admired him for coming first.

Janek's younger brother Leon was dark haired like mum, but he was tall and had his father's broad shoulders. He didn't play any sport, he didn't even watch football on TV, yet he looked like an all around sportsman. Leon read books.

“He'll make something of himself,” said dad.

Janek wanted to be loved by his father like Leon was. He probably came home to reconcile with his childhood in Linden where people first told him to grow up.

During his school years Janek had to protect his sister Helena, because she was a girl, he had to protect Leon because he was his little brother. Leon wanted everything his way and other kids liked to bash him. Janek felt that he also had to protect his mother because she cried when Dad yelled at her.

As Janek's body began to change during his teens, his face became ugly with pimples and hair and he became disturbed with the urge to touch his body. He was scared of being caught. Something that felt so good had to be forbidden. Not sure about other boy's sexual activities he never talked with anybody about masturbating. Like others, he boasted about

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mysterious secret exploits with girls. All his sexual education came from a rare movie at the drive in. He went to the movies with the girls from school and in the erotic darkness he groped for the girl's hand and breasts like other pushing teenagers did. Adults hissed disgusted with the permissive youth kissing in front of them.

By the time Leon became a teenager, Ivan became used to the rebellion and ugliness of teenage boys so he hung on baby Leon with all the love he couldn't manage when Janek needed it. By the time Janek turned into a handsome, tall, young man, everybody, including Janek, was sick of his growing up and of him. He went away to college.

Janek used to baby-sit Leon when they were children. When Leon cried, mum or dad yelled out: "What did you do to him, don't be a bully now, be a big boy, leave the toys for the baby, grow up, don't be silly, look after him, he is your only brother. Don't you love your baby brother, you big bad boy. He is only a baby, how can he hurt you, he broke your car, he did not mean to, he does not understand yet. We must love our family." Janek began to hate Leon who grew up to be strong and arrogant.

"I couldn't care less what people think," said Leon. "I hate complicated people. They make problems so they can solve problems. I don't get overly excited about things, so I don't get overly depressed." Leon never seemed to worry about what he wore or ate, he had friends but he seemed just as contented on his own.

Mum made nice dresses out of old rags for Helena, she added new ribbons and dad bought her pretty shoes. The boys wore second hand daggy clothes most of the time and for special occasions parents chose daggy new clothes at Woolworth's. Janek would have loved to pick his own clothes, he loved the silk shirts and pure cotton things he now bought. He bought the finest wool and silk and leather. Janek always wanted to choose his clothes, he liked flamboyant colours and hated the grey outfits chosen for him by his father.

"I want you to grow up to be a man. Do You want to be a woman, is that what's wrong with you," said dad and the thought scared all of them.

Mum asked Dad to talk to the boys about growing up, whatever she meant by it. "I told Helena everything," she said. Helena later told Janek how Mum introduced her to tampons. Janek thought that he knew everything, of course. When one knows no more, one assumes that what one knows is everything. A friend gave Janek a Playboy magazine with everything in it but dad found it under his mattress. He made Janek kneel next to the bed as he gave him five straps across the bottom for bringing pornography into the house.

Janek smiled ruefully remembering that even after he left home for good dad still kept telling him how weak he was. If Janek was more like him, he'd be able to control his students.

They expected Leon to go through the same awkward teenage stages but because they expected it, it never really seemed to happen. Leon became a little more withdrawn, more manly, his voice deepened, his feelings became less obvious and he grew up.

"We all grew up to please Daddy who built Linden," thought Janek. He returned to show dad how independent he became but he realised that he still had a need to please Daddy.

The out of town landowners and rich Linden people living in their mansions up on heights resented the fact that more and more Aborigines moved down to Linden. They sent their children to a boarding school so they would not be contaminated by the local environment.

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The area wasn't prosperous anymore and in the late eighties the welfare provided for those that needed help.

By 1987 everybody talked about cultural awareness, kinships, roots, extended family, and the past. Janek re-examined his childhood as he listened to the stories of other people. He remembered that as a child he could never bring his friends home because in his home everybody spoke Slovenian and the stories told were meaningless to outsiders. But now people began to take pride in their diversity. Janek wondered what his grandparents were like. He realised that he never knew any old people, any people that could give him an idea of what grandparents were all about.

"We are what we are," said dad, "you should be proud of what you are." Maybe dad was right. Everybody now wanted to be ethnic, eat and dress ethnic. Some even wanted to learn other languages. Self esteem became vital.

In 1990 Janek's school chose intercultural studies for their theme and the principal wrote in the newsletter: We are looking for people in our community who were born in some other country to talk to the children about their culture. The principal personally asked Janek's Mum Barbara to speak to Janek's class.

"It's OK with me," said Janek. "She probably won't come," he hoped but Barbara came and sat under the tree on the playground with his students.

"When I was a little girl I used to lay in the grass and dream how I will one day go away, far away like the birds, as far as the sky and the clouds, I always wanted to go away," she smiled.

"I came from Slovenia, which is in the middle of Europe and about as big as Victoria. I came from the sunny side of Alps, with many mountain lakes and clear streams, and forests with soft moss. My father told me that good fairies slept on the moss in the forest and ate berries. I believed that Hansel and Gretel lived there. The soft grass in the meadows was full of the prettiest wild flowers. You could lay down anywhere and go to sleep." Kids lay quietly on the lawn, their dreamy faces following Barbara's words and the clouds above them.

"Maybe they also remember other places, other parts of their lives," thought Janek.

"Every spring my Dad took me into the forest to listen to the wedding song of the birds. The forest was full of chirping noisy birds, but I was looking for the church where the bird's wedding was. The trees had beautiful new green leaves and the sun was making them yellow as it reached towards the earth, to melt the snow. When the cuckoos returned from their winter migration you could hear their calls echo from the hills. The purple cuckoo flowers opened up then. My father once showed me a tiny bird feed a huge grey baby bird. The little bird kept bringing insects and worms for the big bird. Dad told me that the big bird was a cuckoo whose mother threw the little bird's own eggs out and lay her one big egg. So the tiny bird had to feed a baby that was five times her size.

I liked to pick flowers in spring: primroses, snow bells, purple soldiers. Lilies of the valley came in May the month of flowers. In summer we were swimming in the river and picked mushrooms in the forests. In autumn we searched for wild strawberries and blackberries. We picked chestnuts and roasted them in the fire as we grazed the cattle.

In winter, ice flowers grew on the windows, and ice crystals hung down from the roof. The trees had naked branches and the fields were white and deserted. I liked winters most

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because Dad told me stories about Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, and Snow white during the long winter evenings. We sat around the huge warm oven and mum sewed my dolls and dad carved the doll's bed. He taught me to weave baskets. I remember the smell of freshly baked bread and mum's cooking. I often went to sleep on top of the warm huge oven.

Friends came during winter, they stringed feathers for doonas and pillows, they shelled beans and told stories. Men repaired their tools. Children were tobogganing, skiing, skating. Once I was showing off to my brother and skied into the river, the ice broke and I almost froze. He saved my life.

My dad used to say that seasons reminded us that God didn't forget us."

Janek never heard his mother speak so much, she never seemed as at ease as she was with his difficult class. He began to relax and listen as her gentle monotonous remembering calmed his class so much that they almost went to sleep as the warm autumn wind swayed the branches of the tree above them.

"Why did you always want to get away," asked a little Aboriginal girl.

"I don't know," said Barbara startled. She never thought about it before. Why did she want to go away? It was an unknown force that she had no control over. They were silent for a few moments, each one of them following an unknown path of thinking and the words came half way into their consciousness as their eyes followed the clouds above them.

Barbara wandered why did she want to go away even when she was so intensely happy with her family. What was it that made her long for the mysterious and unknown. Why wasn't she happy to be with people that loved her. She had nothing to run away from then. Did she really want to see the world? She was only six or seven when she first felt the aching for the faraway places. She had tears in her eyes because in the spring the world looked so beautiful that she wanted to embrace it all, she wanted to run to the edge of it and hold it to her heart. Did she start running then? Was that the primeval call of the wild, a call to run free. Why did people need to form ties if they only wanted to run from them. And when away they wanted to go back to the beginning. Barbara realised that she ran past people and places. She wanted to touch everything but she never really touched anyone. She wished now that she could be allowed another chance but maybe God knew that she would not do any better the second time.

Janek also thought about his running away from his family. He felt like an atom orbiting in the sphere of some whole. He wanted to be whole but he was constantly pulled apart. He was moving out and out like the stars from the centre, from the source, becoming bigger all the time and more apart from the centre. But the more he moved out the tighter he held onto the strings pulling him back. His emotions seemed to be an invisible matter resisting the laws of nature. He wandered if everything was relative and nothing real. Was pain only the friction of passing through time, was his spirit just another invisible dimension of a whole? Were cells and atoms and neutrons as real as the hidden fractions of people's minds? Were the combined energies giving an appearance of life? Maybe even in death some other dimension of consciousness followed, moving, keeping the balance between far away and far back, between the source and the horizons, between the mind and the body and the soul. Was God the universe? Did god hold the strings to let people play in the playground of their consciousness? Was life only a little playtime in the eternity of being. In

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the vortex of being was there another and another and another consciousness keeping the balance of eternity within the universe.

Janek wandered why he could not simply accept things like dad did? Dad accepted God and heaven and he expected to be rewarded for the good faith he had. Why did Janek have to search for the meaning of it all? For the first time he realised that maybe mum was like that too.

Janek realised that he always wanted to run away from the painful events and words he carried in his soul. His soul would not let him run away because it had no home other than with his family.

Janek wanted his father to tell him that all the time he felt small and unworthy and powerless he was really loved, appreciated and admired. He returned to hear those words. But there was no room in his soul for nice words because it was full of bitter sweet sadness and silenced voices of the past.

Janek promised himself a new life, not an escape like his mother has chosen, but an opening to the new experience. Suddenly Janek knew in his heart that he was doing good, that he made his students feel loved, recognised and admired.

“Would you like to see all those things again,” asked a little Chinese boy bringing everybody into the present.

“I wonder if all those things still exist after thirty years,” said Barbara. “Sometimes I wonder if all the things I remember were ever real. Maybe I only saw them because I was a child then. Maybe grownups don’t see things children do.”

“What kind of clothes do people wear in Slovenia,” asked a blond little girl, unable to relate to Barbara’s thoughts.

“The same as we do in Australia. I never even saw a national costume in Slovenia although most Slovenians in Australia own one.”

“What sort of food do they eat?” asked an Aboriginal boy whose mum also came to school to talk to the class about bush tucker.

“Slovenia has borders with Italy and we learned from them to cook spaghetti and rice. We like tomato sauce and pizza. From Austrians we adopted Vienna schnitzel and roasted potato. Hungary is our neighbour and we cook their Hungarian goulash. Croatia is on our South and we took their recipes. Maybe the smell from our neighbours’ kitchens just spilled over the borders. In the olden days we ate mostly what we grew on our farms. These days you would call that kind of food health food. Lots of vegetables freshly picked, home produced milk, butter, cheese. For Sunday’s lunch dad often caught some fish but otherwise mum killed a chook, a duck, a goose or a rabbit. In winter we killed a pig or two. Most of the meat was smoked, some was cooked and stored covered in lard because we had no fridges in the olden days.”

“Did you know Captain Cook in the olden days, when you were young?” asked a little girl remembering the history lesson about the white man who was supposed to discover Australia two hundred years ago. Some children were simply too young to relate to the ages of history. Janek and Barbara looked at each other and suppressed the smile.

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“They tell me that Slovenia is much like Australia these days, people wear jeans, drink coca cola, listen to Abba and learn about computers,” Barbara returned to the reality because the students were becoming restless.

“What did you think of Australia when you first arrived?”

“When we came to Bonegila’s camp for migrants in Victoria I saw big pots of stew and steaks. I was starving but I could not eat any because I wasn’t used to mutton. Most Slovenians never tasted lamb or mutton at home. We couldn’t even eat the potatoes cooked in dripping, everything smelled of dripping. For breakfast we got cornflakes. I never saw dry cereals before, we had polenta or porridge at home. Cornflakes were like straw to us. We hated vegetables boiled without spices and salads without dressing. I suppose Australians hated the smell of our food just as much. Now we eat much the same. I brought a walnut roll we call potica for your little lunch.” Barbara unwrapped the baking dish and children became instantly hungry.

“What did you think about Australians when you first arrived to Australia,” asked a little Aboriginal boy.

“The first thing I remember was people waving to me. I waved back. I thought that they were very friendly but someone explained that they were just brushing the flies off their faces.”

Janek felt relieved because kids loved his mum and her potica. Multi-culture became attractive.

“

He that is down need fear no fall,
he that is low no pride.
John Bunyan

Aborigines

In 1988 Janek offered to drive a small bus to the opening of the new Parliament house on the Capital Hill in Canberra. His Aboriginal friends wanted to see the queen and they hired a Land's Council's bus. Most of Janek's students came and the excursion was deemed a cultural enrichment for them.

The occasion marked the bicentenary of Australia and the Prime minister Bob Hawke said that Canberra in Aboriginal language meant a meeting place. They all met and talked, the queen, her son Charles, enthusiastic parliamentarians, dignitaries, citizens, Aboriginal representatives and Aboriginal protesters.

Janek and his friends had a pleasant picnic on the lawns of the new centre of Australian politics.

In his speech Hawke pledged a special place for Aborigines in the maturing Australian nation. He promised a treaty with Aborigines because the promise seemed appropriate to the occasion but he did not say when and how it would be arranged.

The Queen and her son spoke about Captain Cook's discovery of Australia two hundred years ago and about the progress white settlers made since.

A little Aboriginal girl presented a posy of flowers to Her Majesty the Queen, wrapped in the unmistakable Aboriginal colours of black, red and gold. Aboriginal protesters chanted: "What do we want? Land Rights. When do we want them? Now."

Janek just began to realise what Land Rights meant to Aborigines. His father talked about Slovenia where his people lived as equal, first class citizens. Where could Australian natives go to stop being second class citizens? Without Land Rights they belonged to no place.

The Opposition Leader later concluded that there was a negative community response to the radical Aboriginal protest and that it failed to promote reconciliation.

The word reconciliation was to become a catch of the decade. Janek remembered his father talking about the reconciliation among Slovenians. Words become kind of all embracing slogans. They developed a universal meaning although everybody understood and explained them differently.

The word ethnic was like that. In the popular political jargon the word ethnic clearly separated the new comers from the English speaking people; it drew the line between Anglo Saxons and those whose background was of another culture; it made some people ordinary and others different. Department of Ethnic Affairs was created to deal with the problems of those that were different. It was tacitly agreed that ethnics had problems.

Created during seventies the word ethnic came to lump together all who were less, who had peculiar habits, who couldn't speak English, who were not typical Australians. In the eighties Australians were divided into English speaking Australians, ethnics, and Aborigines.

Even Government forms carried the choices of identity: Australian, ethnic background or Aboriginal origins.

Branding people by their nationality, race or colour wasn't acceptable anymore so ethnicity pointed to a cultural origins. Peculiarly English did not take part in the ethnic cultural identification, so ethnic became more odd, quaint and peculiar than cultural. The society accepted the novelty value of ethnic dress and cuisine and art but in the political culture ethnic still meant less.

Many Aborigines wholeheartedly embraced the new Aboriginal identity. They felt that at last they became a nation in their own country. Gradually the novelty wore off and some wondered why the government chose to separate them.

The Prime Minister spoke about the Australian achievements during the twentieth century and he said that half of the Snowy Mountains Scheme workers were ethnics. He praised their endurance and hard work.

The children of European ethnics blended in so well that people had difficulties to tell them apart. Janek wondered if they stopped being ethnics after a generation? They looked the same as Anglo Saxons, spoke the same, were indoctrinated in the same school. Liberated from their ethnicity, however, many chose to search for the source of their being.

Janek remembered how he hated his name during his teenage years. The name of his family separated him from the English speaking kids. It pleased him to discover later that many important people in the media and even in the government had foreign sounding names. He also knew that people admired his family and talked about his father with respect. They succeeded against all odds.

Since that Canberra excursion Janek became known in Linden as an Aboriginal sympathiser.

Janek was nine when he met the first Aborigines. His teacher introduced the two Aboriginal girls to the class in Linden's primary school and ordered the students to be nice to the strange looking newcomers.

The girls' fiery eyes flicked over the class as they stood at the door, close to each other, forlorn before the white audience. Janek remembered that their dark hair was sunburnt and almost red at the ends, the snot from their noses was just visible and the puss on the inside of their eyes stuck fast. The skin on their hands was cracked and one girl's colourful dress had a hem undone. They stared at the floor.

The taller of the two girls had green eyes and her name was Tracy. She looked less Aboriginal because of her eyes. Other children looked the girls over during their play lunch, they sniffed at them and put up their noses as they rolled their eyes meaningfully.

The class learned in their social studies about Australian savage natives called aborigines. Much later they made A capital and Aborigines became a nation.

During their lunch break the girls wanted to kick the ball with the other children but one of the boys fiercely kicked the ball out of Tracy's hands and out onto the other end of the oval. Janek deliberately ran after the ball and kicked it back to Tracy. Nobody noticed a brief smile Janek and Tracy exchanged but that was the beginning of their friendship. Both felt awkwardly foreign and in need of support.

Janek noticed Tracy watching him during lunch time. He looked at her and she asked: what you eating? He offered her half of his salami sandwich and she grabbed it eagerly but she screwed her face after tasting the salami. It taste funny, she said and threw it in a bin. Janek got used to Tracy's lunches. On a pension day she had a hamburger, chips, coke, lollies and ice-cream. She shared it with Janek. For the next week Tracy ordered her lunches from the canteen but for the last few days of the pension fortnight she went without. Gradually she got used to Janek's salami sandwiches.

Tracy came to Linden from the outback Brewarrina as a child with her family. She was the first Aboriginal student to finish high school in Linden. At the age of seventeen she went to Redfern in Sydney where her brother Keith worked as a police Liaison officer. Keith was a state's boxing champion, he was popular among his own people and respected by whites. Lots of his people from Brewarrina came to his place, people who had nowhere to stay, his friends and relations sometimes stayed for weeks. Her brother Keith was Tracy's hero. She wanted to succeed like he did.

Tracy enrolled in Tech. She also found an evening job in Greek fish and chips shop. That's how she met Nick, whose father was the owner of the shop. Nick liked Tracy and he invited her to his eighteenth birthday party. Tracy had never been to a white people's party before. Although whiter than some Greeks, she felt that everybody stared at her dark skin. She knew that she was different. Nick was busy serving drinks and Tracy accepted a glass of wine like everybody else. Slowly she relaxed and laughed with the rest of them. Wine helped to make them all equal.

It was still dark when she woke up with an aching head. People were sleeping on the floor next to her, she stepped over them as she straightened her clothes. She felt sick and scared so she ran all the way home. "It won't happen again, I will stick with my own mob," she kept saying to herself.

Nick smiled casually at her the next day and she asked no questions. Everything was normal Tracy tried to block out the vague recollection of the evening.

"You don't have to work for them wogs no more, you can keep house for me," said Keith's friend Glen who was also an Aboriginal Liaison officer for the police.

Tracy didn't know what exactly was wrong with wogs or who wogs were but they sounded like a sickness. You catch a wog, wogs were an unknown quantity to her. She felt shamed by wogs. She felt that wogs didn't like her and she was scared of them. Janek later explained to her that wog was originally short for Westernised Oriental Gentleman. Tracy had no idea what that meant either.

Glen's sister had a housing commission home but she went to mum's in Bourke when her boyfriend bashed her. She packed her four kids and a bag of clothing and took a bus home. Her boyfriend followed after he sobered up.

Glen was left alone in a house so Tracy moved in with him and went on a pill.

"I don't want to end with a bunch of kids and a pension like my mob at home," she said to Glen. She felt comfortable with Glen, he had a job, he loved her and he was her own kind.

She just woke up when the first morning sickness started. She closed her eyes, covered herself with blankets and waited for it to go away. It didn't. She accepted her pregnancy but she didn't tell Glen until she was five months gone.

"I thought you didn't want kids," he said unconcerned.

"I must've skipped the pill."

Coming home from school one evening she found Glen drunk.

"Where is my fucken tucker?" he yelled.

"You gave me no fucken money, you spent it on grog with your fucken mates." She scared herself with her temper and her words. He hit her.

"You fucken cunt, you fucking them wog fellahs." He heard about her party. She was on the floor as he kicked her. She grabbed the legs of a chair and smashed it on his head. In the morning she returned to Linden.

Janek also returned from Sydney that year and Tracy often came to see him after school. They liked to remember the events and people from their long high school years. Tracy told Janek all about the baby and his unknown origins. She also insisted that Glen was really good to her.

"It's just the grog, Glen would never hit me sober," said Tracy to Janek as they relaxed in his lounge room, smoking.

"As soon as I have this baby I am going back to college. I have to keep away from my mob. I don't want to end like them." She had to convince herself and hold onto her dream. Janek was the only white person she ever relaxed with and he was the only one who knew about the party and the baby. The intimacy of knowing each other made them happy. They made no demands on each other they were simply enjoying each other's company. Neither Janek nor Tracy worried too much about the dust settling over Janek's belongings. Janek and the two young boys who shared his house were not bothered too much with cleaning either. People dropped in all the time, they liked the casual atmosphere but deep down Janek felt guilty about the mess.

Mum once came to see Janek and he offered her a cup of coffee.

"No, thank you, I'll just have a look around," she said and started tidying the cupboards, pulled out the drawers, opened the fridge and the oven.

"You came to check if I cleaned up, mum. You still treat me like a five year old. You never trusted me." Something snapped in him and Janek yelled at his mother. She came to remind him that he wasn't free, that he was still a child to be criticised and belittled.

Mum sniffed into her hand and he lit a smoke to calm down.

"Is that black girl going to have a baby?" Mum wiped her eyes, she tried to disguise her fear but now Janek suddenly understood that she came because she was afraid that Tracy would disgrace their family. She was probably afraid of what dad would say. She was always scared of what dad would say.

"I thought you'd be able to tell when a woman is seven months pregnant. You came because you'd like to know if it is my baby," Janek always knew what Mum thought.

"Don't be silly. I know it isn't."

"How can you tell," he teased.

"She came from Sydney or wherever she came from, pregnant, didn't she?"

A few days earlier Tracy came to see Barbara. "Janek wants me to pick a photo he took of my people." Barbara found the photo of Tracy's family in the pack of photos Janek left on the table. She looked at it and found Janek in it.

"Is this the picture of our people," she asked. Tracy looked at the photograph unsure and said, "yes that's the one." Barbara could see some adjusting going on in Tracy's head. Both knew that they were thinking about the words 'my people-our people'. Barbara became terrified that her son became involved with a black girl. What would Ivan do? What would people say? Barbara became terrified of becoming Tracy's people.

"I don't want to be like my mob. They drag me down. If you stick to my people you will never own anything. Unless they are all rich, Aborigines remain all poor," said Tracy to Janek.

"Where do you get these green eyes?" teased Janek

"Who knows. Mum has them, all mum's relations in fact. My real father was a white fellah, but I never met him. So was my grandfather, maybe one of them had green eyes."

"People often wonder why some of you blond green eyed people insist on being Aborigines. It is obvious that you have little Aboriginal blood."

"My mother's father was actually a Cherokee Indian. He jumped ship and joined Aborigines. My other grandfather was German, but I never met him," said Tracy. "We were rejected by white relations. Aborigines never reject you no matter what amount of Aboriginal blood you have. If you grow in an Aboriginal home all you ever know is Aboriginal life. Like they say: You feel like an Aborigine and you are accepted as an Aborigine, you must be an Aborigine. Believe me I know what it's like. It costs you. We never turn anyone away. My people depend on each other. You have to be careful not to become a coconut."

"What do you mean?"

"Black outside, white inside. My Cherokee grandfather was accused of being an apple: red outside, white inside. He worked for the American navy and jumped ship in Australia because his people rejected him."

"Was he a part Indian?"

"You can't be part anything, I can no more be a part-Aboriginal than I can be a part human being. One of my more sober uncles once told me that if I sat on the fence I was likely to fall off. I think he wanted me to decide if I was an Aborigine or if I wasn't," said Tracy.

"Have you decided?"

"How could I, I have no control over it. I know that people who like me, consider me Aboriginal and that is all that it takes," said Tracy.

Janek realised that he sat on the fence and couldn't decide who he was. Most minorities must have felt like that at some time. But it wasn't just minorities, English speaking migrants felt torn between being British or Australian. Maybe the whole world changed as people became mobile.

"Who would you consider the most important Aboriginal person today," asked Janek.

“No one Aboriginal person is more important than the other. If one goes to a hospital or a prison we all visit. To us the alcoholic who died in the gutter is as important as a sober pen-pusher in the office. Everyone comes to their funeral.”

As a teacher of Aboriginal children Janek was often the only white person at Aboriginal funerals. They all wailed loudly as they sang their beloved song: The old rugged cross. Although some moved away and lived apart, when one of theirs died they returned to pay respects. Janek was touched by their reverence of the death. Washed and perfumed in their black and white finery they looked awesome. Janek would have liked to feel the same towards his people. United in their sorrow they shared the mystery of coming home to Jesus. The gods of their past were forgotten and the crucified represented the hope for the future.

“Education sometimes causes a separation, you don’t want to go talking flash around Aborigines,” said Tracy.

“But you want to be educated,” said Janek.

“It’s going to be a lonely road,” said Tracy.

Janek did not see Tracy for three years after she had a baby. She got a grant to study in the Australian capital. He met her again on the lawn of the newly opened Parliament house in Canberra and she promised to visit.

Soon after Janek and Diana moved into their first home Janek met with his other school mate Ray and his wife Karen. It was too early for his soccer training on the oval but a couple of Aboriginal boys tagged along waiting for sir. He went into the supermarket to buy a packet of smokes when he bumped into Karen.

“Coming for a drink,” Karen flashed a smile from under a mass of her long blond curls.

“Bloody forties in the shade,” said Ray loading the groceries in the ute. In an acubra hat, mole-skin trousers, riding boots and checked shirt he looked like Australian farmers choose to look even when the temperatures reach forty. Janek felt that by dressing like that they wanted to ostensibly emanate their separateness from those who possessed no land. To Janek only those that owned and worked on the land, truly belonged to the land.

“The kids are waiting for the footy practice but it’s still too hot,” said Janek dressed in city walk shorts, tee shirt and joggers. He was a public servant and dressed like one.

“Hard to believe that it’s the middle of the autumn,” said Karen.

Janek met a freckled nine years old Ray nicknamed fats at the same time as he met Tracy. Janek was popular among children so Ray tagged along. As they entered their teenage years girls giggled a lot and followed Janek. Ray became jealous but he still tagged along hoping that some of Janek’s popularity would rub off on him. But the girls made fun of Ray and he took a revenge on Janek.

Sometimes Ray playfully called Janek ‘Jay neck’ mispronouncing Janek’s name into a nickname. Once Janek hit Ray for it, his nose bled and Ray cried into the principal’s office. Janek’s Mum Barbara was sent for. The principal asked what happened.

“Ray’s been teasing me,” said Janek looking to the floor.

“What did he say?” Janek felt too embarrassed to tell.

“What did you say to Janek?”

“Nothing.”

Janek was put on detention for a week and the principal told his mum that Janek laughed a lot and he made other children laugh with him. He disturbed the class and was a bad influence on the other students. Janek translated for Mum and on the way out mum told Ray: “My husband hit you if you not leave my boy alone.” The other kids laughed and Janek wanted to run away ashamed. Janek concluded that people should never argue in a foreign language.

At seventeen Ray grew into a pimply thin fats. One girl teased that all Ray’s fat came out in his pimples. Janek became withdrawn and moody at that time. The girls tried to make him happy because he was the best footballer at school but he felt that nobody listened to him or wanted to understand him. He played sport aggressively to get rid of his frustration. He desperately wanted to win something. Maybe it was his father’s admiration and love that he missed.

Ray and Janek played a lot of footy together, they competed for girls, for marks and for friends. They often played on the same team but they never visited each other at home. Neither Ray nor Janek ever forgot that Karen was in love with Janek when they were at school. Feeling a little cheated both liked taunting each other even when they all became respected young members of the community. The two men met occasionally, they shared the memories of school years but underneath those memories was a desire to get back at each other for pain they suffered in their school days.

Janek remembered Karen as a little girl from year nine. He was a big man in year eleven when he kissed her under the flowering gum one day after the swimming carnival. He had a trophy in his hand, she had a ponytail, fiery eyes, flushed cheeks and heart shaped lips. It was the first real kiss for Karen. There remained something soft and warm in the memory for both of them.

Karen’s family had a property next to Ray’s and when Janek was at Teacher’s college in Sydney, Karen married Ray who stopped on his father’s sheep station. The families were close for generations and their marriage came about naturally.

“Who do you think will win?” asked Ray. They found the table in the RSL club’s garden from which you could see the main street of Linden. In small country towns people still came to see each other on the main street.

“It’s only a practice,” said Janek.

“I mean tomorrow. It’s 23rd of March 90, remember, the federal election. How do Yugoslavs vote,” asked Ray and the way he pulled at the word Yugoslav, felt insulting to Janek. He wanted to say that he was Slovenian but didn’t want to become more entangled in his ethnicity.

“The poor vote Labour, those that escaped from communism go for conservatives.”

“Aborigines and bludgers will vote Labour, they have a majority,” predicted Ray.

“Who would you like to win, Karen?” asked Janek.

“We vote national,” said Ray.

“Speak for yourself,” said Karen in mock reprove.

“Did you see those fruit growers on TV. Millions of dollars worth of grapes rotting because they can’t get pickers,” said Ray.

“Wives and kids seem to be the only people not on the award wages,” said Karen.

“Nobody likes picking the bloody fruit,” said Ray. “The farmers, their wives and kids pick the fruit to earn their living. They also pay taxes so the government can give the money to those who don’t like picking bloody fruit because picking bloody fruit is a lemon job. Guess how most of those farmers came to own their farms: by picking bloody fruit for years, that’s how. And lots of those farmers are migrants,” he added.

“Conservationists you see on TV are on the dole and they travel around stirring trouble. Why aren’t they planting trees? Or picking fruit to pay their way,” asked Karen.

“Government promised to do something about coons. They are coming in droves from the bush up North,” said Ray looking at the dark skinned native boys leaning on the fence, waiting for Janek.

Aborigines were still not welcome into the RSL club because white people didn’t like their drunken brawls. Whites carried their liqueur better.

“Aborigines are cashing on guilt industry. The majority of whites feel guilty about their own good fortune, they want to share it with Aborigines. They believe that they live on the stolen land,” said Karen.

Most white television viewers never met a native and they felt kindly towards Aborigines who were obviously less well off. Aware of their superiority and good luck, they felt luxuriously and reverently benevolent. They never had to live next to them. They presumed that Aborigines would be happy as soon as they had the same standard of living as themselves.

“They should come here and see what luxury the government provides for them,” said Ray.

“We messed them up,” said Janek, annoyed, because Ray spoke about Aborigines like the boys leaning on the fence had no ears or feelings. Janek also knew that Ray was taunting him because he was the only teacher that ever had a beer with Aborigines in their homes. He also had a reputation of defending Aboriginal rights.

“Every fortnight they come to collect their pension and go on the rampage,” said Karen.

“The government spends millions trying to educate them. For what? They don’t want jobs,” said Ray.

“The government should seriously considers Aboriginal demands for sovereignty, land rights and self-determination,” Janek remembered politicians’ promises from Canberra’s bicentennial celebrations.

“Aborigines should be made to scratch for their living like the rest of us,” said Ray.

Janek was recently asked to speak to the groups of local unemployed on how to improve their skills in order to get jobs. They all had to come into a Shire hall or else they’d lose their entitlements. Janek had to inform them about the important Literacy courses for the unemployed. But the courses weren’t compulsory and the unemployed didn’t properly understand the value of education they never had. Education only threatened to expose their ignorance so they never came to classes.

Janek sat with the employment officer at the table and smiled slightly embarrassed. He noticed that most of the unemployed were young black men. A couple of young white men

had earrings and long, blond, sun bleached hair. Many had some hair on their faces, some for decoration others out of neglect. The only white girl there had long red fingernails and matching earrings. She was very obviously pregnant and smoking.

The employment officer wore a suit and a tie. He said that employment officers and the unemployed will look good if the unemployed behaved like they wanted to find a job.

“We don’t want the employers to bad-mouth us in the pubs and specially in the media,” he stressed.

Unemployed had clean but wrinkled shirts and shorts and thongs. The two older white men looked embarrassed by the company of young Aborigines. One well groomed middle aged white man pretended that he wasn’t unemployed, he sat close to the official table leaning towards employment officer.

Aborigines giggled belligerently and exchanged furtive glances with each other. Whites sat individually but blacks seemed huddled together, heads forward like they were conspiring their defence. They barely looked at Janek as they smoked in short quick puffs. Some carried a bottle of coke, others clutched their cigarette packet like the worn teddy bears. Most were Janek’s school mates and friends but now they barely acknowledged him. They were on the opposite side now with nothing to smile about.

Janek wandered where were all the girls until he realised that there were almost no unemployed girls in Linden. Girls became unmarried mothers with single parent supporting pensions. They had a job bringing up children. “They provide me with a job as well,” thought Janek. No wonder Aboriginal women felt so much stronger and healthier than men, they had a job to do.

Men were redundant. The incidence of suicide in young men has doubled in the last decade and this national statistic suddenly made sense. They probably weren’t needed, or didn’t feel good enough. Janek felt sorry for the men and he put down a prepared lecture.

“Look if you want to find out something about training, if I can help with anything at all come and see me,” he concluded his short speech and saw some light return into his friends’ gloomy faces as if they wanted to say: “No offence mate, we know that you are only doing your job.”

Janek remembered the news segment on TV about poor Aborigines in Linden. It was a sensational story about the roof of the toilet that was blown away in the storm. The camera was poised on the broken down tin toilet away from the neglected tin sheds where children played in the dust half naked. The new houses with flush inside toilets weren’t in the picture. Nobody mentioned that residents wanted to use the outside toilet because the sewage pump, that pumped the effluent from their inside flush toilets, broke down. They waited for Aboriginal Land Council to repair the sewage pump. The Council claimed that they had no money for maintenance because Aborigines refused to pay rent.

“We aren’t going to pay rent either,” said an Aboriginal grandmother to the TV reporter pointing at the kids. “The people on the Land Council spend the rent money on grog and our kids have to run in the bush because no toilet.”

And then the wind blew the roof of their old bush toilet away. Sensational! Reporters looked desperately shocked seeing the neglected Aboriginal people. The news segment made every white Australian a little more ashamed of their good fortune.

As the national unemployment grew, education and training for the unemployed became a big issue in the nineties. They learned to decorate cakes, make ornaments, play guitar and the games on computers, type, make pottery and silk-screen print.

Nobody learned to put a roof on the toilet or repair the sewage pump.

“In the olden days farmers learned us to do all the jobs on the land,” said Ted, an old Aborigine. “I learned to do everything so I could get a job anywhere. They learn silly city things these days.”

“We need better policing and stricter laws,” advised Ray, emptying the beer glass. He saw Aborigines as nefarious parasites on the hard working society. Janek never consciously decided where he stood in regard of Aborigines. There were so many thoughts and opinions shared with him that he failed to get the clear view.

Janek remembered one Aboriginal grandmother telling him in her broken English that her son was picked up again by the police the night before. “They is watching us like hawks, they the police, is. Howard and Mervin would never hurt each other, they are best mates, they are,” she punctuated every word. “When kids is down with grog they fight and them police pounce on kids like hawks on dead meat, they do. They is after their jobs they is, they pick them up instead giving them a boot in the arse and take them home. They have to go to court regular like. Couldn’t they just lock them up to sober up and give them talking to.”

Janek often gave a lift to eighteen years old April and her cousin Kim. They came from the river-bank settlement out of town every fortnight to collect their pension cheques and have a few drinks. An argument usually followed about the boys they liked and it ended with a fist fight. The alcohol made the girls courageous and angry. When the police was called for to end their fight, the girls called policemen fucking cunts. They hurled abuse on the frustrated policemen who tried to remain calm and in control while doing their duty. The girls attracted a crowd who cheered them on. Enjoying the high moment of bravado in otherwise miserable monotonous existence, they pushed and scratched and punched and spat and swore. Overpowered by police, they were charged with assault and offensive language before they were allowed to go home.

Janek sometimes gave them a lift the next day to answer the judge and they were firm, sober friends once more. Janek asked them why they drank and they said that they couldn’t help it. The grog made them feel good. There was nothing else to do and everybody had a drink on a pension day.

Sitting on the lawn in front of the court house with their friends, social workers, counsellors, probation officers and solicitors, they laughed remembering their pension day fun. The boys they fought for were long forgotten as their sexual urges and anger subsided. The government provided legal representation because everybody was equal before the law. Their families came and bought hamburgers and coke for a picnic on the lawn. They became a centre of attention for the white government officials.

The white justice system seemed to need these problems so these important people could earn their daily bread. Often the case wasn’t heard on the same day. The girls came back the next day, unconcerned, almost happy, having something to do. They waited for the judge to suitably punish them like all the other Aborigines who were drunk on the pension day, who swore and hit each other.

Solicitors worked overtime, judges were busy, social workers, probation officers, warrant officers, they could all rely on Aborigines to get drunk, to swear, upturn the street rubbish bins and to resist arrest as long as there were pension days and grog. They were valuable clients for solicitors and other government officials who earned thousands of dollars waiting there on the lawn with Aborigines until their case was adjourned. They knew in advance, of course, that it will be adjourned but the Legal aid also paid for their waiting time.

The concerned citizens in Linden organised conferences and seminars to solve the problem of Aboriginal drinking, they were sorely concerned about under aged drinkers. It was reported in the local press that kids as young as six could be found drunk on the street. An inquiry was held into the validity of such inflammatory reporting. Special committees were organised to look into the reasons for Aboriginal alcoholism. Clever experts were called in to look into it and report for the media. Other indigenous people from America and New Zealand were invited to come and speak about the ways they tried to combat the alcoholism among the natives.

Janek remembered a six years old Ben telling during news time at school.

“My dad sells grog to Aborigines so they would kill themselves with it,” said Ben, his innocent blue eyes upturned to look at sir.

“That’s inflammatory reporting,” smiled Janek to himself remembering that Ben’s mum and dad were on the committee of concerned citizens.

The judge in his wisdom didn’t like sending Aborigines to jail because a disproportionate number of natives in jail caused bad publicity for the justice system. Some Aborigines hanged themselves in jails and caused Royal Commissions inquiring into their death. It wasn’t good politics and Australia didn’t look good internationally. The spotlight was on judiciary and they had to be careful. The judge looked for alternative solutions, for options. Community work was organised as punishment. The girls had hundreds of hours of community work due, so a few more didn’t hurt. They were told to pick the broken glass around their home. They had nothing else to do anyway. On the pension day they went to town again became drunk, depressed and courageous.

Janek couldn’t talk about this with Ray.

“They keep coming because they know that they will get a nice new brick house if they produce a family. What they get in benefits is more than one bloke’s wages. Everybody is telling them how great they are and what they need,” said Ray.

“Many still live in tin sheds without proper toilets,” said Janek.

“But they lived in humpies or under a tree for thousands of years without toilets,” laughed Karen.

“It’s goody goodies like you that want to stop them living traditional. If they wanted to have a house they’d work for it like we do,” said Ray.

“How could they, drunk most of the time,” said Karen.

“You see a few Aborigines drunk on the main street but there are almost a thousand here.” Janek wondered why he felt that he had to defend blacks. He remembered the morning’s episode at Latoya’s. The front windows of Latoya’s house were freshly broken and the new hole in the fibro near the front door was gaping like a bleeding wound.

Janek wanted to pick Latoya's grandson Tess for school but the seven years old threw a stone at his grandmother. "You ain't going to make me" he shouted. Latoya ducked, the stone brushed against Janek's hair and smashed the glass in the picture frame of Elvis Presley on the wall. The frame fell to the floor and exposed the hole it covered on the wall, the evidence of a previous battle.

"Oh darling," pleaded Latoya, "sir is going to give you a ride in his nice car and I'll bring you something good for lunch."

"Stick it," growled Tess tipping the box of groceries to the floor.

"He needs a smack," volunteered Janek.

"His mum should look after him but she is drunk all the time," protested Latoya.

"Sweetheart, not in front of sir," she begged.

"Fuck him," snarled Tess.

"He knows I can't catch him with my bugged leg," apologised Latoya.

"Where is Venessa? Where are your boys?"

"They is too weak from grog, they wouldn't catch him," admitted Latoya. Janek knew that Latoya wouldn't let him catch Tess, she was a doting Nan, trying to make up to her grandchildren for not having good parents to look after them.

Janek couldn't talk to Ray about Latoya either.

A group of Aborigines passed by and a girl yelled out, swore at the man and then laughed at him: "Fuck off," the man pushed her towards the rubbish bin, the bin tipped and the rubbish scattered. Children laughed, about ten of them under school age.

"Stop swearing," said the woman, "I want to teach my fucking kids some fucking manners." They all laughed at her and she looked at them, saw Janek, smiled a little, flashing her yellowish teeth, and went on in her dance like swagger.

"They breed like rabbits, drink like fish, fight like there was a war on," said Ray expecting a laugh.

"They have no bank accounts to worry about," laughed Janek.

"They make kids to entertain themselves," laughed Karen.

"They have nothing else to live for anyway." Janek was always defending them, he always felt compelled to defend the weak and unworthy.

"He should be a missionary or something," people used to say.

"You should be paid for defending people," said his father, annoyed with Janek.

"What did they have to live for before the white fellah brought them the video, cards, grog and smokes? They were bloody starving that's what they were doing. They can still go walkabout in their precious bush if they want to. They want air-conditioning and a cold beer. Forget the billabong, mate, power is what they are after, power to make whites work for them. They are getting it too from these socialist governments," said Ray.

“Since whites civilised them they became dependent, inferior alcoholics,” Janek wanted to get out of the argument but he couldn’t let Ray think that he got the better of him. Janek realised that Aborigines with large families got more in social benefits than they would in wages but that wasn’t Aborigine’s fault. He remembered his Aboriginal assistant, a mother of six, who worked for a full year before she figured out that she was getting less in wages than she would on the welfare. And they expected her to be reliable and grateful for a job. She was clever and became a project manager in an Aboriginal office. She didn’t quite know what her duties there were but they gave her a car and the wages were good. Janek and the kids missed her a lot because at school she knew exactly what to do.

“Our generation can undo the wrongs done to Aboriginal people so that next generation will have nothing to feel guilty about.” Against his better judgement Janek repeated the words he heard from a politician on the election campaign trail at an Aboriginal mission.

Janek called a meeting of Aboriginal parents at school and asked them what they’d like their children to learn about Aboriginal culture. Young mums giggled embarrassed. They grew up ashamed of being Aboriginal and now they tried to adapt to the new pride multi-culturism delivered.

“Everything,” said one brave girl.

“They should learn about their sacred sites,” said Ted who knew what he was talking about because Education Department trained him and appointed him as an Aboriginal culture officer. He vaguely understood that kids were messed up, that they became parents before they grew up or knew better. He also knew that there was nothing Aborigines were afraid of like they used to be afraid of spirits when he was young.

Janek often wandered about sacred sites. How could one square inch of mother earth be less sacred than the other. Hasn’t every inch of the continent been a burial ground sometimes during the last fifty thousand years?

Janek once met Ted after school in front of the hotel sitting on the kerb. “Got a bit of a cold,” said Ted trying to cover up the smell and effects of the cheap fortified wine. Janek offered him a smoke and they enjoyed the intimacy pretending that it was all right to sit on the kerb in front of the pub and smoke. A couple of nuns passed by smiling at people who greeted them respectfully.

“I remember when Catholic nuns first came and thought us kids about gentle Jesus,” said Ted. “We happily followed their Jesus. But when Presbyterians came they offered us a cup of tea and sandwiches as well as Jesus, so we attended their prayers and ate their food. Anglicans offered us singing and dancing so we went to sing and dance; we went from one to the other to get all they were offering. Jehovah witnesses came to us and brought us books about Jesus. We forgot our old gods and followed Jesus. Finally in 1967 the government joined the Jesus people. To get our votes they offered us money and grog and tobacco. We smoked and drank and we were happy. But every day we wanted to be more happy so we drank and smoked more. Kids smoke marijuana now or sniff glue to dull their senses and be more happy. The emptiness inside us is growing and the government just can’t keep up with our needs any more. The need in us grew disproportionately with the government handouts, they can never again catch up with the needs they created in us. Our kids steal and kill to satisfy their needs. Whites taught us to love the money and the

material things. Since government provides for our children we lost our children's respect. Who will raise them to know right from wrong," said Ted quietly looking to the ground.

Neither Ted nor Janek ever consciously thought about these things before so now they both pondered the validity of his statement.

"The truth is that no matter how many rights and how much money government gives you, if the people around you don't like you and don't trust you, you haven't got much. In fact you have nothing if people around you don't respect you. I used to like whites and whites liked me. They trusted me. They learned me to work and I had plenty of work all my life. If I needed extra money to go to the funeral or something I could go to any white and they'd give it to me. They knew that I'll work for it or pay back. When whites went for a holiday I looked after their properties. They wouldn't trust my kids to do the same. My kids would wreck the place. My kids will never have what I had, no matter how much money the government spends on them. We knew our place but today there is no place for them. We knew what was right and some things just ain't right."

"Dad blames communists for the love of material things," said Janek and wondered what Ted would make of that. But Ted was caught in his own reasoning.

"At the end of the day you are what you are to yourself. it doesn't matter what anybody says," Ted muttered in response to his own reasoning.

"True," said Janek eyeing the rowdy youngsters entering the pub. He shifted closer to Ted to let them pass.

"What's the use," Ted followed Janek's eyes. "Government gives it and government takes it."

"Bless the government," laughed Janek awkwardly. A thought came to him suddenly. He wished he could talk to his own father like he talked with Ted sitting on the kerb in front of the pub. But he would be embarrassed if his father sat down on the kerb.

"They created the needs in our bodies that we never knew before," elaborated Ted on the subject he just began to understand. "Our kids became greedy and wicked, they are not afraid of spirits any more, in fact they are not afraid of anything. The publicans installed the money game machines in the hotels and young mums, hooked on the gambling, forget their children and their husbands. They hold onto their babies as they pull the levers that swallow their pension. Then they beg the charities for support, they have no pride left, they simply place themselves at the mercy of the white masters."

"Why do Aboriginal girls have so many babies," asked Janek.

"They have to do something, government doesn't want them to do anything so they make babies to love." Ted was reasoning with himself about the addictions and drugs and video and fast life. He thought that there must be a reason deeper than drugs, only he could not see it clearly. It bothered him that someone was out to destroy the way of life he knew was good.

"Dad blames communists for destroying morals, for taking away authority and letting kids do as they like, for selfishness and greed and cruelty," said Janek reflecting on his own upbringing. He wandered if the world was really becoming less just and moral than it used to be. Everybody always strived for freedom, prosperity, peace and justice. Will they ever

get it right in their search for perfection? There must be a reason for all that was unfolding. Maybe morality and god and justice had nothing to do with life, maybe they were invented by people who wanted to subdue and dominate others. Maybe the survival was the only important thing, the survival of the fittest, the survival of the genes and the tribe and the species and the life itself. Maybe every living thing was fighting for the survival on equal terms. Maybe all rules and regulations should become redundant. There was romance in the struggle, there was poetry in suffering, there was wisdom in pain, there was a symphony in achieving contentment.

“My race is dyeing and I don’t even know who is to blame,” said Ted. Both sat silently, the old black drunk and the young white migrant teacher wondering if everything was really as it was meant to be.

“I wish Aboriginal mums would send their children to school more regularly,” said Janek hoping to be able to do something to stop their destruction and sad emptiness.

