

**YOUR FEET TAKE
YOU WHERE
YOUR HEART IS**

Cilka Žagar

Your feet take you where your heart is.

Real life is not like that.

What is real life like?

What is real life?

What is real?

Are dreams real?

Is being awake an illusion?

Is real what I touch or what touches my heart?

Part 1 From Slovenia to Australia

Part 2 Slovenians in Sydney

Part 3 Lightning Ridge