“Young girls have nothing else to offer their kids but love, they have lots of love for their babies. Whatever their kids ask for, they get, if they don’t want to go to school their mums tell their teachers that they are not well. They lie for them because they love them and want them to be happy. They let them play video games at home or sit in front of the pub and eat their lunch out of a paper bag. Mums are not in control of their own lives, they live on the government mercy, they also try to dodge the authority best they know how. Respected citizens sneer at pregnant young girls and their children. They are the people with jobs and homes and good standing so they are afraid of losing their status. Aboriginal mums only have the love of their babies and they would do anything to keep what they have. They ask their children what they want to do and eat and wear and play. These young girls never made decisions for themselves let alone for somebody else, they don’t know that it is their duty to decide for their babies. They have no wealth, no pride, no self-respect and no reputation to protect. They are not afraid of anybody. They laugh if I mention spirits to them.”

Janek remembered Ted’s old illiterate mother without teeth and with blind eyes sunken into the holes full of puss. She sat in the sunny spot at the back of her humpy smoking a pipe. “My grandmother told us kids about them soldiers coming to their camp,” she said. “The soldiers made the convicts split the rocks, they were spirit rocks, sacred places. They pissed on the old story rocks. The convicts dug for latrines on our sacred bora ground and the soldiers flogged them while they were digging. They dug on our birthing place where only women were allowed to come. The soldiers flogged the convicts and their blood splattered the place where our children were born. My grandmother died when I was a little girl. She thought that the spirit will punish the white man but the white man had guns and the shots echoed in the bush. Aborigines packed their spears and ran. The spirits were pissed on and they left us because we didn’t fight for them and for our sacred sites. Our kids don’t believe in the spirit world any more, they go after alcohol and drugs to forget the sadness, to fill the emptiness.”

Ted told Janek how Aborigines hated the words whites made up for them.

“White people call our history Dreaming. They laugh at their own weird dreams and they laugh at our religion and history. When we tell stories to our kids, they are real things, we tell them what we know is true, we did not dream these things up.”

“To make us happy they changed our name into Kurri. I am not Kurri. Maybe there was a tribe called Guri on the coast. You see we did not even have a sound K. You are not German just because your people live close to Germany. I am Murrey, my people come from inland up North.”

Janek wondered why the identity was so important to his father and to Ted while all that was important to young people was to be the same, to follow the same idols.

Janek’s father tried to explain to his mother about the motherland. “One day my children will hear the bones of their ancestors calling. If I don’t show them where those bones are buried they will never know where they belong.” Mum and the kids dismissed his weird reasoning but the words came back as Janek listened to Ted.

Soon after his grandmother died Janek saw Ted on the street one morning and followed him into the grocery shop. Ted was counting the coins in front of the liqueur shelf. Seeing Janek he explained that he had to buy two cans of beer for the man who would cut his hair. Janek looked at Ted’s short hair and lowered his eyes quickly. Ted noticed his glance and began stuttering.

On a Saturday morning Janek looked for Ted and found him in the pub at ten in the morning. His son was with him and both looked uncomfortable because their faces were severely bruised from the fight the night before. “You had a fight with the wall,” said Janek trying to crack a joke and they all appreciated an excuse for laughter that covered their embarrassment.

On the way home Janek heard a man yell through the window: “Why do I have to fuck a black cunt. Fuck you, you black gin.” The man’s two years old son was hiding near the window and his lips chanted: fuck you, fuck you.

In the olden days gin was the cheapest grog for white men to ply black girls with. The brownish kids were the reminder of the pleasures white men had with black gins. Peter and Annette, his gin, were at school with Janek. Annette was proud to live with a white man. “Fuck you, million times fuck you and your bastards,” yelled Peter. He had an unattractive face of a mentally backward who feels that he is not good enough and the world is against him.

Janek never swore, deep down he was still afraid of dad’s thundering voice cutting into his frustration making him feel small and powerless. He said that Abos will always be better at swearing than Janek.

“They’ve lost their culture,” Janek said to Ray while he tried to win arguments with dad in the solitude of his thinking.

“That’s a joke,” said Ray. “We were taught that culture was literature, art, science, technology, they had none of that,” said Ray.

“Archaeologists found thousands years old rock paintings near Linden. The oldest in the world,” said Janek. “Culture is a way of life.”

“How can you take it away then,” laughed Karen. “They still have a way of life, and the rocks to paint on.”

“Aborigines were not even aware of each other, of the continent or nation, they were lost wanderers in the bush.”

“The bush was the whole world to them,” said Janek.

“The modern historians ignore Aboriginal less acceptable customs like cannibalism and infanticide. They talk about Aboriginal land conservation. Of course they conserved the land, they never touched it, animals are the same sort of instinctive conservationists,” said Ray.

“Aborigines lack ambition,” said Karen scornfully.

“Has it ever occurred to you that they may have been happy as they were,” said Janek.

“They were going nowhere,” helped Ray.

“And where are we going?” asked Janek.

“All you hear on TV is the needs of Aborigines,” argued Karen.

Ted told Janek that Aborigines haven’t yet defined the needs for themselves. They were caught in the needs created for them.

“Most of them are not really Aborigines, they are the bastards European men left with Aboriginal women,” added Karen.

An old Aboriginal woman told Janek about the respected farmer who called for her night after night. She had six children for the farmer while his wife only managed two. The Aboriginal woman boasted about it.

“Whites made Aboriginal children ashamed of their parents. Historically they had nothing to be ashamed of, in fact their social structure was as close to the ideal of the communism as you could get and I’m not talking about the bastardised version practised in Eastern Europe and China.”

Janek reminded himself that he must not preach, because he always ended up being called a preacher. People stuck to their notion of higher and lower class of people, everything depended on where you stood on the social ladder. Every nation had a rung to stand on in human consciousness. Janek wandered if it really mattered where you were and what progress have you made for humanity. Birds made no progress and they chirped contentedly from the time immemorial. Was progress necessary so the earth could sustain more people for a little longer. In the end did it really matter if one lived to be fifty or eighty, if there were ten billions people on the earth or one million.

“They have mountains of flagons and beer bottles in front of their houses and children smash them on our roads. Our hospital is full of Aboriginal kids with feet cut on the broken beer bottles.”

Karen’s voice brought Janek back into the reality but he lost the enthusiasm for the argument. He saw the children on the main street finishing their drink and smashing the bottle on the curb next to the rubbish bin. They ate their lunches and flicked the wrappers on the street. Maybe he only noticed that because his parents drummed it into him that there was a place for everything and the place for rubbish was in the rubbish bin.

“They have mountains of dirty clothes in front of their houses as well,” said Ray. “Charities are falling over each other providing second hand clothing, nicely dry cleaned, mended and ironed. Aborigines wear it once and throw it on the heap. When we were kids we all wore hand me downs.”

“Government builds houses for them next to you and the price of your house drops, you can only sell it to them,” said Karen.

Janek knew what she meant, they made it a policy even at schools to sit an Aboriginal child next to the white child so that they would be forced to relate to each other.

“Look at your neighbours. They sleep through the day and brawl through the night. You can’t even complain because brawling at night is their culture,” Ray stepped in to help Karen.

“My neighbour is only twenty-six. She has six children under eight, she copes the best she knows how. Her boyfriend spends more time in a dry-out than he does with her,” said Janek wandering what made him defend his neighbours who kept him awake at night. He remembered asking Lucy’s seven years old son why he didn’t come to school and the boy told him matter of fact like, that it was a pension day, sir, and mum was in horrors and dad was in jail and he had no school uniform.

“Ethnics like to live close to their own kind but the government is pushing Aborigines and us to live side by side,” said Ray. “They want to scatter them all over like a disease.”

“Poverty has never been attractive. You need rich neighbours to impress your friends. Maybe Aborigines do too.”

“Bullshit,” said Ray. “I just want someone next door who will let me sleep over night so I can work over the day for them.”

Janek remembered Ted’s words.

“It’s only common sense that government should want something back for all the money they spend on us. Government has millions for the dole and the welfare but no money for employment. Aboriginal people need to develop themselves and their community. Our people have nothing to do. The government is taking care of our old people and children now, we have always taken care of our people. .”

“When our people lived on the river bank they could at least build their camps, look after them,” said an old woman. “Now the government built houses and the government does the maintenance. Aborigines can’t put their hands on anything and say: I built that, I planned that, I planted that. There is nothing there touching their soul. That’s why they don’t think anything of it. Whites say that they have no respect for property. Aborigines have no property, they have not made anything. They don’t identify with property. Their homes are government property.”

“They keep saying that we have to improve the Aboriginal self-esteem. Nobody can improve another person’s self-esteem,” said the old grandmother who got a job as an Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer.

“It’s hard for an Aborigine to go to Sydney looking for work,” said Janek to Ray. “They have no money for the bond on the accommodation, no transport, no family to take care of kids, no-one to show them the ropes.”

“They’d never survive without whites now, that’s for sure,” said Ray.

“They lived without whites, without grog and pollution, without drugs and dole and air conditioning for thousands of years. They have nothing to look forward to now.” Janek was angry at himself because he always got drawn into arguments he couldn’t win.

“Be realistic, Janek. What do you have to look forward to? You work to pay your rent and keep the car running so you can drive to work. They get it all for nothing. They should be bloody grateful that Japs didn’t take over Australia. They’d have shot them all by now.”

“Other countries have been conquered by other people over and over again, hasn’t Slovenia been conquered by other nations?” said Karen. To make him understand she had to remind him that he belonged to one of the conquered nations.

“Only I have never been to Slovenia,” thought Janek angry for being singled out.

“England was conquered by Romans before Slovenia,” he said defensively.

“The survival of the fittest. How many times has Europe been taken over by different nations?” helped Ray with a neutral approach.

“Paul Hogan said in a film Crocodile Dundee that whites and Aborigines are like two fleas on the dog fighting about who owns the dog,” reminded Karen.

“Aborigines insist that the land owns them. Makes sense. But why do they want the land rights and land compensation now? If the land owned them before, how come it stopped owning them,” ridiculed Ray.

“White landed gentry took away their freedom to live on the land. To stay alive Aborigines had to abandon their god and they realised that the white man’s god is gold. The more you have, the more holy you are.”

“They will never have enough, they will never stop claiming. They multiply because they figured that more of them can claim more of everything,” said Ray.

“White lawyers started the Land Rights issue. The long court battles for land rights provide white lawyers with steady employment. They are concerned with their own survival, not with Aboriginal Land rights,” said Janek.

“How can they claim that they love the land more than we do,” exclaimed Ray.

“The love for them is a feeling not a calculation. To them land is their daily bread and god and religion and history and family,” Janek was making up definitions for Aborigines just to argue with his rival Ray.

“You have two options,” said Ray, “you either go on the welfare and have the housing commission home full of kids or remain childless in order to buy your own home.”

“We got a new house,” said six years old Mervin to Janek. “Mum said that when we brake this one, we will get a new brick one,” explained Mervin. Ray wouldn’t understand that. “Kids punch holes into the fibro,” complained Mervin’s mum. “The government takes no notice.” Her husband and his mates also punched holes into the fibro when they were on the grog. “I can’t do nothing about that,” she told Janek. Maybe when they brake this one they will get a new one. In the surge of enthusiasm government built houses for Aborigines who never lived in a house. They built air-conditioned fibro houses and kids broke the air-conditioning buttons before they were used and their parents broke the walls around them.

“The poor and the conquered always multiply faster,” said Janek.

“And the stupid, “ said Ray, “I reckon we should tax families that over-breed. They are the worst source of pollution. They are reproducing flagon culture.”

“A flagon makes it easier to forget how whites went out on a Sunday afternoon shooting kangaroos and Aborigines along the river. Whites cleared the land and erected fences to keep out Aborigines and kangaroos. The cleared land is becoming a desert. The wind is blowing your precious land away, mate. And you would like Aborigines to go further in the desert. They aren’t that stupid, they never lived away from the water.” Janek silently warned himself that he was getting too involved.

“That’s history, you can’t blame me for it,” said Ray.

They were silent for awhile and Karen fidgeted with the glass.

“This abo shooting is a new myth. Abo shooting was never a sport. It is true that the poor graziers had to keep the thieving black rats away from their precious stock. The settlers bought a few sheep to begin the wool industry and blacks came and slaughtered them.

Janek did not want pursue the matter, he had no proof either way. Some things were never quite clear.

“We still teach how the brave white explorers killed the savage natives who tried to stop them from discovering the fertile land and rivers. The rivers were the bloodlines of Aborigines for thousands of years, they knew and named their rivers before brave white explorers came. They can’t forget overnight.”

Ted told Janek that Aborigines never worried what white fellah thought about them. “We live our lives, they live theirs. We worry about our kids, they are growing away from the family and they are not strong enough for that. They don’t stick to our rules anymore.” Janek’s father was saying much the same for Slovenians.

Janek remembered Reuben preaching his version of Christianity: “We are the people from the garden of Eden, the only ones that didn’t break the God’s law. We only took from the land what we needed for the day, we did not package things, save, sell, profit. We lived with nature waiting to be enlightened by Christianity. But what the white Christians are preaching to us has naught to do with what they are living.

Janek remembered a joke about Aborigines. “You know what Jesus said to Aborigines before he died? He said: don’t do anything until I come back.” Maybe he really did say that. So they were dreaming and wandering about aimlessly. There were other hurtful jokes about Aborigines but jokes against the poor were common to all nations.

“Our parents told us stories how things came to be, whites are saying that our story is silly. I think their story is silly,” said an old woman defiantly. “I don’t want my kids learning their story.”

Janek’s father said the same about communists: “They ridiculed religion so they could spread their own beliefs. I won’t have my kids indoctrinated by communists.”

“Dole offers more security than any job these days. Abos have no fear, you can’t fail in unemployment,” said Ray who did not follow Janek’s memories

“Did your lucky natives invite you to take over their lives? Did they beg: English invaders, have our land as long as you give us your culture. We were all equal, show us what it’s like

to be inferior. We protected our mother nature, bring your technology and destroy our environment. Thank you for brand new diseases, the second hand goods and poisoned flour.”

“Here I go again,” thought Janek.

“It was their good luck that British came first, others would kill them,” said Ray.

“British were convinced that Aborigines will gradually die off. The might is right, said the Brits, and it still is,” said Janek.

He remembered Ted’s words: “They talk about assimilation but they don’t really want to have anything to do with us. No white person invites an Aborigine for a cup of coffee, let alone a party.”

“But you meet on the street and in the clubs all the time,” said Janek.

“Not really meet,” said Ted, “we see each other but we rarely meet.”

“Aborigines don’t invite white people to their homes,” said Janek to Ted.

“They remember the days when white managers came every day to inspect their homes to look for their dirty spots, they are still ashamed of their dirt,” said Ted.

“The government is bending backwards to listen to every fringe group, they don’t even want to know about the hard working silent majority. You’ve got Multi-culture, mate, what more do you want. Millions of dollars are spent just so that people don’t have to learn the bloody English. The Ethnic groups make all the noise,” said Ray.

“The government still checks the proportions of new migrants so that no group could become too strong before they assimilate. A token participation in governing is OK to show how democratic and generous Anglo-Saxon majority is. But when unemployment comes migrants and Aborigines are first to go,” said Janek to Ray.

“The unemployed are almost better off than those working,” said Ray ignoring Karen’s thought. He was angry now and Janek felt the gap between them rising.

“Unemployed are still losing out because they are getting weaker and less able to look after themselves,” said Janek, backing off. “I am not complaining, I just want you to know that we know where we stand. And for the record I am as Australian as you are.”

“Would you like bloody Japs to take over?”

“No way. We like Brits. In order to keep out the yellow peril of Asia, they reluctantly accepted South Europeans. To the White Australia policy makers our whiteness became a necessary qualification for entry. As Christians we would become assimilated in a few years. We did, we are Australians.”

“Why are you winging then?” asked Ray.

“As the migrant groups multiplied, government had to recognise their voice. Slovenian senator was the first token federal politician of non-English background. He made Multi-culture look bloody good but of course he had no power,” said Janek.

“Would you like him to become a dictator,” asked Ray.

“Of course not, we are a minority, our parents chose to live as a minority. I’d just like you to know that we have equal rights with any white Australians, whether they were brought here in chains or chose to live here. But Aborigines didn’t choose to be a minority. They never asked for grog and video and coke. Or for the Bible.”

“Try taking it away, said Ray. Unfortunately the missionaries educated Abos so they can push us out now.”

“The missionaries taught brotherly love to natives while other whites raped Aboriginal women. Today’s Aborigines truly are white bastards. Wasn’t it a missionary who said that: African blacks had the land while the whites had the Bible. Now the blacks have the Bible and the whites took the land.”

Janek remembered a Catholic priest telling him why he had given up being a missionary among Aborigines. “The mining companies planned an earth fill dam and I offered to drive an Aboriginal elder to see the explosion. We watched the small mountain hiccup and stir a storm of dust before settling into a dam wall. “You bugger that up pretty good, boss,” said the old man. I realised then that whites were pretty good at bugging up everything we turned our hands to with Aborigines. So I left,” said the priest.

“White Australians deported the natives to internal concentration camps known as missions and reserves,” said Janek. “They dispossessed them.”

“For their protection and so they could teach them to read and write.”

“Protection against the landowners who wanted to shoot them. They learned to read and write so they could learn to obey the white law.”

“You’d like us all to go home,” said Ray.

“Like you, I have no other home, but neither have they,” said Janek.

“Reminding me of home, we have to go,” Karen stood up.

“There is only one way to solve the problem, shoot the black bastards before they’ll start shooting us,” laughed Ray.

Janek regretted their meeting. Ray and Karen were a team now and both played against him. Every word they spoke repeated itself in his subconsciousness and he was annoyed because he was alone. He played footy with the boys aggressively to get rid of his frustration but he barely smiled or spoke.

The meeting seemed to set him apart from his school mate and from all the respectable citizens of the town. Diana seemed restless and secretive that evening. They spoke little. He woke up in the morning irritable. There were no phone calls, even Diana forgot his birthday. He made a cup of coffee and smoked alone on the veranda. He went to vote on his way to a soccer competition. He voted Labour defiantly for the first time. He wanted to win against Ray and his family and establishment.

When Janek returned for lunch his house seemed deserted but inside was a crowd singing Happy birthday. A banner was on the door saying: Welcome home birthday boy. Everybody embraced him and presents were coming from excited guests. Even his father was beaming as he shook Janek’s hand and said: Good on you son. Congratulations. Janek realised that his father congratulated him for more than his birthday. They all admired the spotless

tastefully decorated home and specially the festive table Diana prepared. Ivan was finally proud of his son and approved of Diana and his home. Despite her long painted fingernails Diana managed to keep a beautiful home for their son.

Gino, Diana's father, brought a case of best Italian wine and they toasted Janek. Mary, Diana's mother helped her daughter prepare superb international cuisine.

Leon and Kim were there with Kim's parents. Scottish, Italian, Irish and English and Slovenian migrants were united and Janek was so overwhelmed by their adoration that he had to keep tears from running down his face.

After dinner they relaxed and played games when the bell rang and Tracy was at the door with her husband Ron. For a moment Janek wondered surprised if Diana invited them. Tracy produced a boomerang and said that boomerangs were made to come back. Janek remembered how one year, long time ago, they celebrated his birthday alone after Janek had a fight with his family.

"We were in town and I just happened to remember that it's your birthday," said Tracy.

"I hope we are not intruding, took us awhile to find you," said Ron.

"It's been ages," said Janek introducing them.

"We got married after all, Ron's people persuaded us."

"They offered us a honeymoon trip around the world. You can't have a honeymoon without getting married," said Ron.

"Oh, we could have managed it somehow," laughed Tracy, "but it's nice to see them happy. They weren't always happy about us getting married either. Little Paul and Petra, our twins helped to change their mind."

"We'll please the Gods as well, I am sure," said Ron.

Ron was a good looking, tall man. He had an earring, a beard and a tattoo on his wrist.

"Markings of the past," thought Janek, "we all carry them. Some are visible, most are hidden, some we laugh about, some we cry with. People take notice of our markings."

"Good seeing you again, you were my best friend," Tracy whispered as she hugged Janek and he felt her heart tremble. Despite her brave talk, she was still a scared little girl.

"I still am."

"I needed you then."

"I needed you too."

"Cut it out you two," said Ron.

"What are you doing these days?" asked Janek.

"We both work for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. All Aborigines work for the DAA. Government, mate! I did finish college like I promised. Ron is the head of the department."

"Where did you leave the twins?" asked Diana. She couldn't say why she felt threatened by Janek's intimacy with this Aboriginal girl but it bothered her that he felt so at home with a girl of a different race.

"At Mum's. Aboriginal women always look after their grandchildren. Mum has about ten of them crawling all over her. She is the guardian of my oldest daughter. She has about twenty grandchildren not counting strays."

“What are strays?” asked Diana.

“The kids my brothers made and we don’t know about,” laughed Tracy.

“I am glad things turned out right for you,” said Janek squeezing Tracy’s hand. “How’s the rest of the family?”

“On the grog, I told you I won’t be like my mob,” laughed Tracy a little nervously. “They have grog and videos, and smokes and marijuana. Kids are in courts or in jail all the time.”

“Government is paying legal aid, so solicitors are dragging Aborigines through courts instead of ignoring their squabbles,” said Ron.

“Aborigines run to the police for protection, silly sods,” said Tracy.

“Lately we’ve seen many fine Aboriginal speakers of TV,” ventured Diana.

“They learned to talk flash,” said Tracy. “They used to stick together but since white government bestowed all these powers on us some turned out flash.”

“What she means,” explained Ron, “they crawl to whites to get money and power so they can lord over their own people.”

“They are like kids, you throw a bag of lollies to contented group of kids and they’ll fight each other for them,” said Tracy.

“Goes for all sorts of people,” said Janek.

“But my people are not educated enough to handle power and money. Goes to their heads. They share with the family what should be for the whole community. It breaks communities,” said Tracy.

They talked about the places they’ve been to and the food they ate. Janek had a beer but both Ron and Tracy chose orange juice. Diana made herself a cappuccino. Somehow they all realised that the choices they made had a lot to say about the way they wanted to live.

“Ron looks more Aboriginal than Tracy, With his black hair all over his olive skin.” said Diana after they left.”

“He is from Lebanon,” explained Janek wondering if Ron’s family wanted their son to take his bride to Lebanon like his dad wanted him to go to Slovenia.

Kim’s parents came from a posh suburb in Sydney where they never saw a native before.

“Have you ever had any success with Aborigines,” asked Kim’s father Kevin.

“I thought them to read and write,” said Janek cautiously.

“What is their intelligence like,” Kevin’s wife Eva joined in.

“I go bush walking with them and they make me see things I’d never see otherwise. They are not worried about old age, they have no regrets, they live in the present. We seem to have lost this simple skill.”

“You don’t want to go back to the dark ages. Animals live like that,” said Leon.

“We like to baffle others with words,” laughed Kevin.

“Just listen to Yes, Minister, in fact any minister. Words were really made to disguise the thoughts,” said Diana.

“Everybody wants to help the stupid. Nobody helps the smart kid,” said Ivan.

“THEY can’t make the dumb smarter so THEY have to keep the smart ignorant,” said Kevin.

“Don’t blame me or the Aborigines,” laughed Janek but he remembered Ray and he did not want to be drawn into the same argument at home as well..

“This is a worldwide trend. They don’t want one group of people to appear superior to the other,” said Kevin.

“Who are THEY? If THEY are so powerful THEY must be smart white fellows. I don’t know why would THEY want to make everyone appear equal,” mocked Janek.

“You can spend millions on kids that will never amount to anything,” said Leon and Ivan was glad that his son saw things from his perspective.

“Aborigines are simply not acquisitive enough. They have no proper love for things,” said Janek.

“Government creates artificial jobs for Aborigines,” said Leon.

“Government is experimenting with programs and Aborigines know that they are on probation all the time. Their future depends on the whim of a politician while white public servants relax and settle down in their jobs for life.”

“A born preacher,” said Leon.

“Aborigines want to feel right at home and be ordinary. Like Slovenians do in Slovenia,” said Janek looking at his father but Ivan was embarrassed about Janek’s sympathies to Aborigines.

“There is no prejudice in Australia now,” said Kevin.

“Have you ever been a victim of prejudice,” asked Janek.

“You don’t have to experience everything to know about it,” said Leon.

“Some things you have to. People are nice to Aborigines, they patronise them, but they are still skilfully prejudiced.”

“How do you mean,” asked Kevin.

“They ignore, mock, stare, they make smart remarks and gestures that make Aborigines impotent. I am beginning to understand what self management and self determination means to them.”

“You are a bloody romantic, big brother. Your precious environmentally friendly blacks are not interested in self-sufficiency. They want compensation, lots of compensation,” said Leon.

“Self management means that they can decide what we teachers tell their children about their ancestors, it offers books with brown faces and clothes with Aboriginal motifs.”

“And beer,” said Ivan.

“You don’t hear people call Aborigines goons anymore,’ said Leon.

“There was a little Greek boy Tommy,” said Janek. “Tommy said to his Aboriginal friend in kindy: God didn’t like you that’s why he made you black. Tommy was the illegitimate son of

a deserted Greek mother who peeled potatoes in the local fish and chips shop. Tommy had poor hearing, he wore thick glasses and suffered from asthma, yet he managed to feel superior to the little Aboriginal boy. How could that Aboriginal boy ever recover?"

"If they keep multiplying as they do, we will have a real racial problem," said Ivan ignoring Janek's story.

"That's right," said Janek. "WE will have. Until now only Aborigines had a racial problem."

"They conveniently follow the gravy train because at present all the gravy is going their way," said Kevin.

"They call their lifestyle traditional, I wonder what is traditional about drinking beer and playing bingo under the tree," said Leon.

"To me traditional is full blood," agreed Ivan.

"If they are ninety percent Irish but have a drop of Aboriginal blood they call themselves Aborigines, because there is no gravy train for Irish," said Kevin whose Irish ancestors lived in England.

"Mark my word Mabo is going to get us all," said Ivan.

The High Court of Australia decided in 1991 that Australia wasn't a terra nullius, an unoccupied continent when British explorers claimed it for their king. Eddy Mabo, an Aborigine from Murray Island, claimed that Merriam people traditionally owned the land on that island. The High Court in Canberra decided in his favour and white Australians realised the gravity of this decision.

Mabo decision, as it became known, gave Aborigines unending possibilities to claim land or compensation for being displaced. People suddenly began to search for Aboriginal roots and the uproar in the white community grew.

"Aborigines can claim anything now, there is a precedent," said Leon.

Pastoralists, farmers and miners condemned the High Court decision.

Marko, a Slovenian father of Janek's student, tried to justify Mabo by which his Aboriginal children were likely to benefit in the future.

"Mabo only recognises that Aborigines have the right to inherit those remaining parts of Australia where Aborigines still occupy their traditional country on which their families have lived for tens of thousands of years. Every Australian is entitled to inherit from their parents."

Janek spoke to an old Aboriginal grandmother about land claims and she dismissed the issue.

"Grabel, all of them from Charlie Perkins down, grab all of them," she muttered.

"What is grab?" asked Janek.

"Them never look out for the poor no more they grab all, them white Aborigines. They grab all from the gubment," said the old woman sitting on the park bench, her blind eyes closed to the sun.

Janek suppressed a smile, finally he understood what she meant. The resentment of poor Aborigines grew towards their new black grabel elite. People in charge of the government funding became the real power brokers, culture brokers, hated, feared, admired and worshipped. Living amidst the white comforts they promoted the course of poor Aborigine. Acting for the government they had access to the wealth and they let some of it sip down where it was intended to go. But most of it they grabbed for their chosen ones.

“The government wants to sever all the ties with England and merge with Asia. I came to Australia because it had British system, I don’t want to join Indonesia,” said Ivan bringing them back to their topic.

“I think that SOMEONE somewhere has a plan to make Australia an Asian continent. When that happens Aborigines will realise what they had, I bet they will again want to be British and white,” said Kevin.

“There is too much of a racial mix in Australia already, one day it will blow in our faces. The government is making us ashamed of our white ancestors,” said Eva

“Someone somewhere is trying to get rid of Christianity as well,” Ivan realised that charity was a Christian virtue but he also believed that all people should work for their living and obey the law.

“Maybe a country of mixed loyalties will be more tolerant.” Janek

He remembered Ted’s words: “Someone once asked me why I call myself an Aborigine when I am obviously a half cast. I am not even a half cast. I am a quarter German, a quarter Indian, a quarter Irish and a quarter Aborigine. I have no idea how to be German, Indian or Irish. Take away Aborigine and I am nothing.”

Janek wondered what that made him. He had no idea how to be Slovenian, he had never been to Slovenia. In Australia he was known as a new Australian. How was a new Australian supposed to act? Janek felt guilty rejecting dad’s nationality and didn’t feel quite one with other Australians. He belonged to that small minority of second generation Slovenian Australians. Not loyal to any other country, maybe he was a real Australian. Maybe the children of all these different people will one day say proudly that they were Australians.

*There is nothing, either good or bad
but thinking makes it so.*

Shakespeare

HELENA

Helena was one of those lucky children who were actually born with the smile on their face. Barbara felt an overpowering sense of well-being when Ivan came to the maternity ward in Cooma and took the little pink bundle to his face and kissed it. She saw him hold back tears. With his serious face next to Helena, he kept breathing in the smell of milk as he touched the softness of the baby's skin. He played with Helena's fingers as Barbara supported the tiny head while breast feeding. Tender, reborn and fragile in the new love, they were afraid to speak. Barbara felt warm gratitude and love for Ivan because he shared with her the sweetness that was Helena, Barbara's greatest achievement. She tried hard not to caress the rough hand of her husband as he played with the soft pink fingers of their daughter. Afraid that he would suddenly stop loving her, she held back tears of joy.

On her return from the hospital, Barbara found a new pink wooden cot near her bed. Ivan managed to build a nest for his first child, he simply adored his daughter. He ordered Barbara to bed and he placed pillows behind her to make her comfortable but he never spoke all the words he wanted to say. The smell of chicken soup came from the kitchen and Barbara remembered how they cooked chicken soups at home to make the new mothers strong.

Ivan held Helena while Barbara ate. She swallowed the hot liquid and tasted the bitterness of happy tears mingling with the aroma of parsley. She tried to believe that the new life was here to stay, that gentle loving wasn't just an Indian summer. Ivan bought a camera and the pictures of smiling faces prominently displayed on the battered walls soon brightened their home. The happiness of the new family was not surpassed by anything that ever happened to Barbara. Helena became a shining light. She wasn't awake enough hours but when she was, she smiled and chirped contentedly.

Helena started calling daddy and mummy when Janek was born. Ivan and Barbara expected their new baby to double their happiness, but Barbara became sad after Janek was born. The light has gone out of her eyes and she cried every day feeling worthless and empty. The doctors in the sixties weren't bothered with post-natal sadness. They told Ivan that she will soon snap out of it. He became increasingly annoyed with it. Ivan comforted his wife the only way he knew how and she became pregnant again soon after.

Janek was admired when asleep but he didn't sleep much. His crying disturbed his hard working daddy. Helena kissed the baby and mummy affectionately, she held Daddy's hand and took him away to show him things she discovered outside. Barbara spent most of her time with her crying son. The pregnancy and the babies tired her. She went through the motions of sex without resistance or joy and tried to keep the house spotless for Ivan. He was rarely home because he worked more and more overtime. When he didn't work overtime he went fishing.

Helena remembered Daddy holding her in his lap and combing her hair as she prepared for her first day at school. "She reminds me of you when you were young," said Daddy to mummy. Helena was sitting between Mummy and Daddy one day later when she was already ten or eleven. The boys sat at the back of the car and they went fishing. Daddy was happy that day. "I'll teach the boys about cars and tools, science, football and fishing," he said to Mummy. "You have to let the boys fight, they have to learn to sort their problems. If they don't learn to fight for what they want they'll get nowhere. It's different for girls. You can teach Helena things women do. I don't want her to be like Australian girls who can't cook or keep the house."

Dad's words lingered in Helena's memory. She wanted to grow up to please daddy.

Helena was well loved at school. With an elf like face she inherited Ivan's blond hair and Barbara's blue eyes. Quiet and helpful it was simply impossible for anyone to dislike her. When they moved to Sydney Helena learned to play the piano for daddy. Later on weekends she went out to play tennis and shared her first sweet love secrets with her girlfriends. Daddy told her that dating was out until she finished high school. When she finished exams she could pick any boy she wanted to go out with. That was always far away and something to wait for.

Dad found Helena experimenting with her first lipstick at the age of sixteen. He grabbed it angrily out of her hand and threw it in the bin. "Don't ever let me catch you with it again, you don't want to look like a cheap slut" he yelled, angry with her for the first time. She learned to hide her make-up, her cigarettes and her thoughts from that day on.

Wanting to do well in her High school certificate exams, Helena studied hard to make her family proud. In the evening after the exams she went out with Jack, a friend from her class. He brought her home in his old car at eight, it was summer and the sun was still up. They never kissed before but they were happy then and they kissed.

"I like you," he said. "I never liked anyone like that."

"I like you too," both felt incredibly happy.

"Let's celebrate," said Jack. "I've got a bottle of wine and there is no one home. We could listen to music."

She knew that she must be home before ten. Wine relaxed them, they danced and kissed and promised never to forget the day. She left at 10. "It isn't far, you shouldn't drive, you are half drunk," she said. He walked her home, hand in hand they talked and life felt incredibly promising. Helena went to bed quietly just before midnight.

"Where have you been, you whore?" Her father pulled the blanket off her.

"I've finished school so I don't have to tell you where I've been any longer," Helena usually got away with brash talk like that, but that was when she was just cheeky. He smelled the alcohol and smoke on her breath so he slapped her face.

"You bastard," said Helena.

He punched her, she fell and he kicked her. "I'll teach you a lesson, you bitch." He tugged at his belt, out of breath.

"Stop," screamed Barbara. She jumped between them, yelling at Ivan.

He belted Helena and she was squirming in shock and pain.

“Stop it, you bastard, you are jealous of your own daughter.” Barbara knew immediately that she went too far. Everything was out of control now.

“You cow, who are you calling a bastard? Remember where you came from. He took a deep breath and belted Helena again. “My daughter is not going to be a whore.”

Helena crawled out of the house while he took his next breath. She sat on the lawn until dawn and then walked to her friend’s place.

“Can I stay?” she asked and Ana became fully awake as she saw Helena’s welts and the flagon of wine. On her way to Ana’s place Helena stopped at an all night bottle shop.

“What are friends for,” smiled Ana and made herself busy fixing breakfast. She went to work without prying or lecturing. Helena drank on her own until she fell asleep. The next morning she started to shake and Ana held her, caressing her hair, crooning like a mother over her. “Cry baby, cry.”

After three months Helena found a job and moved out of Ana’s flat. She enrolled in a beautician course and spent nights studying.

Barbara realised that she should have walked away when Ivan and Helena argued. She shouldn’t have put herself between the man and his daughter because they loved each other dearly. Helena would probably never have left, if Ivan and Helena were left alone that night.

Just before Christmas Barbara knocked on Ana’s door but nobody answered. She went in and saw Helena on the sofa, a flagon of wine half empty next to her, the room filled with the vile, stale smelling smoke. Barbara felt that she caused Helena’s suffering and had to make her well. She persuaded her to return for Christmas dinner. Helena felt desperately homesick and she needed to make it up with daddy. Ivan acted like she never left.

Soon after she left home at the age of nineteen Helena lost her virginity. She read about the ecstasy of sexual fulfilment during her lonely weekends, the films showed beautiful couples engaged in sex and Helena wanted to experience this ultimate fulfilment of her dreams. Jack was happy to co-operate. Kind and gentle, he would marry her and father her children if she wanted him. Helena later realised that they spoiled their friendship with sex.

A couple of months later Jack and Helena attended a friend’s engagement party in the football club. After several drinks Helena became the life of the party. Jack was forgotten as she danced the night away. Helena fell in love with a handsome stranger who looked at her from the other end of the room.. The earth moved for her, she felt all those things she read about in romantic, erotic books, it was stronger than anything she saw on TV, it was more enticingly pure than anything she ever heard from her friends. Her head was light and she felt a strong desire to fly into the arms of the man. The eye signals from him were like sparks of lightning and the electricity was becoming more intense with every sip of wine she took. After an eternity of remote loving he finally walked across the room and she stood up mesmerised. They came into each other’s arms and the music guided them into a slow sensuous dance. At last it happened to her, the real thing, the love at first sight.

Overpowered by the wine and magic, Helena leaned on the man of her dreams, cheek on hot cheek. After a couple of dances he led her towards the door.

It was once in a life time magic, too precious and unique to spoil with words. Afraid to brake a fragile bubble of instant love, Helena snuggled close to the man as he drove her to his flat. He undressed in his bedroom and folded his clothes over the chair as she stood uncertain of what he expected her to do. Did he want to undo the buttons on her dress like they did it in films, slowly with eyes locked in a silent communion? Helena half undressed herself. She wanted to explore his body, get used to him, hear the words of endearment. He pulled out the drawer of his bedside cabinet and unwrapped a condom. With it in place he took her hand and they went to bed in a silent ballet of actions that was love. After a few moments of caressing and kissing they came together in an explosion of intensity and Helena experienced her first orgasm.

"You enjoyed it," he said as, exhausted, she folded herself around his body to savour the pleasure of fulfilment.

"You can go first," he pointed to the bathroom. She wanted to go to sleep but she followed his directions and showered. As she came out, the bed was made and there was no trace of her glorious experience. He showered next and she looked at the immaculately organised shelves that told her nothing about the man she made love with. "They'll miss us," she said as he dressed, because suddenly she was afraid of the cool proximity of this stranger. She wanted to be back in the familiar, loving company of the party. She needed a drink and Jack to lean on. At the entrance of the club the man opened the door for her and told her that he will be back a little later. As he drove away she wanted to call after him: "What's your name?" but he was already gone and she never saw him again. Overpowered by wine and her own sexuality, she felt like a rape victims sometimes do, cheated and powerless. She was convinced that she deserved at least a promise of love.

Helena never shared the experience with anyone. It frightened her and she weaved the wicked fantasies of other strangers during her lonely nights. But she never again experienced anything like it. She was almost 20, owned a little sports car and she just got herself her first modelling job. Helena read Erica Yong's books about instant, mutual, uninhibited attraction, about the coitus without the aftermath of guilt and remorse. She refused to feel guilty but a sense of sadness overwhelmed her. It may have worked for Erica but Helena needed intimacy with sex.

In her first TV commercial Helena sat with a cup of steaming coffee in front of her and looked like a person going places. Someone wrote in a magazine that next to her face cucumbers would look hot. Her expression gave nothing away, she looked like models do, remote and mysterious. When the producer noticed her teeth he wanted her to do a tooth paste commercial.

Helena met Richard while she was doing a pantyhose commercial. They discovered her legs. She was made to climb a grassy hill with the reinforced crutch of the hose almost visible from behind.

Helena's life changed when she met Richard at the age of twenty-two. For the first time in her life she felt so intensely in love that it hurt and the pain of it overwhelmed her. Richard said all the loving words she ever dreamed of and his hands were like fire on her skin. She tried to reason with her feelings but there was nothing her heart would listen to. After they made gloriously tender love in her flat, he told her that he was married and that he was waiting for a divorce.

Helena agonised about telling her parents about Richard. After living on her own for the last three years she wanted to move in with him and start a family. But she needed her father's blessing. When she told her parents that Richard was married before, her father flatly refused to meet him.

Helena played tennis with her father on Sunday afternoon before she went to Perth. She wanted him to invite Richard over for dinner.

"Richard and I went bush walking in Snowy Mountains last weekend," she said casually.

"He should be taking his kids to church on Sundays. When he got married in the church, he promised to bring them up in the faith," said Dad, hitting the ball hard.

"They live with their mother," explained Helena patiently.

"I hope you realise that you can never marry this man. He is married as long as he and his wife both live."

"We'll marry in the registry office, many people do."

"I hope you are not asking me to condone that. I've upheld the church law all my life, I can't give you the licence to break it."

"You were lucky, you had a successful marriage," begged Helena.

"You marry for better or for worse. You take the good with the bad. Remember that whatever you do in life, you take the good and the bad. Without the pain you don't know what the joy is."

"Even if it makes you miserable," said Helena.

"Christ said to Peter: Whatever you bind on Earth is bound in heaven. He said nothing about unbinding." For Ivan the church laws were the only safe and constant thing.

"They are church laws, dad," pleaded Helena.

"I only want what is good for you," he felt a tremendous responsibility for Helena's happiness. He never felt as protective towards boys and yet the boys followed him in the right direction.

"I love Richard," said Helena boldly as the tears started to sting her eyes.

"You'll find someone else to love. You are free to love any free man until the day you marry."

"It's just those men in Rome," said Helena. "God would understand."

"Jesus told the man in Rome: For those whose sins you forgive they are forgiven, for those whose sins you retain they are retained. He gave them the power. My religion is all I have. If you start chipping that away, I am left with nothing. I wouldn't know why I am here. I want to save you, can't you see that I want to save your soul?" Ivan's voice broke and he turned away.

"I know it is a sin to hurt someone but we are not hurting anyone. Religion is changing, dad," said Helena in a small whisper.

"God is old enough to know what he is doing, he said what he meant and he meant what he said," said Ivan convinced that there was no way one could bargain with God.

"It all depends how you look at the Bible," tried Helena.

"Let me explain something clearly," spoke Ivan slowly leaning on the fence. "Jesus put Peter in charge of the church to speak in his name. Either you believe that or you have no faith."

"But people are the church," argued Helena.

"It's true, we are the body of the church but pope is the head. Without him we have no church, no law, no God. Without the pope you are on your own and you will never know what is right or wrong."

"People follow their conscience," tried Helena.

"Families are falling apart, kids are on the street, is that good? Is that following your conscience? People run from pain, they search for everlasting happiness. There is no everlasting happiness on Earth. People should tolerate each other and work at keeping the family together." Both remembered the time when Barbara ran away and were sad about it.

"Do you think God would want Richard to be celibate for the rest of his life just because his marriage did not work out."

"I am not concerned with Richard. I would take the sin on myself to save you. If I killed him-" Ivan wanted Richard dead. Powerless in fighting this man who had no right to his daughter, he would kill to uphold the god's law.

Realising what he meant, Helena became afraid for her father and for Richard.

"You want to kill him." whispered Helena, scared cold.

"I would commit one sin and save you from living and dying in sin. I would confess my sin," said Ivan holding his chest in desperation because the enormity of his commitment was crushing him.

"A priest may forgive you but I would not, I could never forgive myself if you killed him for me. You'd place your soul on my conscience."

"The church will reject you."

"The church may, but God will not," Helena tried to convince her father and herself but dad's words haunted her, she could hear his voice coming in the evenings: "If I kill Richard I will save you from burning in hell for all eternity. You understand that I have to save you, I love you." His voice became a ghostly whisper and Helena realised that he meant what he said.

"I won't let Satan take your soul, I won't let you live in mortal sin for the rest of your life," promised dad. Helena decided then to follow Richard to Perth.

"You won't have to do anything for me ever again," said Helena.

"If you ever have children, remember that they will have to share their daddy because you want to share the man with another woman. One man, one woman .." Ivan couldn't finish his warning because Helena waved goodbye.

"You are still Daddy's little girl, aren't you," said Janek when he found her crying in the shed that last Sunday afternoon at home. There was no jealousy between Helena and her brothers Janek and Leon. As children they had little in common, Helena seemed always so much more mature than the boys and she made friends easily with other little girls.

“How do you mean?” Helena realised that her little brother was a grown up man who led his own life.

“You cry because Dad told you that Richard is married. You knew that yourself. It is insane to ask dad to ignore the fact that Richard has a family. Is it still so important to you what dad thinks?”

“I don’t care what he thinks,” she said.

“You can’t even blame him for sticking up for his faith,” said Janek.

“He couldn’t be such a bastard if he believed in God,” said Helena.

Helena never said good bye to her family, she wrote them a letter, she rewrote it again and again and cried every time as she broke her ties with home and boarded the plane for Perth where the biggest contract of her career awaited her. Richard’s family also waited for them there. He wanted to be closer to his two children so he found a job for himself and Helena there.

After Helena left for Perth with Richard, Ivan never asked for her again.

Helena tried to justify her relationship to herself and to her friends. “Richard was married before, I have no problems with that. He is thirty and at thirty anybody who is worth marrying is married. At my age I don’t expect to marry a virgin. Being divorced is not a big deal any more. I can handle it.”

Richard helped Helena with contracts, she became a flavour of the day and wherever she went people looked at her and tried to be with her. The money rolled in but the more she earned, less secure she felt. She was afraid that every shoot might be her last. Living in a colourful bubble she became a glutton for attention because she knew that bubbles burst just when you get used to them. She felt that she could not exist without being the centre of attention. Knowing that Richard became a key to her success she held onto him jealously.

Richard spent every second weekend with his kids and Helena tried to fit into his family. “Let’s all go for an ice-cream,” she pulled at two little warm hands enthusiastically when she first met them. She expected the children to be excited by her friendliness but they weren’t impressed.

“Go away, I want my Daddy,” said the girl. “I want to go home,” said the boy. The children didn’t try to be friendly. Four years old Richard and seven years old Patricia were confused and hated Helena because their daddy held her hand. Richard smiled at Helena and explained that the children will come around and eventually get used to the idea.

Helena’s friendly smile froze and when Richard took the children home, she remembered dad’s warnings and cried alone. She suddenly realised that she would have to compete for Richard’s love and attention with two children who openly disliked her. She prayed angry prayers because everything seemed so unfair.

Before they moved to Perth Helena received the sacraments on Sundays to please her family, she slept with Richard weekdays to please Richard and she cried for a big white wedding and an ordinary marriage with lots of children. “I would be a good mother, I would never let my children hurt.” Helena believed that she could simply instruct her children to be happy regardless of other events in their lives. She hadn’t realised yet that a perfect childhood, like perfect marriage was only a dream.

Her conscience troubled her as she fantasised about Richard's family vanishing from the face of the Earth. In more generous moods she was troubled by the thought that Richard's children might be hurting because of her. "They split before I came into the picture," she tried to convince herself. She made a conscious effort to be kind and unselfish towards them but they seemed indifferent to her charm. Helena became more and more insecure. What if everyone would one day become as indifferent to her as Richard's children were. she needed a family of her own.

In Perth Helena didn't have to go to church anymore and she didn't have to make excuses for her father. People liked her beautiful smile and her sense of humour, she joined the beautiful people they both worked with, models, artists, actors. They talked about other beautiful people and about the trends in the show-business. Helena pretended to be happy, only she couldn't cleanse herself of the guilt because she disappointed her family. Her parents didn't send her to a Catholic school for nothing, she developed a conscience to trouble her.

Helena's friend Ana also moved to Perth soon after and the friendship between them developed as they reminisced about the old Sydney times.

"We couldn't run any further," teased Ana. Sydney was a lifetime away and so was the little home town Linden where people still had time to gossip. Helena tried to come to terms with her feelings about her family. Did Mum and Dad ever love each other? They were always fighting over kids, did they have any other life? Go and ask Daddy, say sorry to Daddy, call Daddy, be good to Daddy, be quiet for Daddy. It was always Daddy, Daddy works for us, be good for Daddy. Mummy also worked for us, Mummy was always there working on the buildings, cleaning, digging, planting, decorating, serving, washing, fetching, carrying, begging, crying. Nobody ever mentioned Mummy working. We were all working for Daddy, we learned to love Daddy and pity poor mummy. Daddy had an interesting life somewhere outside, at home he drank beer, read the paper, watched the telly but he was not to be disturbed because he worked. Daddy didn't have to say thank you, we all had to say thank you, daddy never said sorry but Mummy always had us say sorry Daddy, when Daddy wasn't happy. He made us say sorry to God and thank you God. Daddy and God provided everything we had to be grateful for."

Behind closed doors Helena heard them argue and Mum usually sobbed. "Daddy could kill Richard for me, but daddy couldn't make Mummy happy. Mummy made us all feel guilty for her suffering. Why didn't she stand up for herself, why didn't she yell out? Poor little Mummy was laughed off when she tried to reason with daddy. Daddy's favourite argument was that God fashioned Eve from Adam's rib because the rib has no marrow, no life of its own. The rib was there to support men's vital organs and that's what a woman is made for, to support a man. The Bible supported all daddy's opinions of women. Women were to be mothers and obedient wives. The ideal mother was obedient to God to such a degree that she remained a virgin mother. They'd like all women to be virgins. Mary Magdalene was mentioned only after she gave up sex, because she gave up sex and followed the man Jesus."

Helena tried to dismiss God and daddy. "I am twenty eight years old, I am supposed to think for myself and forget all the garbage they loaded me with," she reasoned.

"I would never go away if dad would let me bring Richard home," she thought, feeling guilty again just as suddenly. She wanted to be part of the family, only she never wanted to be like her mother who never learned to be herself and took the blame for everything. She even took the blame for producing children.

Helena remembered her father saying: "Women are lucky, they don't have to go to work, they suffer no heart attacks, they don't know what it's like to provide all your life. They always know where their next lipstick is coming from."

"But I like working," thought Helena. Richard never suggested that she stay home. If she had a baby, would he let her stay home, would he beg her to stay home and look after their children? Could he support two families? Would he want their child to have a mother stay home to care for it? Maybe he would want to look after the baby. Maybe he doesn't even want any more children. Helena was scared to ask him. Maybe he would tell her to forget children and this thought terrified her. She suddenly realised that she was secretly hoping to relax at home with their children, cooking meals for her family, having a valid, noble reason to end her stressful career. She wondered if Richard would still like her without the glamour and the money of her job. She heard her body clock ticking louder and faster. She knew that her job won't last forever and then it might be too late to have a baby. If women were equal why did they need a man to make them complete. Was daddy right when he said that men are born to be the leaders, the hunters and women were born to give life, to please and nourish?

By the time Daddy finished the big house on the hill, the kids had grown up and left. They rarely came to swim in the big pool at the back, no-one admired the air-conditioning and the dishwasher. Mum learned to cope; if dad said nothing while he ate, she translated that into praise and appreciation. Helena hoped for a long time that she could make Dad actually say to mummy: you are wonderful, or, I love you, or, I am proud of you, or just, well done. She'd heard other Dads say that. But other Dads were altogether different, they were grateful for their families.

Janek was told to earn his spending money while at college and he became the bartender in the night-club. Helena wasn't allowed to even know that night-clubs existed, that there was a night life.

Helena lived with Richard now for four years. His kids came to stay every second weekend. Little Richy was eight and Patricia was six. Both went to Catholic school, Richard provided well for his former wife Zoe.

"It is commendable that he didn't abandon them," Helena told her friends.

"Zoe rang, that she has problems with her menstruation and wants to have a HYSTERECTOMY," said Richard one day. "She asked if the kids could stay with us for a while. Maybe a month, maybe a bit longer, we'll see how she recovers. You don't mind, do you. I'll help with the chores and we'll teach the kids to help too. They go to school anyway."

"We'll be right," Helena tried to suppress a knot that was choking her but it was so tight that she needed a drink. The intimacy between Zoe and Richard shocked her, she was jealous because they discussed Zoe's intimate health problems. Zoe with her cheerful honesty and independence scared Helena. She learned to tolerate the kids, she could almost like them but Zoe was a threat.

Richard played games with the kids to keep them out of mischief. Helena invited friends to play trivial pursuit, they ate plates of finger food and drank wine as they talked about beautiful people and trivial things.

When alone with her friend Ana she spoke about her feelings.

"I am jealous, because little Richy was named after his father, because little Patricia was named after Richard's mother and because I have no power to break the ties Richard has with his family," reasoned Helena afraid that she would break into tears.

"I wish Richard would talk about his feelings and about his divorce, but he told me that he put the pain and the memories behind him, so they would never upset us," said Helena to Ana. She wanted to peck at the pain, to see it clearly, to examine every painful detail of Richard and Zoe's intimacy. "I can't take the secrecy, it's like there is another Richard, dark and deep and mysterious pining for his first love under the veneer of everyday life with me. I want to know what is in his heart when he sees her."

"You mean what is in his pants, you want to know if he still lusts for her. He either lusts for her or he doesn't worry about her," laughed Ana.

"What do you think," Helena was serious.

"I think he is kind to Zoe because he never properly lusted for her. But there is a danger that he will stop lusting for you and return to the comforts she offers."

"What comforts?"

"She is relaxed, she makes him feel good about himself she boosts him up. Anyway, I don't think they are cheating on you."

"You only say that to make me feel better."

"Of course, I am sure they perpetually dream about going to bed. I wonder why they don't."

"What's stopping them?"

"For one thing Richard lusts for you and Zoe is wrapped in her boyfriend, but Richard is also such a boring moral person. Were you a virgin when you started with Richard?"

"I had two short affairs."

"Do you lust for those men?"

"No."

"Why should he then?"

"I want a child," said Helena. "I also want a white wedding."

"You were conditioned by your family, that family is the only acceptable thing for a woman after a white wedding," said tiny Ana sitting in the oversized armchair like a sparrow in a stork's nest.

"You knew what you were getting into," said Richard becoming annoyed by Helena's crying. "I can't change things. Maybe it would help if you had a child," he suggested as an afterthought. "It would make you understand what being a parent means."

"He would give me a baby, so I would come to understand his love for Zoe's children," she told Ana.

"His children," corrected Ana.

"I don't mind Richy, he is happy and uncomplicated but Pat ignores me and wants to grow roots into Richard's lap."

"You are a threat to her."

"Zoe should be jealous of me, only she never seems to be. Richard informed me that she does not want to get married again."

"Some women have all the luck," said Ana.

"Sometimes I wonder if she feels lucky," said Helena.

"You are not the only one with problems. Jim and I are both bisexual. We make allowances for each other but we don't want to complicate the lives of any children." Helena knew about Ana and Jim but she still wasn't prepared for her statement. Ana loved Helena but she never made advances while Helena was vulnerable and insecure. Now she realised that it wouldn't be any use because Helena was in love with Richard. It wouldn't be fair to complicate her life further.

"Why don't you have a child, then?"

"I want my children to grow in a secure family, in a proper marriage."

"In a marriage like your parents had, like Richard had, like all the married friends you know have?"

"I can't help it."

"What makes you insecure with Richard?"

"We are faithful to each other, we like each other, we make love all the time, he brings me little gifts, he remembers special days, times we shared. Is that secure?"

"It depends on how you feel about it."

"Lousy. I feel like all this doesn't belong to me. I wish he wasn't secure, I wish he would do horrible things, so I could rave, I wish he was jealous."

"How do your folks feel about him now?"

"Ashamed, I am sure. Ashamed, because their friends pity them, guilty because I live in sin and dad is scared for my soul."

"Does that bother you?"

"It's at the back of my mind all the time. We are going to meet at the christening. Leon and his son are bound to take the limelight from us. We won't stay long enough for Dad to lecture me and Mum to start crying."

"Lots of women would do anything to have Richard, you know that," said Ana. "He is good looking, has a powerful job in advertising, he promotes your modelling, he provides well for you, makes love all the time, you said. What else would you want?"

Helena was grateful for pep talk but the questions were still twisted in her. "Is he offering enough to show that he is committed?" The lease for the apartment was in his name and he paid for it. Helena paid for the food and cooked it. They each looked after their own cars.

Richard bought an occasional pizza, when the children come over, sometimes he invited Helena out for dinner and at other times he brought home Chinese take-away. He said that way they would have more play time. She washed and ironed for him, but he took care of the dry-cleaning. They had separate bank accounts and investments, they didn't need support from each other, they were comfortable. Helena wished something would happen so Richard would have to prove his commitment. She knew that a child wasn't the answer, a baby would be the end of her career. It would only make her feel more trapped.

"Would you feel more secure if you had ten children and a mortgage?" asked Ana.

"Probably. With ten kids and a mortgage Richard would not have a choice."

"You'd like to trap him," laughed Ana.

"I don't know what I'd do without you. Don't ever leave me," said Helena embracing her friend.

"Why don't you look on the bright side, or get out of the relationship if there is no bright side."

Science cannot explain the existence of each of us as a unique self, nor can it answer such fundamental questions as: Who am I? Why am I here? How did I come to be at a certain place and time? What happens after death. These are all mysteries that are beyond science.

John Eccles, neuroscientist.

LEON

“Tell me what to cook for them,” begged Barbara when her son Leon announced that Kim’s parents were coming. Leon’s fiancée Kim didn’t seem to worry about food, she ate a bit of everything Barbara offered, but her English parents have never eaten a Slovenian meal.

“Relax, mum. Why not shock them with kranskies, everybody eats kranskies these days,” laughed Leon.

“You had a hard time when you had them for lunch at school, didn’t you,” said Barbara.

“The timing wasn’t right. Australians were learning to cope with Chinese take away then. Later they tried to come to terms with spaghetti invasion. Mind you, for a long time it was just the tinned variety. Now they have pasta in every shape and size. It was the garlic in kranskies that frightened Australians,” said Leon.

“Boiled veggies and fried steaks was all they knew, I wonder if her royal majesty ever eats garlic,” mocked Ivan.

“German wurst and Polish klobasi paved the way for kranski sausage. Soon English dictionary will be full of European words we already know,” said Leon.

“You can buy them everywhere now,” said Barbara.

“And I tell everybody that my Mum comes from a little town Kranj in Slovenia where kranskies originated and got their name. Don’t you think I am doing my bit for the Slovenian culture,” laughed Leon.

“Dad keeps telling me to marry a nice Slovenian girl so we could eat well,” Leon teased as Kim entered the room. Barbara and Ivan smiled apologetically but Leon liked to shock people by speaking bluntly.

“Why don’t you?” said Kim.

“Everybody is dying to be introduced to ethnic food these days, mum. Even Kim is learning to cook ethnic. Well, that might be giving her too much credit, but she did boil the water for the noodles once,” Leon winked at Kim.

Barbara and Vida watched Kim and Leon talking to other youngsters after the Sunday mass when Barbara invited Vida to Leon’s wedding. They still invited all Slovenians from Linden for things like that. Everybody did, who else was there to celebrate with. They were rather sad though that so many of their children married outside their group and religion.

“Is she Slovenian?” asked Vida

“No, Kim is Australian.”

“Can’t do nothing about, I suppose. You do best you can.”

“We are happy with Kim,” said Barbara who would be happier if Leon chose a Slovenian girl. Vida had two lovely daughters, they learned to cook lovely Slovenian meals in their

restaurant and Barbara knew how happy Ivan would be to have Slovenian daughter in-law. Joe had three pretty girls, all Slovenian girls seemed so much more suitable.

"Unfortunately these marriages rarely last. Kangaroo girls can't cook, they never learned to do anything in the house. Our boys are used to home cooking," said Vida.

"It's up to them," said Barbara uncertain.

Barbara remembered Kim's first visit almost a year ago. Leon called out of the bathroom:

"Where are my socks, mum?"

Kim laughed and said: "You live here, find them."

"Mum is in charge here, we don't look for things in this house," he explained. Barbara felt comfortable being in charge of the places in the house. But even then she had doubts that Kim would be accepting of such a role.

"Get me a drink," called Ivan from behind the newspaper and Kim whispered to Barbara: "Something wrong with his legs?" Leon seemed unconcerned, everything was as it was supposed to be. Barbara felt apprehensive about Kim's values and worried that Leon would expect more than Kim was ready to give but Ivan was dismayed at how fast Leon adapted to changed roles.

Barbara hoped that Kim will realise one day that it was good to have a supporting role in the lives of her people. She knew that she also depended on Ivan and her children for support and help. The pattern interwoven with expectations and little sacrifices brought them closer.

"I hope you taught Leon to cook," laughed Vida.

"They'll cook if they want to eat," said Barbara, "I couldn't cook when I first married."

"But it's different with kangaroo girls, they refuse to cook, they eat out of paper bags," said Vida.

"If it's good enough for them it's good enough for me. By the way she is no more a kangaroo girl than you. Her family migrated from England when she was still at school."

"Makes no difference. They'll be happy while they are hot but when they cool down they'll have nothing to come home for. Don't expect her to invite you to dinner, that's all," laughed Vida, "unless of course Leon cooks. They'll live on junk food, mark my word, Australians do."

Barbara wondered if Kim's family was just as worried about their daughter marrying a foreigner.

"When it comes to a divorce they take the lot. I've seen it happen time and again," Vida had told her.

Barbara wanted to forget the words but they haunted her. Her children chose the partners she barely knew, the partners that didn't even care about knowing her. They took her children away and Barbara hoped that they would reach a compromise they could live with.

Barbara remembered Ivan's reaction six months ago when Leon had announced his intention to marry Kim. His sudden decision left no room for negotiation and the whole family was in a shock for a few days.

“Couldn’t you find one of our girls,” muttered Ivan unprepared.

“We’ve grown up with Slovenian kids. We are like cousins,” said Leon as if that would explain things.

“What does that mean?” asked Ivan.

“I didn’t pick Kim because of her nationality,” said Leon evading the issue and becoming even more vague.

“Are you ashamed of your nationality,” Ivan’s sharp voice admonished. “You will never stop being Slovenian however much you try.”

“Are you ashamed to be Australian, Dad. Why did you come here if you don’t want to be Australian?”

“What is Australian? It’s certainly not a nation,” protested Ivan. He was never attracted to an Australian woman. He couldn’t understand Leon, so much like him, not being attracted to a Slovenian girl.”

“Why don’t you get to know Australians, you can’t expect them to come running after you.” Even for Ivan it wasn’t easy to intimidate Leon.

“I never ran after nobody,” said Ivan and immersed himself into the newspaper like he did whenever he wanted to cut somebody off. Only Leon did not allow him the luxury of exit.

“We had to speak Slovenian because you didn’t speak English.” Leon realised that his words cut as deeply as Ivan’s so in respect for his father he quickly tried to make amends. “I know you couldn’t and it doesn’t matter anymore now.”

“Aren’t you proud to speak Slovenian, you should be grateful that I spent hours and hours correcting you so now you can speak what your people spoke for centuries,” persisted Ivan.

“I wasn’t proud or grateful while I was at school,” answered Leon flatly. “I wish I had a choice. I would have liked you to speak English sometimes when my friends came. Kids don’t want to be different. Other kids can be real nasty to a different kid.”

“The most I could do for Slovenia was teaching you our language and the most I could do for you was making you realise who you were,” said Ivan on his way out. “The family should always come first, remember that. Your family is all you have when it comes to the crunch.”

“The ties sometimes drag you down like an old address.” Nobody knew exactly what Leon’s words meant but they had a meaning for all of them.

“We had hard times so we hung onto each other,” said Barbara always ready to explain her position as Ivan left the room.

“I am sorry you felt like that,” Barbara smiled apologetically as they were left alone.

“It’s cool, mum, really. We all speak both languages now, we are all brave enough now to eat kranski and salami and persut and wurst and klobasi. People even take pride in knowing the difference. Wog food became trendy in the sophisticated circles. We’ll survive.” Barbara wished that Leon would tell her how he really felt but he never discussed his feelings.

“Remember how we begged to be allowed to order vegemite and peanut butter sandwiches. We never liked them, we just wanted to be the same as other poor kids,” laughed Leon.

"You didn't get in trouble much at school," said Barbara.

"Migrants and Aborigines gave me cheek until I smacked them a bit. It wasn't my fault if my parents had a better house than their parents. If you don't push them around they push you," said Leon.

"Isn't life sad," said Barbara.

"The only kind there is, mum."

"I blame myself because you had no extended family to turn to, I was only young myself," Barbara tried to explain.

"What would I want with extended family, mum?" laughed Leon. "What you never had you never miss, Mum. You grow stronger, when you have no one to lean on, you just dig your roots deeper. Don't go blaming yourself for something you had no control over. People became mobile so they moved away from their extended family. Nobody could predict the consequences."

"The change hits you and you cope with it the best way you know how," admitted Barbara. Ivan tried hard to establish a sense of belonging for his children.

In 1989 they all watched a television show about American ethnic communities. At the end of it Ivan told his children that wherever they went in the world, they could call on Slovenians and count on their hospitality. "Just look up a Slovenian name in a phone book, tell them who you are and where you come from. They will look after you."

"It is truly amazing," admitted Leon. "Even in Australia Slovenians always take you in, feed you and look after you just because you speak the language."

"It's more than that," said Ivan, "they'll soon find someone you are related to or someone who comes from the same part of Slovenia, they'll turn you into family."

"But I have never been to Slovenia."

"Your people come from there," said Ivan confidently.

"It amazes me how migrants hold onto their kids. Australians can't wait to kick them out."

"We were always scared for you because we didn't know anyone here." Barbara felt guilty for hanging onto her children.

"My friends were the only sort of people I knew," said Leon. "Australian kids I went to school with were the only school mates I could ever have. You always tried to turn me against them."

Sitting silently Barbara worried that she said something she should not have done.

"We had hard times when we first started up," said Barbara when Leon and his wife moved into their first modest house..

"I have hard times right now, Mum. We have a baby coming and my wages are spent on the mortgage," said Leon to Barbara. "My wife won't have the luxury of staying home to play with the baby like you did. I can't support my wife and the baby, but my father supported you with the three kids, without speaking English. That was a pioneer spirit, that was brave and you should be proud of yourself."

“That’s what I keep telling you,” said Ivan returning suddenly like he was there waiting for his cue.

“You just wanted us to be proud of being Slovenian, dad. But it’s not so bad being Australian, is it? There will be lots of other Slovenians in Slovenia but we Australians are strong because we sprung up from all over the world. We are a bit like Americans who are today the most patriotic nation in the world. They revere their flag, their government and national anthem.”

“I enjoy American films, they warm your heart, “ said Barbara.

“There are also films showing their poverty and brutality and decadence,” warned Ivan.

“We are talking about nationality not the social class problems, said Leon. “Americans became a nation when they fought for their independence from England. Fighting is a rude business but you learn to love the things you fight for. Australians celebrate ANZAC day because Australian soldiers died in a senseless war at Gallipoli during the first war. That was the beginning of Australian spirit but they have yet to fight for their independence.”

“There is too much swearing in Australian films,” said Barbara remembering that Ivan pointed their faults out to her.

“Australian humour is gross, exaggerated, overdone, brainless, too obviously loud and rude,” agreed Ivan.

“I go for the subtle but so cutting English comedy. I watch their repeats and every time I hear something new. But that has nothing to do with the nationality. Australians are still pioneers,” said Leon.

“English are the only ones that feel right at home here,” said Ivan.

“The nostalgic thoughts of new migrants are the only thing that divide us. Who knows if British migrants cling less to their homeland than you do,” said Leon.

“I wish you had a happier childhood,” said Barbara for no reason at all.

“I only ever had one childhood to measure childhoods by. I quite enjoyed mine, mum,” laughed Leon.

“You are like your father,” said Barbara.

“He is OK. He does interesting things.”

“Don’t you resent him for beating you when you were little?”

“He never beat me, Mum. He punished me for things I did wrong. Maybe sometimes it was a bit harsh, but I am all right, aren’t I. Maybe he lost his temper sometimes but so do I. You worry too much, Mum. You worry about us not having Uncles and Cousins. Maybe that was good for us, did you ever consider that. Look at Slovenian kids. I don’t know one that hasn’t finished high school. Most hold degrees, many are business people in their twenties. We are prosperous.”

Leon finally managed to laugh at the secret he kept from his parents. When Leon left to study economics in Sydney, Ivan was so pleased. He asked Leon if he needed more money and, a little embarrassed, he slipped a hundred dollar bill into his pocket as they parted. Leon’s new friends in Sidney smoked marijuana and Leon spent his father’s money on his first deal. Everybody smoked his joints and he became instantly popular.

Leon met his first real love on the campus. They were going together for a couple of years and he brought her home to meet his parents. Everybody liked each other. She was an arts student, pretty and softly spoken, she was polite and friendly towards his parents.

When her parents surprised them with their visit on the campus, they found them in bed stoned out of their minds. Her father yelled and her mother packed her daughter's bags. They took her away and Leon never saw her again. Her father wanted to speak to Leon's father so Leon figured that they were all best left alone. Leon punished himself by refusing his father's secret gifts of money. He said that he found a tutoring job. He needed an excuse to drop out of weekend orgies. He was in his last year and he had to study hard to fulfil his father's expectations. He met Kim who was majoring in science that same year and she would never have anything to do with a drug addict.

"Janek said that dad is the biggest bully, that he bullies everybody," said Barbara.

"Of course he is a bully. Where would he be if he wasn't a bully. If he wasted time solving other people's problems like Janek, he wouldn't have time to do what he's done. He is a crafty old bastard but could he afford to be anything else." Barbara knew that Ivan liked Leon because they seemed to be so alike. But she wondered if they really were alike or did they maybe just want to please each other. Maybe Leon was afraid to argue like Janek did?

Ivan felt guilty about the money he secretly gave to Leon. He tried to reason that he could afford now what he couldn't afford when Janek needed help. He was so proud of Leon and when he refused the money, Ivan told his friends how independent his son became. Ivan often asked Leon to translate the highly abstract jargon of Australian politicians. Leon reassured him that politicians only wanted to baffle people with words that said almost nothing. But Ivan refused to be baffled, he had to know and understand and make his own judgements.

"He wanted you two to be tough and to remain Slovenian," said Barbara.

"We are Slovenian, Mum. Maybe we don't marry Slovenian partners, we don't want the pressure from two families to go to Slovenia to find our culture. I left nothing in Slovenia. Sure, I'd like to travel, I'd like to see the world. If I ever pay off my mortgage I'll go to Slovenia too. But at present with interest rate at eighteen percent this here is my culture to worry about."

"Maybe if you had an extended family here, you would feel more secure," tried Barbara.

"Look at kids I went to school with, kids with large bludging extended families. They are nobodies. People try to pin Dreamtime culture on Aborigines but today Aborigines only know video and grog and smokes and coke and hamburger-pie culture. They queue up for the dole cheque. I never lived in Slovenia like these Aborigines never lived in the Dreamtime." said Leon.

"You don't even remember our first years in the bush, you were too little, those were the hard times," said Barbara.

Leon remembered how dad learned his first rude words on the job. They were his fighting sticks. He could say 'bloody bastard' just as well as any other man. It was too much to expect him to beat an English speaking person in a sophisticated, verbal argument. Migrants learned the rough language from Australians of the bush fighting the frontiers, shooting roots into the scrub.

"I suppose their convict ancestors brought rude language to Australia," said Barbara.

"In chains, starved and sick, they were not even allowed to swear, mum. If they expressed displeasure they were flogged until they almost bled to death. And most of them were punished because they stole to feed their kids. No wonder they wanted to swear when they became free," said Leon.

"I suppose we really have it easy now," said Barbara.

"Australia has been good to you, mum, at 50 you are still young enough to want to paint and garden and entertain. You don't need to go out to work. And you have a fine family. Don't you think you have a fine family, Mum?"

"I was afraid that you kids will be scarred for life because we left Slovenia."

"What's a few scars on an Australian man, we became as hard as nails."

"I worry about Helena and Janek."

"You like to worry and they like to feel guilty and a little tragic for giving you a hard time. Remember that at 25 you have already been a mother of three, living on a foreign continent away from your parents. Your children are over twenty-five now, mum. Let go."

"You are right, but this is a foreign country."

"No, it isn't, this is the only home your kids will ever have."

"Are you trying to comfort me?"

"Mum, the world is not revolving around you, people are too busy with their own rotation."

Barbara often remembered Leon's first girlfriend. They seemed so much in love but without explanation she vanished. Leon didn't want to talk about her. Leon never talked about his feelings. He was hurt, everybody knew that he was hurt but he simply switched off, turned away or started to read. Much like Ivan, he built a fence around his privacy and even Barbara was not allowed to trespass.

"The priest said at mass that only the people you love have the power to make you unhappy," remembered Barbara.

"Obviously he never worked in an office," said Leon. "I sure never harboured love for some of the bastards that annoy me at work."

"We might go home this year," announced Barbara suddenly.

"Why did you wait this long? Maybe you'll find what you left there."

"You can't have your cake and eat it too," smiled Barbara.

"Careful, You are using Australian phrases, Mum."

"Home is where the heart is," she smiled.

"We'll sure see where your heart is then," said Leon.

One friend, one person who is truly understanding, who takes the trouble to listen to us as we consider our problems, can change our whole outlook on the world.

Dr. Elton Mayo

Of mind and heart

Barbara met Paula in Sydney hospital when Leon had his appendix operation. Paula was a young nurse sitting on Leon's bed and she explained to Barbara all the things about appendixes. When Barbara did not understand, Paula quickly found a pen and paper and drew the part that was taken out of Leon's tummy. Paula held Barbara's hand and asked about her family. If Barbara didn't know some words Paula found others. Grateful for her interest Barbara returned to the clinic whenever her children were sick. The doctor never talked to her like that, he just wrote a prescription and sent her to the chemist.

Paula became a social worker after she moved to Linden. She worked with migrants and Aborigines, she made people feel at ease and at home in her company. She liked Barbara and they became firm friends.

Barbara told Paula things she could tell nobody else. When Paula was amused, her body vibrated with a contagious unrestricted laughter. She laughed at herself a lot and she found a funny side in every misfortune. She never pretended to be smarter than she was and she talked about her embarrassments and fears. Paula even made Barbara's problems seem funny and insignificant.

Barbara loved Paula for being so imperfect, in her company she didn't have to pretend to be happy, clever or good. Barbara would have liked to share her life story with Paula but her life was so tangled with the lives of other people that she had no right to talk about it with strangers.

"I hate Ivan," said Barbara one Monday afternoon in 1985 after Ivan and Janek had a row during their Sunday lunch.

Janek returned home from Sydney in 1985 and became a teacher in Linden. After a few months of arguing with his father, Janek moved into a rented house, but he still returned for dinner most Sundays to please his parents.

"It's bloody hard to be loveable all the time," laughed Paula and the laughter shook her whole huge body. She was fond of Barbara's cakes but she ate for comfort and to forget about her drunk husband. Paula never complained, she knew that she should have known from the start that Sam, her husband, was a bloody alcoholic. Paula's parents kept telling her all her life what a mess she got herself into and that she should have known better..

Paula knew all about the equal rights for women, as a counsellor, she advised battered wives. But although financially independent and liberated, she felt battered herself. She hurt because the children she had high hopes for drank with their father. She learned to swear and use course language to cover up her disappointments.

"Ivan is a big bloody bully," said Barbara copying Paula's language.

"Why are you staying with him. Kids left home." Paula understood that Barbara needed telling.

"He is still their father," said Barbara.

"I was only teasing," Paula patted Barbara's hand. "You want a father and grandfather for your offspring. At the same time you'd like to quietly get rid of Ivan. You know about the cake of course, either you eat it or you have it. Do something to occupy your mind. Think of something that has nothing to do with your family."

They stared silently at the futility of Paula's advise until Paula jumped up with the solution. "Come with me to the arts classes."

Paula admired the collages Barbara made long ago from pretty things her children picked on the way home from school. Seeds and pods and leaves and feathers and stones were arranged to make the picture come alive. Paula tried to create pretty pottery and that gave her a measure of distraction.

"I wouldn't be any good at art."

"It doesn't matter how good you are as long as you enjoy it."

"Ivan might not like it."

"He doesn't have to like everything you do, give him a break."

"I don't know what he'd do if I went on my own," said Barbara.

"Find out."

Barbara loved painting at school, she even had fantasies about becoming a painter but she was embarrassed about her ambition. It was difficult to just announce to Ivan that she wanted to paint. She might not be any good.

"He is not even talking to me."

"This is serious," mocked Paula.

"He knows how it hurts me when he is not talking."

"Of course he knows, that's why he is not talking."

"Ivan wanted to buy a computer and asked Janek for advice. Janek was so grateful that his dad asked him for advice. When he came for Sunday dinner he brought all the pamphlets but Ivan had a surprise, he already bought the computer."

"You took no notice of what I told you," said Janek.

"I know what I want, for my money I can buy whatever I want," laughed Ivan.

Barbara didn't know why it was so important to Janek what his dad bought but she knew that Janek would have cried if he wasn't a man.

"You know nothing about computers, they are not picks and shovels," said Janek trying to cover up his disappointment. They were both honing for an argument so from computers they soon turned to other insults. Ivan said that Janek will never amount to anything or have anything because he was stupid. Janek said that he couldn't help being stupid since he had a stupid father.

"Bastard, you'll never know half of what I know," said Ivan. "If you are not my father you brought me up badly, you messed things up either way," Janek slammed the door and left.

"I'll never speak to him again," said Ivan. "He will apologise for slamming the door in my face."

“When will you apologise,” said Barbara.

“Who to?”

“Me, all of us.”

“Whatever for? For working my guts out for all of you?”

“You worked for yourself.”

“Stupid cow.” Ivan slammed the door and stopped talking to Barbara.

“And you begged him to forgive you,” mocked Paula.

“Ivan and Janek love each other but both keep saying: I am smarter than you.”

“All men want to be the smartest, biggest, bloodiest bulls. There has never been a wicked step mother looking into the mirror saying: Mirror mirror on the wall who is the prettiest of them all. Men invented the mirror and the wicked step mother. They put their hidden evil thoughts into a woman’s mouth because they knew that women won’t protest. Don’t expect the wicked stepmother to say sorry because the wicked step mother does not exist,” said Paula.

“I begged them to talk about it like grown men,” said Barbara.

“Grown up men are grown up prima donnas,” said Paula. “They sulk like spoiled brats if someone steals their thunder. Janek is also Ivan’s son, let them sort their relationship.”

“My grown up kids still hang on Ivan’s every word,” said Barbara.

“It’s only natural that they want to be powerful like Ivan not weak like you”

“I didn’t clean the bits of broken glass off the floor this time,” boasted Barbara.

“What glass?”

“He threw a glass at the door when Janek left. I get headaches when they argue,” said Barbara. “Ivan said it’s all in my head.”

“Where else do you expect a headache to be,” laughed Paula and Barbara joined in the laughter with tears running down her face.

“He thinks I imagine my headaches to nag him with.”

“Maybe you do.”

“I’ve given him the best years of my life.”

“Are you talking about those years you hated him, you suffered his sexual efforts and made him feel guilty because you didn’t like them.”

“I always made myself attractive for him.”

“You disguised your body, your thoughts and emotions.”

Barbara could suddenly see the funny side to it all. Once, when, she came from the hairdresser Ivan complained about the smell of the chemicals in her hair.

“You must have a headache from it,” said Ivan. “I told him that I have no headache but he insisted that I must have it, only I did not feel it,” laughed Barbara.

“How could Ivan ever be wrong,” said Paula.

"I hate patching things up with sex." Barbara tried to reason out her senseless arguments with Ivan.

"You don't like sex, do you?" said Paula.

"I didn't say that." Barbara couldn't tell Paula about silly memories that turned her off sex. She told her about the day Ivan finished his first house in Sydney. She washed the windows all day, scraping the cement and paint off. At home she rushed to cook and serve dinner. She forgot to put cutlery on the table and Ivan yelled that she never did anything right. She was tired and she pushed the fork and knife angrily on the table. He threw the plate on the floor, food splattering all over the kitchen. "That's what I get after the hard day's work," he said, got up and went to bed. Barbara said sorry, picked the bits of the broken plate, wiped the food off the floor and made love to Ivan.

"I should have pretended that I was sick," said Barbara through tears, suddenly presented with a solution.

"Why?"

"Because I didn't feel well."

"Why didn't you say so?"

"Someone had to cook. The kids have been helping after school on the house, they had homework to do. Ivan watched the news, he hated his news disturbed. If I asked for help he'd say that he'd given me three healthy kids to help. He said that Helena should be able to cook if I taught her well. Helena was about nine. I felt trapped. If he had done something really bad, maybe I'd leave him, but he was never bad for long."

"He must have done something really well to keep you together," laughed Paula.

"He was a wonderful husband sometimes," Barbara rushed on feeling guilty and disloyal to her husband.

"If only I could go to work, earn my own money."

"But you did go out to work, only you forgot to ask for your pay."

"I wish I had gone out to work for an employer but Ivan said: no wife of mine will go out to work. The wives are to take care of the family. "I feel that I am not good at anything but I'd like to try," said Barbara wistfully.

"If you don't give yourself a chance you will never know what you are good at. If you never start to paint you will never be an artist."

"I'll come," Barbara decided. "I'll try to come," she quickly corrected herself."

"I'll pick you up Wednesday evening at six," said Paula.

"Paula, do you always love your husband?" fumbled Barbara. She wanted to know how Paula coped without complaining or crying.

"I love Sam for the same reasons everybody else loves Sam, I suppose. He is witty, generous, easy going. I even find him sexy," said Paula. "But other people don't have to spend nights with a drunken vegetable. He has a repertoire of witty remarks but it's been years since we had a talk. He is not able to form an idea deeper than a puddle." "Paula, why do you think Sam drinks?"

"Alcoholism is an addiction."

Barbara remembered her revolutionary teacher who told her class after the war that religion was an addiction, it was the opium of the people. Barbara was addicted to religion. It was the only way she knew how to survive. What harm was a little opium? Would people be happier without their addiction?

"Janek is addicted to nicotine, Ivan says that he is killing himself," said Barbara out loud.

"Sam is starting to shake in the mornings," said Paula.

"Is religion really the opium of the people," asked Barbara.

"I can do without religion, I wallow in my own misery like a pig," laughed Paula. "It's my misery and they can't take it away from me." Paula ate the whole tin of chocolate biscuits while she waited for her son to return from the pub the night before.

Paula and Barbara often remembered the early days of their friendship. Soon after they both settled in Linden Paula arrived one morning and asked Barbara to come to the Vinnie's with her. She cleaned her wardrobe and wanted to take some stuff to the charity shop.

"These days you can't find anyone to give your second hand things to," she said.

Barbara packed a bag too. Ivan didn't mind her giving to the poor. St Vincent's shop was near the church and the nuns sold the stuff people brought.

"Our people would never take hand me downs," said Barbara. They were afraid that somebody would point at a garment they were wearing and say: I gave this to her because I did not like it, or because I got sick of it, or because I feel sorry for her, or because she has no taste for good clothes.

"I wanted to look into your bag and you wanted to look into mine. In the end we just swapped the bags." Paula liked to remember that day. They wore each other's clothes and complemented each other on their good taste. Paula was slightly bigger even then but both made adjustments happily. Looking at Paula wearing her dress, Barbara felt like seeing herself from afar, like seeing someone wearing her memories.

Ivan said that Paula was a bad influence on Barbara. She mocked men, she talked about her bricklayer husband Sam in a disparaging tone that intimidated Ivan.

Paula first met Thelma in her husband's surgery and she introduced her to Barbara. New to the town Thelma was eager to make new friends.

Barbara introduced Marianne to Paula. Ivan liked their neighbour Marianne. She was a teacher at the local Catholic school before she became a full time wife and mother. Ivan complimented Marianne once on her good works for the church and Marianne wisely answered with the words of her favourite saint: Love is repaid by love alone. Ivan hoped that something of that wisdom would rub off on Barbara.

Thelma enrolled at uni to pass the time and amongst other things she studied religions. She was simply fascinated by people's beliefs.

Marianne, Thelma, and Paula occasionally met at Barbara's place because, they insisted that Barbara made the best coffee. She increased the aroma by lightly roasting freshly ground coffee before she poured hot water over it. She also made delicious strudels.

"Cup of tea and a rainbow sponge cake is all Australians are used to," said Thelma.

"I can't stand the taste of tea any more. My mother would turn in her grave if she knew how this foreigners corrupted me," laughed Paula.

"You only drink instant, you don't really know anything about coffee. People at home know their coffee like they know their wines," said Barbara. "They talk about aroma, taste, body, aftertaste, stimulus effect, colour, smoothness."

Barbara cut the strudel and topped it with cream.

"You know I shouldn't," protested Paula.

"I just discovered a perfect diet," said Thelma.

"Big deal," said Paula. "You are too skinny for diets."

"I heard that sea food is good for you, see it but don't eat it."

"Just a small one for me, " said Marianne.

"And then you will have a couple more real small ones, of course," teased Paula.

"I'll have to get a recipe," said Thelma who had no intention of ever learning to bake. Under the linden tree, sprawled out on the easy chairs the women enjoyed the afternoon sun unconcerned about the rest of the world.

Ivan was much happier since Barbara went out painting with Paula. He was home most of the time lately and he enjoyed the solitude.

"You have no close Slovenian friends" Thelma once observed.

"All Slovenians are close," explained Barbara. "We might not like each other very much, maybe we are too close. To you it doesn't matter who I am and it doesn't matter to me what you think about me." Barbara surprised herself, the thought was expressed before she could deal with it.

"You don't spend much time with them," said Paula.

"But I do. We go to the Slovenian club for christenings, for wakes, engagements, weddings, birthday parties, new year's eve parties, harvest party, fancy dress parties, funerals."

"I thought you liked Australians better," Paula pretended to be hurt.

"Australians I either like or don't care about. I actually don't hate any Australians. Slovenians gossip about each other maliciously all the time.." All these was new to Barbara. "We take notice of our people, if a Slovenian in Melbourne does something interesting or something outrageously bad or stupid, the whole world knows, I mean our world. We ring Brisbane, Sydney, Linden, we write home about it."

"Why do you spend so much time with us then," asked Paula.

"I don't know." She remembered the day Father Damian introduced Ivan to the local Australian priest and the priest introduced Barbara to Marianne. Ivan and Barbara used to travel to Sydney to the Slovenian mass but since then they worshipped with Australians in Linden most Sundays. Marianne was the official church welcomer. She distributed the church newsletter and greeted newcomers. Naturally interested in people, she attracted others by her friendliness. Marianne sincerely believed that what she was doing for these strangers she was doing for Jesus. She made Barbara feel specially chosen and loved.

"My mother used to be terrified of foreigners," remembered Paula. "She said that you could never predict their behaviour so it was better to leave foreigners well alone. They didn't like mixing anyway and smelled dreadful on account of their food. Turned her off."

"Australians smelled of mutton and dripping to us," said Barbara.

"Asians smell of herbs and spices," said Thelma.

"They not only smell different they look different, they aren't even Christian," laughed Paula.

"You aren't Christian either," said Thelma.

"But I eat Easter eggs and have turkey for Christmas. I don't think they do," she laughed.

"Some do, some are even Catholic," said Marianne.

"I was only joking," said Paula. "I suppose people hate migrants because they work hard and earn more money than we do."

"I tried to get migrant women involved in the work of the local charities but they wouldn't be in it. They don't seem to be community minded," said Marianne.

"They spend time and money on their community. You don't see their community because it is sort of worldwide and not obvious but that makes it even harder to keep it going," said Barbara.

"There you have it, you never know where people are coming from," said Thelma. "If you know what I mean, you never know what they mean by what they say and do."

"Talking about foreigners, I must tell you about the lady I met today," said Paula. "I first met her many years ago in Sydney soon after she arrived from Bosnia. She came with a girlfriend to the surgery where I worked. Her friend spoke in a very broken English but she herself just smiled beautifully. I remembered her eyes and the way she sat without the slightest nervous twitch, with a dreamlike composure. The doctor found that she had to have an ovarian cyst removed. I made an appointment but she never returned. I often wondered about her until today we actually bumped into each other. On the spur of the moment I invited her for coffee in a nearby cafe. Her English was still atrocious but her smile did not change. Some people smile with a lot of movement and with their mouths open but she smiled silently like a cat stretching in the basket, satisfied with her lot.

"My husband let me learn English, his cousin tell me how to speak English, she said triumphantly. "You no come back to doctor," I tried my best pidgin English," said Paula. "We Muslim," she explained. "My husband want children. He wonderful husband, he like a doll, he his own boss, big house. I want see doctor I want children for my husband, he not let me to go. He not want doctor see me. My husband girlfriend take me to doctor. She said she no

tell my husband. But she tell my husband. My husband divorce me, marry her. I had nobody take me to doctor. My husband so smart, why he married me, I silly. They find new husband for me. He good man, he only hits me when drunk. He married before. His wife beautiful but no Muslim, she take his money. He no wants save money, he drinks now, he plays poker machines. Poor fellow got sick alcohol, he get invalid pension. Poor man so sick. I got pension because he sick.”

She spoke with simple sincere compassion for the man who broke many bones in her body and made her carry home cartons of beer daily. He lost his driving licence because he was , she carried bags of groceries on each arm and the carton of beer between her arms every day from the shop. He work, he good man, the woman kept saying. He very sick from whisky, doctor told him drink beer. I bring carton every day, when visitor I bring two cartons. He no hit me in the caravan, people see us. We happy in caravan. I don't care I die tomorrow. If I have children I care, she said sweetly. She certainly was worth a cup of coffee.” said Paula. Barbara realised that Paula identified with the woman who cared for her drunken husband.

“You must be talking about Fadila and Adem,’ said Barbara. She heard Ivan and Milan talking about the peculiar Muslim couple and she saw Adem working for Ivan sometimes.

“Really? Small world, shows you how dangerous it is to gossip in a small town,” said Paula who became aware of professional duty of confidentiality. But Fadila wasn't really her client.

“Most former Yugoslavs know each other, Adem often works for Ivan,” explained Barbara.

“I knew a man like that once,” said Thelma. “He took a dog for a walk early every morning. He cursed the dog as he pulled him along, sometimes he hit the mongrel when the dog wanted to lift a leg on the posts along the road. The dog whined and snarled and dribbled urine over his half lifted leg. They walked past our house like that for years. People were sorry for the dog but the man must have loved the mangy animal to stick with it for so long. Without each other nobody would notice either the man or the dog but together they drew attention.”

“Talking of dogs,” said Barbara. “Ivan once asked Adem: How are you today? and Adem said: Like a dog without a leash. That's good, said Ivan. No, it isn't, said Adem. a dog on a leash is cared for by someone but people throw stones at a dog on the loose. Maybe Fadila is grateful for the leash.”

“You are so clever in the kitchen,” Marianne turned to Barbara as she took another piece of piece of strudel. She changed the conversation because she couldn't relate to Muslims or dogs.

“I was a rotten cook when I first came to Australia,” responded Barbara modestly.

“At least you didn't spoil your boys for their wives,” said Thelma.

“By the time they left home they learned to like my cooking. I also learned to cook and now they ring me for recipes. Their wives are likely to hate me for it.”

“There is nothing better in the world than mother's cooking said some politician. My mother had an appropriate quote for everything,” said Thelma. “She could quote Shakespeare at a drop of a hat.”

“I can quote Preseren like that,” boasted Barbara.

“That’s helpful. Is it in English or in Slovenian,” asked Paula.

“In original of course,” said Barbara. “Would Thelma’s Mum quote Shakespeare in Slovenian?”

“The Bible and Shakespeare say it all. Everything else is judged against them.” Thelma made it known that she knew both well.

“Thank God that the Bible wasn’t written by the English, they became conceited by having Shakespeare” said Barbara.

“Victor Hugo said: England made Shakespeare but the Bible made England,” said Thelma.

“I wish I could use English like you do, use your phrases and quotes, play with it. I can’t even sound funny in English,” confessed Barbara.

“The way you use English IS funny,” laughed Paula.

“I don’t want to sound peculiar I just want to demonstrate my sense of humour,” corrected Barbara.

“We love you just as you are,” said Marianne almost reverently.

“I wish we could arrange marriages for our kids like Muslims do. Parents views are not clouded by hormones.” Paula was still thinking about Fadila. Paula’s sixteen years old daughter Amy was going with a Catholic boy.

“My daughter is going with the landscape gardener who showers her with flowers and affection. I’d pick a doctor or a lawyer for her but she seems to need a gardener,” said Thelma.

“We created taboos about sex to protect girls from unwanted pregnancies and sicknesses. I just read that in Holland they actually encourage people to have sex. They tell young people to have sex only when they truly want to and when they protect themselves,” said Paula.

“I stayed at my girlfriend’s place overnight when I was sixteen,” said Thelma. “Her parents were away and we bravely raged all night. My boyfriend took me outside for a breath of fresh air and some smooching and I almost stepped on my girlfriend lying under the bushes. Her pants were down and she was bleeding between her legs. She moaned in a drunken half consciousness. We took her in, showered her and put her to bed. In the morning I cooked breakfast for her. I can’t even cry, she said. Since that night we were never sweet sixteen again.”

Barbara became thoughtful, she could never tell anyone about her sweet sixteen like that. Perhaps she never was sweet sixteen. At sixteen she already gave birth to a baby yet she wasn’t a mother, she wasn’t a virgin yet she never made love. Maybe Vanessa didn’t either. Maybe she was better off than Venessa.

They looked at the birds coming closer to get the crumbs. “When the baby is hatched father bird brings the insects to pass them into motherboard’s beak so mum passes them to the baby. Then she waits for the dropping from the baby bird’s bottom and takes it away. When the baby flies away its parents don’t hold it back they seem to have it all figured out,” said Marianne.

"I listened to the two pre-school boys in my husband's surgery. My daddy drives a bulldozer, boasted one. My daddy drives a bull ant, back chatted the other. My mummy used to be a nurse, piped one. My mummy used to be a baby, responded the other. And they beat their little chests monkey fashion on the words MY," said Thelma.

"We are different to chimps only in regard to sex. Chimps have sex only when the female is ready to conceive. They do it in front of other animals. Humans on the other hand hide it, they probably feel guilty because they do it all the time for fun," explained Paula.

"Animals perfume themselves, ruffle they feathers and dance and fight when their bodies urge them to mate," said Thelma.

"We have this urge to be attractive even when we don't want to attract," said Marianne.

"Most male species would have sex all the time, only females don't let them. Animals are smarter," said Paula.

"Be careful, men might point to the fact that most animal males wander around looking for fertile females," said Thelma.

"Women make themselves attractive to fool men that they want to mate. This makes males fight all the competing bulls from their territory. The most violent bull still mates the most. Cows feel safe with a strong bull," said Thelma.

"Men look for dumb, sexy, blondes for partners, preferably virgins," said Barbara remembering Milan saying once to Ivan that women are much better without brains.

"Who said that they are looking for partners," said Paula. "They want someone to show off to their friends, someone to protect against enemies, someone to boss around at home and someone to mother them and their children. Oh, they like to mate as well."

"They need someone to blame," said Barbara in a brave attempt to laugh at herself.

"God should have taken a rest on the sixth day," laughed Thelma. "He messed things up making a man."

"It is possible that technology will destroy humanity in the end. It is mind boggling what potential power computers have over people. Our generation was frightened of bad movies, our kids are corrupted by TV but computer programs can be the silent killers of our grandchildren," said Thelma. She first learned to use computer in her husband's surgery but soon she became fascinated by the possibilities it presented.

"They are so much more dangerous because we oldies don't understand how they work," said Paula.

"I suppose what doesn't kill you makes you stronger," quoted Thelma.

"Some say that Gorbachev is the popular Anti-Christ, that the mark on his head is hiding the devil's number. Some say that the end of the world is coming at the end of this millennium," said Barbara.

"There have always been Doomsday preachers," Thelma dismissed such nonsense.

"Most people are afraid that god is angry at them because they are having a good time. I'm not afraid of god. I think what we have coming to us is coming right here," said Paula.

"When I worked in the hospital I sometimes talked to a person one moment and the next it

was just a corpse. It made me wonder if we are really any more than any other living thing. In a few hours the corpse gets stiff, it begins to decompose and smell. I saw flies lay maggots in the eyes of corpses only hours after they died.”

“Oh, spare us the details,” said Thelma.

“I wondered where the life had gone. One minute you want to be close to a person the next you move away from the corpse. I liked to talk to corpses as I dressed them. It helped me remember that they belonged to the patients I cared for. I could feel the person floating around me, watching me wrap up its body. I realised that our bodies have little to do with the person we really are. It’s like when you cut your hair you look at it and it has nothing to do with what you are.”

“I visited my aunt in a hospital once,” said Thelma. “She was dying of leukaemia. She hated being in a hospital with a roomful of terminally ill patients. A lady next to her asked me for a sip of water. I held a glass to her lips, she drank a little and died. The nurse covered her face before her lips dried from the water I gave her.” Thelma shivered remembering. “My Aunt was scared of people dying around her.”

“I remember my grandmother’s funeral,” said Marianne. I couldn’t cry because I remembered all the wonderful things she was. I realised that although her body was buried what she touched and changed lived on.”

“Aborigines used to elevate the corpse to dry out and become dust. It is rather nice to think that your body moves with the wind after you die,” said Paula.

“You’d like to lay on the branches and have birds pecking at your eyes,” said Barbara.

“But they covered them up with bark,” explained Thelma.

“I wonder if we are going to get our bodies back on judgement day,” said Barbara.

“I wouldn’t mind having a nice young body to go to heaven with, but we are probably getting the bodies we had on our death bed. That’s not much to look forward to. I don’t know anyone on earth who is quite happy with the body they got,” said Thelma.

“If we are going to live in the heavenly Utopia for ever-after we should all rise from death with identical bodies,” said Paula.

“How boring,” said Thelma.

“A body may be all right in heaven but in the eternal fire of hell you are better off without it.” Barbara was conscious that Ivan wouldn’t like her joking about god.

“Perhaps every dead part of the Earth had once been a living part of the somebody. What a great big sacred site the Earth is,” said Thelma.

“The scientists are saying that we use only a small part of our brain. Perhaps the only living thing is our mind and it develops and lives in some other form when the human body wears out,” said Paula. “

“If they could activate the gene or a brain centre that holds the recall of past lives, we might all remember a continuous line of events from human beginnings,” said Thelma.

“Maybe our life is just a software in a computer, maybe we could transfer the software from one computer into another,” said Paula. “A simple brain transplant might do it in not too distant future”

“They have started cloning animals to have the best stock,” said Thelma.

“I hope they will not clone people,” said Marianne.

“Whatever THEY ever discovered and banned they always used in the end,” said Paula.

“If everybody will be born equally smart and beautiful, who will we laugh at, who will we envy, or love or hate,” said Barbara.

“Sufis believe that people continue to progress along an ethical path until they reach perfection and became one with God. They lose their individuality,” Thelma learned that from her religious course.

“What’s the point in striving to become perfect if you become nothing in the end?” said Barbara.

“I think we are just robots that carry the genes from one generation into another. We live to join the sperm and the egg and produce another carrier for the things we can’t carry any longer,” said Paula.

“I believe that children of today should be placed in a certain environment to learn appreciation of the good things in life because we have so much of the good thing.”

“You mean we should place them into expensive boarding schools,” corrected Paula.

“If you place teenagers into an environment that has a positive peer pressure, you are half way there. By choosing the environment your children live in, you can determine how happy they will be.” Thelma failed to understand her own statement although she was convinced that she could orchestrate her children’s characters by placing them with good nuns in a private school.

“How would you know an environment you never lived in?” asked Paula.

“But I met the parents from Anthony’s school. Ah, such intelligent company. I just felt that the school was right for my children. It is focused into the future, dynamic and gentle within the Christian framework, if you know what I mean.”

“You mean rich, powerful, snobbish.” Paula always called a spade a spade.

“No, not at all,” said Thelma, “they show morals, beliefs, expectations. They have acceptable standards.”

“The virtues became old fashioned. Does it mean that without them we are better people? We used to be able to count on one’s Christian principles.” said Marianne.

“These days you can’t count on anything. People stopped behaving predictably,” agreed Thelma.

“The rich always make their standards acceptable,” said Paula. “We teach our children to swim against the tide, we teach them to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, we tell them not to steal, not to hurt others. Nobody does what we teach our children. No wonder they rebel when they realise that we are hypocrites. People teach morality to protect their property. Poor don’t need morality, they have nothing worth

stealing, protecting or respecting. The law helps the rulers of the country to keep the servants serving in a quiet, orderly manner.

“Lea loves her boarding school,” Thelma became absorbed in the subject of her children. “I know she is not an academic but she will learn to move in any society. If one is made to feel comfortable in high society the move down is easy.”

“You’d like her to learn how to be a snotty la di da snob,” teased Paula.

“I’d like her to be comfortable amongst snobs, I’d like her peers to pull her up rather than drag her down.”

“A priest at my friend’s wedding said to the bride and groom: I hope this is not the happiest day of your life. If it was, you would have nothing better to look forward to. Things never stay the same, if they are not getting better they get worse,” said Barbara.

“They still see the seedy side of life from the boarding school, only they see it from the right side of the road. Of course we pay an arm and a leg for it, but I feel that it’s the money well spent. After all you can’t take it with you.”

“Some parents can’t pay an arm and a leg,” said Paula.

“We can’t afford it but we go without.”

“Love and time is all we can give to our children and we all have that,” said Marianne compelled to spread the Gospel message.

“Rich and famous commit suicides because they have nothing to struggle for,” said Paula.

“Maybe my children will survive, starting from the bottom they’ve done well,” silently prayed Barbara.

They drank coffee and tried to solve life’s mysteries, but they rarely talked about themselves. Maybe some things were best left alone. A doctor said that about the fragments of stone imbedded in Barbara’s eye. Long ago the builders blasted a rock on the building site and the bits of granite almost blinded Barbara. The skin grew over the crushed bits of granite left in her eye but it did not hurt any more. You can see it, you know it was painful but it would be dangerous to cut into it now and pull it out. The body finds its own way of coping with pain.

Barbara was happy to share ideas with her friends, the sharing itself created an intimacy and understanding. It grew like a new skin over the old injuries, it was like a blanket that kept her warm. She often wondered how important her friendship was to these women, did they realise how they grew together closer and closer every day, knowing and liking each other a little more after every cup of coffee.

On man, on Nature and on Human Life,
musing in solitude.

Wordsworth

The times they are achanging

Ivan kept the garden beautiful. It was almost a year since he stopped building houses and he needed something to do. He sometimes took Barbara's hand and they walked through the garden to see his new blooms. Garden became Ivan's playground, his territory. She was scared to pick flowers without asking. It was just as well that Barbara found something else to occupy her time. When she started painting he felt that he finally succeeded in making her happy.

The garden was still in flower and the coolness of autumn sunshine was inviting. Barbara often sat there enjoying the scents of honey suckle and herbs and roses and jasmine as she painted. She merged with the scents and the dreams, escaping unnoticed into the safe realm of her thoughts.

Janek read the news paper after Sunday lunch and listened to Bob Dylan's song 'For the times they are achanging'. The tune echoed on and Barbara began to pick the words as she painted.

Diana left straight after lunch to play tennis, she needed to tone her muscles. Janek asked when she was coming home but she wasn't sure. Maybe she would go for a drink afterwards with the team. Diana smoked and drank moderately. Ivan resented Diana going out on her own but Janek didn't seem to mind.

"Women think that they are equal since they got hooked on grog and smoke. They want to be the same as men even if it kills them," Ivan growled when he and Barbara were alone.

Barbara rang Leon to invite him and Kim to lunch. She heard Leon call out to Kim: "What are we doing Sunday lunch time?" "I have to write my assignment," said Kim.

"Sorry, mum, can't do. Kim's got plans," said Leon on the phone.

Barbara began to understand that an entirely new order was taking place. Maybe the young ones didn't see the change because they had no experience of the old but Barbara saw how men were losing power and how women were fast learning to handle it.

Barbara never told anyone what she wanted and in the process she forgot if she wanted anything at all. She made her first solemn decision and followed Paula to arts classes. She was astonished that Ivan didn't even mind.

Barbara's Australian friends knew nothing about her fears and anxieties. They talked to that part of her that was thinking independently and they praised her artistic efforts.

Life changed for Slovenians as well. They met every month at Slovenian mass eager to impress each other with their behaviour, piety and new clothes. The approaching old age

made them aware how short a lifetime was and how precious were those that took notice of them and so acknowledged their living.

Vida and Andrej brought their ever growing, ever smiling family and they took the front two rows of the church where they could be admired by the rest of the congregation. Looking at them Barbara felt sad because she knew how happy Ivan would be if their children joined them for Sunday mass. Leon was in Sydney, Helena was in Perth and Janek only came sometimes to make his parents happy.

Milan and Milena came because after mass they planned the rest of the day's festivities with Ivan and Barbara.

Joe sat next to Ivan, equal before god like he never felt equal with people. He came on his own since his wife became a Born again Christian. He came to be close to Ivan whom he admired and because he felt liked by Barbara.

They all stood in front of the church after mass to exchange greetings and news. Milan and Milena were coming to Ivan's place for lunch but Joe couldn't make it because he was going fishing. He would have liked to stay but he felt out of place because Hermina wasn't with him and he wasn't a couple like the other two. Joe felt the odd man out and he chose to be alone.

In Barbara's sunny dining room they sat around the table with a drink while Barbara attended to lunch.

"Damian couldn't make it, he has a wedding in Sydney," explained Ivan. "Don't you think his sermon was very clever?" Damian spoke about the political situation at home, but he disguised his sermon with the story of Judas betraying Jesus.

"Symbolic or otherwise the Judas story always fascinated me because it seems so unfair," said Milena. "It is simply fascinating that Judas was condemned for doing what he was born to do."

"What Judas did, was pre-told, not preordained. Judas could have chosen not to," explained Ivan the unexplainable. "We let things happen or we don't."

"I am convinced that God is a woman," Milena enjoyed teasing Ivan, she had no fear of him and her God had a great sense of humour.

"How can HE be a woman," said Ivan.

"A woman can't even be a priest," teased Milan.

"Don't give them ideas," said Ivan, "Eve had an idea and look what happened?"

"Oh, poor Adam couldn't say no, he had to take a bite of the apple and cry out: O, god, she made me do it," said Milena in her feisty mood.

"Women always make us bite of whatever they choose," said Ivan, half amused half annoyed.

"When a man gives in to his lust he still cries: she made me do it. A poor little woman makes him do it every time. It bothered me when I read that St Paul said: no woman should teach a man," challenged Milena seriously.

"Too right," laughed Milan.

"I asked a theologian friend of mine," said Milena. "He said and I quote: "In the old English a word MAN stood for men and women. St Paul said: no woe man will teach the man. A woe man was a man who was disobedient to God. St. Paul wanted to say that a teacher must be a good person to be an example to his students. Men stuck a prefix wo on the females like men through the centuries changed everything to make it easier to blame the poor woman." Nobody responded to Milena's weird discovery. They didn't know what she was on about.

"Women will have to rewrite the Bible," Barbara joined in.

"They are becoming priests in the Church of England, they might do it too," helped Milena.

"I will stop being a Catholic when Catholics ordain women," said Ivan. If Jesus wanted women as priests he would pick them as apostles."

"I suppose we'll never know if he did until women rewrite the Bible," said Milena.

"There were lots of women following Jesus," said Barbara.

"God made a man to be a head of the family," said Ivan half jokingly.

"And the woman to be a neck turning a man's head around." Milena read that somewhere but she made it sound original.

"A woman has the apple," helped Barbara.

"Women are scared that men will look at other women," said Milan.

"What other women," laughed Ivan, "all women want all men to look at them."

"We appreciate beautiful things," teased Milan.

"Sex is all you men appreciate. You can't even admit it, you blame the woman," said Milena.

"That too," laughed Milan.

"Women start nagging after they get married," said Ivan.

"You marry a sexy girl and she becomes a nag," collaborated Milan.

"What do you call a man who lost 99% of his brain?," asked Milena.

"A widower," laughed Milena but the men just looked at her. The jokes denigrating men were new. People were still laughing at women, at wives and mothers in law, and Jews and Aborigines and Irish. Only feminists laughed at jokes about men.

"Listen to this one," continued Milena. "The pope had a consultation with God. How do you like my administration on earth, Pope asked God. It's running pretty smoothly, but I wanted to ask you about a few things. Seeing that people multiply so much, what do you think about the birth control? asked God. Not while I am pope, said the pope. Seeing that there is a shortage of priests do you think we should allow them to marry, asked God. Not while I am pope, said the pope. Seeing that almost half of marriages break up, do you think we should allow divorce, asked God. Not while I am pope, said the pope. Can I now ask you one question, said the pope. Go ahead, said God. When do you plan to have another Polish pope, asked the pope. Not while I am God, said God."

Only Milena could get away with a cheap shot at the head of Ivan's church. Still he didn't laugh at her punch line because divorce reminded him of his daughter Helena and her divorced lover Richard.

Milan and Milena followed the church tradition in a vague hope that what they were doing will come useful one day. Knowing that they had fulfilled all the church required of them they felt free to joke light-heartedly.

"We went to Medjigorje last year," said Milan. "I bought a kilo of cherries for five hundred dinars fifty kilometres from Medjigorje but a peasant near the Medjigorje church wanted one million for the same kilo of cherries. I asked him if Mary appeared to him but he said: Oh, no, just to children, innocent children. I told him that he would be selling his cherries at half the price if Mary hasn't appear for him."

Ivan was uneasy about Medjigorje jokes but he didn't mind Barbara laughing at Milan's experience. After all, the pope hasn't made a final decision on Medjigorje yet.

"This is not a joke," assisted Milena. "Everything in Medjigorje is very expensive." Ivan laughed because he liked Milena.

Milena's god was sensible, civilised and powerful. He wasn't overly concerned with people's worship and love. He was a creator after all and he created what he needed. He made the universe so he must have known what he was doing. She believed that it was presumptuous to constantly pray for things that may be contrary to his plan. If he wanted to have world peace he would create it. Instead he created conflict. Every living thing pushed ahead at the expense of another living thing.

Barbara could never tell anyone about her uncertain god, she wanted to demystify the myth of the all powerful. To please Ivan, she received regular holy communion but she was afraid to face god in a confessional. Barbara last confessed when she was fourteen. She told the priest then that she was thinking about David, a boy she liked at school.

"Do you ever touch your body," asked the priest.

"When I wash," confessed Barbara.

"Do you look at your body when you think of boys," asked the priest.

Barbara wondered what the priest wanted to know. She began to feel guilty about looking at her face in the mirror and about touching her body. She didn't know how to confess about Renata and about things Karl was doing to her. She wasn't sure if that was a sin or a punishment for looking at her body. She stopped going to confession and left it to God to sort out her sins. It took God almost forty years before he let Barbara forgive herself and become less afraid of him.

Barbara always made herself less, so Ivan could be more in everything they did. She simply didn't know how to be happy unless every member of her family was happy first.

"What silly games we played," she smiled to herself as she enjoyed the solitude of painting in her beloved garden. On their arrival to Australia, Slovenians held on each other like a drowning person holds on straw in the fast flowing waters. Young and lonely they were starved for warmth, intimacy and familiarity. They worked homes like beavers against the stream to create an extension of themselves. Their homes and cars and gardens spoke for them. They also told each other how important they were, how beautiful and clever. Behind

each other's backs they criticised and laughed at each other as well. The love-hate relationships held them afloat until they grew roots into the dry ground.

Barbara mixed the colours to paint the faces of her past but the faces turned into shadows and flowers and clouds because she still couldn't look at the eyes that haunted her. She remembered the pain and the beauty of her growing up and she suddenly realised that she felt grown up for the first time at the age of fifty.

The times they were a-changing fast and Barbara was less afraid every day. As she grew up in the fifties, virginity and femininity were girl's biggest assets to trade for a successful marriage. Barbara felt worthless because her virginity was stolen, she felt that she had nothing to offer. She also felt that Ivan was worthless because he wanted to marry her.

Old women warned girls that men use you and leave you. If you don't let them use you, they marry you. Marriage was the ultimate gift of a man.

The men of Barbara's youth grew up in their businesses, became wiser and more prosperous, they scorned the little woman absorbed with peeling potatoes and washing dirty nappies, they had affairs with secretaries and barmaids and openly lusted for the half naked girls on the beach to tease their wives.

In the sixties women's bodies were gradually uncovered, bikinis became smaller and smaller, skirts shorter, tops more open, older people more shocked. Nothing was allowed to cover imperfections so women had to try harder. Anorexia and bulimia became more wide spread. Women became scared of perfect bodies the men photographed for their magazines.

Men seemed to like women scared, the more imperfect they were made to feel, the more they tried to please and obey. Barbara tried to compete with those other women, she bought cosmetics, she looked in the mirror but she saw only fear in her eyes.

Men were hiding their bodies behind the executive desks, safe in suits and ties and socks and belts while women covered their faces with makeup.

Men relaxed and enjoyed sex while women pretended. Barbara put up with sex whenever Ivan wanted it, so he wouldn't go looking elsewhere. Men still boasted about their sexual needs and about their endless opportunities for sex. It was all right for them to be fat, bold and wrinkled. They could get away with any revolting habit, as long as they weren't worried about it.

Barbara heard Leon sing along with Neil Young: "Old man this is your life, I am a lot like you were." This verse became his favourite line and Barbara wandered how much Leon really was like his old man. Maybe he would have liked to be like Ivan but the times they were a-changing for both of them as well.

Barbara remembered the beginning of the sixties sexual revolution. Teenagers were boasting about going all the way, girls went on the pill, women went to work. Orgasm became a household word. If you didn't experience one there was something wrong. It was a challenge for a man to bring a woman to an orgasm and men hated to fail in their virility. Women learned to fake orgasms to keep their men happy. Men even began to marry women who were eager to have sex and were readily orgasmic. Finally many women became ashamed of saying no to sex. They rushed home from work to prepare meals, bath

the children and clean the house. They brought up their children without disturbing Daddy. Specially Slovenian women and Slovenian Daddies.

“They wanted equality, they wanted jobs, let them have it,” men laughed as they went for drinks after work to give the little woman at home time to do things and kids were made ready to be kissed good night by Daddy.

Barbara felt powerless without the job, without the money of her own, she was reminded often that she ate Ivan’s bread, slept in his house.

In a vague hope to liberate themselves women tried to act like men, they pursued men, invited them out and initiated sex. Often they frightened men. Men increasingly claimed to be homosexuals. Some women turned lesbians because they became frightened to surrender themselves into a marriage. While the women in the front line of the feminist movement perhaps knew what they wanted, the ordinary housewife trying to be modern, groped in the darkness. Women took factory jobs and tried to be perfect homemakers as well.

Barbara remembered now that Milena never made herself less, she was always a person in her own right. That’s why Ivan respected her. Milena never needed liberating, she maintained her authority at all times. She laughed with Robyn about new trends but she followed none.

Barbara did not follow the trends either, she wanted a romance during sexual revolution.

At the close of the sixties Simon and Garfunkel became popular and Barbara sang ‘Like the Bridge over troubled waters’ along with them. She needed to share her troubles then. She saw many women leave their husbands, they claimed that they’d rather be out than in a bad relationship. Barbara could never imagine herself walking out. She had fantasies of Milan wanting her to leave Ivan but she never seriously considered leaving Ivan or living on her own. Other women gradually realised that they could provide for themselves and did not have to serve their husbands.

When Barbara met Paula, things gradually changed. Paula made Barbara believe that she could paint. Paula actually had no idea if Barbara could paint but she persuaded her to go out and have a go.

Barbara talked with Paula about feminism and sexual liberation. Paula said that the Flower power people of the sixties produced promiscuous kids who demanded that an instant sexual fulfilment would translate into an everlasting happiness. In her opinion feminists created false expectations.

“What you yourself can do, will liberate you, not sex,” said Paula.

Twenty years old Helena was still in Sydney then and she came home occasionally for lunch and to shock Ivan and Barbara with her liberated feminist ideas. Unconsciously she sought their approval, she wanted to see how much they changed. When they failed to be shocked Helena was disappointed rather than pleased.

“I can’t understand why you have to wear those high heels all the time, mum,” said Helena. “Why do you keep putting make up on your face every morning, push your body into a corset. Be yourself.”

“But I am myself,” said Barbara, “I wouldn’t be myself in a track-suit and Reeboks.” But she tried the track suit and the Reeboks and they felt good.

Helena announced one evening that she invited Jack out for dinner to thank him for helping her with the project at work. “I would not go with a woman who needed a man so much that she paid for it. A woman’s place is to be asked out,” said Ivan.

“Not any more, Daddy,” said Helena bravely, but you could see that she wasn’t convinced. Her father believed, that sex was the only kind of relationship between male and female.

“Men are looking for sex and women are looking for marriage,” he said. He told Helena about the bucks and the does in the wild, how bucks pursue and court and fight other bucks. It’s only natural,”

“Jack is just a friend,” Helena cut in.

“Men hate being chased by a female. Courting is the nicest thing one can ever experience, all animals do it, only some woman somewhere who was never courted by a man decided that women don’t need that kind of stuff. Look at the birds, the cocks are dancing around the female to see if she is ready for mating.” Barbara and Helena felt uncertain.

“To fall so low to pay for man’s company,” growled Ivan.

“Men pay for women’s company all the time. We earn the same money, why shouldn’t I choose who I go out with.”

“Women claim that they are not interested in men. But I bet no woman wants to be a woman men are not interested in,” said Ivan.

During the late eighties men began uncovering their bodies for women to photograph. Women looked at male models and their husbands started to look at their pot bellies, balding heads, and diminished sexuality.

“Indira Ghandi, Golda Meir and finally Margaret Thatcher began to undress men and liberate women,” said Paula. “They hired and fired men, and people all over the world took notice.”

“Margaret Thatcher said that if you want anything said, you should ask a man but if you want anything done, you should ask a woman,” remembered Barbara.

“Women began to call men: love, gorgeous, hunk, handsome, good looking. A woman addressed as darling would accuse the man of sexual harassment now.” said Paula. “In my time we were sweethearts, honey, love..”

“I don’t mind being called darling,” said Barbara remembering that nobody ever called her darling. Ivan was too conservative and other men wouldn’t dare call his wife anything but her respectful name. Since Barbara followed Paula to arts classes she blossomed and expressed ideas that would frighten her in the past.

Men began to expect women to go to work and contribute to the budget. They also reconciled themselves to becoming sex objects and having their imperfect nakedness examined and evaluated by women. But the exposure made them feel vulnerable and anxious. They didn’t realise that most women were still a little frightened by a naked man in the magazines because the naked men they saw were strong, young and perfect.

Ivan gradually grew smaller and less scary in Barbara's eyes. He never told her that he liked her painting but she heard him telling others how good she was. He prepared the stands for her pictures among the shrubs and trees of a beautifully maintained garden and she felt grateful.

This is an art
 which does mend nature-
 change it rather; but
 The art itself is nature.

Shakespeare

EXHIBITION

In March 1990 Barbara was busy preparing for her first art exhibition in the garden of her beautiful home. Marjan advertised in the Slovenian papers, Marianne put a notice in the church newsletter, Ivan, Leon and Janek invited their friends.

"I wish Helena could be here," thought Barbara, but Helena left home almost ten years ago. She was coming from Perth later in the year for the Christening of Leon's son Johnny.

A cool, sunny Saturday afternoon seemed perfect for Barbara's exhibition. People came to look, express admiration and enjoy the outing. Men stood in circles around the BBQ with Ivan and his sons. They praised the building and the landscaping, they appreciated the fact that they were the privileged guests of one of the richest man in town.

Women sniffed the roses and chatted with Kim and Diana who served hors oeuvres and cocktails. Dressed in flowery little aprons the girls looked like walking blooms. Barbara wanted to make Ivan proud. She knew that many people really came to see the beautiful house he built.

Marjan looked at one of Barbara's pictures and marvelled at the mystery of it.

"You first see one thing and as you keep on looking you see lots of things that are entirely different. There is a little innocent face smack in the middle of the picture but in the shadows of the background are sinister faces and frightful creatures ready to pounce. The eyes of these faces have such knowing look, they open the door to the artist," he said.

Barbara smiled and explained that it was just the background scenery for the face or an object that fascinated her. Most people never looked long enough to notice the pictures in the background anyway. They passed the stands and saw the picture that stood out to greet them, but they didn't search for many twisted details at the back of it.

The faces and flowers on Barbara's pictures were reaching far and beyond into the eternity of the universe. They were the faces of the longing she had no words for. The fainter the colours the stronger were the feelings calling into the grey blue nothingness. Like the music from afar they carried the promise of love. The pictures quietly blended into the background because the colours of the garden were bright and their perfume overwhelming. But the faces of the pictures followed people and reached for their hearts.

"I can almost see a steeple of my church. The pictures take you home if you look at them long enough. They compel you to look behind the clouds and the mountains, said Boris.

Men congratulated Ivan on his home and his wife's little hobby.

"Women don't need us anymore," said Ivan proudly, looking at his wife. Men understood that times were changing and they wondered if the change was good or bad.

Australians openly praised Barbara's work, some were polite, some really liked it. But she felt that Slovenians were trying to discourage her.

"It's a nice hobby but what will you do with the pictures," said Milena, "you have them all over the place. Milan would be mad if I cluttered the house like that."

"The materials must be quite expensive too," said Milan.

"You are lucky that Ivan pays for it," said Milena with a little hidden venom in her voice.

"I suppose you could have a garage sale every so often." There was a slight resentment in Milan's words. He lost his hold over Barbara. The fire in her eyes died and she did not blush any more. They spent their lives close to each other waiting for love to change their lives.

Barbara sensed it long ago that she could only change Milan in her heart. She was sad because Milan and Milena didn't want to come to her exhibition and share in her happiness. Barbara invited them, of course, but they suddenly decided to go to Europe for a holiday. Barbara wanted to impress them but they refused to be impressed by her. For Christmas she chose her favourite painting and gave it to Milena. It was an oil painting of a girl wondering in the forest. Milena put the picture still wrapped under the Christmas tree. Nobody ever mentioned it again. Barbara never saw it hung on the wall. She wanted to ask if they liked it.

"Only Australians buy my pictures," said Barbara to Paula.

"Are you wondering if they are bunging it on," teased Paula.

"What do you mean?"

"You are not sure if they really like them. The way Slovenians ignore them is more reassuring. They are jealous, of course, specially the women. Thelma bought your paintings and she should know. She is one shrewd lady who wouldn't buy rubbish."

"I like your pictures, they are pretty," said Hermina trying to be polite but Joe bought a little painting a long time ago and it was still lying in their garage. Barbara saw it covered with dust every time she went there. She wondered why he didn't hang it somewhere. Was it so bad? Why did he buy it in the first place? Barbara wanted him to have it as a present but he saw the price on it and insisted on paying.

"The flowers look so real," said Vida going from picture to picture looking really close at the texture of the paint.

Marjan wrote in his magazine about Barbara's exhibition, he described Barbara's style, her technique and the depth of the feeling her pictures expressed. He knew her better than she knew herself and she was glad because of it. He used the photographs of her paintings to illustrate his magazine, he also wrote home about her work. Barbara did not tell Ivan about his writing, she did not want to provoke an argument knowing that Ivan and Marjan rarely agreed on anything.

Watching her friends at the exhibition, Barbara realised that all that she was, was what she was in their eyes. Her fragile existence frightened her and she wandered if anyone thought of her before going to sleep at night. Was anyone saying thank you to god for her life. Will anyone be sad when she died?

“Marjan might write in the paper about me,” she smiled at the silly thought.

Since Barbara attended arts classes she became more and more fascinated by the artists. She began to read about their troubled lives and was almost grateful in some ways that she too shared in unhappiness.

She loved Vincent Van Gogh’s Sunflowers. She framed the print of his Irises. “I just love Vincent,” she said lightly to Paula.

“You are an old romantic, of course,” said Paula.

Barbara still could not tell anyone why she loved Vincent. She walked with him through the dark corridors of her past. Vincent felt the pain of little people, he was the hero of the poor and the oppressed. What an irony it was that the rich and powerful now decorated their homes with his paintings. The rich and powerful did not want to know Vincent when he needed them. Wasn’t Christ the same. The rich and powerful built churches in his name after they crucified him. People still crucified the weak. Barbara felt that she was never brave like Vincent who openly rejected the dressed up, pretentious snobs. He liked the real people working in the fields and the mines. He captured onto his canvases people feeling true love and goodness and a true pain.

Barbara became easily dismayed. Maybe her friends only came to the exhibition because Ivan built the swimming pool and the tennis court, because they were rich.

The thought that Vincent shot himself, scared Barbara. His suffering helped her come to terms with her sadness. Afraid to be rejected Barbara never allowed herself to love people. She was still afraid to reveal her ignorance, mistakes in her perception, in her behaviour, speech and actions. She avoided doing things because she was afraid to do the wrong thing and say the wrong words. She did not make decisions because she was afraid of making a wrong decision. The invisible big bad wolf was always peering at her from her subconsciousness, so she watched all people with suspicion. .

“I should’ve lived in the last century. They were all a bit mad,” said Barbara to Paula as she hung a print of Renoir’s Two Girls in a Meadow. People told Barbara that she should buy real paintings but she could not afford what she liked. The prints of the great artists reminded her that they felt as she felt and that it was all right.

The story of Vincent van Gogh helped Barbara to come to terms with the most violent moments of her life. Those events from her dark past were never mentioned in her real life.

A few days before the exhibition Barbara was putting the last touches to the faces of the two little girls lost in the meadow half hidden in the grass and wild-flowers. She wanted to finish the painting for the exhibition.

“Listen to this.” Ivan turned on an old tape-recorder he found in the garage. There were children giggling on the tape and Ivan’s steady voice recited a poem dedicated by some poet to Mummy. The girl’s voice repeated his words until she could say it all with him. Barbara stopped and listened fascinated for a few moments by Helena’s childish voice until it dawned on her when the recording was made..

“Where is mummy,” asked Ivan on the tape.

“Mummy gone,” said a tiny voice. It was Janek.

“What is mummy doing?” asked Ivan.

"Crying," said Janek and Leon squealed.

"Why is she crying?" asked Ivan.

"Don't know," said Janek.

"She wants to stay with us, but they took her away," said Helena in a serious little voice.

Barbara fought back an attack of panic and tears as she clenched her fists on the easel, she held herself from reacting.

"How old would the tape be," asked Ivan. Was he testing her? Was the tape a simple evidence of his good teaching? What did Ivan want to remind her of? He taught his children a poem to recite for mummy when she will return. Both Ivan and Barbara would be too embarrassed to remember the sadness and the gentleness. It was essential to change the subject.

"Helena spoke well," said Barbara evenly looking at her painting.

She could never erase the memory of the day when she woke up in Cooma hospital twenty five years ago. She saw Ivan through the glass door talking to the doctor. He was holding two years old Leon in his arms while Helena and Janek held hands closely huddled to him. The doctor told Ivan that it wouldn't be good for the children to see mummy. Ivan looked at her through the glass door. Mummy was very distressed and her children did see her as she was taken away by ambulance. She was crying and holding her hands to them but the two men in white took her into the ambulance and she didn't come home for many months.

"I'll play it to Janek and Leon, I wonder if they'll recognise themselves," said Ivan. He evidently did not remember, perhaps he was better at rubbing out the painful memories from his mind. Barbara decided that she will erase the recording at the first opportunity.

The recording brought back the pain and the fear of those days long ago. It happened after the abortion. No, it started when she told Ivan that she was pregnant. They had three children under the age of six when Barbara was twenty five. She had no friends or family, she did not understand English, Ivan was her only link with the world and he was never home.

"You are on the pill," he said. "You couldn't be pregnant."

"I was sick in the morning, I know."

"You insisted on the pill, so I would have no say in it. Whose baby is it anyway? With me working all the time, how do I know?"

Both knew that he wanted to hurt her by making her remember Renata.

"I was taking the pill, I don't know how it happened."

"If you left it to me, we would have no baby. I looked after things for years. I don't need another screaming baby in my house at the moment. You know the church does not allow the pill. Now you know why. It wrecks families."

"The doctor put me on the pill after Leon was born. He said that I shouldn't become pregnant again for awhile," tried Barbara.

"Go to him then, maybe he wants a baby." Ivan closed the conversation, laid on the sofa and wouldn't respond to her kisses or her begging. He refused to eat and to talk to the children. She kissed him all over, she tried to force him to come to bed and make love to

her. He always wanted to make love. She promised to obey, never again was she going to go against his wishes but this time he did not respond.

“Do anything to me, but please talk to me, tell me what to do.” He didn’t. Janek kept asking why Daddy didn’t like him, Helena cried, baby Leon tried to crawl into Ivan’s lap but Ivan remained distant.

Ivan and the children went to sleep but Barbara sat outside all night crying. She looked to the starry sky and called god to help her. She begged god to let her have this one more child, she promised that she will work for one more child. She knew that she had no right to have a child Ivan didn’t want and she didn’t want an unwanted child. As the morning dew began to fall she felt enormously sad because she was alone in the world. Ivan never came looking for her, she told him that she will kill herself and he said: go ahead. He had no idea where she spent the night and he did not care. Maybe he wanted her dead.

Barbara found a German woman doing abortions for one hundred pounds. She took the money out of their joint account. She wondered how she will explain to the German woman but no explanations were needed. The stout, red faced woman opened the door and looked her up and down. Helena was at school but Janek and Leon came with Barbara. Their frightened faces did not comprehend the danger they sensed. The woman put the children in another room with some toys while she wrenched the foetus out of Barbara’s stomach.

Barbara never asked how Ivan found out. He came home like a hurricane throwing pots and pans against the wall, he smashed the radio on the floor and he yelled.

“You murdered my baby, you sow, you whore. And I paid for it, you cow. You’ll pay for this, see how you’ll pay for this. We’ll see what your mother says about it, you whore. Don’t ever come near me again, murderess. It’s a pity you did not murder bastard babies before I met you. I wouldn’t be in this shit now.” He slammed the door, the window in the kitchen broke on the impact as he left.

“Murderess, murderess,” Barbara felt the cold breeze coming in through the broken window. She was suddenly sick and she couldn’t stop herself vomiting on the floor. She shuddered as the paralysing pain in her chest tightened until she could barely breathe. She went into the bush behind the house, knelt against the trees and prayed, and cried, and begged but she couldn’t stop the pain. She knew that something was terribly wrong and she called for Ivan.

Children followed her and they crawled into her lap whining. She had to take them home to bed and finally they fell into troubled sleep. Leaning on the window in the dark she listened for Ivan’s footsteps but Ivan didn’t come home after work. Trying to deaden the pain she took the only bottle of alcohol in the house and drank from it until her body relaxed into sleep.

Ivan occasionally poured a drop of rum in his tea but the bottle was empty when he returned and found Barbara drunk on the floor. Children woke up dirty and unfed. He laid on the sofa and cried. Barbara never knew why he cried but in her half consciousness she saw the tears rolling down his face. She tried to embrace him but he pushed her away.

Next morning after Ivan left for work, Barbara suddenly felt a sharp stabbing pain in her stomach. A force inside her pushed out in a convulsion and she vomited before collapsing

on the floor. She couldn't go to the doctor. She knew that abortions were illegal, the doctor would know what she had done, he would send her to jail.

Barbara was terrified of the police since her childhood, she felt that sooner or later they'll catch up with her and punish her. She considered herself lucky that she was still running and she looked back to see if anyone was following.

For the first few years in Australia Barbara carried her Australian passport in her pocket at all times just in case police would choose to interrogate her. Sometimes they'd stop her at home in Ljubljana and ask for identification booklet. Once she was in the shop and the young policemen looked at her, she felt the discomfort and she looked away. He kept looking and she left the shop scared. He followed and asked for identification. She forgot it at home across the road so he took her to the police station to wait for the interrogation. Hours later two policemen entered the room and asked her questions that made no sense to her. They asked about her parents, her brothers, her husband, her job, the size of her shoes and the size of her bra. Barbara wondered why they had to know these things but she did not dare ask. She was relieved when they let her go with the caution that she must always have her identification on her.

Barbara was 19 then. She told Ivan and hoped that he would reassure her, but he was scared. "They are probably after me, they only wanted to scare you, so you'd tell them something." Ivan became restless. He worried more and more about his Swiss account, about the people that paid into it, about the gold and the bribes. Soon after he decided that they should escape. Barbara never stopped being terrified of the police, she still believed that they were after her.

Now for the first time she chose to break the law and have an abortion. Nobody would believe that she would have loved to have a baby and that she was sorry. Barbara begged God to help her but she knew that God wasn't on the side of murderers.

Ivan had a bottle of sleeping pills to help him sleep during the day when he worked nights. Barbara washed and fed her children and took them to bed with her. She took a few aspro's to kill the pain so she could tell the children all the stories her father told her. She talked in her gentle quiet voice until they were sound asleep. She kissed them goodnight. When children were asleep Barbara cried for her own parents, she cried like babies do twisting her body into the foetus position. She needed someone to hold her and take away the pain. She swallowed the sleeping pills slowly one by one.

Barbara woke up in the hospital. They performed a hysterectomy because she had a blood poisoning from abortion. It was impossible for doctors to explain it in any detail because she did not understand English. Many years later she found out what a hysterectomy is.

Ivan came to see her and like a good Catholic he forgave her. They sent her to a mental hospital. Barbara knew that suicide was a criminal offence, she accepted that she had to be punished. Sick in every corner of her soul she cried for her mother, for her children, she cried every day. She was considered suicidal and had to stay. She cried to see her children but they had to make her better first. She would be more cheerful knowing that she could see her children but nobody told her that. It would have helped if she understood English, they might have been able to explain. It wasn't their fault that she was ignorant. Barbara cried because she had no words to tell the doctor that she felt sad, lonely and guilty. "I am no good," she said, "I want to be dead because I am no good." The doctor was afraid that he

would be blamed if she committed a suicide, so he decided to keep her longer. He had no words to communicate to her that it was OK to feel sad and hurt and scared because she had a bad experience. Barbara wasn't even looking at him, she had no understanding of what he wanted to tell her. The safest thing was to keep her in.

The doctor pointed Rorschach ink blot cards at her trying to gather some evidence about the state of mind she was in. Barbara guessed that they tested her, that she was supposed to know what the picture was, that she failed the test because all she could see was symmetrical ink-blot on the white background. She tried to be clever and guess the right answer. She was convinced that there was the right answer which they knew and she didn't. Why was it so important to know what the picture was? She was scared to guess wrongly and they didn't know how to interpret her silence. Seeing their frustration, she tried to please and respond. They forgot that she could not even say what she imagined seeing because she could only speak a few words of English. The pictures they showed her were meaningless and she hardly understood any of the questions. They kept her in, just in case, for her own good, sedated until she settled down.

Left to herself for the first time Barbara wailed like a baby. The emptiness inside her and the loneliness, the experience of death and the murder of her baby, it all poured out in the flood of tears. She cried for her baby and for her own childhood, she cried out for love and protection, for all her poor babies left without the mother, for her dreams and freedom. The nurse placed two pink tablets in her hand while she talked to the doctor. Barbara obediently swallowed them and the doctor and the nurse left, their duty done.

A young girl with blond pony tail then sat on the wooden bench next to Barbara and put her hand on Barbara's hair. Barbara surrendered into the girl's lap and sobbed uncontrollably. The girl's own tears were splashing on Barbara's neck until she too bent her head and the tears of the two sipped through their fingers. Lea helped Barbara more than the doctor because she stroked her hair and patted her back until the tranquillisers took over. Barbara looked up and thanked the girl with a weak smile before she was taken to bed.

Hours later she returned and looked out for the girl. With hands extended they came together and the girl said: "Lea," pointing to herself and Barbara introduced herself. Barbara eagerly learned words from Lea because she kept on talking all the time. They often cried huddled together, the two grieving, mad mothers understanding each other's pain. Clinging to each other the two frightened little girls who ran away from life, cried for their babies and for themselves. When their tears dried, they smiled and later sometimes giggled holding hands as Barbara learned to speak English. Lea became Barbara's first friend in Australia. She met other friends in the mental hospital, friendly patients taught her English, they told her their sad stories and hearing them Barbara felt less sad about her life. Lea tried to kill herself because her baby drowned in the bath while she left her to answer the phone. Lea cried a lot talking about her only dead child and about her husband who never came to see her because he blamed her for the death of their child.

Lea patiently taught Barbara to put into words and sentences the events that brought her to the hospital. When Ivan came to take her home, Barbara said goodbye to her new friends and promised to visit. But she was afraid to go back, to ever mention the hospital again, she wanted to forget that she suffered from madness. She never forgot her friend Lea although she never saw her again. Lea gave her something and she felt that she should give her something back. Maybe Lea understood. Barbara hoped that one day they could meet and

become real true friends in the free outside world. Yet she was afraid of meeting Lea because she also carried the memories Barbara didn't want to remember.

When Barbara packed to go home a nurse said to her: "You'll be back. They all come back, sooner or later." Barbara never forgot those words. She lived never to go back. Madness frightened her. Ivan never mentioned the baby or the hospital again, maybe he was afraid or ashamed of the memory as well. He wanted to leave Cooma, he sold the motel and they left for Sydney. As far as possible, thought Barbara. She could only share her shameful secrets with Vincent van Gogh who was also mad. The prediction of the nurse in the mental hospital gradually became less scary.

At the age of fifty Barbara learned all about the menopause. Her friends talked about it often, they did not know that she had hers twenty-five years ago. The doctors didn't even try to explain then. Barbara wondered if perhaps they were shy talking about women's things. Maybe they didn't bother? Maybe they wanted to spare her the anxiety because she didn't speak English. She cried a lot in the years after her menopause and crying scared her. If they only explained that it was normal to feel as she felt. It could have changed her life. She remembered how annoyed Ivan was with her crying so she cried alone. She was afraid that they would find her crying and would send her back to the mad house. Milan once mentioned that his cousin had gone mad. "She cried all the time before she committed suicide," he said. Barbara shuddered and became careful not to let Milan find out about her crying.

She opened the windows when everybody felt cold but she didn't know why she felt hot. Even her children told Barbara that there was nothing to cry about. She tried to be happy but the tears just ran down her face.

Barbara's friends laughed about their tearfulness and hot flushes and vaginal jelly. They were going together through a friendly menopause and Barbara laughed with them.

Barbara tried to adjust to her past. Never slim in the way the new generation wants to be slim, she was never fat either. There was a ripe softness in her body, a fullness in the right places as she approached the comfortable fifties without colourful cosmetics. More contented than ever, she did not try to buy back her unhappy youth. "I wish I was in love with Ivan," she thought sometimes. Barbara never dreamed of him kissing her, making love to her, she never made up words for him to say to her. They just grew together as she followed him. If Ivan asked her what she wanted to do she wouldn't know. She never argued with him or made demands, she protected herself with kind words and obedience because she wanted to be loved. She painted pictures of herself but people saw only flowers, the facade she built around her feelings like a fortress. She travelled incognito behind the flowers of her pictures, behind her words and actions?"

Ivan couldn't deal with Barbara's unhappiness after she came home from the hospital. "Nothing I do is good enough for you," he complained. "What do you want from me? You wrecked my whole life.

Barbara looked at Van Gogh painting of the wheat field. The shadow of the crows over the yellow gold reminded her of the shadows over her life. The evil looking crows were the last thing Vincent painted before he shot himself. He was afraid of bravery, of cruelty, neglect, rejection and of the fear itself.

Barbara's flowers reached into the whiteness of the sky with their pale wet faces. They looked like children playing far beyond the fear and sadness.

People talked about Barbara's pictures like wine buffs talk about wine. Some used mysterious words Barbara didn't understand. They described what they saw with the words they had, they alone knew what the words meant to them. Barbara's sunsets were glorious fires under the clouds turning pink and purple, black and almost green. She fell in love with Australian sunsets in her first lonely years. With her three little children she tried to find the faces of friends in the bales of pink and grey clouds as they sat on top of the hill waiting for daddy. Children sometimes found God looking down from the sky. It is easier for children to believe in magic.

The artists from Slovenia invited Barbara to exhibit at home. They offered to provide the place and publicity. Marjan explained that the invitation was a great honour and she should accept.

"Should I," she asked Ivan.

"It's too much trouble to carry the canvases," said Ivan. "Even if you sell something, their money is worthless." Barbara didn't even think about money.

"Australian critics like your work," said Paula.

"It doesn't cost them to be polite," said Ivan. "Critics are not buyers." Money was the only measure of success and everybody knew the value of Ivan's success. Maybe they only came to see Ivan's home on the hill.

"I am glad you introduced me to painting. You showed me what I can do, what I can be. It means a lot to me," said Barbara to Paula.

"You had it in you, you are full of pretty pictures. What was it Joe said: These pictures are just like Barbara, wild and gentle."

"He probably had too much to drink," said Barbara blushing.

"He looked quite sober to me. Why would he think of you as wild?"

"No idea."

"He likes you. He is a good looking man too."

"Are you teasing me?"

"Yes."

"Joe is just a friend."

"He will never disappoint you then."

Barbara thought how easy it was to like Joe because he was always on her side.

"Where is Milan?"

"Somewhere in the Mediterranean, I guess."

"Aren't they sending post cards?"

"They're moving all the time."

"Joe stopped drinking since Milan left."

"I wonder why."

"I think you know," said Paula.

"I think Joe feels neglected because Ivan spends all his spare time with Milan and Milena. Joe used to be almost family in the olden days. Joe likes Ivan," Barbara hurried to explain.

"Joe knows that you are not in love with Milan anymore."

"We are just friends," smiled Barbara embarrassed and happy knowing that Joe liked her. Maybe he alone thought about her in the lonely evenings.

"I don't even like Milan," laughed Barbara. She realised long ago that Milan wanted to be popular and please all women. He could not be committed and she did not need his commitment any more. But deep down Barbara felt the sad emptiness because Milan and Milena left. She wanted to share her big day with them, their recognition meant everything to her. Ivan also missed them, his only friends weren't here and he had no-one to be intimate with.

Barbara thought that perhaps people bought her pictures for decorations and to be kind to Ivan. They thought that the pictures were pretty. Nobody knew that these were the sad pictures of loneliness and longing. Did Milan see the longing in her pictures and he ran away from it? Did he want to hurt her? Did he ever love her in any imperfect way at all? Was he remembering her on his travels? Barbara was grieving for him like she grieved for her children when they left home. Why was she still searching for his face? She didn't want him to touch her, he wasn't even her friend. But she remembered how they both wanted what the other couldn't give. Both felt cheated and hoped that one day the other would change and be what the other wanted. The strings of their attachment were stretched to the limit. They stopped looking in each other's eyes long ago but both only felt complete if the other was there. Milan resented Barbara's painting because it took her away from him. He took Milena on a holiday to punish Barbara.

"There is only Ivan, he stays with me, he will never leave me. We know each other. We don't speak about it but we know that we only have each other."

"We lead complicated lives, don't we," said Paula. "Life is easier if you remember that you are just like a kangaroo hopping along until you get hit by a car or something. You surely are just as dead. I believe in hopping along as long as I can."

The best cure for restlessness for far places
is to go there and find them full of people
who would like to get back home again.

Sophie Swetchine

THE WATERS UNDER THE BRIDGE

Since they decided to go home Ivan and Barbara followed the political developments in Europe and in sharing the news they became more intimate. Their views assimilated with years and they believed that they reached an understanding.

During 1990 they often met with Linden Slovenians. The world was changing rapidly and they had to see the changes from each others' perspective because the new world developments profoundly affected Slovenian future. They had to hear themselves say things they were thinking and have them contradicted in order to see them more clearly.

Ivan was grateful to Australia because it gave him a sanctuary from which he could fight oppression and injustices of the system he escaped from. As the communism collapsed in 1990 his fighting suddenly lost its appeal. Everything lost the gloss of youth and he could not put into words the banality of it all.

"People are growing restless," observed Mitja as they sat at Kristina's table in August 1990..

"Fed up with good life, they no longer know what to wish for," echoed Boris.

"Equality and freedom, people are always fighting for equality and freedom. The fools don't realise that equality is impossible to achieve and unnatural to have. As for freedom, if men were to have freedom they'd kill each other for it," said Milan.

"The world seems hungry for war," said Ivan. "When Jews are in trouble it usually means war."

"Polls conducted in Germany show that many approve of Hitler and blame Jews," said Milan. "While the system allows Jews to get so rich, there is always room for another Hitler."

"Germans blame Jews when they can't fart loud enough," said Marjan.

"West Germans don't even like East Germans let alone foreigners," said Joe.

"Slovenians are trying to get rid of foreigners. Hungarians are running home, so are Serbs and Croats," reminded Marjan.

"Not enough of them," said Milan.

"Shouldn't we love our neighbour? Slovenia will always be on the edge of Balkan," said Marjan looking at Ivan for support.

"We have been under Catholic Western influence for centuries. Slavs we are led by orthodox East," said Ivan uncertain about his convictions.

"Jews are returning to Israel because they feel the growing anti-Semitism," said Mitja.

"They will also have to live with their neighbours. They can't afford to be hostile," predicted Boris.

“They always cope, they invented suffering, because suffering makes them rich,” said Milan ever ready to spread the anti Jewish sentiment.

“People blame Jews because Jews are better at getting rich,” laughed Marjan.

“Marx was a Jew, remember that millions died because of him,” said Milan.

“People who never studied Marx are his greatest critics. Marx did not kill anyone. Hitler had millions killed. Stalin had millions killed. Khrushchev, an Ukrainian, had millions of Ukrainians starve to death because they rebelled against Stalin. Neither of them was a Jew,” said Marjan.

“I suppose you studied Marx well in your communist school,” mocked Milan.

“I studied him enough to realise that what the poor had to endure in his lifetime, should make any just person want to change the system,” said Marjan.

“People who own nothing have no power. That’s why communists banned private property,” said Milan.

“Marx didn’t invent misery, the proletariat of his time had nothing to lose but their chains.” Marjan was fascinated by Marx, who failed to provide for his family yet changed the course of history. People condemned him because he failed to deliver the promised perfection of Utopia. Economic equality did not make people good or equal.

The lessons of Catechism and Marxism still echoed from Marjan’s childhood but the older he got the less sure he was that any lessons he learned provided the answers to the questions of life and death that came with the loneliness in the quiet of the night. He wanted to understand the workings of the mind and heart, he wondered how he could enjoy life and stop wanting to understand it? But he couldn’t tell himself to be happy or will himself to understand. Marjan wanted to find the answers in Marx.

Marx professed that the conflict, the force of the opposites, created life. To sustain the energy for this force all living things had to die and become the food for the new energy. Maybe there was nothing good or bad, no death or after life, just the continuation of the struggle. Maybe there were just the forces from the centre competing with those pulling apart. Maybe Marx and Lucifer and God were just the names people invented for what they failed to understand within themselves.

The men never even put into words the fears and ideas they pondered for themselves.

Leaders of humanity tried to find a prescription for happiness. Marx offered the Utopia of economic equality. God promised the rewards in the afterlife for putting up with the imperfections of this life. Slovenian Marxist and Christians became confused by the uncertainty of it all. They earned the equality they came here to earn but happiness remained where it always was, just one step ahead. Did it really matter if they changed anything since those that changed the world made so many mistakes.

Neither of them studied Marxism but they saw the greed and incompetence of Marxist leaders. They lived within the oppression and they experienced the abuse of the power by those that Marxism put in authority.

They escaped and capitalism fulfilled all their dreams of prosperity. They bought the things they needed but they failed to feel satisfied. They were waiting for the recognition and

rewards. They wondered how their children, the future generation, will judge the fruits of their labour.

“Marx banned religion, because he wanted to be God. He said that neither parents nor governments should have any authority, he wanted the lot,” reasoned Milan.

“We can certainly thank him for the anarchy of this generation,” helped Ivan.

“Marx wanted an ideal world for all,” said Marjan.

“So did Christ,” said Ivan.

“He wanted to unite people and make them share,” tried Marjan.

“What else is new? He made us share all right. He made us share what we worked for with those that don’t like working. I don’t like working,” said Ivan.

“His most famous words were: ‘From everybody according to his ability to everybody according to his needs.’ He forgot that unless people are paid according to their ability they will never work to their capacity,” said Milan.

“They will if they believe in common good. It’s all a matter of education,” said Marjan.

“In that case what is wrong with Christianity?” asked Ivan rhetorically.

“Don’t blame communism for human greed,” said Marjan.

“People will always want to own things, they will only act responsibly towards the things they own. They have the right to own things,” said Milan.

“I read about the Pilgrim fathers who emigrated to America,” said Ivan. “As good Christians they wanted to share their labour and the fruits of their labour equally long before Marx invented Communism. They almost starved. When the wise elders allocated each family a bag of corn and a piece of land they prospered. People simply push themselves harder than they would let anybody else push them. Maybe greed is the force that makes us survive.”

“Same happened after Russian communist revolution. They banned private property and money as the symbols of the rotten capitalism and soon people were dying of starvation. Millions died before Lenin reintroduced money and private property to save the nation,” said Milan.

“We have more justice, democracy, freedom and equality than ever before because the idealists in the past dared to try and improve the system,” said Marjan.

“It is unnatural for people to share. People are cruel and greedy. After Lenin, Stalin again tried to make them equal by taking away their land. More millions died of starvation. But Stalin never wanted to share, he kept killing his rivals,” said Milan.

“If Christians could not make it work with god’s help, how could the communists,” said Ivan.

“Does it matter how? Sometimes the end justifies the means,” said Marjan.

“It didn’t matter to Stalin or Tito if Slovenians perished as long as communism won,” said Ivan.

“Communists in Slovenia became born again democrats. They bought the best means of production because they knew that they needed them in order to exercise power,” said Milan.

“They bought the means of production at the nominal price and then they legalised the return of the national property. They decreed that whatever was in private hands was not a subject of denationalisation,” helped Ivan.

“You never own things, things own you.” Marjan strived for the recognition of his ideas rather than for tangible rewards but he realised that ideas also changed and become superseded in their everlasting rejuvenation.

“Einstein said: ‘If my theory of relativity is proven successful, Germany will claim me as German and France will declare that I am the citizen of the world. Should my theory prove untrue, France will say that I am German and Germany will declare that I am a Jew.’ The same goes for Marx or anybody else, people worship you while you are up and denounce you when you fall. Jews are blamed for being too clever, too stupid, they are called atheists and religious fanatics, they are accused of inter-marrying and of being homosexuals. People simply need to blame someone else for their imperfections,” said Marjan.

“If Gorbachov lets the Baltic countries go that’ll be the end of Soviet union and Yugoslavia.” Mitja travelled where his own thoughts took him.

“Russians grew used to power, I don’t think they could exist on their own. They have too many politicians to feed,” said Boris.

“The American president said that in The New World Order no big nation will attack a smaller one,” said Milan.

“I will believe it when I see it,” said Mitja.

“You can’t throw away half a century of communist indoctrination like an old coat,” Ivan still argued with Marjan. “You can’t help being what they made you be.”

“We are all changing all the time, whether we like it or not,” said Marjan.

“Some people change quickly to fit any government,” laughed Milan looking at Marjan.

“They appointed you to represent us,” Ivan suddenly raised his voice. “What have you ever done for Slovenia? You never lifted a finger for the good of our people here or at home. Only, like them, you change quickly.”

“They hand-picked their collaborators, they know who could be bought and what the price is. They picked you because a few naive, innocent people believe that you are bringing the goodwill of democratic Slovenia,” said Milan.

“I have better things to do than to argue with you,” said Marjan condescendingly and left. Distant ideas about good and evil were always a safe topic but too often they touched on the personal integrity and the feelings changed.

“You don’t want to be reminded that you were communists,” called Ivan after him.

“For the record I was never a communist,” said Marjan.

“Like communist leaders were never proletariat. They were a group of intellectuals like you who exploited the ideas of equality, freedom and democracy. They wanted to sell this idea to the poor and the oppressed. They sent the poor and the oppressed to fight for the idea that made the leaders free and prosperous. They never counted the victims of their revolution because the victims were always poor and oppressed anyway.” Ivan enjoyed baiting Marjan.

“You see everything as black and white even when the rest of the world recognised Tito’s war as the only legitimate resistance to Hitler,” mocked Marjan.

“Forget the world, the world doesn’t care if we live or die. Tito’s partisans didn’t care that hundred of Slovenians were killed in retaliation for isolated killings of German soldiers. Whole villages have been destroyed. We simply could not afford those losses,” yelled Ivan..

“You never give credit to people who tried to improve the system. Anyway, I have to go,” Marjan waved a smiling goodbye and his voice was condescending. He left with a sense of triumph because he managed to cut Ivan’s further arguments. They had no hope of changing each other but both hoped to influence those that listened to their arguments.

“They live on ideas because they can’t make things work,” said Milan after Marjan left..

“We collect money for Slovenia and they pay for Marjan’s holidays with it. They elected him to help organise Slovenian World Congress,” roared Ivan after Marjan left. Others were getting tired of Ivan’s warnings and Marjan was emerging as a new hero who worked for the newly born democracy. Ivan became aware that his star was descending and Marjan prepared for the leadership.

Barbara remembered a story from Helena’s school book about the eagle that was hatched with the chickens. The young eagle was told that he was a chicken so he never learned to fly. But when someone pointed up his real brothers to him and told him what he could do, he soared into the clouds.”

“Maybe Marjan needed someone to point him in the right direction,” said Barbara now.

“Why don’t they pick someone who already knows his direction,” said Ivan.

“They are not real communists, they just used communism. Much like SS men in Nazi Germany. Those who planned to assassinate Hitler saluted him the most,” said Milan.

“Factory directors will buy the property they nationalised after the war. They are the only ones with the money stashed in Swiss banks. Serbian directors will buy the factories and Slovenian proletariat will crawl to them for jobs. This is our sweet democratic victory. It won’t be long and they will again speak Serbian,” said Milan. Ivan and Milan never failed to support each other publicly, they made each other strong and this made their friendship so important.

They needed to air their views but by mutual consent they tried to refrain from attacks on each other’s character and they left their families out of the argument.

Alone, Barbara and Ivan also began to remember intimate moments from their youth. They remembered only what was safe to remember.

“I remember my first political lesson,” said Barbara. “In 1946 I went with my father to a pre-election meeting. Rajko, my brother’s revolutionary friend organised the meeting. Rajko returned from Leningrad communist school soon after Franc. His mission was to lead the villagers into the socialist future and he was most enthusiastic about it. The farmers, uncertain about the new democratic processes, were choosing the candidates to represent them in the new parliament. Everybody was seriously nominating good people around them. Concerns were voiced that perhaps some would not be able to attend the meetings because they had no bicycle or were busy on the farm. Rajko told them not to worry about that too much because the party has already chosen who will represent them.”

“We only need people’s names on the ballot paper,” said Rajko. Older men realised that Rajko wasn’t supposed to say this but he was only twenty and he did not know it. Some felt sorry for him and others even became fearful for his future. The men would have laughed at Rajko but he had a government uniform on and they did not dare laugh at the government. Barbara was sitting in her father’s lap but she distinctly remembered the feeling of apprehension among men who didn’t dare challenge Rajko or even discuss among themselves the frightening changes coming to them.

“A policeman stood silently next to the black ballot box so nobody dared to cast the vote against the government,” remembered Ivan. “The early voters received a half kilogram of sugar as a reward. I looked at the triangular bags they carried with envy but my father never brought one home. I wished we could have sweet coffee like other families but we had to rely on the sugarine smuggled from Italy.”

The government announced by lunch time that 98 percent of voters voted for the government. Barbara believed that her parents and people like them made the other 2%. It was terrible to be one of such small minority. They learned at school that Tito was their greatest teacher but her parents whispered that he was murderer. Barbara vaguely understood that something was wrong with her family. She never even dared think that something was wrong with the government.

Her teacher, a young girl full of revolutionary zeal, told the students that in communist society everybody will own everything, private property and money will be no more and nobody will be poor ever again. Her teacher promised that communism will come after the first five year plan, but after the first five years came the next five years and the next. Communism came but only for those at the top.

Barbara told Ivan about Magda who went to the city to become a doctor. She returned home soon after in a black limousine with a dashing young husband. The villagers came to look at the car and they heard the man and Magda speak Serbian.. They shook hands and greeted the man in Serbo-Croatian language before they moved away disappointed and sad. This director married their prettiest girl in a registry office and made her speak a foreign language with her own people in her own village. Nobody smiled or hugged Magda and Barbara remembered the coldness of that meeting.

Slovenian boys had to serve army down in the Southern republics and soldiers from other republics came to Slovenia. Communists wanted to assimilate and mix the Balkan nationalities so the people would forget that they ever had a nationality. People obeyed but they never forgot.

Slovenian villagers despised the soldiers speaking Serbo-Croatian language. They had ugly uniforms and no girl wanted to be seen with the boy from the South. Some peasant girls married the elegantly dressed officers in the civil ceremonies but even they lost the respect of the villagers. They’ve done the revolutionary thing, they’ve done what was expected from them, they bore little Yugoslavs for Tito, yet they knew that something wasn’t quite right.

The villagers were still reciting rosaries every evening on their knees while these foreign officers served communists. God wasn’t in the new marriages but he was lurking in the hearts of village girls and they were ashamed of themselves and of their offspring.

“My father always said that Serbs pushed their language and religion to make us obey their rules,” said Barbara.

“Young Serb officer from nearby army barracks came to visit our neighbour Janez,” told Ivan. “Janez brought wine and sausages on the table to serve to the officer. He wasn’t happy about the officer courting his daughter Mimi because he knew that other villagers despised soldiers from other republics. But he felt that he owed the officer hospitality. Janez told the officer how good Serbs were to his family when they were transported to Serbia by Germans during the war. Germans loaded thousands of them on the cattle trucks and dumped them in Serbia. People welcomed them in their homes. Six of Janez’ family shared a small house with a Serbian family and Janez never forgot that. Serbian women took care of the kids like they’d belonged to them. Janez became emotional, remembering how they found friends among those strangers who were themselves poor and frightened.

“They shared their homes and their food. Croats helped Hitler, they would let us starve. I don’t like Croats,” concluded Janez.

“Don’t ever say that again, we are all brothers now,” said the officer very quietly. They took no notice of Ivan but even he knew that the message was important. Neither Janez nor Ivan knew why it was so, maybe even the young officer didn’t know but they all knew that it was so. They all realised that what Janez said was dangerous.

Later on Ivan found out how Croats aided by Germans killed and deported Serbs and how Serbs paid them back after the war. None of that was in the Yugoslav history books, of course. The history was written by communists and it was written to glorify the unity and brotherhood of Yugoslav nations. The historians were directed to rub out the unpleasant deeds of the war time and shine a beacon for the future. The horrific deeds of the past had to be erased and nobody could ever reason out the reasons for the hatred between the Serbs and Croats. Nobody ever spelled out why they hated each other so much that they could not even talk about it

“I read that Croatian Ustashi killed hundreds of thousands of Serbs during the war,” said Barbara.

“Serbs paid them back after the Communist victory, just before they announced the birth of Yugoslav brotherhood. They hoped that people will forget as they built a glorious future,” Ivan could see things more clearly every day.

“But the old people remembered and they told their children and the war never really ended,” said Barbara.

“The government promoted brotherhood because the leaders knew that people who remembered their dead were silently preparing for revenge. They sent Serbs to Slovenia and Croatia and they dispersed Slovenians and Croatians among the Southern republics to unify and assimilate the nations,” continued Ivan.

“Maybe Tito believed that brotherhood would save Yugoslavia. Maybe if communism lasted another generation the eye-witnesses would die and people would forget. I remember how we chanted in kindergarten: brotherhood and unity, Tito, party,” said Barbara.

“But Tito knew that the hatred was alive and well even while he was dying. Of Croatian father and Slovenian mother he was a Yugoslav. He wanted people to intermarry and

become Yugoslavs like him, the children of mixed marriages would have no choice but call themselves Yugoslavs," said Ivan.

"They put women to work on the roads, railways and factories so the children could be brought up in the new communist faith, away from the influence of their superstitious feuding parents," agreed Barbara.

"Many disappeared after the war, especially men. People were afraid to mention anyone who disappeared" said Ivan.

Barbara still did not dare mention her father's disappearance.

"In 1948 my father was drunk one day in the hotel and he yelled: Long live Stalin. He hasn't yet heard that Tito broke up with Stalin. They locked dad up for three months," said Ivan. "In the meantime they came to take our piglets but mum wouldn't let them. She stood on the doorstep of the pigsty and wasn't going to budge."

"We know about you," said the man from the shire, "you sympathise with Russians."

"Russians liberated us from everything," said mum.

"We could send you to Siberia for this," said the young man not quite sure what mum meant or if people were still sent to Siberia.

"I still don't know what mum meant," said Ivan, "but she stood her ground and the young officers didn't know what to do. At that moment I remember the sow pushed between mum's legs and took her piglets out defiantly almost knocking the government men over. Mum wielded a stick and yelled: pigs, pigs. The boys in the uniforms didn't know what hit them."

Barbara noticed that the memory of his parents made Ivan sad so she tried to change the subject.

"Remember that time when we went fishing in Soca. I almost drowned." Both knew the hour and the place.

"Soca looked knee high, brilliantly clear, you could see every smooth white pebble in it. But as I stepped in it I realised that it was over my head, icy cold and fast," said Barbara.

"You could've drowned if I hadn't pulled you out," said Ivan. "Remember how we sat on the hanging bridge stretched over the gorge."

"I called out to you to show you the fish," said Barbara, "There was an enormous trout resting in the deep. She hadn't yet seen the giants underneath, the ones Ivan was looking at. When those giants stirred her fish just scattered. Those giants were bigger than people."

"It is always like that," said Ivan thoughtfully. "A giant sleeps and when he stirs, the little fish scatter."

"You used to say that those giants had university degrees in dodging spinners."

"Big fish learns to stay alive," said Ivan.

"But they only have one lifetime," said Barbara.

"They multiply," said Ivan, "there will be new giants waiting for us in Soca now. Only we will not know that they are new because they learned from their parents how to survive."

"You will try to catch them again," said Barbara.

“The silly ones will always be caught by someone,” smiled Ivan.

Lowliness is young ambition's ladder,
 Where to the climber-upward turns his face;
 But when he once attains the upmost round,
 he then unto the ladder turns his back, looks in the clouds, scorning the base degrees by
 which he did ascend.

Shakespeare.

Franc

"I'd like to move back home when I retire," said Barbara's brother Franc to his wife Jana. The imminent retirement frightened Franc, he would lose the post for which he struggled and compromised all his life. The post offered him respect and a little power. Friends in high places recognised his name and those in low places were in awe of his title. Going home where he once was a nobody might be the least threatening prospect for the retirement. In a little village he could live an unobtrusive existence as he ceased to be a judge. He could remember his childhood without anyone knowing his thoughts

"You want to find your roots," teased his wife Jana. Jana has also retired. She was a marriage counsellor and in the course of her job she met so many mismatched, unfortunate people. She became grateful for her own untroubled family.

"I suppose so." Franc wanted to find the essence of what he was before he became a revolutionary and a hero and later a judge. He wanted to find out where he came from. Fishing in his beloved mountain streams offered endless solitary hours for him to look at his life. Memories were all around him and like photographs in the picture albums he slotted the images of the past where they belonged.

Franc wanted to have another look at his four years older brother Emil whom he remembered as an idolised goody goody of the village. Emil was a leader of the sport's group called Young Eagles. People wanted their kids to be in Emil's company, they used Emil as an example for their kids. Quiet and friendly, Emil seemed to be a leader without ever trying to lead.

The church recommended Emil for a scholarship in the city's gymnasium because the priest wanted Emil to learn Latin. It was generally understood that Emil would eventually become a priest. People actually lowered their voices in Emil's presence even when he was only eighteen.

Franc could never wash away the taste of bitter resentment towards his older brother and the quilt was still lingering deep within him. The war started a few days after Emil's eighteen's birthday. Germans occupied Slovenia and transported many eminent Slovenians to German concentration camps to destabilise the nation. Slovenian clergy and intelligentsia had to be removed because they represented the source of Slovenian culture.

Patriotism and heroism burnt in the hearts of young men. They had to protect their home and country against the brutal invader. The boys feverishly joined into groups to protect their families. Franc felt an overwhelming sense of fear, excitement. He met with friends in the forest and eager young boys told other brave youngsters that bad Germans and Italians attacked their homeland. It was the boy's duty to defend it and many were instantly ready for war. They also promised each other to take from the rich after the war in order to have

a perfectly just society. Most boys came from the poor families and the promise brought hope into their hearts. Gradually the idea united them and they realised that their main enemy were their own rich people.

Some heard whispers about the bad Bolshevik communists trying to invade their homeland as well, but Bolsheviks were fighting against the invading Germans, so it was all right.

Soviet Union used the war to bring about the communist revolution in Slovenia. Their aim was the after war power over the Mediterranean and the countries around it.

Young Slovenians were caught in the cross fire between Germany and Soviet union but they knew little about the global political manoeuvring.

Emil became one of the first volunteer Village guards. Franc knew little about the activities of small isolated groups who helped maintain the law and order in their village during the first two years of the war. The leaders of Village Guards said that open resistance against German invaders was suicidal for Slovenians. What chance had a nation of one million people against the mighty German army? They had to save Slovenian lives and they advised passive resistance and partial co-operation with the occupier. The Village Guards became an organised anti-Communist force in 1943 under the name Belogardists (White Guard). They became known as traitors and Nazi collaborators.

Some Slovenians called for open combat with the Germans. To them their goal justified the loss of lives. They attacked isolated German soldiers and provoked terrible retaliations. The villagers were horrified and many boys left home to join the forest fighters. Gradually they became known as partisans and their leaders became known as communists.

The Red Army ordered partisans to kill anti-Communist Belogardists because they co-operated with Germans. Belo (white) became the colour of shame. All the different forms of the word white denigrated those that were against communism because being against the communism in that crucial time meant being on the same side as Hitler. They were against Stalin's communism when Stalin was an ally of the West.

One side followed Stalin and the other Hitler. Franc wandered now in 1990 who were the real traitors. Both put their lives on the line for their homeland.

Franc was ashamed then of Emil's resistance. Franc realised now how words like: old, loser, hungry, poor and weak, stigmatised a person. Emil lost the war. Franc was the winner. Red was in, white was out in those days. In the nineties, red was on the way out and white was coming in.

The name White Guard came from Russia where it was given to Mensheviks by victorious Bolsheviks. The one thing that White Guards in Russia and Slovenian Belogardists had in common was that they both resisted bloody red revolution.

Hitler and Mussolini carved up and shared the occupied Slovenia in 1941 like they occupied many bigger and mightier nations. Slovenians had neither the organised army nor the arms to offer resistance to the mighty German army that already occupied most of Europe. The occupation was almost routine for a few months until Hitler attacked Russia. Betrayed by

his friend Hitler, Stalin ordered the communist revolution in Slovenia and ordered the removal of those who resisted Stalinisation of Slovenia.

Franc saw it now from a different perspective. Slovenians have always leaned on Germany and Serbs always leaned on Russia. Even now Serbs counted on Russia to keep Yugoslavia together and Slovenians counted on Germany to help them become independent. They even began to count their wealth in German mark. Nothing changed. Was all the killing in vain?

At the beginning of the war many Slovenians have been attracted by Hitler's extreme anti-communism. Some Slovenian leaders even believed that with Hitler's aide Slovenia could eventually gain independence. But how could anyone collaborate with Hitler after 1943 when the whole world knew what he was doing and that he was losing the war?

Did they believe that the evil of communism was greater than the evil of Hitler? Was it? Hitler killed millions because he wanted to conquer the world. Stalin, Tito's mentor and patron, killed millions of his own to stay in power. Franc realised that his leader, Tito, also killed his opposition after the war. Emil was Tito's opposition.

Franc wandered what Emil knew and believed. He was killed as a traitor after the war. Maybe he just followed those he believed in, what else does an eighteen years old boy do? Maybe he had no choice.

Franc began to question the right and wrong of it all. He wanted to talk to Barbara and Ivan now, he needed someone to show him the other side of the coin. He remembered the summer of 1943 and the day he ran away to defend the country. He felt the patriotism and bravery burning in his heart as he went to war for freedom and justice at the age of sixteen. He was also tremendously jealous of his older brother Emil, who, in his parents' eyes, was already a hero.

Franc began his apprenticeship with the local carpenter a few weeks before the war started. On his sixteenth birthday he left home to go to a ten o'clock mass. Only, unbeknown to his parents, he stopped going to mass months earlier. Metka, the carpenter's fifteen years old daughter was waiting for him down by the river. She had strawberry red hair and green fiery eyes unlike any girl Franc ever met. In his hands she was warm and soft and enormously exciting. They watched from under the willow tree as the people filed out of the church after the mass. They merged in the crowd then, to go home to a roast chicken dinner.

Sunday dinners were the main event of the week. His father was saying grace when Franc saw the priest coming towards their home. The priest knew that Franc wasn't at mass and that he met with young partisans in the forest. Franc hurriedly made his last cross to end the prayers before he excused himself from the table. Franc did not eat that last roast. The boys were waiting and he suddenly became ready for war. But they didn't go to war, their superiors sent them to the military school in Leningrad to be properly indoctrinated.

Franc almost starved in the cold barracks. The only meagre warmth he could find was in the arms of young Russian girls. The sweet and the bitter memories flashed before him now and he would have liked to talk to someone about it. But Russia has long ceased to be an attraction and even his faithful wife Jana wouldn't like to hear about his old girlfriends.

Ten years younger, Barbara was just an adorable plaything when Franc left. Franc wandered who told Barbara what to think and believe. Franc often thought about Barbara, in some ways he felt that she was the only family he had.

Franc returned from Russia in 1948 as an ambitious victorious twenty years old man. The opportunities were there for the revolutionary heroes and he rejoiced. He resumed his studies and first became an economist and later a lawyer. For the last ten years he was a Judge in the Supreme Court in Ljubljana.

It would be nice to have the family behind him but he felt let down by his parents. They were two sad, old people, mourning the death of his traitor brother Emil. Since his return from Russia Franc never felt at home with his family. He saw his parents as ignorant, religious peasants who knew nothing about the rising sun of the brave new world.

Dad seemed to hold Franc personally responsible for Emil's death. Franc felt that his parents blamed him for the communist victory and hated him for everything that happened in their lives. They never rejoiced in his success, they never even acknowledged it.

When Dad disappeared, Mum began mourning dad, she didn't even notice Franc. Dad was only 50 when he disappeared, a young man really. Franc always thought of him as old. He never talked to him since he grew up and now he wished he knew him.

As soon as mum died Franc felt the strings pulling him back home. He inherited the house and the land after all. Alone at the end of his glorious career, he suddenly felt the urge to explain his feelings and thoughts to his parents because he felt the need to convince them that he had the right to be what he was. He wanted to tell them that he now understood why they didn't believe as he believed.

He had to go along with the party, he wouldn't be where he was if he didn't. He was sorry that he didn't talk to Mum before she died. Dad wouldn't talk to him but after Dad disappeared Mum was lonely. He could have talked to her when he took her to hospital. He visited with his family but he never talked to her. They had no words for everything that was hidden in their hearts.

Franc wished that he had taken mum's wrinkled old hands into his and talked to her before she died. The emotions overtook Franc as he walked along the river in the freshness of the early morning and he almost cried the tears he couldn't cry at mum's funeral.

Franc wondered if he really changed the world for the better. What will people say about him after his death? Will anyone say: he was a good man, he was a friend, he understood? The questions tiptoed into his consciousness as the silence of the day called him to ponder his life. His two sons had their own lives, they were in full professional flight and not interested in his past.

Franc knew that his colleagues were the only ones happy about his retirement. When he moved everybody behind him moved one step forward.

Franc went fishing most days, fishing gave him time to think without appearing to brood. He liked the solitude of fishing near his old home. His whole life was passing in front of him like the river. One life, as important as it may have seemed, never changed the whole river of life.

“We can renovate the old home, replant the flowers and trees, it will give us something to do,” said Franc to Jana but he was really telling mum that he returned home to plant flowers for her.

Franc was grateful for a chance to go to university. Before the war, poor, bright, village boys could only become priests. He didn't want to be a priest. He hated priests. The fat, red faced priest always complained to his parents that Franc misbehaved in church so Franc stopped going to church. His parents sent a turkey, a leg of ham and baskets of eggs to keep the bastard happy. They worked in the priest's forests and felt grateful if he let them keep the brushwood. They worked in his fields and as a payment they took home whatever they didn't need in the presbytery.

The girls from the village were leaving after the war to become servants in the city. On their day off each month girls came home to the village, white as lilies, wearing the fashionable hand me downs of their mistresses. they attracted the sunburnt, rough skinned village boys away from the rough skinned, sunburned village girls. They lured other girls and boys into the city with their whiteness, their city talking and cultured behaviour. They represented the good life to the villagers who toiled in the sun and soil and water, so they gathered enough food to survive through the winter. From year to year they survived until next harvest if they were prudent and hard working.

The work on the land became despised after the war, the peasants were the lowest on the social ladder, because they unpatriotically hung onto the land ownership. The word PRIVATE became a source of shame. Nothing was allowed to remain private in the communist utopia. Even one's thoughts and hopes had to become common thoughts and hopes.

The old religious peasants tried to hold onto their private god and private land and private thoughts. Their sons and daughters, brave and smart, escaped into the city. The name peasant became a derogatory term, people who owned land had to be unearthed and dispersed in order that they too would accept the new order.

The servant girls had half a day off each week, they were first to rise and last to tidy up after supper, they were always indoors. On their afternoon off they met in the park, the servant girls and the village boys working in the factories. They courted, went to a movie, walked in the park and planned their future. They married in the registry office and became the first link of Slovenian peasant becoming proletariat. The white church weddings became a thing of the past.

After Mum passed away Franc looked through the house and found the attic full of books half eaten away by mice. His father was shy about reading, it wasn't good that villagers should see him read so he read in the attic. Reading was considered a waste of time for an honest peasant.

Franc wanted to remove the huge old grain chests from the attic and nailed under one he found a worn out book without cover. He opened it and there were pictures of soldiers and dead people. He saw the familiar names and faces and he shuddered. This was the book the Belogardists published in 1944. Franc never saw it before but he heard the whispers about the forbidden book. He read it but he didn't know what to do with it so he nailed it back in its place and left the chest in the attic. There were so many horrid things he knew nothing about.

Ivan knew Karl from a nearby village since before the war. A couple of years older than Franc, Karl became a communist leader. He had a commanding voice and his steely grey eyes pierced those that he addressed. He spoke with fervour about the red revolution that would bring justice for everybody. Karl made Franc see how rotten the system was and how Stalin was their only hope.

Karl became a shire president after the war. He, married Tereza, his beautiful secretary. Soon he became the a chief of the Internal Information Biro, the dreaded UDBA. Karl and Tereza left their village and moved to the capital Ljubljana.

Franc married Tereza's younger sister Jana. Karl was like a big brother to Franc. He recommended Franc for high government scholarships to study whatever he wanted. Karl also offered to take care of his little sister because she was so smart. She deserved the best. Barbara could have become a doctor or a lawyer like himself. Karl said that they had to look after their own.

Franc loved the little creek running through his father's farm. When it joined other mountain creeks it made a mighty river Sava that was a bloodline for Slovenia. He grew up catching fish here as a boy, he waded in the creek and tickled the trout under the rocks and caught them by hand. He wanted to keep his parents' home and property. Franc reasoned that Barbara neither needed nor wanted it. He had the house modernised, new orchard flourished, fences were erected. He wanted to show it to his sister.

Franc never knew his sister well. He had been questioned by the party about her disappearance. His home background was never helpful. He reasoned that he didn't owe anything to anybody. It wasn't easy with a brother fighting against communism, with parents forever praying in the church. Barbara's escape was particularly dangerous. If he didn't have friends like Karl, it might have cost him a job.

Franc would have liked to go with Jana to church on Sundays now, but he felt embarrassed because he hadn't been to church for almost fifty years. He was tracing the footsteps of his parents now but he would none the less, feet like an impostor in the village church.

Franc erected a stone and planted carnations on mum's grave. Often in the cemetery behind the church tending his mother's grave, he wondered where his father's grave was. He never dared to ask, there were things he was afraid to know. He heard people say that UDBA got him. But why?

Barbara, as an emigrant, came under the influence of political migrants and war criminals. Her husband Ivan blamed communism for everything. Franc knew that communism didn't replace a perfect society. The poor were always treated poorly. Franc could hear Ivan's criticisms in Barbara's letters and he stopped writing to her. He hated to admit that he was scared that someone would open her letters.

There was nothing to be scared of since the war heroes retired or died. The thought made Franc shudder.

He invited Barbara home but she wrote that her son Janek would come instead. She asked Franc to look after her son and his new wife. Both Franc and Jana began to plan for the visit. Franc made a trip to Triglav every year. The trip to the highest mountain in Slovenia became a ritual, a pilgrimage almost. Franc felt a sacred love and closeness to God on top of that mountain and he wanted to share the feeling with Barbara's son.

Franc and Jana waited at the airport and became a little frightened and overwhelmed by seeing a dashing young couple looking from the steps of the aeroplane. They overcame the initial awkward strangeness by hugging and kissing and saying silly things like how nice it was, how pretty and good and happy they all were. They drove home and the young couple beamed with excitement at seeing cute, picturesque, story book like countryside in full summer splendour..

On Sunday Franc took them to the foot of the mountains to introduce them to Triglav. They strapped their knapsacks on their backs and began their way up. Every step was secured and many people could now reach the zenith of Slovenia. Franc remembered his first dangerous climbs up the treacherous cliffs with sad nostalgia.

“We’d better find a good view,” he said as Diana and Janek climbed the grey cliff rock with him towards the top. Out of breath almost at the top Franc saw them stop. The track to the top was clear so he left them there alone to get out of the mountain what they could.

Diana and Janek sat in the saddle between two rocks silently, tired, awed, at peace, like two birds nesting between the Earth and the heaven. There was no need for words. Janek felt his heart in his throat and was afraid that his voice might betray his emotions. He spotted an edelweiss in the crevice of the rocks and took Diana’s hand to point at it. It was open to the sun, to the sky, to God, velvety and white, struggling, beautiful because of its struggle. “You know what this white flower is?”

“Of course, we learned the song edelweiss at school but I never saw one. I think we call it lion’s foot. should we take a plant and take it home?”

“It wouldn’t look the same in the garden,” said Janek. Like a tear-drop, or a pearl, born in pain, an edelweiss had a place of its own. They sat there catching their breath and felt one with the rocks and the sky and the moss. Slovenia was under their feet like a painting: mountain lakes nestling in the slopes, rivers rushing home, people in the valleys far away, quietly at home with the nature. The late autumn sun felt kind on their faces.

“Slovenian name for edelweiss is Planinka, which means mountain flower. The Slovenian club in Brisbane is named after it,” explained Janek and Diana snuggled to him and kissed him.

“Now we’ll always remember Triglav and Planinka. We met in Triglav club, remember, it must have been in the stars for us to meet on Triglav on our honeymoon.” Both felt tremendous closeness.

“My parents looked up to this mountain from Slovenian side and your father looked at it from Italy. They looked at these snow covered mountain peaks each from their own side before they left for Australia,” smiled Janek.

“I suppose we always see the same things from different perspective. I hope we will always remember that each person looking at the mountain gets a different view,” said Diana and Janek understood that although there was teasing laughter in her voice, she spoke seriously about their future.

“We’ll be coming back,” said Diana.

“But we’ll never stay here, said Janek.”

“Who knows,” smiled Diana.

Halfway to heaven, away from the dirt and grime everything looked beautiful. But the dirt and the grime are a part of life too. Janek knew that he will have to come back. He wanted to take with him what he experienced here but he remembered what he said about the eidelwise. "You can't take it away."

"I like it here and I hate to admit it but I am too fond of money and the luxuries it can buy," she smiled at him sincerely admitting what both considered their weakness.

"I guess I am corrupted as well. I grew up in Australia, I went to school there, I wouldn't be right anywhere else," said Janek.

Hand in hand they travelled the last few hundred metres to rejoin uncle Franc.

"On your left there, just under the mountains is Diana's village in Italy. On the right is Austria," explained Uncle Franc looking at a familiar face of the only nephew he ever met.

Janek liked to call Franc Uncle. He never had an Uncle before. His uncle's face was so familiar.

Janek's parents and Diana's father lived only 100 km apart. From Triglav you could almost touch both homes yet people spoke different languages, had different politics, history and culture. In Europe people learned to cope with that.

Janek remembered his childhood in Australia. He felt like an outsider although he spoke nothing but Australian and was never out of Australia. He carried the label of the ancestors he never knew. Australians made him feel that his ancestors weren't first class, because they weren't English.

The teachers told their students that everybody should be proud of their identity. They tried to improve their students' self-esteem, because people needed a high self-esteem to be happy. A happy person is a lot less likely to rebel. Janek remembered how the teachers kept telling this story to their students until the teachers also started to believe it. Aborigines told Janek that only land could return their dignity, that people grow roots on sacred sites, on the burial grounds of their ancestors.

Janek felt that he had found his sacred site on this mountain. Uncle Franc was a proud Slovenian and he had no idea what it was like to be Slovenian in Australia in the sixties and seventies when Janek grew up. The eighties were better but the roots of Janek's national pride were planted in poor soil. He realised that most Australians had no idea about the life outside their island. Janek used to blame his parents for not listening, but now he realised that it was him who didn't, couldn't listen. He had no idea what they were talking about.

Janek's father attempted to change the rules and built a town for them in Australia, maybe he wanted to build them a sacred site. He refused to assimilate to a life style he didn't know and often didn't even like. He showed Slovenians that they could succeed even when they remained what they were.

Franc and Jana planned the activities and trips so their guests would make the most of their holidays and they would take home memories that would entice Barbara to return and see what she missed.

When Barbara's letter arrived saying they were coming, Franc was convinced that Janek persuaded his father and mother because he had to share the beauty he discovered. They

were all sorry that Janek's parents could not come sooner and participate in the two most important events on their agenda.

Most Slovenians began looking at themselves and re-assessing their values. The national expression of reconciliation was to be a sign of the new beginning. In July 1990 Franc took his family to the reconciliation mass in Kocevski Rog, held in the clearing at the foot of the hill.

On one side of the clearing the dark green forest murmured with the movement of its branches. On the other side was the valley where summer grass full of wild flowers was swaying in the wind. People already thought of the harvest when the flowers will be cut with the grass to make the scented hay for the long winter.

People kept coming reverently from every direction. They parked their cars a fair distance away afraid that the noise of the engines would stir the peace that finally settled over the site where thousands of young boys with their hands tied together were killed after the war because they did not believe in communism.

The solemn ceremony was attended by priests, communists, students, artists, writers and peasants. Many old women in black knelt on the grass and their lips moved in silent prayer as they looked to the ground. Janek saw some old men looking around as if they were searching for the criminal who caused the killing. For many it was just an outing to celebrate another milestone in Slovenian history.

They all prayed now, the words of the prayers came to them from their childhoods and they responded to the priests with timeless words from the mass book. The little choir led the thousands into singing. The hills were echoing their words and they honoured the boys that were also part of the nation. Many became truly aware during the ceremony that to survive as a nation, they had to unite and reconcile.

Janek wanted to sing with them but he didn't know the words and he couldn't because his throat was tight with emotion. But he was determined that one day he will learn these words from his father.

Janek and Diana often travelled to Italy to stay with Diana's relations. Both tried to learn Italian and Slovenian in record time to surprise their parents. Everybody enthusiastically corrected their sentences and they were thrilled at the progress both made. As they went through shops they chatted with sales people who looked at them strangely. They didn't know that Janek and Diana eagerly learned what they refused to learn all their lives. They practised new phrases vigorously after every new experience.

"We have two homes, said Janek. "We belong here and in Australia."

"And in Italy and in Scotland," added Diana smiling mischievously.

"I can understand the language of Gorbachev, I can understand Czechs, Polacks. The Slovenian language gives you the foundation for all Slavic languages, knowing Slovenian makes you understand the languages of a quarter of the world's population," he told Diana beaming with enthusiasm.

He wanted to tell his Australian friends, how lucky he was. He wanted to say thank you to his father who paid for this trip and persuaded him to go.

Janek and Diana planned to return to Australia in August but Jana persuaded them to stay for Anica's wedding. Her niece wanted their wedding celebration to be a kind of political statement for her husband Dusan who aspired to become a premier of Slovenia one day. The wedding was to be a thanksgiving for freedom, for democracy and for reforms, it was to be a preparation for independence, it marked the beginning of the new order. By their family reunion they would give hope for the new family, for a clean new beginning.

It was to be the first white, church wedding in the family since the war. Until then, Slovenians who wanted to prosper, married in a brief ceremony in the registry office. Church weddings were not valid and became redundant.

Anica's mother, Renata, explained to Janek that she chose to have Anica's wedding in Jana's home because her own parents, Karl and Tereza, were too sick to attend. Her estranged husband lived in Germany and his new girlfriend didn't want him to come to his daughter's wedding. At least her aunt Jana was a family and Renata always felt welcome in her home.

Renata was an intelligent unpretentious lady. When she first met Janek and Diana she affectionately embraced the honeymooners wishing them a long and happy marriage. They stood together during the wedding, Jana and Franc on one side and Janek with Diana on the other. They wanted to support Renata who represented all the bride's family.

"I sincerely hope and pray that they will make it," Renata whispered to Janek as they looked at the backs of the loving couple promising loyalty and fidelity to each other. The tears were welling in her eyes but Renata swallowed hard and smiled squeezing Janek's hand. "I am all she has," Renata told Janek and her voice cracked a little but she straightened her shoulders and lifted her eyes bravely.

Janek squeezed her hand and he wished he could tell her they were all there for Anica, that he knew what it meant to stand alone to protect the family. They looked at each other with tears in their eyes and they understood that they shared something, that they had each other.

Janek wanted to ask what happened to Renata's marriage but the smiling lady's blue eyes told him that there was to be no prying, that what she wanted to disclose, she would do so of her own will when she chose to. The rest of her was private.

Janek wished that his parents were there, he couldn't understand why they had to delay their trip for another week. It was getting cooler and they would soon have to return.

The early autumn sun was still warm enough so they spread the wedding festivities right into the orchard.

Janek and Diana expected the newly-weds to go on their honeymoon but they stayed until the sun rose from behind the forest. They spent time with every guest and they danced with everybody. Anica was just a tiny elf like girl bubbling with laughter and love. Dusan tall and serious, spoke to people, he listened to their words like he was collecting the thoughts for the future.

The villagers watched Franc and Jana with suspicion at first. They were powerful intruders from the city and used to the easy life. Most were surprised by their wedding invitation but they all came. As a group they came to see what they watched carefully from afar before. There were peasants, factory workers, a judge, a doctor, an engineer, a teacher, a plumber and children. They all belonged, spoke the same language, shared the same history. Diana

and Janek sat under an apple tree and Janek tapped the rhythm of the accordion music remembering the same tunes played in the Slovenian club in Sydney. The tunes felt at home here. He also felt at home, he wanted to take with him the knowledge that he belonged here.

Janek remembered his visit with dad's brother uncle Martin and his wife Mici. Diana and Janek came unannounced. Mici and Martin just got home from the field, the wet soil was still sticking to their shoes. Mici kept apologising and wished they'd let them know so they would be prepared. They sat under the linden tree in front of their home and looked at each other trying to know each other as quickly as possible. Martin brought a litre of homemade wine from the cellar and Mici cut some smoked pork sausages. They spoke about the season and the harvest and the family while they were trying to assimilate to each other.

Janek watched uncle Martin standing still in the distance and he concluded that uncle Martin looked exactly like dad. But as he moved and smiled and spoke he was completely different.

He was shy and wanted to please Janek. Dad was never shy and he never tried to please anybody. Dad's smile had an edge of ridicule. Mici was trying to please uncle Martin, they looked at each other all the time to confirm everything they said or did. Mum used to do that but dad didn't.

At uncle Martin's place Diana and Janek slept in the attic. From the only little window cut into the roof they had a good view of the village and the forest. Janek woke up early, he heard uncle Martin whistling as he led the cattle to water. Mici was feeding the chooks. Janek came down just as Martin returned with a pail of milk.

"You just missed out on milking," said Mici.

"You can come with me and meet your cousins. The boys have the farm nearby and we'll take breakfast to them."

"Show us the way and we'll surprise them," said Janek. The muddy path led through a patch of dark forest where the first rays of rising sun made golden bubbles out of the dew on the leaves. Janek and Diana stopped on the ridge clearing but he couldn't see anything under the bluish veil of fog down in the valley. The mist was like the breath of freshly turned earth.

"It smells good," said Janek wiping his eyes. "It's manure, lovely fresh manure. Shit, it smells good." The sky seemed higher here and the sun was stinging his eyes. But the pain was pleasant and it came deep from within. The fog slowly lifted and under it they noticed the two men, one ploughing, the other spreading cow manure. "Cousins," said Janek embracing them with his eyes and heart. The tractor stopped and the men introducing themselves stood shy for a moment before they embraced almost without words. They looked at each other unashamedly again to register the details like eyes, nose, ears. They looked like cousins and they were glad because although so different they were cousins.

"You talk like my dad," said Janek.

"It's still cold," said Tone opening a pot of coffee. The clouds of warm breath from their lips mixed with the hot coffee vapours in the morning freshness.

“In Australia is winter now but it is not much colder than your summer,” said Janek to break the ice.

“Have you noticed my dad’s eyebrows, you got the same upturned line on your left side,” said Daniel crumbling dirt between his fingers and looking closely at Janek.

“I will never forget the smell of fresh manure spread on newly ploughed dirt,” said Janek to Diana later.

“I am glad,” said Diana. They were both very glad that they came.

“We’ll stay until next Sunday to say hello to mum and dad but then we’ll be off to your family,” said Janek.

*Breathes there a man, with soul so dead
 who never to himself hath said,
 This is my own, my native land!
 Whose heart hath ne'er within him burned
 As home his footsteps he hath turned*

Sir Walter Scott

COMING HOME

Barbara and Ivan's plane landed in Frankfurt. They had to buy a shiny white Mercedes in Germany before they returned home to Slovenia. It was important to Ivan to come in style. He never boasted about his achievements, he wanted everybody to see them.

As they entered the Slovenian soil he stopped the car and both stepped out. Ivan wanted to kiss the soil and hold it to his chest. Barbara stood silently watching the first signs of autumn 1990 in her homeland.

"So we are home," said Ivan lightly.

"Not for another fifty kilometres," said Barbara just as casually. She was afraid that she would unintentionally do something to spoil it all for Ivan.

The majestic mountains cradled the green valley as far as they could see. They wanted to return to the place of their youth but this wasn't it. During the decades they were away the poor villages with tiny homes blossomed into three story palaces with flowers all around them. The fairy tale poverty of their youth was replaced with seeming prosperity and arrogance. Barbara felt a pang of fear and longing for the simplicity of the wild and natural Australian bush.

"We'll stop for lunch before we go to your brother's place. We must freshen up," said Ivan as he parked a car at the beautiful hotel on the hill along the road.

They had to present an appropriate picture for everybody expecting them at home. Whatever was in their hearts had to remain under control.

Ivan drove slowly through the forest and Barbara smelled the smells and listened to the sounds, she wanted to walk into the woods and shamelessly embrace the trees because her heart was overflowing. She tried to feel at home in this changed, strange land. The gravel road through the forest had been sealed and the cars were passing on the busy road now. She savoured the new sights as the memories of the olden days were flooding forth. The wagons full of produce were pulled on this dirt road by cows or horses before she left. The tops of the branches used to meet in the middle of the road, filtering sunshine in the mysterious patterns to the ground in spring when the leaves were golden green. In the autumn colourful leaves covered the road and soon after winter icicles hung from those naked branches.

Now the trees were cut away from the road so the drivers could see around the corners. The patchwork of little paddocks has been replaced by valleys of green, yellow and brown. Ivan commented that even at home people didn't grow a little bit of everything any more. Barbara noticed that the colourful mixture of plants was replaced by commercial crops

growing isolated from each other. Farmers reared one kind of animal, cows and horses were replaced by tractors, shepherds were replaced by electric wires.

“Cash crops,” said Ivan. “Australians are just beginning to experiment with old organic farming while Slovenia begins to grow cash crops.”

“They are not subsistence farmers anymore,” said Barbara.

“Compared to Australian paddocks these still look like a miniature playground,” said Ivan.

“Boys and girls travel to school by bus now. Buses are safer,” said Barbara and the past suddenly touched her. She was thirteen when she came from Ljubljana for a school holiday. Marko caught up with her late in the evening on this road and clumsily offered to carry her suitcase. He was a seventeen years old man then and he told her that he was coming to Ljubljana to work. Both of them grew up since they, as children, grazed cattle along the river and there was no way back to the close innocence of their childhood.

Suddenly Marko put his hand around Barbara’s waist and it slipped to her bottom. She could feel the wet flesh of his sweaty palm through the dress like stinging nettles. She ran and he caught up with her, tried to kiss her, to make up for whatever made her afraid. In the struggle they both fell in the wet grass beside the road and Barbara screamed. Marko fled, maybe he didn’t know what he wanted to do either. They were both afraid of the feelings that overwhelmed them. Barbara ran home confused. That was the last time she spoke to Marko.

Marko spoke to her one night the following May. On the night before the first of May village boys brought flowers under the windows of girls they liked. Barbara’s window was full of flowers and people said that Marko brought them to her. Marko used to leave flowers under her window even before she left home. During May boys used to court girls by knocking on their windows at night. Marko came knocking on Barbara’s window. He told her that he loved her and wanted to marry her one day. His voice was weak and shy. He did not yet understand what he was saying and what he felt. He just followed the call of spring and of growing up. Good girls never answered the calls of their embarrassed suitors. Barbara was a good girl. The next day neither of them looked at the other. It was frightening and exciting to grow up.

Peasant boys were a little intimidated by Barbara’s huge blue eyes and by her milky white skin circled by black curls.

On Saturdays girls swept the yards, scrubbed the floors and arranged the flowers, because on Sunday afternoon boys came to visit. They came on some pretext or other and the villagers began speculating about the impending marriages. Barbara never had a Sunday visitor, she was 14, going on 15 when she last spent her holidays at home. It was the last time she saw her father or her mother.

“I used to count seven churches from this spot,” said Barbara as Ivan stopped on top of the hill for a lookout. The white churches with high steeples like mother birds watched over the nests of other buildings over the valley.

“They say that people built churches on the hills to be closer to God,” observed Ivan.

“We listened to Angelus every night,” said Barbara and remembered how everybody stopped work when the bells tolled and peasants said a prayer united all over the valley before they retired for the night.

“The bells don’t toll anymore,” said Ivan.

“Maybe they will renew the tradition,” said Barbara.

“Traditions change,” said Ivan.

They came to the house Barbara was born in and there were people greeting them but the only people she knew were Janek and Diana. There were children and boys and girls and Barbara suddenly realised that she was an old woman and that nothing was as she remembered it and that nobody remembered her.

Nobody remembered the places where she played in the dirt and houses were built over her playground. She laughed through tears as she embraced her son and her daughter in law. She was introduced to relations and their friends who soon went home to give the travellers a chance to unpack and rest. They felt a bit disoriented for a few days but gradually they tuned in the life of a village.

“Jana and I lead a very quiet life now, the boys are busy working in Ljubljana,” explained Franc.

“They couldn’t even be bothered to have children,” said Jana.

“They have places to go. Families can wait,” said Franc but both he and Jana longed for grandchildren and visits from their children.

“The orchard and the garden keep us busy,” said Jana. “Would you like to see the trees, the apples and pears and plums are plentiful this time of the year.”

Ivan went with Jana while Franc and Barbara sat on the bench under their old linden tree.

“This tree is about the only thing that didn’t change,” said Barbara caressing the trunk. “Its shade is just as thick, it smells just as fine.”

“I pruned it a bit,” said Franc.

“I carved these hearts and names in the trunk.”

“Some things you can never rub out.”

“If they go deep enough.”

“Are you disappointed?” asked Franc.

“Things change, that’s all.”

Shy, they didn’t know where to begin but both knew that things had to be said. That’s why they came together. There were unspoken things in their hearts that had to be shared so that they would become a brother and a sister again. Barbara came to make peace with her daughter Renata and to find out what happened to her father. She hoped that just by being at home things would become clear, but she couldn’t ask because she didn’t even know what her brother knew. She had to get to know him first.

“I used to hide behind that wall when I was still at home. Nobody could see me there. It was a high wall in those days,” said Barbara. The old stone boundary, covered by moss was barely visible now through the shrubbery.

“The wall didn’t change,” said Franc.

Both were silent for a moment looking at the boulders piled on top of each other.

“Every stone is still in place,” said Franc.

Even things that were the same looked different.

“Maybe I grew up,” she smiled. Maybe her home did not know her anymore because she changed. Even the memories changed during the many lonely years under the Southern sky in Australia. Barbara realised that she could never be completely at home here again.

“Everybody wants to claim the credit for the democracy in Slovenia now,” said Franc following the changes in his thoughts.

“You know how it is, you won a revolution once,” said Barbara.

“I fought Hitler. Not all partisans were communists.” Franc was annoyed with himself, because he denied that he was a communist. He didn’t have to explain to his little sister.

“We learned at school that communists won the revolution,” said Barbara.

“The idea of communism was attractive,” said Franc, thoughtfully trying to regain his composure. “When I was young I believed that all people should be treated equally, that they should all have jobs, medical care, education, that they should all be able to become what they wanted to become. To me that was communism.”

“Young people are usually idealists,” conceded Barbara.

“All leaders use Robin Hood tactics. They take from the rich and give to the poor in the hope that the poor will elect them into the high office and make them rich,” said Franc abruptly.

“Young people learn from their parents,” said Barbara.

“People condemn others for selling themselves but all the time they are waiting for the bidder. I felt guilty because I became a part of the system but now I know that as soon as I would step out, someone else would step in.”

Barbara didn’t want to discuss politics, she wanted to talk about their family. All her life she had to listen to discussions, whenever she sat silently next to Ivan she was a witness to a political argument.

“As soon as you are allowed to do as you like, freedom becomes a lot less attractive,” said Barbara to fill the silence.

“I fought the establishment when I was young. My children are fighting now. I don’t feel guilty anymore,” said Franc quietly.

“Guilty of what,” asked Barbara.

“After the bloody revolution people need stricter laws to recover their sanity, they need someone to guide them.”

“Are you defending the killings after the war?”

“Those were tough times but communism isn’t just corruption and oppression, it’s leadership and order and vision.”

“Ivan said that Tito’s grave will be moved like Stalin’s was.”

“Maybe,” said Franc, “we don’t know what will happen to Gorbachev yet.”

“Gorbachev received the Nobel peace prize,” said Barbara. “The West does not disturb the graves of people they once honoured.” Franc resented Barbara echoing Ivan’s thoughts.

“I often remember the story Dad told us,” said Franc. “The farmer was carting a load of pumpkins up the hill. Just as he reached the top, the cart upturned and pumpkins scattered in every direction. Said the farmer: Look, look, every pumpkin has a mind of its own. In Slovenia now everyone thinks that they know best, political parties are growing like mushrooms after the rain.”

“People need to express their thoughts and beliefs,” Barbara quoted old Damian.

“People want a piece of cake. They also want to punish those who gobbled up their cake in the past,” said Franc angrily.

“They didn’t have to kill the opposition,” Barbara wanted to talk about their brother Emil, about their father, but that was still too close, it might hurt both of them. The layers of the onion had to be peeled slowly to come to the wet white inner layer where the heart was, to see if there was a white, soft, wet heart still inside at all.

“I had nothing to do with that. I can’t even explain it, let alone condone it. People wanted to settle scores, they were enormously frightened of each other.”

“You could have refused to get along.”

“I had university degrees in Economics and Law, but if I didn’t prove myself as a communist I would have swept the road. I became the administrator of the state. Who do I blame for sacrificing my principles? I could have escaped like you, I suppose. I was 26 when Mum and Jana took our children to be baptised by the village priest one evening. The next day I was called by the party. I said that I didn’t know, that they did it against my will. You couldn’t reason with the young, ignorant heroes of the revolution. They believed their own empty slogans. Your escape came next, I had to make up for it.”

“I didn’t know.”

“I wanted success and wealth as much as anybody,” said Franc abruptly.

“We all do,” Barbara tried to hold onto the peace and tranquillity between them.

“The young want to become a part of the European government. We’ve been under European governments before,” said Franc. “We were the lamb sleeping with the lion. We are still only lambs. The big European lions can put their paws on us again when it suits them. There is one Dr. Otto Habsburg rejoicing at our coming home into the Europe dominated by Germans. He is a direct descendant of those Habsburgs that ruled Slovenia for centuries, the ones we learned to hate. Are we to feel grateful now because they want to take us back. We learned nothing from history.”

“This time we’ll be equal partners,” said Barbara.

“The rules are changing but the game is the same. We will be where we first started within the borders of the Holy Roman Empire founded by the great Charlemagne of the eight century. First they persuaded us with the Bible, then they used the sword, now they promise the common market. They always wanted Slovenia because Slovenia is like a jewel in the crown of Europe, precious and defenceless. But we will never be equal because we are small and they are big.”

“Young ones believe in what they are doing,” said Barbara.

“Young fools fight for justice but those fighting for power win every time, they have to win to exist. For many the old communist regime looks more and more attractive, people had jobs, they were taken care of. People become comfortable with the order and even expect a certain amount of oppression. Most importantly, majority always resists change. In the end the change is just a change. The management changes the policy to make the poor believe that progress is taking place. Young ones will be made to believe that they succeeded because energetic and idealistic they have to believe that they made the world a better place. Their impetuous minds have to be placated by success. Their ideas will be incorporated into the system to stop them thinking.”

Franc reminded Barbara of the picture of Karl Marx, he grew a beard since he retired and the black and white hair made his big face look even bigger.

He found it hard to talk about real issues with his little sister. “What does she know, how much can she understand. She heard criticisms from those that escaped, her views are clouded. Maybe mine are too,” he thought. “Maybe she is not a little girl anymore.”

“Would you do things differently, if you had another go?” she asked.

“We only ever have one go. When I was sixteen I had to choose either to go into the German army, the Home-guards or the Liberation front,” said Franc, his voice a little impatient, almost angry. “If I didn’t make a choice, either of them would’ve chosen me. Liberation Front sounded good to me at sixteen. I believed that I was fighting for justice and equality. I had to grow up fast, of course, and I started to hate the enemy that tried to kill me.”

“Communist leaders promised a classless society but they had nothing like that in mind of course. They wanted to become super rich and gain absolute control. The masses were taught that it was sinful to have aspirations and want to be better and that it was noble to obey and remain equal.” Barbara became aware that she repeated the words she heard from Milan and Ivan. She did not listen to their words for nothing the last thirty years. “That’s how we learn things,” she thought.

“We wanted to be noble after the war because the memory of blood had to be erased or justified.” Franc remembered the songs and slogans of the revolution. People believed in the better future.

“I hope the young ones will learn from your experience,” said Barbara.

“We failed. The young will want to learn on their own mistakes.”

“But you learned so much,” said Barbara feeling that Franc was annoyed with her accusations.

“I am glad you see it that way.” Franc liked the innocence with which Barbara accepted the new regime. Disillusioned with the elite and afraid of the senseless blind forces of the masses, he felt sadly alone.

Franc thought of the masses that will always be swayed by manipulative, wily politicians. Will Slovenians ever grow up to accept and respect the leaders they elected? Will the leaders ever grow up to lead with dignity and integrity? Proud of their national heroes, artists, scientists, grateful for their beautiful country, how come they cannot elect the

leaders they would be proud of? People pointed a finger at anyone who tried to establish a sensible system.

“Why don’t we all examine our consciences and give credit where credit is due. Have we no words of praise left?” asked Franc rhetorically.

“Slovenians were forced to praise our communist leaders for fifty years, they might be fed up with praise,” said Barbara.

Sitting in the shade of the scented tree it was easy for them to speak about ideas that floated on the surface but neither could touch the inner chords.

“People need the recognition when they do their best. Only it is easier to criticise, it is revolutionary to disagree.”

“Slovenians do as they are told, in Australia they speak Serbo-Croatian with people from other Yugoslav nations because they were told to do so at school after the war. We never really escaped or grew up,” Barbara laughed suddenly. “Many Slovenian children in Australia even called themselves Yugoslavs until Slovenian government at home gave us permission to call ourselves Slovenians.

“Janek knows that he is a Slovenian,” said Franc.

“Thanks to Ivan,” said Barbara.

“Have you ever felt,” smiled Franc, “that after the speech is over, we find the words we wanted to say, after the children have grown up, we learn how to be parents, after the war is over, we realise who our enemies were. It’s all trial and error, we never learn anything. The sweetest part is the child in us because only the child in us believes. Now those that are dead are dead. Even God can’t change that.”

“God may not be able to change the past but our historians surely had a go at it,” smiled Barbara a little embarrassed by her big brother’s speech.

“Most children had to learn a false history about their parents. Didn’t you tell your children what a good girl you were?” teased Franc.

“I suppose we all rub out the naughty bits.” Barbara became sad. “I protected my children,” she reasoned. “Maybe we all do.”

“It’s getting cooler,” said Franc.

Autumn was always a melancholy time for Barbara, she played with the fallen leaves so aware of the imminent cold dead sleep through winter. She thought that all this could be hers if she stayed but she realised that she wasn’t a hero and would not have the money to modernise and renovate like Franc did. She’d just be a hard working peasant rushing to collect crops, to pay taxes, to save, to survive. She would probably want to run away.

“Do you ever wish that you stayed home?” Franc followed her thoughts.

“Not really,” she said.

Both wanted to talk about Mum and Dad, establish ties that would link them to the past, to innocence. Both wanted to feel at home with each other, to touch in their hearts, confess and comfort each other. Their thoughts met sometimes in a fleeting moment, the intimacy made them feel warm but it was gone before they could relax in it.

“Did you ever hear about dad?”

“No.”

“What happened to him Franc?”

“How would I know?” His face was blank.

“I couldn’t resist them,” Ivan came back carrying an armful of plums, pears and apples.

“I’ll get some wine and cut some meat and cheese,” Franc seemed relieved by Ivan’s return.

“I love my home,” said Barbara to Ivan when Franc and Jana had gone.

“Only it’s not your home anymore.”

“I mean my real home in Australia. I only lived here with Mum and Dad until I was ten. It’s a long time ago.” Ivan put his arm over her shoulders pulling her to him, he had no words but she felt that he understood. Jana brought a freshly baked loaf of bread. They ate and drank in an easy companionship, talking about food, weather, nature. The things they wanted to talk about faded away again.

“We are very old-fashioned, we still bake bread,” said Jana.

“We have chooks, a pig and a cow like we used to have,” said Franc.

“Others don’t even pick fruit from their trees these days,” said Jana.

“I made cheese and butter this year,” boasted Franc.

“The young ones play with the computers and watch videos in their spare time,” said Jana.

“We still grow things at home,” said Ivan.

“He calls Australia home,” smiled Barbara to herself.

“What are Australians like,” asked Franc.

“Very casual, they are not passionate about anything. They think migrants are nuts because we get into a sweat about politics,” said Ivan.

“I hear that Australians want to dump their queen. Are they ready to fight for independence?” Franc became interested in the news about Australia since he got in touch with his sister.

“Fight who? For what? Some communist Labour leaders would like to become president that’s all.” Ivan clearly was monarchist.

“I thought you’d be against English dominance,” said Franc.

“I’ve chosen the British system, it’s served me better than any other. I never escaped to Asia. Labour leaders want to make Australia an Asian country.” Ivan became angry.

“Do you like Australians?” asked Jana turning towards Barbara.

“They are OK. Australian men get excited over cricket and football, they are busy watching sport on TV, mowing lawns and drinking stubbies of beer with their mates. Australian women are fund raising for all sorts of charities, they are organising quests and parties,” smiled Barbara to ease the sudden tension.

“Communism is alive and well in Australia,” said Ivan. “Marxist dictum: from each according to their abilities and to each according to their needs’ works there. Bludgers have the needs and people like us have the abilities. If you can gain the status of the needy you got it made.

Over four million Australians are on some kind of welfare or pension now. They are a benign army protecting the government.”

“You are joking,” laughed Franc suddenly.

“Fair dinkum,” said Ivan, “Australia is an authoritarian state. The authorities decide what abilities people have and what needs. A single girl with a dozen kids has the greatest need so we all work for her. Those that don’t qualify as needy, scream that they are discriminated against.”

“You will have to escape to Slovenia next,” laughed Franc.

“Australia must be doing something right for people to want to bring so many children into the world,” said Jana. “Slovenian birth rate is negative and getting lower every year. People have lost the will to multiply.”

“Slovenians have the highest suicide rate, that scares me even more,” said Franc.

“I escaped to the West,” said Ivan, “because I believed that the Christian West was fighting communism. But while they pointed a finger at the East, they smuggled communism to Australia. The Labour party does not represent the working people any more. they serve the fringe groups like the unemployed, homosexual, criminals and drug users.”

“Clever, clever,” said Franc considering things from Ivan’s perspective. “Maybe the West achieved what Karl Marx had in mind. He said that communism will first succeed in the prosperous capitalist country. Russia wasn’t ready, communism wasn’t a result of the people’s struggle. It was imposed on working class by intelligentsia and the military. The West always claimed to be a step ahead. Communism after all is just a means of gaining control over the poor. You say that four millions of Australians are at the mercy of your government. A quarter of your population,” said Franc thoughtfully.

“Government provides everything for those that own nothing. When I first came to Australia you were charged with vagrancy if you had no work or if you were homeless. Now Sydney alone has ten thousand homeless children. Kids don’t want to obey their parents, they go on the street and government pays them homeless allowance. Parents don’t dare discipline their kids, they are afraid that the government will take them or that the kids will leave home.”

“I often wonder if the society is getting better as we become more enlightened and prosperous,” said Jana.

“It is true that more people have more rights and more goods but more also depend on their government,” said Franc, not at all certain where he stood.

“When I first came to Australia we all built our homes and bank accounts for the safe old age. Now people try to get rid of their assets in order to get the pension. You are penalised if you own something. Almost half of Australians own nothing, they are communists depending on the government. Teachers indoctrinate our children at school that it is bad to compete and try to be excellent. Teachers write reports in such a way that no parent knows if their kid is smart or if he had tried and learned. Their favourite statements are: He works to his ability. He is improving. He is trying harder. What does that tell me?” Ivan tried to discuss the educational system with Janek, but his teacher son was the product of the communist indoctrination.

“Communism caught up with you,” smiled Franc.

“I watched an Australian grazier rounding the sheep.” said Ivan. “Most sheep were easily penned but the few belligerent ones just wouldn’t go in. The grazier ordered one dog to keep the sheep in the pen while he directed the other two to find ways of bringing in the strays. They were lead around the bush and into the boss’s pen. People are much like that, most are penned easily but strays need special treatment. It’s all the theatrics.”

“Look after my sheep, eh” thought Franc aloud.

“They do,” Ivan understood the Biblical implication.

“I was in the Lenin’s school of Political Warfare in Moscow for awhile and I will never forget these words of my teacher: ‘Always remember that in the end communism will win. If we don’t win with force we will wait until capitalist guard is down and during their decadent slumber we will smash them with a clenched fist.’ The words are imprinted in my memory because the officer spoke with such pathos, confidence and conviction that there was no doubt left in any of us young boys after that. We believed ourselves to be the chosen avant-garde of the perfect society.”

“But you don’t believe the words anymore,” said Ivan.

“I believe very little these days but young people believe just as faithfully. Slovenians sheepishly trotted into the Yugoslav brotherhood and wiser now they trot just as mindlessly into the United Europe. Just look at the signs on the street. People try to be modern by using a universal language of Europe. Mangled English words are tied together with Slovenian prefixes. You have to know English to understand the new Slovenian language,” said Franc.

“The shepherds are looking for lambs, mild and mindless, gentle and ignorant, soft and obedient. Are we always going to follow,” wandered Ivan.

“Slovenians are again leaning to Germany for support in their struggle for independence and Serbs know that Russia’s might is still behind them,” said Franc.

“We have centuries of historic ties with Germanic nations but we are Slavs. Are we always going to be a tiny bit of meat lost in a huge sandwich,” wandered Ivan.

“I wonder what Slovenian independence would really do for us,” said Franc.

“They always come back to sheep and shepherds and lambs,” thought Barbara remembering the stories from the Bible. The sheep, determined to follow, mindlessly look for clues from other sheep. without the leader sheep die. Lambs are sacrificed. Jesus was a sacrificial lamb. Was it good or bad to be a lamb?

“Sheep follow sheep.” said Franc and Barbara became startled because her brother seemed to follow her thoughts.

“Good sheep dog in Australia works better than a shepherd. A dog follows farmer’s orders and is not troubled by his conscience like shepherds tend to be,” said Ivan.

“Shepherds have power over sheep. The church shepherds had power over sheep more or less through history,” said Franc cautiously.

“Someone has to show the way, we need shepherds,” said Ivan.

“The world needs believers. I think our use by date expired. We don’t believe much.”

Barbara listened to the thoughts and longings of the people she loved. The scent of the linden tree was permeating the air but from time to time the breeze from far away brought other familiar smells. The hay drying in the sun mixed with a distinct aroma of wild strawberries embraced an instant but the wild flowers took over the next. Closing her eyes against the sun, she travelled back to familiar earth things she left in her childhood realising happily that nothing changed deep down where things mattered.

“In Australia we have the freedom of expression, only nobody listens to us,” said Ivan. “It pays to be a part of the system but we, migrants, were always outside, we escaped communism to enjoy the freedom as fringe dwellers in Australia. We weren’t listened to in Slovenia or in Australia. If we wanted to be listened to, we would have to join the party. But most of us never believed in any party.”

Barbara knew how much Ivan needed to be listened to.

“When you prostitute yourself to the system the system protects you and make your enemies look ridiculous,” said Franc.

“Migrants are your typical ridiculous rouges, I never wanted to be a part of the system,” said Ivan. “Systems manipulate you until they sit on top of you. I wanted to be in charge of my family’s fate. The hungry manipulators are after you wherever you go, though. It’s getting harder to keep outside. I am no saint,” conceded Ivan quietly, “I just want to do what I think is right.”

“Let the one without sin throw the first stone,” Franc seemed to quote Jesus more than Ivan. Disillusioned in their own beliefs they came closer to the middle where the truth was less ideal, but closer to reality. “In all my life I never met a man who wasn’t a prostitute at some point.”

Barbara was happy that an unspoken understanding united Ivan and Franc. They each took a different path in life but in their old age they realised that maybe they only played the roles others wrote for them, that maybe the path they’ve chosen wasn’t important after all.

“Did you ever read George Orwell’s book 1984? Janek brought it from school before 1984 but I only managed to read it last year. Do you believe that a big brother is watching us?”

“Everybody has a big brother, we count on a big brother whenever we mindlessly turn to the system to solve what are our personal problems,” said Franc.

“The big brother wanted all opposition killed after the war. Who was the big brother, Franc?”

“Nobody wants to name a big brother because nobody wants to be perceived as a powerless, ridiculous puppet.”

“We choose to take unanimous responsibility for our stupidity,” helped Jana.

“Tito was a vain, cruel, arrogant man but only a puppet. Half Slovenian half Croatian he united our nations for the big brother. His fame and his medals were short lived but the fruits he produced for the big brother were important. While Tito slept with his young lovers or hunted the tame deer, the big brother wrote his laws and his speeches. Tito’s

accesses made him forget that he was just the puppet.” Franc never thought about this things, they came to him now and he felt easier saying them.

“Rumours are that Tito wasn’t who he said he was but a Bolshevik sent to lead Yugoslavs into the communist revolution. What do you think?” Ivan used to dismiss these rumours out of hand but he wanted to hear Franc’s opinion.

“Does it really matter? We don’t even realise what role we were made to play in this melodrama,” said Franc.

“Nothing much changed. The presidents of the world are only puppets of the international bankers. We were fighting capitalism and communism while materialism conquered the world. Remember how communists always spoke about the rotten West and the West spoke about the suffering behind the iron curtain. They were just the games politicians played while bankers explored the markets and wrote policies.” Ivan. was disillusioned by his own conclusions but the realisation took the weight of his shoulders. He didn’t fail, it was beyond him to change the world.

The words of his friend father Damian echoed in Ivan’s memory: Jesus told us to stand up not perturbed against evil, because our stand will bring the evil to the notice of more powerful nations who will want to correct the injustice. When you stand cold and naked the world will judge your attacker. If he strikes your right cheek, show him the left one as well. When you are small and powerless you have to bring the injustice to the notice of the world.

But the world refused to take notice. Did the world change? Was the Wall street the only respected institution left. Did God lose the plot?. The thought that he must know what he is doing, reassured Ivan.

“People believe that democratic elections give them some kind of power but the leaders manufacture the choices that are no choices at all. The power struggle of the elite has little to do with democracy,” continued Ivan.

“Europe has prospered through xenophobia and chauvinism, it gained cultural and economic vitality by competition. The love-hate relationship and the desire to be different and superior has led to wonderful achievements. People recognise Italians by spaghetti, Austrians by leather hosen, Scots by kilts... What will they know us by when we become a nation state?” wondered Franc.

“Without an enemy Europeans would die of boredom,” said Ivan remembering the empty Slovenian clubs in Australia since they reconciled.

“People stay at work for eight hours a day but they watch the clock and the calendar. They live for knock off time, for holidays, for pension. They try to forget what they are doing eight hours a day and why,” said Franc.

“I wanted to be alive every moment of my life, that’s why I escaped.” Ivan never put his thoughts in words like that before.

“It’s a funny world we live in. It is getting cooler, we better get in,” said Jana breaking the reflective mood of the men who came to the end of the road wandering if they arrived to their destination.

"You have lovely lawns now," said Barbara. In the olden days pigs' manure made our yards smelly."

"Young people don't know what it was like," said Jana.

"Even we remember only what we want to remember," smiled Ivan.

"People grew tired of remembering the war. People changed. Going over old grievances would serve no purpose. We are all sentenced to death anyway because we are all guilty of something. Children are only innocent until they become strong enough to hurt other children," laughed Franc because he did not want to cover the old ground again.

"We have to know our history to learn from the past," tried Ivan.

"All we ever learned is that the winners kill the losers. The powerful conquer the weak, the fittest survive, the world is a cruel place. Life is a struggle, if you stop fighting, you die. The lessons from the past are in everybody's blood," said Franc.

Uncertainty entered Ivan's heart. He leaned heavily on his God who was in charge of everything and knew what he was doing. There sure was a reason for everything.

Ivan remembered his arguments with Marjan and wanted to go back and reach an understanding with him because he suddenly realised how illusive the truth was. He missed his friends and his enemies. They struggled for perfection but maybe the good and the bad were part of each other like love and hate are. The sparks of their heated discussions ignited new ideas and they became enriched by each other and closer in their hearts.

Ivan and Barbara went to see Ivan's family. They passed the corner where Ivan's home used to be. After 32 years Ivan again stood on the land that was taken from his family, only the land didn't feel the same. A busy supermarket stood where his father built a restaurant before the war. Ivan's favourite English tune 'The Green, green grass of home' came from the block of flats where his home once stood.

"No more green, green grass for us. They concreted my green, green grass and my home. This land should be mine," said Ivan shaken and angry.

"What would you do with it?" asked Barbara afraid to say the wrong thing in the tense moment of his remembering..

"I want to build a home here."

"Our home is in Australia where our children are," said Barbara.

"Our children will one day want to come home as well," said Ivan. He felt that he had to believe that, without believing it, all his work was for nothing.

"Their home is in Australia. We just came to say goodbye properly, so that we can say good day properly to our home in Australia?" Barbara suddenly realised that her heart could never again be on the same continent she was. She would forever long for that other home she left behind.

"I suppose we will always long for Green green grass of home, wherever we are," said Ivan also knowing that torn between the countries he will never find peace.

"We would be just as homesick in Slovenia as we were in Australia," said Barbara.

Ivan looked at the linden tree forgotten behind the shops. Most Slovenian country homes used to have a linden tree, they used its flowers for tea, its branches for shade, for climbing, for hiding. Ivan remembered things he saw hidden among the top branches of this tree. The days before the war held pleasant memories for him, games and laughter and the future all promising in front of his family. Sometimes he listened to people talk under the tree. He heard things they wouldn't want him to hear.

"If we kept coming home, we would be forever saying good day and good bye," said Ivan, sad because the time could not be bought back.

They stopped at the modest home on the outskirts of the small town Ivan was born in.

"My brother is a fringe dweller, half farmer, half factory worker," noticed Ivan.

Martin and Mici were expecting them and a little nervous they welcomed Barbara with a bunch of carnations and rosemary. Martin brought out a bottle of slivovic to wash down the dust of travelling. The strong drink relaxed them so they laughed and talked easily.

"You are lucky, you have the best of two worlds, you are a farmer and a wage earner," commented Ivan.

"That's the only way to go, we are never hungry because we grow our food. And we can buy things with the money I earn," Martin still felt that he had to explain things to his older brother.

"People who only live on wages pretend to be so poor, they don't even offer you coffee when you drop in," said Mici loading the table with home produced delicacies.

Next day on the way to Ljubljana Ivan and Barbara remembered Mici's words.

"They might be poor but they are all so generous to us," said Barbara. People offered coffee to Ivan and Barbara, they brought out persut, best wines and sweets. They also offered to wash their white Mercedes.

"They are attracted to money," laughed Ivan.

"That's bad," said Barbara.

"But true."

"I hate it."

"Don't you like being loved?"

"That's not love."

"What is?"

"They expect dollars."

"Of course they do. It's nice for them to hope. They like to have a photo taken with our car," Ivan teased.

"The best things in life are free," Barbara reminded him.

"Everybody has things that are free, but they still love money because money makes them loveable," said Ivan.

"They are not really glad to see us," said Barbara.

"Why should they be? We are just old people who went away to make money. They want to wash my car because they know that I pay well for their service."

Barbara knew that Ivan paid well for everything they offered but he never gave gifts. He said that they have Slovenia and he had dollars. He simply didn't feel at ease giving presents, giving money seemed demeaning to him. It was like saying it right out that they were less rich. Money made Ivan feel strong and secure.

"Old people like us two would be ignored without money, the world is full of poor old people. We make it possible for them to love us. We make no demands on them," explained Ivan.

"You don't believe that people are naturally good," asked Barbara.

"I believe that we are good people. We worked hard and we earned a lot of money. We deserve a lot of love. It doesn't matter if people love us for our money," laughed Ivan.

Ivan and Barbara finally walked on the crowded streets of Slovenian capital Ljubljana where they first met. They noticed that people were elegantly dressed, the colours matched, the accessories were carefully chosen. There was an abundance of good things in the country they escaped from.

Dressed for comfort, Ivan and Barbara felt a little odd among their finery. They pointed the sights to each other as they tried to absorb the changed and the familiar. The beauty of early autumn took their breath away. The falling leaves covered the roads and the last summer sun was sweet on their skin.

"Remember when we first visited Canberra," said Barbara as they peered into the rich displays of the shop windows.

"It's different, isn't it," said Ivan. They also remembered their first visit to Australian capital Canberra. Without the street directory Ivan drove around the endless Canberra's circuits trying to find an address. The roads seemed identical, the houses like clones of each other stood in endless rows. But there was no sign of people and no children played on the immaculately mown lawns, no dogs or toys or chatter or noise on the footpath. The cars sped past as they searched the deserted streets for a person to show them the way. It seemed unthinkable to knock on someone's door but the majestic capital with the beautiful parks, monuments and buildings had no people on the streets.

"I got so used to the empty streets in Australia that crowds almost scare me now," said Barbara as people kept bumping into them, passing, touching, running, laughing.

"It is spring in Canberra now," said Ivan. They remembered the fresh and peaceful flowery parks. Barbara suddenly felt like a stranger longing for home.

"They have new cars, new houses, new furniture," said Ivan impressed by changed Ljubljana. "Everybody seems to complain all the time but at the same time they want to impress each other."

"I don't know how they do it, they only earn a quarter of what we earn," said Barbara.

"They are ingenious," said Ivan.

They walked through their home city looking for something to touch their hearts. In the centre of the city they saw a group of young people in weird clothes. One boy had his orange hair cut into a cock's comb. He hugged another boy dressed in a flowery loose fitting pants.

“Poofsters,” said Ivan. The whole world had gone mad and Ivan placed his anger on the youngsters because he wasn’t happy with the changed world. He was counting on the innocence of his homeland. The loss of innocence made him realise how meaningless life really was. Barbara sensed that he wanted to go home to Linden because that was where they both belonged.

The park Tivoli was covered with fallen autumn leaves and the musky smell of autumn made Barbara feel nostalgic. She remembered her friend Andrea.

Andrea and Barbara at 14 met in the park in the spring when life was bursting with love and expectations. They wandered in the forests and embraced trees as people these days embrace lovers. Their hearts were overflowing with love, life and growing. They rolled in the grass like puppies do, carefree and happy. The boys were in love with Andrea, the girls wanted to be her friends, but Andrea chose Barbara to be her best friend. They showered each other with spring flowers like children do. Not yet ready for the real big love, they walked with hands entwined behind their backs or with arms around each other’s shoulders oblivious of others, sharing in the beauty of becoming. Barbara and Andrea shared the sweetest moments of their youth. What Barbara experienced at home at the time wasn’t real. She had no words to tell Andrea about Karl’s secret visits at night, about the man hovering over her bed night after night like a never ending nightmare.

Andrea fell in love with a national soccer hero because everybody else was in love with him. Both Barbara and Andrea married at eighteen and lost touch with each other.

In the middle of Tivoli they sat next to the pond and Ivan threw bread crumbs to the ducks in the water. They watched them fight each other for the food.

“Remember Andrea?” said Barbara.

“Andrea who?” asked Ivan.

“My best friend from high school.”

“Oh.”

“She lives in Ljubljana. I’d like to see her.”

“Have you got her address?” Ivan asked..

“I’ll look her up in a phone book.” Barbara wanted to touch the past, the most pleasant non-threatening part of her past, to share in the innocence of remembering with Andrea. She also wanted to show to someone her jewels and her silk. She wanted to tell Andrea that she wasn’t powerless and ashamed any longer, that she had everything Andrea used to have and that she still loved her. But maybe Andrea never even realised how frightened Barbara was at 14. Maybe nobody knew how ashamed she was.

After she gave birth to Renata, Barbara told Andrea that she did not want to stay with Karl and Tereza and that she was looking for a job and somewhere to stay. Andrea never asked questions. She took Barbara home like children take a lost puppy to offer it affection because they have lots of affection and it gives them pleasure to give it. If Andrea was a lost puppy Barbara would gladly take her home now. But Barbara realised now that lost puppies are not gentle creatures, they are scavengers. Andrea was never a scavenger, she never had a reason to be scared or jealous or guilty. Andrea had enough love for a lost puppy so she offered Barbara a home until Barbara found a place of her own. Barbara needed a home because her soul was aching from shame and her body ached for the closeness to the

daughter she had to give away. Andrea gave her love until Ivan found a job for her and a place to stay.

Ivan drove Barbara to Andrea's house but he chose to wait for her in the nearby park. He said that he wanted to take a nap in the car, the sights and walking tired him.

Barbara rang the bell and a handsome young man opened the door at Andrea's address..

"Mum is in bed, who will I say," his voice was formal but his eyes reminded Barbara of Andrea.

"Barbara. We went to school together."

"Come right in," he said as he returned. Andrea leaning on the pillows looked at Barbara, her smile was weak and distant. Her skin was like faded silky finery around tiny coals of fire in her red eyes. Instant tears melted the sparks in her eyes and the fire died like snowflakes in the mud.

"Are you sick?" asked Barbara alarmed before she could stop herself.

"I am getting better." Andrea's weak smile was lifeless.

This was not Andrea as Barbara remembered her. The skin on her hands was transparent now, the webs of skin on her face looked dead. Andrea introduced Toni, her thirty years old son. He stayed with mum since his divorce. Hemi, Andrea's best friend, shared the house and helped with cooking.

"Would you bring us some coffee," said Andrea to Hemi and her son excused himself and left the room.

Barbara wanted to say that it was good to see Andrea, that she didn't change, that nothing changed. She wanted to embrace her, laugh with her but both searched for the right words, not daring to touch.

"I often remembered you," said Barbara embarrassed.

"That's nice," whispered Andrea in the distance of her memories.

"Do you remember that day when you gave me your picture," tried Barbara.

"I gave you my picture?" repeated Andrea.

"You wrote on it: To my best friend, how could you forget that?" thought Barbara, but she didn't want to upset her best friend.

"How are you, what are you doing now?"

"Oh, I am taking it easy."

"Your son is a handsome fellow."

"He is my doctor too. I am very proud of him. I am very lucky to have my family around me," said Andrea. "But tell me about yourself."

Barbara rushed to tell Andrea about her family. Hemi brought cakes, coffee and sweet liqueurs.

"Everything is different now," said Barbara before she could stop herself.

"It's been a long time. I am glad you have a nice family," said Andrea.

"Are you happy," wanted to ask Barbara, but didn't.

"I hate the fog in the autumn, I used to like it before, remember," said Andrea and there was a flicker of light reaching the past.

"We used to go in the fields," responded Barbara touching the tips of Andrea's fingers.

"I think you'd better rest now," said Hemi after a while.

"I have to go too," said Barbara.

"Hope to see you soon again," said Andrea and Hemi saw Barbara to the gate.

"Andrea hasn't got long. They've taken both her breasts a year ago, but they couldn't stop it spreading."

"Where is her husband?"

"He is working. He has been good to her. She left him, you know, before she got sick. She was going to join her lover who went to Kenya. He was a doctor there. He left his wife and four children to be with Andrea."

"Are people still having four children?" Barbara felt silly saying that. Andrea must have felt guilty.

"He got killed in a plane crash. Andrea was crushed. Her husband returned to look after her. He loves her. She became sick and he never left her. Andrea doesn't like talking about it. It upsets her. That's why I am telling you," said Hemi.

"Are you related to Andrea?" asked Barbara.

"No, I am just her best friend. She has always been good to me." Hemi was a plain woman Barbara's age but she spoke confidently and with authority. Barbara wondered what bonded her to Andrea but there wasn't time for asking.

"Andrea was my best friend once," said Barbara, "please look after her for me."

"You liked Andrea," smiled Hemi. "It is so easy to love her. Her family loves her too, of course."

Hemi told Barbara about Andrea's husband. He was famous when they were young. Andrea followed him around Europe where he played soccer for his country. They all worshipped him and Andrea also came under the spell of glamour and excitement. After their two children were born, he injured his knee. By the time it healed, he was too old for soccer so he worked as a dental technician to provide for his family. Her parents bought them a house. It was hard for them to adjust to the mundane working life but it was easier for him because he really loved Andrea. Andrea felt unhappy and guilty because she felt that she never loved her husband. The more he loved her the more unhappy and guilty she felt because she did not realise that he felt happy to have her on any terms.

Barbara wondered why everybody loved Andrea. She knew that she will never see her again, it was best not to become attached again.

"We'll be going back in two weeks," said Barbara.

Barbara walked through Tivoli, the park of lovers, where the autumn leaves were gently falling in the breeze and the smell of winter was in the air. The lovers were still there discovering the mysteries of life as the petals of the flowers were laying down to rest. She

should return with Andrea in spring and remember other springs when they walked there, hand in hand, reciting poetry. There was Ivan sleeping in the car and waiting for her.

Who that hath ever been

could bear to be no more?
 Yet who would tread again the scene
 he trod through life before.
 James Montgomery.

Renata

Barbara and Ivan spent much of their holidays seeing their relations and acquaintances. They travelled to every corner of in Slovenia which seemed so minutely quaint compared to Australia.

Both felt comfortable with Franc and Jana who welcomed their company.

Ivan and Franc went fishing in a nearby river. Barbara sat there with a book, but full of new impressions and recollections she could not read. The roar of the water rushing from the mountains overwhelmed her. The little river Radovna chiselled its stream into the rock thousands of years ago. It moved with an impetuous speed until it splashed noisily into Sava Dolinka which silently passed Barbara's home into the little valley under the mountain.

She sat on this river bank so many times before. There used to be her footprints all over this place, there were castles she built and pyramids. But the river did not remember, it's blind surface was shining into Barbara's face without recognition. Barbara realised that she gave up her rights to the river long time ago.

The words of the song came to her and she sang softly: some say life is like a river. Barbara as a child often wished to be like a river forever going and never returning. She jumped in the stream of life without asking how deep it was and how strong the current. Luckily she learned to swim to save herself.

"Karl taught me to swim here," she shivered remembering. Soon after that frightening experience she left home for good and nothing was quite the same ever again. The fear and the guilt and the shame followed her as she became Karl's daughter.

Ivan and Franc were hidden now down under the weeping willows, the men enjoyed their new friendship and the fishing.

Franc and Barbara went to the orchard in the morning to get plums for Jana to cook in dumplings for lunch. Barbara wanted to explore the places she knew as a child. The old apple tree in the corner was still full of late autumn apples but most of the other trees were newly planted.

"I remember the day you ran away to join the partisans," said Barbara to Franc hoping that he would be happy about her remembering. But Franc didn't remember. How could he forget? It was his birthday and he argued with dad before he ran away. "Mum ran after you, she pulled my hand to come along and I was only six. My hand was hurting but mum kept on running and calling after you. You were only sixteen and you kept running to the river. When mum and I came really close you jumped into the water and swam across where your friends were waiting for you. That's how you joined the partisans. And then we haven't seen you for years until the war was over."

"It wasn't like that at all," laughed Franc. Barbara became scared. Maybe things didn't happen like that at all, maybe all the memories she carried with her, weren't true. How could they be true if they were not remembered by anybody else, if there were no witnesses.

Jana joined Barbara on the river bank now. Jana was a big girl during the war she would surely remember things.

"Do you remember the bodies floating in the river after the war, we were afraid to swim in the river after that," said Barbara to Jana.

"I never heard about that," Jana laughed.

Barbara was relieved that nobody remembered her memories because not knowing her memories, they maybe couldn't see her fears. Except Ivan of course. But they carefully picked what they wanted to remember together.

"Did you want to see Karl and Tereza," asked Jana out of the blue as they sat watching the river. Barbara was stunned by the question.

"No," she said much too quickly. Breathless she tried to hide the panic inside her by leafing through the book.

"I don't know if you kept in touch," said Jana.

"Look at that fish jumping out on the other side," called Barbara to buy time. What did Jana want from her? How close was she to her sister Tereza and her husband Karl. Did they keep in touch? Did Tereza tell her younger sister that she could not have children and that she brought up Barbara's daughter Renata. Were they talking about it all the time or ever at all?

"Karl has emphysema," said Jana searching Barbara's face. Both felt cold, both wanted to be comforted, to break the barrier. Barbara subconsciously covered her face with her hands and Jana looked away again.

"He needs the sunshine," Jana continued. "He hasn't long to go. Maybe six months at the most, hopefully less. Both are praying that he would be spared further suffering. He can't breathe without a mask and cylinders of oxygen. He only takes the mask off his mouth to eat. He eats slowly, he has no air to help him swallow. He weighs forty kilos and he used to be over a hundred. He was tall too but has shrunk. He is over seventy now." Jana quietly explained what she believed Barbara wanted to know. Jana seemed at peace with the world, her greying hair was cut in a natural looking bob and she wore conservative, expensive old clothes.

"They couldn't make it to a wedding so Anica and Dusan went to see them for a while. Tereza is also very tired and weak. I don't think she will be with us much longer either, poor thing." Barbara was convinced that Jana's only sister Tereza must have told her about Renata. How could they keep secrets like that from each other? Barbara remembered suddenly that she also kept the same secret from her own children. She wondered what Jana wanted from her, was she pleading with her to see the old couple. Barbara could not go to see them, she had nothing to say to them, she could not stand there and look at them.

Was Jana making excuses for the old man, was she begging forgiveness for Karl and Tereza. Was Jana a victim? The thought struck Barbara for the first time. Tereza's younger sister

often stayed with Karl and Tereza. Did Jana want to tell Barbara about her own shame, was she waiting for a go-ahead sign from Barbara. Only Barbara couldn't give a sign, she couldn't ask, maybe she could not even listen to it yet. Maybe Jana tried but couldn't tell her either. "One day, one day I know we will talk about it," thought Barbara.

Barbara thought about Karl and Tereza for the first time since she left them. Until now she was afraid to say Karl's name even in her thoughts. Now she thought of two old, broken people, waiting to die. Jana said that Karl and Tereza were praying, but what sort of God were they praying to?

Barbara felt the anger and vengeance evaporating slowly. They were like poison in her veins for years but she could no longer hate the little old man gasping for breath and begging God for forgiveness. "I forgive you," she said in her heart. She had to forgive herself as well but she had no idea what to do, if there was anything at all that she was supposed to do. She finally felt free of Karl. But what about their daughter Renata?

"I suppose Anica told them about your coming. Janek told Anica, of course, during the wedding. If Anica remembered anything else but her adoring husband from that day," said Jana lightly. Lights and shadows played tricks with Barbara's thoughts. She felt stunned and tried to follow Jana's words as a hundred questions raced through her head and her ears were ringing.

"Probably," she said and wandered why Jana did not tell them?

They watched the waves play over the smooth white stones towards the pebbles on the river-bank. The gurgling ripples kept the silence bearable.

"You can see the clouds reflected in the water," said Barbara to change the subject.

"The sky blue water is really the sky reflected in the faceless stream," said Jana.

"In Australia most rivers are muddy because they have muddy bottoms. Sometimes they get yellowish blue with the sun and the sky on the surface."

"They'd be dangerous to swim in," said Jana, "you'd never know what's hiding at the bottom. Here you see right through it."

"Pure water is like pure person, one can see right through it," Barbara remembered Ivan's words. She thanked God that one couldn't see through people like that.

"Renata is coming on Sunday," said Jana.

Barbara bit her lip and folded her arms in a self protective gesture. Barbara was sure now that Jana knew and that she was testing her, forcing her to confess and talk about Renata.

"I wonder what plans Ivan has for Sunday. We might go away for the weekend," she said suddenly. She didn't want to look at Renata and she couldn't bear to have Jana look at her face looking at Renata. Barbara wasn't ready yet, she did not feel strong enough yet. She needed more time but how much more time? She waited almost forty years. Ivan wasn't ready, she realised, he still could not cope with it. She could not cope with Ivan not talking to her.

"Renata often comes to pick mushrooms or chestnuts," said Jana. "I think Franc and Ivan made plans to climb the mountain on Sunday."

So Jana arranged it all, she wanted to see the reunion. But why did she want to bring Barbara and her daughter together?

“The honey-mooners are staying with Karl and Tereza in their big beach house.”

“That’s nice for them, what are they like,” asked Barbara casually throwing pebbles in the water.

“Like most young people, spoiled. Dusan likes cooking and politics, Anica is into recycling and perma-culture. He likes French recipes and she likes raw fruit and vegetables. He is a teetotaler and she likes a glass of wine.”

“Have they nothing in common,” smiled Barbara.

“They share mutual adoration,” said Jana.

“It’s amazing how the world changed, in the olden days we tried-“ Barbara stopped abruptly, she wanted to say that she always tried to be the same as Ivan, to please him. She didn’t want Jana to know how much she tried.

“Renata lives in Ljubljana. She is divorced,” continued Jana. “Do you remember Renata?”

“She was only a baby,” said Barbara. If Jana wanted to play cat and mouse games why not join her? If she wanted to see her break down, she would have to wait. Barbara never broke down, she was used to cat and mouse games.

“We lost touch with her when she went to a boarding school at the age of fourteen. Her school didn’t do Latin. Renata wanted to be a doctor but she married early. She finished her studies after Anica was born. She is a psychologist.”

Both women looked at the river as Jana told the story.

Barbara realised that Jana was dealing her the cards and it was up to her to play or give in. She was used to giving in and she couldn’t change her game yet.

“Why did she get divorced,” Barbara asked against her better judgement. Divorce was something she could never even contemplate seriously. How could a woman survive after the divorce?

“It was silly really because they became good friends after the divorce,” said Jana. “Both were miserable in their marriage. Renata became a different woman since her divorce. She is outgoing and cheerful.”

“That’s good,” said Barbara to say something but she felt enormously happy that Renata found a way to be outgoing and cheerful.

“Dusan, Anica’s husband, likes to go sailing, he persuaded Anica to go to her grandparents’ place. A honeymoon at the seaside will suit him,” said Jana. Barbara heard everything she came to hear, everybody seemed happy here without her. She wondered why did Anica have to be persuaded to go to her grandparents’ villa. Will the honeymoon at her grandparents’ suit her? Was she also the victim, was her mother a victim? How much pain has Karl inflicted on everybody? “But he will cause no more pain, the pain was all his now,” Barbara tried to reason. Only the guilt and the shame were left behind.

“What’s Dusan doing? she asked.

“He finished law and wants to go into politics. Everybody wants to be a politician these days. He wasn’t a candidate in our first democratic elections, but he was hanging posters all over Slovenia.”

“What was on the posters?”

“They were white posters with a black frame saying: Murdered Slovenians won’t rest in peace while their murderers rule Slovenia.”

“What does Anica think about it?”

“She is his greatest fan. Anica and Dusan are talking about rewriting Slovenian history from 1945 until 1955. They want to find out who murdered who after the revolution. Dusan wants to put the records straight. I bet they are researching even on their honeymoon.”

“I wonder what Tereza thinks about it.” Barbara wondered what Karl thought but she couldn’t ask, she still couldn’t say his name out loud..

“Dusan said that Karl never talks about politics. Dusan is in the human rights movement with Jansa’s group,” added Jana.

Barbara remembered Jansa’s name, Ivan organised a protest demonstration against Jansa’s imprisonment. He also sent a lot of money to the human rights committee in Slovenia. Slovenian clubs all over Australia sent the money because Ivan asked them to.

Barbara knew that Ivan would be happy with Dusan. Anica may also one day find out about Barbara’s father, Anica’s great grandfather? Would this make things better or was the history better forgotten? Barbara remembered Ivan saying long time ago to father Damian that everybody had the right to find out the truth. Why must she forget what others have done to her? If everybody had the right to know the truth why doesn’t Ivan allow her to tell the truth. Deep down she knew that she still did not allow herself to tell the truth.

Anica was Karl’s granddaughter but she had no idea that Barbara was her grandmother. She might get hurt knowing the truth. Karl knew that Barbara’s father would kill him, if he found out what he did to his only daughter. Karl took the last precious thing from her father. Was Karl so afraid that he had her father killed? Did Jana know anything about Barbara’s father?

“Janek is very impressed with Slovenia,” said Jana to break the silence.

“Yes, we spent a couple of days with them in Italy,” said Barbara the first thing that came to her mind.

“Franc loves climbing the mountain,” said Jana.

Barbara wandered if Jana sent Ivan and Franc to climb Triglav mountain while Renata came to see her mother. Barbara panicked. Did Jana arrange Renata’s visit? Did Renata know? Did anybody know? Did they all know?” Barbara wanted to run away terrified.

Barbara got up on Sunday morning restless and confused after the sleepless night. Her confused thoughts turned into weird nightmares where Renata became a little girl and Ivan was yelling, big and angry, at Barbara while Renata was running away, crying.

Barbara heard Franc and Ivan preparing for their excursion into the mountains and she wanted to go with them. Both men told her that it was too difficult for her and Jana wanted to have her home for company.

Have they all taken part in the conspiracy? She tried to go back to sleep but her head was spinning and Jana was calling her to breakfast. They drank the coffee and observed that the days were getting cooler and shorter. The clouds were gathering and the sun barely penetrated through. Barbara said that cloudy weather caused her headaches. She wanted to lie down with a couple of aspros

Hidden behind the curtain she watched, glued to her bedroom window she waited for Renata. It was an eternity before Renata parked her white Audi under the tree near her window. Bracing herself she watched a strange, elegant lady step out. She knew that soon Jana would call out to her. Barbara splashed her flushed cheeks with cold water and combed her hair again before she stepped out. Renata was just exchanging greetings with Jana, they were embraced, as Barbara joined them and said hello. Jana introduced them, they shook hands and the hands rested in the handshake for a moment while both women looked for something to say.

Barbara noticed that Renata had blue eyes and she quickly looked away. No wonder they all knew, the eyes were unmistakable. The blue in them couldn't be changed. Renata's dark hair that became pleasantly auburn, almost like the autumn leaves around them.

Barbara wanted to say: How do you do? escaping into English form of greeting but she quickly remembered that this was her Slovenian child.

"I love it here, every time I come to my aunt's place, I feel so much at home," smiled Renata to break the awkward silence. "I almost forgot how beautiful my home was," said Barbara trying to hold an even voice while the silly words bubbled inside her: we are home baby, we both came home, my darling.

"I love this linden tree," said Renata wistfully looking at the branches reaching over the window. "I love trees, you know," she bubbled on smiling almost apologetically. They sat on the bench and the leaves of the linden tree moved with the wind before they fell red and yellow and brown under their feet.

This confident, grown up, beautiful woman was a stranger to Barbara who came to see the baby she left. She had nothing to say, there was nothing for her to do. Barbara felt like she was Renata's child.

"Renata's mum and dad never come," said Jana "We are lucky to see their daughter so often."

Barbara felt that both women were looking at her and enjoyed tormenting her. Maybe they would suddenly burst out with the truth and they would all laugh about it. As a psychologist Renata might explain it all and make it right. Maybe she was hiding her feelings because she was waiting for her real mother to confess, to hold her in a happy ever after reunion.

"Only I can't, not after thirty eight years, not for the first time," thought Barbara angry at being intimidated by these women. Suddenly homesick for the safety of her children, Barbara wanted to escape home to Australia.

"I was waiting all my life for this baby, now I want to run to my family for cover," thought Barbara. She didn't come to meet this self-assured lady. She realised that she wasn't really Renata's mother. Motherhood is more than giving birth, more than longing, hurting, praying, crying from the distance. Motherhood is nurturing, sharing the pain, walking into the life together. She reasoned that it wouldn't help Renata to know that she deserted her, that her mother has done nothing to protect her. Did she need protecting? If she was the victim of her father it was Barbara's fault and she couldn't carry the full guilt of it. Not yet. If she knew she might hate Barbara for abandoning her. If she knew she might also hate Karl and Tereza. Maybe she does. The words inside her called to her daughter: beautiful Renata, my beautiful baby, please forgive me.

"Renata is a real peasant, every autumn she comes to pick mushrooms, strawberries, blueberries and chestnuts." Jana tried to break the silence.

"I can't resist it. Autumn leaves hold some kind of magic for me," laughed Renata softly and the dimples in her cheeks made her look like a shy young girl meeting a boy for the first time. "I love to sit next to the fire and roast chestnuts," she went on. "I feel blissfully, peacefully at home. I must have been a tree in my other life." Renata remembered how she often roamed through the dark mysterious forests watching the rays of sunshine trying to penetrate through the myriad of shadows to warm the ground. There she felt safe.

"I love the forest too," said Barbara before she could stop herself and suddenly her voice trembled ever so slightly as she smiled and her eyes met Renata's.

"I think I'll go back to bed, I have this terrible migraine," Barbara excused herself casually and went to her room. She laid down and sobbed uncontrollably as she remembered that other autumn when she was expecting Renata.

Barbara was fifteen when Karl sent her and his wife Tereza to their seaside home for the last three months of Barbara's pregnancy. Karl told her to write to her parents that she could not come home for the autumn holidays because Tereza was expecting a baby and needed her. It was a long, lonely three months for Barbara. With no one to talk to, she stayed inside with Tereza, they sewed and knitted and read. The secret each of them had to carry was making conversation difficult. Twice her age, Tereza could not get close to Barbara, she had no words to communicate to her. Both were afraid of the coming child because both felt that they had to love it but they didn't know if they ever could. They didn't know how to talk about the baby, yet the baby was all they were thinking about. Karl arranged it with a doctor friend of his, to write that Tereza gave birth to the baby. They were expecting a child that was to become Tereza legitimate daughter. Barbara and Tereza needed each other, one wanted to have the child and the other wanted to get rid of it.

In the privacy of their rooms both Barbara and Tereza cried often. Tereza was sad because she could not carry the child she and her husband wanted, a child that would make it all worthwhile, a child that would take the hollow emptiness out of their lives. She could not share her thoughts with this child girl, swelled inappropriately more and more out of shape every day. Tereza wanted a child of her own.

Barbara cried for her parents and for her baby. It was her first holiday away from home. She cried for the forest, for the mushrooms, for falling leaves and chestnuts and peace. She wanted her parents to come to hold her and take away her pain. If her father saw her he

would know what happened and what he had to do to make everything right again. But Barbara did not want to break her father's heart.

Barbara was grateful when Tereza took her baby, wrapped it and held it to her face gently. But hidden under the blanket Barbara cried every night. She never touched baby Renata. She shivered just looking at her. Scared that she would have to take her and go home with her shame, she closed her ears to Renata's crying. She was afraid to hurt her parents because they were hurt before and they never smiled since she went with Tereza and Karl. She never once wished to keep Renata. She knew that they had absolutely nothing to offer each other, nothing but shame and misery.

As she sobbed in her bed now she realised that she had no rights to Renata, that she should have forgotten her once and for all. The happy stranger outside chatted with Jana happily while Barbara remembered how her breasts ached full of milk but she never once wished to feed Renata. She squeezed the milk out, hiding in the toilet, she squeezed while it hurt, but it soon dried and she became normal again.

Only the shivering remained and crying at night.

Barbara realised now that the forest changed and didn't know her any more. Maybe Renata found what she lost, maybe that is why she felt that in her other life she was a tree. Overwhelmed by feelings Barbara cried grateful prayers because there were no visible scars on her daughter.

God put the pieces of his puzzle in place. The words were flooding over her and she wiped her tears not afraid any more, she was free, getting rid of the tears she never cried before.

Renata brought a basket full of chestnuts and Jana had the fire going.

"A glass of red wine goes really well with them," said Renata as they picked the hot chestnuts out of red coals. It took all their concentration to peel them without getting burned and dirty all over. Barbara liked the rich bitter sweet wine from their vineyard and they relaxed together for an hour before Renata had to go so she wouldn't drive in the dark. Barbara often tried to reconstruct the words they spoke during that afternoon but the time remained a blur of wine and smoke and she wasn't even sure if the bitter sweet taste was really wine or the tears of happiness held back.

Ivan and Franc talked about the mountains and the deer they saw and they laughed about the old age catching up with them.

Barbara thought about Renata who had to drive a hundred kilometres to Ljubljana. If you travel two hundred kilometres in Slovenia you've come from one end to the other. Barbara reasoned that people didn't travel hundred kilometres to pick chestnuts, with petrol their prices Sunday drives were up to twenty kilometres. But maybe Renata did not have to consider the expenses since she was the only daughter of an important family. She could do as she liked. Maybe everything was as it was meant to be. Maybe Renata needed to come home in the autumn.

A man's reach must exceed his grasp or *what's the heaven for*

Anonymous

BIRDS WITHOUT A NEST

"When you go home see my people in Rozna Dolina in Carinthia. The people there give a whole new meaning to faith," Ivan remembered Damian's words about his beloved second home. Ivan wanted to see for himself how his people lived where they have lived from their very beginning and always under a foreign government. Barbara and Diana were already packing their suitcases, sad about leaving Slovenia and excited about going home.

"Before we go home I'd like us to visit Austrian Slovenians together," said Ivan to Janek. He had the address of Damian's friends not far from Slovenian-Austrian border. The steep mountains cradled the tiny village spread along the river. The noisy stream running through the village wasn't even a river, in places one could step over the crystal clear water that splashed over the rocks like a playful child.

"The country is so clean," noticed Diana. Not a piece of rubbish could be found and they all became conscious of the fact that they must leave it as they've found it.

"I always liked a disciplined country," said Ivan. Discipline was one national characteristic Slovenians shared with Austrians. Pedantic tidiness separated Austrian Slovenia from Yugoslav Slovenia. Ivan wondered how many other intricate facets of culture separated Slovenians from the South Slavs just because historically they were under different influences.

Ivan hated sloppiness, he wished he could make laws that would stop littering in his new hometown Linden. Down in the middle of Linden he saw bottles smashed along the kerb and it hurt Ivan to see his dream town vandalised like that.

They found the house belonging to Damian's friends and they stood in front of it to admire the windows decorated with pots of flowers.

"Every house has flower pots on the windows," observed Janek.

"The colour co-ordination is magnificent," said Barbara. She knew that she must memorise the picture because one day she wanted to paint real happy pictures of real places like this. The carnations of different colours grew from the window seal trough and hung down white washed walls.

An old woman came from the cowshed with a bucket of milk. Her apron covered her long skirt and the flowery scarf covered all her hair and pushed to the front it shaded her face. As Ivan mentioned Damian's name she embraced everybody and then wiped her eyes with a wrinkled brown hand. Damian's family instantly became her family; the woman shouted to her husband working up on the narrow slope between the cliffs. The man with a funny sing along accent danced down the hill and shook hands and slapped everybody's shoulder over and over before he disappeared into the cellar to get some wine.

“Before you all die from thirst,” he said as he poured the rich, red wine into big men sized glasses for everybody. The first toast required ‘bottoms up’ performance and since then everything seemed roses. Unaccustomed to midday wine they felt elated and laughed merrily as they remembered the people they knew and told the stories of their lives.

The woman climbed the stairs into the attic to bring down the ham that hung there for a special occasion. She cut a huge loaf of bread and in the enthusiasm of their meeting they forgot that the sun was getting low behind the mountains. The neighbours dropped in to see what was going on and they too joined in the celebration. Before they knew it, they all sang old Slovenian songs into the night. Ivan remembered that they had to go in search of accommodation but their hosts laughed at him saying that they would never allow them to go.

The next morning still in bed, feeling quite at home, Barbara talked with Ivan about the amazing night they spent with their new friends.

They simply had to stay the next and the next day because they had to help preparing for Sunday when all the villages would come together to celebrate the yearly feast of Saint Martin who was their patron and whose name their church carried. Everybody prepared for the feast and everybody would participate in the celebration.

Women sewed their colourful outfits, baked mountains of magnificent cakes, cleaned the church and their homes, decorated the path leading from their homes to their church. They all confessed their sins so they could join in Sunday’s Holy communion.

Men hammered the stalls where all their goods would be displayed, they cut the timber and brought the old spits. Cannons and the cannon powder were carted on the hill above the church. The thunder of the cannon fire proclaimed their faith just like their singing and praying did.

Young people collected the greenery from the forest. They met in the evenings to make miles of wreaths until their hands bled from twisting the evergreen branches. They practised the songs for the Sunday ceremony and then they sang the old love songs as they chose the people to love. The litres of wine kept coming and the youngsters and the old danced the night away to the music of the accordion. The courtship was in itself a celebration of the new life because they would marry before next lent and so continue the cycle of life.

Ivan felt grateful that his family had a chance to be a part of the old ritual and he was very willing to stay for the mass in the ancient church on top of the hill with Slovenians who have preserved Slovenian culture despite the centuries of foreign rule over them.

The processions of people in their finery slowly climbed up the hill from every direction as the church bells tolled every few minutes inviting them to be together. The girls waited at the entrance of the church to pin red and white carnations on every lapel before they assembled for the service. The choir sang as people kept coming and the words of their songs were echoing of the hills that recognised their people.

“And there are people,” said the preacher, “who are saying that church is not catering for this generation, that the church is dying. I tell you, the church has never catered for a generation. If it did, it would die with the generation. The church is leading all generations towards that, which is common to all generations, it is uplifting us, it is bringing us closer to

what is divine in us, it is bringing us to God. Again and again the church became the corner stone of civilisations, again and again Slovenians look for the leading light of the church in their struggle. Again and again we meet like birds without a nest united in our common belief in our church. Those who were rejected by the builders became a corner stone again. All over the world Slovenians are united in the church that is the source of our strength.”

The procession followed the priest and the choir on the slopes of the hills, they stopped from time to time, the bells tolled, the cannons fired, the singing followed, the prayers continued.

The faces of the believers shone in their divinity and Barbara cried as the hills of Saint Martin’s parish became alive with singing.

This yearly ritual was a pivot of their life, a festival of life. Barbara cried because the day seemed so holy and these villagers so pure and fresh and young, and full of hope. She fell in love with their simplicity. The warmth of love filled all her senses and she wanted to hold onto the memory of the day forever.

After the mass they sat with the locals who served their festive food and their faces were full of joy.

“Everything comes together here, the harvest, the season, God and courting and singing. Everything is connected, everything belongs. That’s what I had in mind for Linden,” said Ivan and they became thoughtful. Ivan realised that one could not simply build the town, the ties that connected people grew over the centuries. He realised that the town he built in Australia will grow with his children into a new future. Happy that he laid the foundations he hoped that they will remember why he built the church and the cemetery on the hill outside town. That’s how things begun, one was born and baptised and passed into the valley below to do his part before he was brought up to the church again to be returned to god and the soil.

“One can only do so much,” he echoed his thoughts knowing that generations to come will shape Linden.

Barbara also felt the wholeness of the country and the people. The autumn wind and the sunshine, the summer gone and the winter coming and the beginning of the new life in the spring. Weddings before Easter from the courtships begun before the snowfall. That’s how it was in the beginning and will be. Forgotten among the mountains they lived the secure life, never independent but dependent only on each other they knew when and how to live and be happy.

“They never needed to run away,” said Ivan.

“Mum, you are crying,” teased Janek.

“All these flowers and singing and bells and words,” said Barbara wiping the tears.

“They spent two thousand dollars for cannon powder alone,” said Ivan focusing on tangibles.

“These people sing everywhere, in their homes, on the fields in the church,” said Barbara.

“They have to practice. This Sunday is at St. Martin’s, next one will be St Margaret, and then St. Leonard and St. Marko. I believe there are six churches within their reach. They go and sing, on these saint days they sing for the blessings to last them a year,” said Ivan.

“In Slovenia you don’t see such reverence,” observed Janek.

“The traditional pageantry of Slovenians in Austria has never been interrupted by communism. For the last forty-five years the church had a bad image in Slovenia, religion was considered a superstition of dumb peasants. The mass there still sounds insincere,” explained Ivan.

He wondered if it was progress or communism that changed his Slovenia but people at home did not feel connected, they were aching for some unattainable liberty and achievement. This valley squeezed into the mountains was forgotten by Slovenia and ignored by Austrians but this was full blooded Slovenia. Ivan was glad that he shared with his family the country his friend Damian loved. He gave Janek a gift of knowing where his people came from.

“They dress up so carefully,” said Diana.

“The people speak a mixture of German and Slovenian much like Slovenians in Australia speak a mixture of Slovenian and English,” observed Janek.

“This is still the cradle of Slovenian culture. Damian told me about it,” said Ivan.

The sun was setting on them but nobody thought about going home. The little groups scattered in the hills were singing until dawn. People moved from one group to another to exchange their thoughts and feelings.

“Drinking and making love,” Janek winked at Diana.

“Birds without the nest,” Ivan remembered the priest’s words.

“Nesting all over the world,” finished Janek.

“People can’t exist without a celebration. That’s why I built a club in Australia,” said Ivan.

“Trust you to do the right thing,” smiled Barbara.

In a short while the generations of the living are changed and like runners pass on the torch of life.

Lucretius

Christening

Ivan proudly carried Johnny in his white christening robes as they stopped in front of the Linden church. The apprentice grandfather was the centre of attention because he held the celebrant baby. Johnny wriggled himself out of Ivan's arms. He spotted a puddle on the side of the road and was determined to lower his padded bottom into it.

"Watch it, no son, don't, I said no, did you hear me, I won't say it again, NO, Kim get him, watch him. No, come to me Johnny, come to daddy darling, you are a good boy aren't you, daddy's boy, come baby. Give a big kiss to daddy, I mean it, I am serious, son, NO," Leon felt vulnerable because everybody watched and his son took no notice of his first public fatherly attempts at discipline. Johnny knew that all this smiling people were delighted with him. He could read the benign faces like a book.

"He likes his poppy," beamed Ivan as he let his grandson down but holding his hand firmly. Johnny extended his foot and splashed it into the mud. People laughed as the baby, freshly delighted, squealed for the first time.

"There is nothing like mud," said Ivan wiping his suit. Barbara was afraid that he would be cross with the boy but he lifted him and kissed him into a delighted embrace. When he let him down again Johnny bent his knees and splashed backward directly into the tiny puddle. Everybody laughed as he shivered and shook his cold bottom like a wet puppy. Kim came to the rescue with one of the brightly wrapped presents to entice him from the water. Johnny expertly tore the paper, looked over the fluffy teddy bear for a second and threw it in the puddle.

"We all love him, I don't have to worry about him," thought Barbara and the luxurious warm flow of love brought a smile on her face.

Ivan wanted to discipline his grandson but he realised that it wasn't his place and that being stern might offend Leon and Kim. He couldn't risk failing in his disciplining in front of all these people so he casually wiped the mud off his suit saying: "Dry-cleaners will be grateful."

Ivan disapproved altogether of the way young couples brought up children. In his time babies were toilet trained as soon as they could sit but these days they made poor toddlers carry the shit in their nappies until they, the kids, decided that they were ready to go to the toilet. Potties became redundant.

Parents tried to keep kids permanently happy. But the children refused to be happy and more and more left home to be unhappy without their parents, on the streets.

"You don't know what happiness is until you have experienced unhappiness," reasoned Ivan in his own mind. He couldn't understand young mothers asking their toddlers what they

would like to eat and drink and wear and play. What are mothers for if they are not qualified to make decisions for their kids? How could a toddler decide what is good for him?

Kim cooked a meal for the rest of the family but she asked Johnny what he would like. It was hard for Ivan not to interfere but he knew his place, he knew the limits of what he could and what he could not do. He knew that Leon and Kim would resent him for undermining their authority.

Ivan firmly believed that hard work, saving and frugality brings success and that only success could bring happiness. But kids laughed at his ideas.

"I wish my mum could see her grandson," said Johnny's other Nan, Eva, who was still grieving for her mother who died in England only months ago. Suffering from the Alzheimer's disease she lived in a world of her own. "She wouldn't recognise me anyway," Eva tried to convince herself but she was sorry that as an only child she didn't attend her mother's funeral.

"Would be nice to have a family here," said Kevin whose father was bedridden and was looked after by Kevin's sister.

"We were so lonely here at the beginning, were you lonely?" Eva turned towards Barbara as they stood in front of the church and the memories took them in different directions where their loved ones were..

"I never thought about it," said Barbara quickly and then remembered that she had no words for pain and despair that loneliness brought her. Her children never knew the people who held them to be christened, or the people, whose names were put down as their Godparents. Is that lonely? Her mother never experienced the joy of holding her grandchildren or felt the soft, milky skin on her old face. Her children never had anyone remembering them on their birthdays or for Christmas, nobody ever laughed as they misbehaved. They had no-one to run to for comfort when their parents didn't understand. That must be lonely.

"Fancy them telling me about loneliness. They came from England, how could they feel lonely, they spoke the language." thought Barbara."

"We were so cut off," said Eva. "There was no-one one went to school with or to church, no-one to remember things and places with. People were kind enough but they were strangers."

"I suppose we were," agreed Barbara. Barbara wandered how could Eva have any idea about being cut off.

"You are lucky to have your people around you all the time," continued Eva as she looked at Slovenians chatting around her.

"Kids used to hate being with our people. They felt that we were holding them back. Actually we were holding them back because we were afraid to let them go. We didn't know anyone. They are coming back now since they left home." Barbara suddenly knew that everything was as it should have been.

"They come for the food," laughed Ivan, happy that they wanted to come.

"We'd better get out of here," Kim picked her son and headed for the rest room with a bag of paper nappies.

Kim's parents came from Sydney for the occasion. Relieved at seeing Kim and Leon affectionately holding hands, they admired their grandson. Leon was rather abrupt young man with an air of defiance, almost arrogance, when they first met.

"He is the most beautiful baby ever born. He has my eyes," said Kim's father Kevin.

"And Leon's nose," said Kim.

"And Kim's mouth," helped Leon.

"And Barbara's cheekbones," said Kevin.

"And Eva's fingers," helped Ivan. They felt generous and united by this real Australian baby whose roots were their roots.

"You'll have to sleep with a grandfather now, Eva," teased Leon.

"And like it," laughed Kevin. "Johnny suddenly turned four young people into pops and nans."

The loveliness of baby John brought smiles on everybody's faces. Even Janek and Leon teased each other light heartedly. Baby John made one a father and the other an uncle and a Godfather.

Helena, a little uncertain, stood next to Richard who insisted on holding her hand. The aunt Godmother wasn't sure if holding hands with divorced Richard in front of the church and her parents was the right thing to do. Her eyes flicked from Ivan to Richard but everybody was smiling.

The nuns provided morning tea in the nearby convent for the occasion and most Linden Slovenians attended. Ivan invited father Damian from Sydney to baptise Johnny but Damian couldn't stay, he had to baptise another child in Sydney.

"Everybody is having grandchildren in 1990," said Marjan. He would have enjoyed showing off his grandson to his friends but his daughter Naomi had a son in Paris and didn't plan on getting married or coming home.

Joe came on his own, Hermina went to the prayers of her Born Again Christians' group. By silent arrangement they accepted their new lifestyle that kept them apart most of the time. Their oldest daughter was living with a boyfriend, the other two didn't care for men so they rented a small flat on their own. Wearing strange clothes they became strangers to Joe and even Hermina seemed uncertain about them. They still came sometimes on Sundays because they liked her cooking, but they rarely talked to her. As soon as she tried to quote the verse or chapter of the Bible they bolted out on an urgent assignment.

During their brief holiday in Slovenia Joe and Hermina came a little closer, but back in Linden the last sparks of love peacefully died. Joe saw his friends in Slovenia, they seemed happily married with their families around them, he felt that they had something he missed out on. They boasted about the homes they built, the cars they drove and the achievements of their children. Joe blamed Hermina for being away from home, he became snappy with her until gradually both accepted their dislike of each other and began to keep out of each others' way. Joe also became a little jealous of Hermina's new God. He wanted to believe something, he wanted to find the meaning for it all.

"I wonder if Johnny will ever speak Slovenian," said Joe.

"He might. Last year in America we met Slovenian pensioners who spoke clear old Slovenian dialects," said Andrej. "I asked them how long they've been in America and they told me that they have never been to Slovenia. Second and even third generation they spoke what they learned from their parents." Andrej and Vida had six grandchildren who spoke Slovenian words of greetings to make Nan and pop proud. The whole family kissed each other at peace offering in the church and they looked like a glossy pictures of family bliss.

"Maybe our grandchildren will sit in our clubs in years to come and remember us," said Ivan.

"Wishful thinking," said Joe.

"Our clubs have served their purpose." said Marjan. "We only go for a drink there now, we could just as well go to the pub."

"I like to drink with our people," said Joe.

"My kids don't mind coming along only there is nothing for them to do in our club," said Andrej. "Somebody should do something for young ones, so they will want to come."

"Yes, like the mouse said: somebody should tie a bell on a cat. But who?" laughed Marjan. "I was always saying that there is nothing for our children."

They tried to inject some life into the club by electing the second generation Slovenians into the committee, but there was no Slovenian atmosphere in the festivities. The young ones chose modern music and decorations and most spoke English. The generation gap was felt acutely but the old generation had to give way to the young.

"For the last New year's celebration there was nothing Slovenian. The young president even informed me that nobody in the new committee spoke enough Slovenian to wish Slovenians a Happy New Year in Slovenian," said Ivan. He instructed the boy on the words to say and the boy obeyed. Dismayed that nobody else saw the significance of this action, Ivan became less sure of its importance and tried to enjoy the evening.

"If only men would stop fighting, we could all enjoy ourselves there," said Vida.

"There is no life in there since they stopped fighting." said Vinko. "We used to go to the club to hear the arguments and take sides."

"At least we learned something while we argued," said Marjan.

"Boredom is the killer. It goes right across the society. People stay at home because they couldn't be bothered to socialise," said Mitja.

"They watch videos instead of participating in life. Boredom and loneliness are the killers," said Boris.

"We joined the golf club," said Milena who couldn't stand being accused of boredom or loneliness. Playing golf sounded posh and foreign to others but Milena didn't mind excluding herself. Milan went along with activities she organised. They became friends, partners in business and in sport. Looking to each other for support they even finished each others' sentences. In some ways they became each other's children. They persevered in each other's company for over thirty years and both were sure that they would protect each other against the world. They carried each other's memories and became a treasure

chest of remembering. They travelled a lot and appreciated each other's company. They travelled to China once and have heard about the nomads who carried the bones of their ancestors wherever they went. "We carry each other," smiled Milena and squeezed Milan's hand..

"Soon we'll start bowling with Australian pensioners," laughed Milan a little uncomfortable.

Barbara remembered Milan's words to Ivan from years ago: He was talking about Milena who tried to impress people. "It's a waste of time being posh, you get one chance to be yourself and you waste it on being posh."

"We are going for lunch at the club in Sydney," said immaculately groomed Vida..

"You never come to our place anymore," said Kristina with her hands resting on Peter's wheelchair.

"With some wine we could still raise a song," said Peter. Sonja glanced at Kristina knowingly. Peter drank regularly now. Vinko and Peter often reminisced about home but on his own Peter became cranky and demanding.

"He is blaming himself because we can't go to Slovenia for a holiday like everybody else," explained Kristina to Sonja.

"You didn't even invite us to the christening of your first grandson," teased Milan. He was a little sad because Ivan and Barbara spent less and less time with him since Barbara began painting and Ivan retired.

"There are nine of us now," said Ivan proudly. "You wouldn't invite us all."

"We can only sit twelve at the dinner table," Barbara felt guilty for not inviting them.

"We managed to have fun without a dinner table," Milan glanced at Barbara.

"We could bring the plate like Australians do. Remember how I brought an empty plate for our first morning tea here," laughed Vida. "Nobody told me that I had to bring food."

Tired of all the attention, Johnny fell asleep during the drive home and they celebrated without him.

"It's nice to be back home," said Barbara to Leon.

"What do you mean Mum," teased Leon. "You went home to Slovenia."

Both knew that something changed, that maybe for the first time they were all together home.

"It feels great," said Helena. "We haven't all been home for ages."

"We named him John after Dad and Janek," said Leon. "Did you know that Ivan and Janek both mean John. I didn't know that."

Neither Janek nor Ivan identified with the name John but both felt honoured. Maybe the English version of their name would have helped them in the past, had they adopted it, but now they knew themselves as Ivan and Janek.

"I'll look after him when he comes to school," said Janek.

"He goes on his own, off the deep end," said Leon.

"I might have something to say about that," said Kim.

"If we ever have a daughter you can go with her, I might myself pounce on anyone wanting to hurt her. But boys have to be tough."

"Nothing changed," thought Barbara, "girls have to be looked after, boys have to be strong but when they grow up they will expect to be equal. Boys don't cry, girls burst into tears and are comforted by men if they look pretty. Maybe all is as it should be."

"I hope he doesn't develop an Achilles heel. People always look out for your hidden weak spots," said Leon rather seriously.

"What's yours?" teased Janek.

"You'd like to peck at mine, you chook," laughed Leon.

"Everybody likes a little blood. They don't shoot, they knife them in the new thrillers," said Janek.

"Little Hitlers are sprouting all over the world," said Leon.

"Everybody looks after number one," said Janek.

"You don't want to wait for others to look after you," said Leon.

"The garden is positively glorious," said Helena looking at rows of roses of different colours near the dining room window. She knew how proud dad was of his efforts. Mum told her that the garden became his main purpose in life since he returned from Slovenia.

"Reminds me of the kids' garden at school," said Janek. "We were spacing out seedlings. In one corner remained a thick mixture of plants and it was positively flourishing while half of the spaced out plants died. I had a hard time explaining to kids that maybe being spaced out and independent is a mistake. We are experimenting with perma-culture now. Companionship growing."

Ivan understood Janek's implication, his son still rebelled against discipline and order. He was promoting freedom but what was his idea of freedom? How could he condone the way children behaved these days? Janek let his students do as they liked and he kept on smiling at them. Ivan heard reports from other concerned parents that there was no discipline in Janek's class. He was too liberal.

"Kids have no-one to lean on these days. Single mothers are busy with their boyfriends while the government acts as a remote father. How are the kids to learn, they have no fathers to model themselves on." said Ivan.

"Fathers are indeed redundant," agreed Kevin.

"Kids can't learn from teachers, they themselves don't know right from wrong." Janek felt a sting in his father's words.

"Or parents," said Janek. "You taught me one thing, the school taught me another. I had to juggle all the time to find out who was right?"

"Old generations always despair about the young," said Eva lightly.

"Idleness is the root of all evil," said Kevin.

“Shakespeare said: If all the year were holidays, to sport would be as tedious as to work.” helped Eva with a quote from a good book.

“They don’t want to have full employment,” said Ivan. “If they were serious about it they would take the dole from the young single people and give it to a married mother to stay home. She already has a job. Mothers should be there looking after the family and teaching children some manners and morals.”

“They want to work and be equal,” said Kevin.

“Bulshit, they wanted to be equal but they are realising now that they chose slavery,” said Ivan. “Most have to work to help the ends meet.”

“Since we can’t change the world, what about a little game of tennis,” said Richard.

“About time we gave it a rest.” Ivan watched Richard, he tried to ignore the man, but he couldn’t help liking him. He wished his sons were like him, friendly and confident. He never seemed worried about what the rest of the world thought about him. Handsome and successful he made people take notice. Ivan began to understand why his wayward daughter chose to live with him. He realised that Richard was more like himself than his own sons were.

“Leon is so much like your father,” said Eva to her daughter Kim after the men left. They stacked the dishes and prepared for afternoon tea.

“You tried to stop me going with him,” teased Kim. “Remember how you would have paid me to go on around the world trip to buy time and change my mind about marrying Leon.”

“We didn’t know Leon then,” said Eva.

“You called him a wog,” accused Kim light-heartedly. “Would you like me to tell him that now.”

“We didn’t mean it like that,” said Eva.

“How did you mean it?” asked Kim.

“We would have stood by you anyway,” said Eva.

“You would have stood with me against Leon, that’s wicked, mum.”

Barbara and Helena sat on the patio, looking into the valley as they sipped their coffee.

“I was afraid that dad would yell because I brought Richard. They seem to like each other.”

“His bark was always worse than his bite,” said Barbara.

“He scared me,” said Helena.

“Dogs smell people who are scared of dogs. They growl at them.”

“Are you calling my Dad a dog,” laughed Helena.

“He lost his bark a lot since he doesn’t scare us anymore.”

Ivan came in with Richard for a drink and he put his arm around Helena’s shoulders: “Here is to my family!” Helena squeezed Richard’s hand on the other side.

Richard was shaking his head as if to say: “I don’t understand you, I really don’t.”

"I am happy that Dad likes me," thought Helena. "In fact I hate lots of things he does, but I must like a lot of other things about him too. Nobody is perfect."

"Here is to my wife, my daughter and my sons. I hope that we will meet at many more christenings," said Ivan.

"I'd like to have a baby," thought Helena. "I will have a baby. I might get married, imperfectly married in the registry office."

Suddenly happy, Helena remembered that Richy and Trisha liked her lasagne. They came excited every Saturday night and she prepared the pasta dish to perfection. The cheese oozed out of their smiling lips as they made faces at Helena. They laughed at each other as they planned the games to play after dinner. For the first time Helena realised that she did not hate Richard's kids any more. They might become excited at the news of a new baby.

"Why are you crying," Dad squeezed her shoulders. Both were enormously happy that they began to communicate again; they were most special to each other.

"Too much wine," laughed Helena.

"The food was delicious," complimented Eva.

"Barbara is an excellent cook," said Ivan. "I trained her well."

Barbara wished that he'd say that a long time ago. Maybe he did, maybe she did not hear him. She looked at their wedding photos and saw two beautiful young people, yet she never considered themselves beautiful."

Helena was bringing cakes on the table.

"Aren't you planning a family yet, Helena?" asked Kim.

"One day soon." People looked at Helena, models are to be looked at, said Helena's photographer. Models create illusions, they inspire feelings. Nobody really cares what is underneath the exterior. Helena's exterior was always immaculate. Leon called them together.

"We have this multicultural gathering here to celebrate the initiation of our son John into the Catholic community." He lifted the glass. "We'd better drink to his health and hope he doesn't wake up for awhile."

"And hope that he will abstain from drinking," laughed Kim.

Home is not where you live but where you are prepared to die.

Graham Connors

Slovenian Independence

Soon after their return from Slovenia Ivan suffered a heart attack. He was irritable all that hot Sunday morning just before Christmas. He yelled at Barbara for cutting the roses without as much as asking his advice. He shouted at Janek for parking in the driveway. Janek explained that he was just dropping off mum's shopping and wanted to get away quickly. Ivan complained earlier about the heaviness in his chest and about his restless night so Barbara kept out of his way to avoid a major argument.

After lunch Ivan held his chest for a moment before he slumped in a chair. His breathing warned Janek that something was very wrong. He jumped and loosened dad's collar before he almost carried him in the car. It took them only minutes to the hospital but by then Ivan could barely breathe and he stopped moving.

Janek never left dad's side, he was afraid that dad would die before they could say all the nice things they wanted to say to each other. Barbara was asleep in a nearby chair when Ivan regained consciousness. He lightly squeezed Janek's hand and whispered: "Son." "Dad," said Janek embracing the weak old man. They became aware of their closeness. Neither of them ever experienced this kind of closeness with any other person. They couldn't find the words to say but they didn't need the words any more.

Ivan rarely left home since his heart attack. He spent hours in the garden looking after his fruit trees and he talked to his first grandson Johnny more than he ever talked to any of his children. They looked at ants and grasshoppers and birds. Ivan said to Johnny all the things he wanted to say to Janek, soft, loving, forgiving words that would wash away everything that was wrong between them. He looked forward to seeing Janek home on weekends. They talked about the rapidly changing world and their role in it. Both knew that there was new intimacy between them but neither ever mentioned that time in the hospital.

Ivan began to admire Janek's strong stand for justice. He realised that Janek wasn't weak but concerned. His son became an invincible force who was actively promoting racial harmony in the community. He grew determined and full of idealism despite Ivan's calculated warnings. Ivan was happy that Janek still had the vision, that he still believed in an ideal world. But Ivan could never bring himself to tell Janek how proud he was of him.

"I became cunning and sceptical," admitted Ivan to himself.

Janek began to realise that there were two sides to every story and he began to count on dad to show him the other. It was important for both to communicate. Both acknowledged that agreeing with each other would serve no purpose. They finally felt free to be what they were and enjoyed the stimulation of controversy.

When alone, Ivan looked at his life now and saw flaws and bitterness and futility of it. He craved perfection, he wanted to live a good life, he always wanted to do the right thing. He began to wonder about the good and the bad? Was bad only a degree of good, was hate only a degree of love? Was life only an intensity of feeling gradually dying away? When he was young Ivan's pendulum was swinging from one extreme to the other causing the exquisite pain of anticipation. Now he wandered wistfully if he would ever be overwhelmed

by this essence of life again. He looked at the pain of his youth and begged for another chance. He wanted to do it again and again, to do it right and experience the joy that was life.

Ivan never forgot his mother's words of warning. He was twelve years old and dressed for confirmation, he had a white shirt and a white lily in his hands. His mother made a cross on his forehead saying: "Son, live every day like it was your last. One day you'll be right." Ivan never forgot that.

Ivan warned his children not to enjoy the dangerously exquisite experience of life but now he wanted to do everything that was dangerous again and again.

Ivan warned his children to stop being happy and to build a better future. He didn't yet know then that all people get is now, one moment in the eternity of the universe. It made Ivan a little sad that his children would probably repeat his warnings to their children.

Ivan travelled back into his youth searching for innocence and dreams of the future because he wanted just once more to be consumed with the intensity of passion for life. He wanted to be young and reckless again. He also thought about the eternity and he made himself ready to cross the darkness of death because he realised that his life will be complete only when he will reach the other side.

The Lenten liturgy gained a new meaning for Ivan. Jesus knew no hate so he always stood perfect in his white innocence. His disciples saw him shiny and transfigured on the mountain only after they cleansed their own souls of hate and fear and jealousy. Suddenly an ordinary man they knew became good and clean and powerful and gentle, they saw him as love and compassion. Ivan suddenly realised that it was disciples who were really transfigured. Utterly changed they saw for the first time what had always been in front of them.

Ivan himself became transfigured and forgiven. He began to see the goodness in others. Was that what the birth of Christ was? Was Jesus just a man until he was born in the hearts of men? The new understanding washed over Ivan. He wanted to rush out and talk to Jesus in the hearts of the people he loved. He never saw Jesus in any of the people he lived with. Maybe that's why he was afraid to let his children follow other people. He never trusted strangers. Damian told him long ago that there was goodness in every human heart, but Ivan couldn't understand it then. Damian said that Jesus was waiting to be discovered in every human heart.

As Easter Sunday's alleluias were echoing from the church walls, Ivan suddenly experienced the resurrection of Jesus. It had nothing to do with the battered body of Jesus nailed on the cross. Jesus became alive again in his heart because Ivan died a little to the world. The imperfections and mistakes of his life became visible, the doubts were everywhere. There was no escape and he had to accept the imperfect preparation for an everlasting perfection.

Ivan remembered how he whispered words of love to Barbara long time ago. He held her tenderly, afraid to hurt or frighten her. She said the kind loving words to him but neither her body nor her heart responded and accepted Ivan. Finally she told him that Karl, who had no right to touch her, had frightened and hurt her. Ivan wanted to hurt Karl for taking away Barbara's trust but unable to hurt Karl, he punished Barbara. He wasted all those years punishing her. He decided to take her home again so she could deal with her past and forgive him.

Ivan also wanted to go home to be at the birth of his nation. He reasoned that it will probably be the last time, that he will say goodbye Slovenia. The plans for Slovenian proclamation of independence were finalised in 1990.

The Slovenian world Congress was selecting their representatives for the celebration of Slovenian independence. He was considered a sick man. He quietly expected to be chosen to represent Australian Slovenians but as the time approached nobody asked him.

Janek spent a lot of time with his father. Milan often brought news from other Slovenians. Most of them finally stopped talking Serbo-Croatian Yugoslav language when they met friends from other republics. Many denied that they ever had friends among other nations of Yugoslavia. They now hated Yugoslav regime as fiercely as they loved and supported it in the past. Some called their former Southern brothers Gypsies and other derogatory names. Drunk with beer and patriotism they beat their chests as they insisted that they always struggled against Yugoslav brotherhood. Their instant turnabout was repulsive to Ivan and Milan.

Not long ago Slovenians were boasting about their anti-Communist activities but communism became a forgotten enemy now. The old communists told them that other nations of Yugoslavia were their real enemy.

Most people of the former Yugoslavia embraced nationalism and became ashamed of their past unity. They tried to spit out the ideology they were willingly swallowing for half the century. They wanted to rid themselves of the bitter venom of betrayal. Disarmed, resigned and slightly disappointed they spattered their hatred of Yugoslav brotherhood in a self cleansing gestures like a victim of a rape scrubs her body over and over trying to destroy the degrading memory.

Slovenians accused each other of not doing enough for Slovenia. Many would like to return to Slovenia for good, but they realised that Australia became a comfortable home and that they belonged here.

Ivan talked to Janek about Slovenia, he wanted him to understand who they were and why they escaped from the country they loved so dearly. In the past Janek defiantly closed his ears to everything that was remotely Slovenian because he hated his family. Now he learned an unwritten, uncertain, unconfirmed version of history that even his father wasn't sure about any more.

The Austro-Hungarian Empire disintegrated after the first world war and Slovenians and Croatians who were part of that Empire were free to form a new union. They joined Serbs and formed a federation with a constitutional right to secede when either of them wanted to. Soon the federation of Slovenians, Croatians and Serbs became Yugoslavia with the centralist Serb dominated government in Belgrade. Many Serbs considered all Yugoslavs to be Serbs who had to be reunited into a Greater Serbia. They believed that peoples of Yugoslavia had been misled into thinking that they were any different from their brothers in Serbia. They had to be re-educated or forced into accepting Greater Serbia as their ideal.

Other nations began to resent growing Serbs dictatorship and exploitation. By the time Hitler occupied Yugoslavia many welcomed the change. Croats even proclaimed an independent Croatia under Hitler's protection. Many people died in the bloody fratricidal war that was part of the second world war in Yugoslavia.

After the war the new communist leadership maintained that brotherhood and unity was essential for the good of all Yugoslav nations. Growing in this spirit of unity, people were made to believe that it was reactionary, sinful and shameful to even think of separating the nations that had entwined gradually since they became one country in 1918. The ties of six Yugoslav nations were strengthened under Tito's dictatorship.

The communist party, following in the Stalin's footsteps, was the ideal of the united proletariat. Even after Tito broke up with Stalin everybody knew that the threat of the Russian army was eminent if anything would threaten Yugoslav brotherhood. They've seen Soviets walk into Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland. They knew that any uprising against Serbs' dominance in Yugoslavia would be squashed at its source. Serbs and Russians always considered themselves blood brothers. Russia remained a rock behind the Yugoslav brotherhood even after Tito's death.

When Stalin died in 1953 he was succeeded by a collective leadership of his closest collaborators. Maybe Tito followed Stalin's example. Just before he died in 1981 Tito ordered that for the next thirty years the presidents of the six Yugoslav republics rotate yearly as Federal Yugoslav presidents, each nation taking a turn at presidency. Some insisted that it was to be the most fair distribution of power, others attributed this arrangement to Tito's fear that some other personality would emerge and take the gloss of his leadership.

Did Tito sincerely hope that in another thirty years of brotherhood and unification the one Yugoslav nation would emerge, that nationalities and religions of Yugoslavia would be forgotten, that Balkan would become one homogeneous, stable nation? Was Tito aware of the depth of animosities and historic vendettas of the Yugoslav mix? Did he hope to rub out forever the names of the national heroes interwoven into the country's poetry and music. Did he intend to destroy the pictures and the buildings that carried the names of their gods and idols and heroes? Did he hope to wipe out the consciousness of the herd culture.

Tito realised that only economically equal nations would have a chance of accepting each other as equals. He ordered that the more progressive republics of Yugoslavia help develop the underdeveloped ones. They could then march into happy communist utopia together in the spirit of brotherly love. Tito suppressed the hatred and competition and promoted common good and self-sacrifice.

Slovenians were desperate to get ahead only they were made ashamed of their selfish drive.

As communism self-destructed, Yugoslav nations again embraced their old gods, national symbols and arms.

In 1991 Slovenia and Croatia claimed the right to secede. They hoped that the simultaneous disintegration of the Soviet Union would keep Soviets busy and they would not interfere in Yugoslav affairs. The fear of Russian military intervention became lessened. People did not realise yet that in the global politics of the United Nations Soviets, as members of the Security Council, could prevent any intervention of the West in the affairs of Yugoslavia. Serbs knew that they could always count on the voice of Russia.

In charge of the Yugoslav military might, Serbs were well prepared for the war they expected and planned. Yugoslavia was the border between the East and the West and both East and West kept Yugoslav army well equipped. The six Yugoslav nations also paid heavily for the defence.

In charge of the vast Yugoslav armoury, Serbs were prepared to fight and prevent other nations from seceding. Their dream of Greater Serbia has been rekindled. Many Serbs and Croats were killed in the bloody barbaric, fraternal war during second world war and Tito was afraid of the hatred between Serbs and Croats ever since. He knew that Serbs never forgot their dead. While they preached brotherly love they armed themselves for the war.

Neither Serbs nor Croats liked Muslims in their midst. Muslims reminded Balkan nations of centuries of Turkish invasions. The cluster of Yugoslav Muslims were the remnants of those that burned the homes of their ancestors, of those that pillaged their villages and raped their women. Most Muslims were Croats and Serbs who accepted Muslim religion to save their lives under Turkish invasion.

If the brotherhood continued for another thirty years as Tito ordered, maybe another generation would grow up and they may not remember their history, their different gods and their dead. If dictatorship continued and people intermarried a few more times maybe their children would be able to accept themselves as Yugoslavs? Perhaps the children of a thoroughly mixed ancestry would have no choice?

Did Tito really hope to make one nation out of six Balkan nations? Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina made plans to secede. Only Serbia and Montenegro wanted to remain under the name Yugoslavia. Both orthodox nations were known by many as Serbs.

On May 15, 1991 Stipe Mesic, a Croatian, should have become a president in the rotating presidencies of Yugoslavia. Serbia and Montenegro voted against him because he favoured Croatian secession from Yugoslavia.

The threatening constitutional crisis could have aided the disintegration of Yugoslavia so eventually Serbs also agreed that Mesic become Yugoslav president for a year. But this did not stop the disintegration of the Yugoslav federation.

“Nothing happened by chance, the whole communist indoctrination plan was carefully prepared,” said Ivan disillusioned. His role in the politics suddenly seemed insignificant and Ivan vowed to drop out of public life.

Slovenian world Congress was to be held just before the proclamation of Slovenian independence in June 1991. Marjan nominated Kristina to go to Slovenia as Australian representative. She said that Peter did not want his family to see him in a wheelchair and she didn't want to go on her own. Marjan had just returned from a visit to Slovenia and couldn't afford to go again.

Milan and Joe talked about the candidates from Sydney. Joe actually suggested that Ivan should go, but he never thought of nominating Ivan properly and to lobby for his election. Ivan waited until the middle of June when all the other candidates left. Barbara was relieved that the time almost ran out but Ivan came home on Friday the twenty first of June bringing two plane tickets.

“We are going home tomorrow,” he announced. She knew that it was pointless to argue, he had it all planned. She began packing in a frenzied absent minded way, but she had a deep premonition that something will go wrong. She tried to rationalise that it was just the fear of a change. Contented with Ivan and happy with her family she was afraid of change. She

reasoned that she was happy in Slovenia in 1990, that in fact she was much happier since she went home. But she wasn't homesick any more.

Ivan was intoxicated with the plans for Slovenian independence, he had to be there.

"Everybody will be there. This is a historic time for Slovenia," said Ivan and his voice was feverishly excited. He couldn't sleep any more, he talked of bravery, patriotism, guns and dying.

"We'll actually attend the first birthday party of Slovenia, history will be written about it." It was kind of funny for Barbara seeing her ever serious husband almost trembling like a child opening Christmas presents.

Ivan haven't slept for two days when they arrived to Slovenia on the twenty fifth of June. He was too exhausted and too excited to go to sleep. The Slovenian parliament decided to move a day early and declared the independence at nine on the same evening Ivan and Barbara arrived. The early proclamation was to be a top secret so Slovenia could celebrate in peace. But they were betrayed and the federal army was on its way to crush them. Although Croats also announced their independence a day early, no-one could take Slovenia off the world's centre stage because the federal Yugoslav army moved North to destroy it.

Thousands of Slovenians cried on the streets of their capital as the new independent country was proclaimed. But their joy was short lived because the army planes flew threateningly low over them. People went home but few of them slept that night, most listened into the silence until they felt the ground tremble like a heart of a frightened child as the army tanks approached from the South. Slovenians all over the world called each other, the phones rang in Australia and America as the danger united the nation. The good news of independence were within hours followed by the dreaded reality of war. Young Slovenian boys picked the Kalashnikov guns they were hiding. They were touched by the fear and the fervour of patriotism. The glory of fighting made them breathless, they embraced and kissed their loved ones, they held hands, they were saying goodbye just in case, they were ready to fight and win or die.

Barbara felt tired after their arrival, she took a couple of sleeping pills and went to bed. The time change and travel made her disoriented, she needed to adjust. Ivan talked all night with his sister Marija and her husband. He was the first to see army helicopters flying low over Ljubljana, he was the first to hear the news of Yugoslav army tanks rushing towards Ljubljana. He could see the bonfires of the celebration burning and he heard the church bells tolling a warning, all was ready for the independence day celebration and the war. There was an exquisite, terrifying agony that sent shivers up Ivan's spine, there were tears in his eyes. A reverent sacred pleasure pushed his heart into his mouth and he cried for liberty, for Slovenia. The sensuality of terror and death engulfed him into a unity with his people. He came in nick of time to protect his people and he thanked god for being there. Like all patriots Ivan believed that god was on the side of his people. All over Yugoslavia people began to ask themselves who they were and where they belonged.

Ivan and his sister's family embraced and cried but Barbara was asleep. Ivan showered and was dressing up to go to Ljubljana when Barbara woke up groggy from the sleeping pill and the restless night.

"Where are my ties," growled Ivan.

“What do you need ties for,” said Barbara half jokingly, still half asleep. Nobody wore ties in Australia and Ivan hated them. He had to wear it for the dance nights in Slovenian clubs but he took it off as soon as he got through the door.

“Do I have to explain to you? You slept through the most important moments of my life, it’s time you woke up,” Ivan’s voice was ridiculously unnatural, it was edgy like a newly sharpened knife and Barbara laughed.

“You never wear ties, you are not getting married, are you? If looks could kill I would be dead now,” she chatted on looking at him defiantly but a chill shook her and she stopped suddenly. This wasn’t a joking matter.

“Can’t I depend on you to do one single thing right. How can you be so stupid.” Ivan resented Barbara for sleeping while Slovenia was attacked.

“Why can’t you take responsibility for yourself? You have to blame me for everything that has ever been wrong in your life” laughed Barbara nervously and Ivan’s eyes became glassy and his hands were shaking. She implied that there were important things wrong with his life. Barbara moved slowly, still half asleep and not aware of what was happening. She knew that she should not have said this in front of his sister and the sobering thought made her afraid.

“You only remember me when you need to blame someone. You are angry now because I am saying this in front of your sister but it is true,” she felt herself sinking deeper and deeper. The anger that could not be released in front of his family was thick between them. Ivan’s family would think less of him if he lost control now. Barbara tried to remedy the situation in her mind. They should know Ivan for the man he was, but did they? He was her judge, her father and mother yet she did not know him. She did not know what he might do if he was angry, she never found out. Becoming fully awake to the danger she did not know how to apologise now.

“You told me the last minute that we were going, if you had it all figured out why didn’t you take your ties?” Barbara tried to say the right words but something pushed her on deeper and deeper. This was Ivan’s old home and she was a stranger here.

“We’ll wait for you there,” said Marija as they left feeling uncomfortable.

“You sow, you shamed me in front of my family. I killed myself working for you and you have never had the decency to say thank you. I went to Australia because of you, you cow, to protect you. I could never return because of you, I was your slave. “

“You took me to Australia, away from my daughter because you couldn’t stand the thought of her, because you still can’t say her name. You made me so ashamed that even I can’t say her name any more.” The words came out uninvited.

“You wrecked my life, you whore, from now on you will do as I tell you,” said Ivan.

“What will you do if I don’t,” she looked at his face, hanging dangerously in the suspended energy of their emotions. The curtain was finally drawn and the wind was coming cold and fresh into the secret corners of their hearts.

“That’s what,” said Ivan as he hit her across the face. The room darkened, she fell to the floor. As she gained consciousness she saw him dragging her legs towards the bed. She got

up and sat on the bed numb. He kept on yelling, he called her names, ugly, dirty names but she couldn't cry. She wasn't afraid of him any longer.

"Would you like me to tell our kids that you were a slut and had a bastard child at the age of fourteen to a married man. You'd be out on the streets whoring if you didn't con me into marrying you."

"You begged me to marry you."

"I thought you were a virgin."

"You never asked. I was never a slut." Barbara's slow, cold words penetrated Ivan's soul. Suddenly he wanted to hold her, to make love to her and make everything OK again. But she moved out of his reach and looked at him dispassionately. Strange thoughts entered her consciousness.

Barbara was always afraid and wandering what Ivan would do if she disobeyed. Now she knew that he would hit her, that he wanted to hurt her. But strangely the blow didn't hurt as much as her fear did. She didn't die and she was standing there now and he had no more weapons. She was afraid that he would hurt her children so she stood between him and them. They were his children too, she should have left them together and tell him to kill them because they were as much his as they were hers. Perhaps he never wanted to hurt them, he was only hurting her through them. Every time he broke a dish he wanted to hit her.

Ivan broke something now but Barbara wasn't sure yet what it was. She felt no physical pain, it was almost a relief, maybe he finally broke her fear of him. Maybe his self control was shattered. He boasted that he would never hit a woman, but now he did. He always wanted to.

"I should not have done it," thought Ivan. "She made me. She mocked me in front of my sister. I am just like my father. She wrecked my life." He slammed the door and lay on the bed waiting for her to come after him. The minutes ticked away and she did not come. Tears came down his face, he broke down, he went to Barbara, he cried and begged forgiveness. For the first time in his life Ivan begged to be forgiven and Barbara finally put his head in her lap and caressed him. But she had no tears. "It's all right it's all right," she kept saying, rocking him like a baby. He was a broken man, he was just a boy in her lap. He needed her, she had to comfort him. Barbara felt strong and calm trying to make Ivan better.

"It's not all right, it's not, it's not," he cried as his whole life crumbled before him. He hit his wife, he was a basher like his father. He wished he was dead.

"You made me do it. I am sorry," he kept saying, "I am so sorry." He hated her for holding him like a mother, calm and cool, he wanted her to cry so he could comfort her and make love to her.

"Forget it, it's nothing, we'll start again," she soothed. Both knew that a new pattern will emerge in their lives.

"We'll be late now, let's get ready," he said.

"I am not going," she said.

"We came to celebrate. This is once in the lifetime, we can't miss it."

"So is this," she pointed at the red swelling around her left eye.

"I'll make it up to you," he promised.

"Go without me."

"We can't end what we had, we will sort things out as we return," he was angry again.

"We have to end what we had before we sort things out," said Barbara in a cold distant voice.

The roles were suddenly reversed and Ivan felt the pain of uncertainty, he wanted to shake Barbara, make her follow, yet instinctually he knew that she will never again follow as she did before. Now she knew what he would do.

"You cow," he hissed trying to coerce her, "you'll remember this day, you'll remember what you've done."

"How could I forget," said Barbara calmly.

"All my life I waited for this day and you spoiled it, you spoiled everything for me." In desperation he took a bottle of homemade slivovitz. He drank and subconsciously waited for Barbara to stop him, to beg him to stop. Only she did not move or say anything. He lay on the sofa now whimpering softly like a baby. "You are all I have," he whispered scared of his own words, "don't leave me, please don't leave me, I can't live without you, I love you so, I always loved you. Please forgive me." He was drunk now and he leaned on her, his hands limp in his lap, impotent and old. She rocked him, protective motherly hands all around him. It was easy to forgive, she felt sorry for the old man next to her, she leaned his head on her chest but she couldn't cry. She remembered other times, the times she cried and begged forgiveness, the times she forgave. "It was a silly argument," she rationalised, "you are exhausted, you broke down." Barbara suddenly felt liberated, Ivan broke down and the ogre was gone forever.

"Will you forgive me, will you ever forgive me, I was never a good husband, I was afraid to tell you how much I loved you" he wailed wanting her to break down and cry with him.

"I wish you'd told me, I was waiting for you to tell me, I didn't know," crooned Barbara softly like a mother putting her baby to sleep, exorcising the demons. "You are all I have too," she realised suddenly. She couldn't leave him, he was holding all her memories. Barbara kissed his big, warm working hands that have surrendered to loving without the will of their own.

On television there were tanks coming and people with guns and shooting. She felt an iceberg of tears in her chest but like an iceberg they didn't melt, she couldn't cry. She did not even notice when Ivan left. He drove to Ljubljana, his dear city, his capital, his first love.

"I'll never do it again, Barbara, I promise to God I'll never hit you again. I am just like my father, I am his son," he kept saying to himself as he drove. "I have been a bastard, forgive me, I will never be a bastard again. I was afraid that you would leave me, you were never mine, I knew it all the time, I saw you looking at other men and I couldn't bear to lose you."

Ivan suddenly remembered his drunk father dead on the icy white snow on the way home from his drinking. Ivan never cried for his father, he hated him for hitting his mother, he hated him for dying a shameful death and leaving his family for Ivan to look after. I had to be the father and the mother to them. I could never be a mischievous and irresponsible like other young people.

Now Ivan cried for daddy and Barbara and his mother as he drove on the highway through fog and tears running down his face until he came to the road-block, a barricade of trucks and cars in the middle of the road. The tanks were coming, the war was right in front of him when he felt a grip in his chest and his arms became powerless as he slumped on the steering wheel. The car swerved onto the dirt and hit the tree. He never woke up when the Yugoslav army smashed through the road block and pushed his car against the rocks on the side of the road. The bushes on the sides of the barricades were alive with on-lookers peering at the action.

The police came to tell Marija, she identified Ivan's shoes and Barbara identified the wedding ring because it had her name and the date of their wedding engraved inside. Marija's husband saw his shredded body, but he did not tell anyone that what he saw was a mass of blood and bones squeezed by the metal.

Barbara stared at people, she forgot how to speak Slovenian; she spoke English and people said that she was in a shock and couldn't go to the funeral. She never saw Ivan die or be buried. Looking past those strangers she kept talking in her mind to Ivan. She rubbed from her memory everything that happened in the last few days, she was with him, she never was with anyone else since she lost her daddy. Now she talked to daddy about Ivan and forgave them both for leaving her. Looking through the window she saw birds chirping their courtship songs. The flowers opened their faces to the sun and Barbara remembered Ivan saying that they only had one season to catch the sun.

Barbara hasn't spoken to anyone since they brought Ivan's wedding ring to her. Her eyes became glazed, she had that surprised look on her face and didn't respond. Marija finally contacted Janek and invited them to the funeral.

Marija's sons were in the war. Marija drove her grandchildren to safety and on the way she noticed a graffiti on the wall. It said "Don't count the dead, that's how the war is lost." Marija felt that her time has come, she had to be a tower of strength for her family. She didn't know what to do with Barbara who was acting childish while Slovenia needed everybody to be brave.

Marija didn't cry at Ivan's funeral, in fact nobody cried, people looked at the sky and listened for the tanks. "I will break down and cry later," Marija promised.

"June is a fateful month for Yugoslavia," said Franc to Jana as they waited for Ivan's funeral on the twenty eighth of June. Ivan's death had to be the beginning of something.

Franc stared through the window thinking of all the other fateful Junes in Slovenian history. Long ago the Turks invaded Balkan on twenty eight of June. Later Serbs, newly liberated from Turks, wanted to wrestle the Slavic Balkan nations from the dominance of the crumbling Austrian Empire and establish greater Serbia. Serbs killed the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo on the twenty eighth of June 1914 and so began the first World War.

Franc remembered the excitement and fervour of that June when Hitler attacked Russia. Stalin was angry at Hitler's betrayal so he ordered communists everywhere to rise against German occupation.

Franc heard the name Tito for the first time in June 41 and the stories of a bold and heroic leader enchanted the minds of young boys. Tito's partisans were told to smash Hitler's mighty power. Franc now realised that the greatest horrors of the second world war were

not inflicted on Yugoslav nations by Germans. It was Serbs and Croats killing each other and communists replacing the old dictatorship with new communist dictatorship. It was a bloody revolution.

In 1991 the world recognised that Yugoslavia was an artificial state and they acknowledged the fact that the states wanted to secede.

Bosnia itself remained a mini artificial Yugoslavia that could not be disentangled without war. Bosnian Croats could join Croatia, Serbs can join Serbia but what about Muslims. Everybody cursed Tito for making Muslims into a nationality and for making the borders within Yugoslavia.

“What about Tito’s Yugoslavs, who will split the children of mixed marriages,” thought Franc.

During Ivan’s funeral service an army helicopter was shot down not far from the cemetery. The prayers stopped abruptly and people scattered. The service was over. Some mourners regrouped around the charred bodies of the Yugoslav soldiers in the wreck of the helicopter. The roads were deserted, but the bushes and forests were trembling with anticipation. Ivan never fought for his country in a war but he came to die for it. By the time he was buried other soldiers died or were wounded. Ivan did not even make the news.

Many young Serbian soldiers deserted the army because they couldn’t kill Slovenians they were taught to love. Without hatred they deserted the army and Slovenians embraced them as friends.

Franc wondered what punishment and shame these young boys will suffer for their desertion. Maybe they will have to go into exile to escape the retribution of Serbian government.

Barbara did not go to the funeral on the twenty eighth of June. In the excitement of the war nobody asked Barbara why she wasn’t with Ivan when he died or why she wasn’t at the funeral. After the funeral she took the travellers cheques they brought for their holiday to the office of Slovenian militia and gave them to the young soldier.

“My husband would like you to buy yourselves some guns.” She signed the cheques and left. Ivan wanted to be a hero, now someone else will shoot with the guns he paid for. Barbara began telling Ivan her thoughts. Ivan loved her, he was an honourable man, he was the rock she leaned on. Other people cried and laughed as they told about their fears and sorrows, joys and successes but Ivan felt that he had to be strong for those around him. She never told him that she loved him so she was happy that he was there reading her thoughts now. He came home to be buried next to his mother and father among the people he belonged to.

Other Slovenians who came from Australia to celebrate Slovenian independence had no way of knowing that Ivan and Barbara arrived and that Ivan died. They missed out on his funeral.

Nobody in Australia knew about Ivan’s death.

On the evening of the 25th of June 1991 all Linden Slovenians gathered around the symbol that sustained them in their exile. Janek raised the Slovenian flag hoisted on top of the linden tree at his father’s home.

Marjan made copies of the new Slovenian anthem and they sang the words Preseren wrote for them almost a hundred and fifty years ago. Their faces shone and the tears in their eyes glistened. They raised their glasses to the birth of their nation state as the flag unfurled noisily in the wind.

Ivan promised to call and report to them what was happening at home and they stayed close to the phone. But the phone didn't ring. Maybe he couldn't get through, they said. Everybody was ringing home that night. Ivan's call did not come that evening or the next day.

They watched the news on TV, they tried to ring Slovenia but the lines were congested. At the end of the day on 26th June 1991 they saw the name Slovenia splashed on the front page of every newspaper and on every television screen. Serbs attacked Slovenia with heavy tanks and air bombs. There was war. Slovenians were ringing home again from all over the world. They also rang each other. Shaken, many left their jobs and came together to cry as they saw the planes strafing the forests where newly formed Slovenian defence fought for their homeland. Prayers were held world-wide.

Australian Slovenians marched on the streets of every Australian capital in protest and to plead with Australian government to help Slovenia. Everybody in Australia learned about Slovenians because they became top news item for the week while the war lasted.

The Linden News proprietor heard that Ivan and Barbara were in the war zone. He wanted to take pictures of the Slovenian flag being raised above the linden tree at their home. So the raising of the flag and the singing of the anthem was repeated for the media on the 27th of June. Milan and Milena told Olga and Janez about the reporters coming. Janez and Olga came from Sydney with their friends. ABC TV cameras were there and the commercial stations had their people floating around asking questions. Statements had to be made. Olga's blue, red and white hat matched her outfit and the Slovenian flag. Janez was in his navy pin-striped suit like most of Australian politicians.

Olga, Janez and Marjan had their speeches prepared for the camera but only the unpolished incoherent words of the crying Slovenians made the news. Olga, Janez and Marjan were not even mentioned. Everybody was a little put out by the selective media.

Mitja and Boris watched from the background.

"It's amazing," said Boris, "how they all want to be behind the flag now."

"We want to be on television," mocked Mitja.

"I don't like the new flag," said Boris seriously. "I dislike Yugo colours as much as the stars of our past semi-royal, semi foreign masters. Our flag should show the vision for the future not remind us of our past slavery."

"They may be semi foreign but that is the best we have in our history. Count Celjski gave us the golden stars for the flag and the white, blue and red background colours come from the shield of Count Goriski. They held most of Slovenian territory in their hands during fourteenth and fifteenth century," observed Mitja.

The media left but Slovenians remained under the linden tree Ivan planted. Ivan still didn't ring.

“We should call on Yugoslav ambassador,” said Milan. “He is Slovenian after all, he should be seen with us.”

“He can’t afford to,” said Marjan, “he is still Yugoslav ambassador, his job is at risk.”

“If he is worried for his job while Slovenians are losing their lives, if he is not with us now he needs never be,” said Milan.

“When things quieten down they’ll change him into a Slovenian ambassador,” said Mitja, “Mark my word, Slovenia might be liberated but ambassador’s friends are still in power.”

“Either way he has nothing to lose,” said Boris.

“The Slovenian minister advised him not to say anything publicly,” tried Marjan. “He can only work behind the scenes, on diplomatic level.”

“Yes,” said Milan, “we know which minister advised him.”

“Slovenia is on every station,” said Joe turning the TV knob.

“The lucky countries never make it on TV,” said Mitja.

“Middle East is on TV all the time and Lebanon and East Timor. I hope we will be peacefully forgotten before all hell breaks loose in Yugoslavia,” added Boris.

They didn’t hear about Ivan’s death for another two days.

Helena and Leon returned to their father’s home when they heard.

Their mother was under doctor’s care in Slovenia, they were told.

They listened to the news and remembered things their father told them about Slovenia.

Richard was comforting Helena who was expecting a baby. She wanted daddy to see her first child.

“Dad would be happy dying for Slovenia,” said Leon stoically. He did not cry but his face was grey and he stared in front of him.

“His wish came true. The world knows where Slovenia is,” said Janek and his eyes were red.

The television showed again and again the tanks bulldozing the barricades. Crying they wandered behind which barricade was their father killed. Nobody knew why he was there.

On the 4th of July Janek invited Slovenians to his father’s memorial service and a wake. He specially invited all the young Slovenians, his generation, he wanted to establish ties like his father did. He heard his father’s voice from the deep within him, he felt his father’s love for Slovenia in his heart.

Father Damian spoke in the church about Ivan’s life and death. People cried openly when he said: “We all lost a friend. Ivan fought all his life for freedom and justice and now for the first time in our history Slovenians rule Slovenia.”

Marjan wished he could tell someone how he missed Ivan but they simply wouldn’t understand. He could depend on Ivan to oppose everything he said, to show him the other side of the coin. The rest of them didn’t have half the soul Ivan had. Ivan was Marjan’s conscience.

Milena was also saying goodbye silently, she remembered the sweet, intimate moments she shared with Ivan, the personal and private bond that had nothing to do with other people. She remembered the years they shared, the trips, the meals, the dances, the glances, the words. She felt complete with Ivan near her because she knew that he loved, respected and admired her.

Joe cried openly. He wanted to be like Ivan and he knew that Ivan liked everything that Joe liked about himself.

"There will never be anyone like Ivan," said Milan. The sadness brought Milan and Joe close for the first time. They had so much to remember. However divided they were in life, at the presence of death they became united simply because they knew each other.

They all followed Janek to the Slovenian club after the church service. He went on the stage and thanked everybody for coming.

"I invited you here not to mourn my father but to touch the base and remember where we came from. I heard rumours that this club served its purpose and that we do not need it any more. This club is a monument to our parents, it is the only sacred site we have. People don't sell their monuments. Maybe older Slovenians can now afford to travel home but most of my generation has never been to Slovenia. We celebrated the stepping stones of our growing up in this club. Christenings and weddings, graduations and the wakes were celebrated here. We met on national days and feast days, we got together to sing and to comfort each other. I would like to show my children where I met their mother. There is a future for Slovenian club because we are the future. This club represents the first tender roots of our Australian history. We may want to wander away from it but only as long as we know that our home is going to be here when we return."

"He is Ivan's son, the chip of the old block," said Joe with tears in his eyes.

"Maybe kids will unite Slovenians," said Andrej.

"When you believe in something you have to stand for it. Fighting is life, I hope Slovenians keep on fighting for what they believe in," said Mitja. There was glory in fighting, the killing, the burning tanks and wounded soldiers became a promise of a new beginning.

"There will always be neighbours coveting our land, we have to be ready to defend it," said Boris.

The media favoured Slovenia, the reporters talked about the beautiful countryside, industrious, intelligent, friendly people. They felt proud to be Slovenians at last. They talked to their workmates about Slovenia. They felt just fine as they were introduced to the world with respect and affection.

As Janek finished speaking, Marjan stepped forward and spoke about the destruction and pain caused to their nation. He had direct news from people in charge at home. He promised to organise aid for the new Slovenian government.

"Ivan died for Slovenia," started Marjan and many had instant tears in their eyes. "We cannot take arms and fight for Slovenia but we can and we must do something. There are places destroyed and people homeless. We owe it to them. I wish every Slovenian would donate a day's wages for Slovenia. I know that in your hearts you suffer with Slovenia. I will

come to your homes and hope that you can give something.” Marjan was touched by his own appeal and had to wipe the tears. Most cried with him now and clapped him.

Olga and Janez weren't among the names of donors for Slovenia. Nobody dared approach them personally. During the wake at Ivan's place hundred dollar bills were placed on the plate and receipts were given but Janez and Olga abstained. Janez said that he made private arrangements to help. The same happened in other Slovenian communities. The poor felt obliged to give, but rich weren't easily intimidated. Most gave from compassion. Some found a way to make it a tax deduction, others saw publicity and future business prospects by giving large amounts publicly.

Marjan would have liked to donate a thousand dollars anonymously but people might give the credit for the donation to the likes of Olga. He simply couldn't let that happen. Embarrassed, he wrote down in the book that he donated one thousand dollars. It was more than he could afford, for a thousand dollars he could almost travel to Slovenia. But that had to wait. He hoped that nobody suspected that he got rid of the silver that burned the hole in his heart. He paid a little prize for the publicity he received from the Yugoslav regime. He rubbed out his Embassy connection. He still believed in the idea of equality only he realised that people were not ready yet for the utopia of communism.

Kristina and Peter donated five hundred out of their pension. Vinko and Sonja remembered the days when they were weak and poor and were helped along and with the thousand dollars they paid back a little now and felt strong and good inside.

Slovenians all over the world became alive with heroism and felt a burning desire to be brave and to save the nation. Young Slovenians, born all over the world, felt the tug at their national heartstrings for the first time. National awareness was born as danger threatened Slovenia. Nationality sharpened their wits, people redefined their identity.

In the midst of nationalism Australian Prime Minister also called on Australians to become a nation and sever the ties to England. Milan remembered how Ivan treasured the ties with England, he loved Australia as it was when they first came. As English colony Australia was the land of hope and justice to him. Did people want the change for the sake of changing?

Marjan invited everybody to celebrate German recognition of Slovenian independence on Christmas Eve 1991 at Kristina's. Everybody came except Barbara.

“I have my family home for Christmas,” she said lamely.

Others brought their families along. Hermina and Joe stood so close that their hands touched, the unity of the nation brought even them together for the moment. Milena and Milan were toasting each other and their eyes shone. Andrej and Vida and Vinko and Sonja were embracing and kissing. Robyn spoke with Ivanka because Ivanka seemed so alone on the night of nights. Marko and Drago also came without their families but they had each other.

Although aged and more fragile now they were as important and beautiful to each other as they were in their youth. They grew into one people with one purpose because they carried a bag of common memories. They knew that whenever one of them died some of their memories died as well. A part of them died with Ivan and sharing that loss brought them closer.

They looked back on the best years of their lives and chose to remember things that made those years their best. They realised that there never was anybody else for them but their families and their friends. Ivan's death reminded them how lucky they were to still have a partner and be alive among friends.

The young ones helped Kristina load the tables with festive food. Mitja and Boris stood in the background with glasses raised as they sang their national anthem once more.

"Here's to Germany and Slovenia," said Milan. "They said they will recognise our independence before Christmas and they did."

"Germans want to have their claws in Slovenia," said Marjan.

"Better Germans than Serbs," said Milan.

"Only Serbs are capable of such savage attacks on innocent people," said Joe siding with Milan.

"Bull, don't underestimate Germans," warned Marjan. "Hitler never once said that Slovenians are like Germans, but that they are Germans. Those not wanting to be Germans could only be slaves. Being innocent counted for nothing with Hitler."

"Serbs will never forget that Croats under Hitler's protection killed hundreds of thousands of Serbs," said Boris.

"Serbs made Croats pay for the last fifty years," said Milan.

"Slovenia is too small and someone else will decide what will become of us," said Joe.

"Remember the old fable about the bird and the cat," said Marjan. "On a frosty morning a little bird fell off the tree and landed in the snow. The cow came by and covered it with warm soft shit. The bird wriggled out and started pecking at the undigested bits of food in the cow pad. A hungry cat came along, she saw the bird struggling in the shit, she pulled it out and ate it. We all know the morals of the story. Don't struggle if you feel warm and comfortable in the shit, the one that shits on you is not necessarily your enemy and neither is the one that pulls you out necessarily your friend. We are that bird now. I am afraid of Germany just like Jews are. I am afraid that Germans still want to swallow us," said Marjan.

"The creativity of the conflict between pro-Communists and anti-Communists kept us alive. It seemed to be the vision and the whole reason for our gatherings," said Mitja.

"We all hoped to unite Slovenians," echoed Boris.

"Slovenian politicians at home took our trophy, we are not in a race anymore," said Milan. Communism treacherously died a natural death and the men fighting it, lost the stage, where they played chiefs and Indians.

"As Ivan would say, we played a part," said Joe, realising that in the end nobody recognised the part migrants played. THEY won again. It has always been THEM, the majority, the power, the elite, the popular government. Minority never counted. A quiet diffidence again united them like a storm unites lost sheep.

"Old communists are still in power," said Milan quietly more to himself than to anyone present.

Milena stood quietly beside her husband. She knew that they'll have to find a new beacon in the cloudy sky somewhere because it was inconceivable for them to live without the light on top of the hill.

"Nobody is happy at home either, or sad. The conflict has gone underground for the time being, that's all," said Mitja prophetically, "but mark my word, it will resurface."

"The new government is a lifeless compromise, there is no warmth in this cook up. Nobody won, nobody lost, there is nothing," said Boris.

"I wish Ivan was here with us," said Milena and they all turned to her.

"I always liked the man who stood for something," said Milan remembering his dead friend.

The democratically elected Slovenian government asked Marjan to promote economic ties with Australian business. They were the same people Marjan met before, only they became democrats since he last saw them. Marjan finally became a bridge between the two countries. Younger than Milan and Ivan he was a natural choice for the leader of the new generation .

"Britain established Yugoslav brotherhood. They're going to drag the war in Yugoslavia until Serbia grabs all the land they want. Britain is related to Serbia in more ways than one," said Mitja.

"And they call us savages from Balkan," complained Vida.

"They should look at Belfast before they condemn anybody for fighting," said Andrej.

"Even as we speak we can't agree on which side we ought to be. We will have to pick a side or we will end up killing each other again," said Boris.

"We are independent," Marjan raised a glass. "Let's drink to that."

"Some people will be sorry for the old times. Under Tito they had peace, bread and jobs," said Vida.

"Half Slovenian, half Croatian, you can't really blame the bastard for trying to build one Yugoslav nation, he was one of the original Yugoslavs," said Milan.

"United Nations have long been known as a toothless tiger but now this toothless tiger tells other tigers where to bite. United nations are deciding who will live or die in the New World Order. What we do is meaningless, our struggle will only prolong the misery."

"The United nations will choose the thoughts the new generation will think and the dreams they will dream. Until they too realise that they have been deceived," agreed Boris.

"We are finally under one umbrella," said Mitja. "The media is showing us one poor Muslim child taken to America for an eye operation and we rejoice."

"They will return that same poor child back to see the dying and the suffering before the poor bastard also dies," said Boris.

They became aware that the ethnic cleansing will get a whole new meaning before Bosnia would be divided on historic, ethnic, religious and national lines. The new borders would cut right through the families.

Many soldiers were afraid of the end of the Balkan war. The events of the war may come to haunt them, the consequences of murder were hard to imagine. The soldiers were brought up in the spirit of brotherhood and unity but many became bloodthirsty hounds in the explosion of violence.

“Will the vendetta ever stop,” wondered Marjan.

“The crimes of the past will call for retribution until they are openly dealt with in the international courts,” said Mitja.

The general public became used to the news about the suffering and brutality of the war in former Yugoslavia. The sad, starved faces arose sympathy and interest, the world now talked about poor Bosnians who were dying from bullets, starvation and sadness. The words genocide and ethnic cleansing brought back the memories from the second world war and some shuddered at the thought of senseless mass killings.

There is no death. How can there be death if everything is part of the godhead? The soul never dies and the body is never really alive.

Isaac Bashevis Singer

The new beginning

TV reporters came to the airport to talk to Barbara as she returned from Slovenia alone. Her children and friends embraced her, the reporters asked questions, everybody was there for her but Barbara felt that everybody stared at the empty space beside her where Ivan used to be. She smiled a small, polite smile, said thank you for condolences and assured everyone that she would be all right. During the many long years she learned to remain cool and say something suitable.

Barbara was bewildered by the crowds and wanted to go home because she desperately needed to be there safe with Ivan. In her mind she begged him not to leave her because she had to cry with him the tears that she didn't cry at his funeral. They all offered to drive her home and they were annoyed because she asked for a taxi. She watched the scenes from her past as the taxi took her from Sydney airport to her Linden home. She had never been alone before, she didn't know how to be single. She didn't feel single at all but an incomplete half and people looked for that other half that was significant.

The king was dead but people seemed to be saying the words of the tragedy: long live the king. Soon they would realise that the king was indeed dead.

Barbara shuddered and felt utterly alone. She got used to the narrow cage of her existence next to Ivan and now she felt afraid. Being free and alone was an unnatural fantasy of a caged bird. She dreamed of this freedom for a long time but like a caged bird she did not know where to fly outside the cage. Was that it, did she always need a cage and the adoration of the king? Did others like her because she sang a happy song for her king? When she stopped singing, she stopped being. Without the adoration of the king she felt dead. Her singing was not needed or wanted any more.

Barbara tried to find the way back into the cage. Once behind the familiar walls of her home, she cried for the intimacy she shared with Ivan.

Barbara remembered how the people cried when Tito died. Tito built a cage for his people, they had to sing a happy song for him and many learned to love their murdering ruler. Was fear and hate and love all a part of the intimacy. Did people simply learn to love? They chose strong leaders to lean on. Was that why the nations mourned the death of their dictators? Was it easier to love the dead king?

Linden Slovenians came to see Barbara often in the next few days. She couldn't tell them how she felt because she didn't know yet. She offered refreshments but she couldn't cry and give them an opportunity to say all the kind words they wanted to say. They tiptoed around Barbara anxiously because she showed no grief. Only Johnny seemed unconcerned, he pulled her into the garden to show her what he had discovered. Barbara followed her grandson.

Slovenians watched the television news but news about Slovenia fell into second and then into third slot. On the eleventh of July Slovenian parliament accepted the European peace plan. In the next three months they were to sort things out. Many

were a little sad and disappointed because they were ready to sacrifice so much more, to fight more.

Shaken by the short war, many tried to attribute the attack on Slovenia to some misguided general because they still harboured in their hearts the idea of a brotherhood. The new generation knew nothing but the brotherhood, they heard nothing of old political hatreds until they too became involved in the hatred.

“When will we ever learn,” the words of the song came to Barbara as she watched the news on television. Ivan would have liked to see the fall of the KGB. Barbara wanted Ivan to be with her when they kidnapped Gorbachev. Ivan trusted Gorbachev from the start. There in the rain stood Gorbachev’s friend Boris Yeltsin, the defiant leader of the Russian democratic forces and the people gathered around him to form a live barricade against the military might. Yeltsin stood on the tank and spoke to the ever increasing crowd until the coup failed.

The monuments were toppled in the Soviet Union. At the foot of Lenin’s monument were the words: Workers of the world unite. Russians crossed the word UNITE and wrote: FORGIVE ME. Then they put a noose around the monument’s head and pulled it down.

Barbara remembered Ivan’s words from long ago: “We must touch the icons of history even if they crumble in our hands.” He read those words from the newspaper.

“You would die to see this,” she said out loud to Ivan and she realised that all the news meant little without him.

On 26th of August 1991 Barbara went to St. Mary’s cathedral in Sydney. She lit candle after candle in the deserted, dark, cold church. She asked all the people to forgive her before she entered the confessional where an unknown man forgave all her sins. She told the man what she could never tell any other person. The man said that it was all right.

“Are we friends again,” she asked God and he smiled on her.

October and November 1991 came and people became used to the news of killing. The world realised that Yugoslav brotherhood ended. Serbs and Croats and Muslims began to wipe each other out in the most brutal, barbaric, fraternal war.”

The United Nations Security Council arranged the cease fires which were broken again and again by eager patriots who wanted to vent their pent up anger.

Everybody kept saying that THEY should do something but THEY refused to become involved. THEY sat at the negotiating tables all over the world and their decisions were ignored. THEY didn’t seem to mind.

Barbara wandered why the world didn’t want to be drawn into the conflict. Whose side were they on, anyway? Who were THEY? Didn’t anybody care? Were there too many people and some had to die? Was that a natural selection? Did Britain really side with Serbs? Were they against Catholics? Did everybody want to get Muslims out of Europe?

Were Americans scared of Muslims? Why couldn't Bosnian Muslims be just Bosnians or Croats or Serbs? Did their God want to become the centre of their war? Were gods angry? Did they want to punish people? Was Muslim god fighting a Christian god like two proverbial brothers always fight? Nobody understood the reasons for wars. Wars always came, they were as much a part of life as gods themselves.

Barbara watched the news alone and she remembered Damian's words of long ago: "If they hit you on your right cheek show them the left one as well. The world will take notice of your suffering."

The world took notice of Bosnians now, in fact the media seemed to prosper by taking notice. But nobody helped Muslims who were now slapped on both cheeks most severely. Everybody wrote about the battered dying people. Even Croatians from time to time plotted with Serbs against Muslims. What Germans did to Jews in the second war, Serbs and Croatians now did to Muslims. Only this time nobody could claim ignorance. Media lived on the news of genocide. The violence continued as the world tried to make its mind up.

"To know what is happening and claim ignorance means aiding the murderers," said one journalist who made sure that he wasn't aiding them. His reports from Bosnia put him in the top spot on television. He respectfully lowered his voice as he told about death and destruction. In a solemn voice he told that United Nations were worried about the escalating war. But nothing changed except the readers voice.

"I might return to Slovenia," said Janek as they celebrated their first family Christmas without Ivan. "They might let me teach English there."

"You mean it, don't you," said Barbara.

"I do."

"I'd love to work in Italy for awhile," said Diana. "We could live on the border of Slovenia, Italy and Austria. We would have the best of the three countries,"

Janek saw a vision that would make everything worthwhile. He wanted to do that for dad. He knew that dad would be proud of him now because Janek was proud of himself. He realised now that every time he tried to make dad proud he actually made himself proud.

Ivan never doubted that one of his children would go and claim what he left in Slovenia. He told his children who they were, they fought against that knowledge until they realised that he was right. The prophecy Ivan wrote on the blank pages of Janek's childhood has been realised.

"You can come to visit us," said Diana.

Barbara realised that the children will miss their father so she took special care in buying them presents that would gladden their hearts at least for the moment. She wrapped up gifts and brought out all the Christmas tinsel for her family to decorate their home. Barbara still felt responsible for her children's happiness although she realised that there was little she could do to make them happy.

Kim and Leon rejoiced in Kim's new pregnancy, they grew away from Barbara and made a new family.

Janek and Diana were out of jobs and excitedly prepared to go to Slovenia. "This was my last year in Linden," said Janek. "When we return, if we return, I will try something new."

Helena got married and her baby was due in April. Richard was gently holding Helena's hand and caressing her stomach.

Johnny pulled Barbara's hand: "I want you nanny, come with Johnny, nanny, birdie there, fly up, up and away." She followed her grandson and he showed her the flowers and the ants and the cars and the toys. He was the first person Barbara talked to since Ivan died. "I need you, nanny," he cried, "come, play with me. They picked flowers and he pushed them under her nose. "Smell nice nanny," he talked continuously. He held on Barbara tightly as he was discovering the world. Others pecked her cheek in greeting but Johnny smothered her with wet lips and dirt and love.

"I love you nanny. You love me nanny." When she wanted to go in he said "I don't like you. Your steps are too big." He hasn't learned manners yet, he said what he meant.

Barbara knew that they would run together until he found others to run with. But even now they did not run at the same speed.

A day after New year they all left, the next day was an ordinary day, a day to clean and put your life in order again. Barbara realised that her children had gone forever. they would return to say hello and do the right thing but they did not need her any more. Maybe it would be different if Ivan was there because he insisted on family togetherness, he planned occasions to be together. Barbara felt that she would not be able to do everything he did, she didn't want to hold them back to pity her either.

Paula came to see Barbara often now. Her daughter Amy was getting married on Valentine's day in February and Paula wanted Barbara to come to the wedding.

"I have to buy a dress," said Barbara. It was the first dress she would buy since Ivan died. Ivan liked gentle pastel colours and she always bought what he liked but now she decided on a simple black dress. She never wore black before but she got used to it while mourning for Ivan. She compromised a little by adding a pink silk scarf and the lipstick to match. She highlighted her cheek bones with a blusher. "A few lines here, a few grey hairs there. Thanks God, without my glasses I see no signs of ageing," she smiled to the face in the mirror.

"You miss Ivan," said Paula.

"I never fell in love with Ivan but I grew up into love."

"But Ivan is dead," said Paula a little concerned about Barbara's state of mind. Barbara never broke down and cried and Paula knew that she had the tears all bottled inside her.

"He is more alive in my mind than any other person, he is more alive than ever before. He did everything for his family and we never appreciated him enough," said Barbara.

“Whatever he did, he did it for himself. If he had no family he would probably never achieve what he achieved and he would never be as happy as he was. Give yourself the pat on the back. He needed you more than you needed him. You were his inspiration,” said Paula.

When alone, Barbara closed her eyes to talk to Ivan. Very slowly Paula’s words gained the meaning in Barbara’s reasoning as she tried to make right all that was wrong between them from the very beginning. She was not afraid of Ivan any longer and she decided that she will never tell anyone that he hit her. He wanted to hit her all the time, he smashed the dishes to stop himself from hitting her because he loved her. Hitting her was like a bolt of lightning that made his love for her known to both of them. He had to break down to be able to tell her how he loved her.

Barbara didn’t run in her dreams any more, she followed Ivan. Even half awake, before she opened her eyes she could see herself clearly laughing and running with Ivan. In the half consciousness Ivan’s warm skin enveloped her like a protective cloak. With his arm around her middle they turned in the silent ballet of the night, without disturbing each other’s sleep.

In the semi consciousness of the night Barbara said to Ivan all the words she could never say before. She told him that she made a nest in her heart for him, imperfect little home for them but the only one. She told him that she felt safe with him and hoped that he was watching her wherever he was. If he didn’t she would simply stop to exist. Other people were passing her like you pass a milestone without noticing it but she could read the vibrations of Ivan’s voice. There were no secret places between them. She needed his head next to hers on the pillow, she wanted to tell him the news and show him the flowers and the birds coming to drink from the bird bath he built. She wanted to cook for him, share the meals. Barbara knew that one day she will have to go home to plant flowers on Ivan’s grave, but she also knew that they will never be as close there as they were here in their new home town. At the beginning like young saplings they were blown in all directions but they grew into one strong trunk that withstood all storms.

Barbara strolled through the Linden cemetery. She glanced at Miha’s grave and the memories of that funeral came back. Miha’s grave was covered with a slab of marble and under the statue of an angel was his name. Barbara had no grave to put the flowers on but she felt close to Ivan now. All their lives they tried to catch up to each other and run together but they remained alone. Only after his death Ivan became a part of Barbara. He became one with God and in his new self realisation he became a part of Barbara. She realised that she could meet Ivan for the first time without pain and fear.

But what if life continued on, if the searching and the rebellion never stopped, if running continued? Will they run after death towards new goals, new horizons, new gods? Animals remain contented where the pastures are good and the waters are plenty. They never think of tomorrows, so they have no reason to run. Children are like that before parents teach them to behave and feel guilty for misbehaving, before they tell them to worry about their future. Children say what is in their hearts before they

learn to say the right thing. People grow feeling guilty because they make mistakes. Some are lucky and blame others but unlucky ones blame themselves.

Barbara decided to accept the imperfections of her life. She sat on the cold marble of Miha's grave and cried. She cried alone on the foreign cemetery, in a foreign country but as she cried she felt the light coming back into her life. She leaned on the cold wall of the deserted cemetery saying good bye to Ivan and the words of the old prayers echoed from the grave-stones as a reminder of many funerals.

Barbara could hear the words they sang as they buried their loved ones: The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul.

Barbara wished she had Ivan's grave here, so his children would come and lay flowers on it. She wanted them to touch the sacred burial site of their father. She wanted to build a monument for Ivan but then she remembered that Linden town was Ivan's monument. Maybe his soul wanted to rest with his ancestors.

The sun was setting on the Linden Valley, the green stripes over the red sunset, the faces painted in the sky.

"You can see the horizon all around you, in Australia you can really see that the world is round," she remembered Ivan saying.

There was no place in the world like Linden, like Australia. Barbara remembered all the sunsets she watched and all the peaceful Australian evenings she shared with Ivan. They became close during the last year after his heart attack. Both treasured the fragile closeness but neither of them ever learned to say the words that were in their hearts. Over the years the new skin covered the festering sore but the aching never stopped.

Barbara finally accepted that Ivan wasn't god. He only did what he believed he had to do and he behaved the best way he knew how. He rescued her from Karl and he buried her shame deep in their hearts. He made her into an extension of himself because he was afraid that she would make more mistakes if left on her own. He wasn't strong enough to let himself be betrayed again.

"There is no-one in my life now," realised Barbara on her way home. Nobody, nobody, she heard the echo of the emptiness. "Good bye Ivan," she turned back but no-one followed her.

Mitja suddenly died a couple of weeks after Christmas. Barbara was sorry that she didn't go to his funeral but it seemed too soon after Ivan's death.

After the funeral of the old lonely man Boris had no-one to share his grief and his loss with. He cried alone, out of despair and loneliness he tried to drown his sorrow in wine but it didn't help. People didn't know how to express their sympathies to a gentleman they grew to respect. They stopped calling him, he even noticed some cross the street not to meet him. They didn't know what to say, they began to fear Boris because they had no words for their feelings. They tried to escape the death that intruded on them again.

After a few weeks Boris visited Barbara. Shy and forlorn he tried to tell her about his sadness.

“Mitja just leaned on the wall one day with the glass of port in his hand and made a groaning sound,” said Boris. “I caught him and laid him on the floor dead.”

Barbara and Boris gradually learned to share the memories of people they loved and this sharing created the intimacy that helped them heal. Vulnerable and shattered they held on the straws connecting them to life. Awkwardly they searched through their past for the common familiarity that a person needs for survival. The ties connecting them were weak, but they were the only ones they had and so they held on each other until they attached themselves to life again. They talked about Ivan and Mitja until they emptied their souls and felt free again.

Marjan was going home to Slovenia again and he wanted to take Barbara’s pictures for an exhibition in Ljubljana. He came to see her and rushed to explain almost apologetically about the art festival. He was afraid to offend her because she seemed so fragile in her loneliness. He also wanted to talk about Ivan but that could wait. Barbara felt grateful but embarrassed by his offer. She wanted to talk about Ivan but the words just died on her lips.

“I like your paintings, you should paint more,” Marjan tried to break the tension but the words hung in the air as Barbara prepared the coffee for her visitor. It was difficult for her to relax and talk, it was a new experience because Ivan took care of entertaining, he knew the right words for every occasion.

Next morning Barbara hesitated in front of the art shop before she went in and toyed with the brushes, smelled the paint, caressed the canvasses. She was enormously happy that Marjan found something to like in her paintings. In some ways he knew her better than she knew herself.

Caressing the paint tubes covered by a film of dust, she remembered Mitja saying that every bit of dust that once was Adam was still circulating the Earth. Maybe this dust had once been Adam.

She read the verse under the picture on the wall: “What is this life, if full of care, we have no time to stand and stare.”

Suddenly she became overwhelmed by the wish to start life over again. The burden of guilt lifted and she had a feeling that she could fly. For months after Ivan’s death Barbara stayed at home. She got used to doing things around the house the way Ivan wanted them done and even after his death she kept doing them until one day she wanted to call out to ask his opinion and she realised that he will never come back to tell her. It no longer mattered how she did things, or even if she did them.

“Whatever I do is just as good as if I don’t do it. There is nobody to tell me what I will do wrong. I only have myself now. Me and myself will just have to work together from now on. Because it’s only me and myself against the world,” she smiled to herself as the ghosts were laid to rest.

Barbara lay in bed when the music reached her from afar and touched the chords that haven't been touched for so long. It was a year since Ivan died and Barbara suddenly felt the light flickering in her soul. She began dreaming about love, she needed to bring out the light that was silently shining within her. When she covered people with the banner of love they became loveable. Maybe love was just the perpetual light flickering in the dark corner of the soul where God lives. A warm gladness came over her and she wanted to gladden someone's heart. She knew that she would.

Barbara became aware that she was given one more chance to be whatever she wanted to be. She knew that most people were never given this most excellent chance. The time given to her became her most valuable possession. She finally felt strong enough to tell all her children about all her sins. Only there was no need for telling. The guilt evaporated as she realised that she did everything she could.

"Me and myself," she smiled as she extended herself into the space where there was nobody else.

With the exception of correctly named historical personages, the characters in this novel are all fictional and bearing no relation to any person in real life.

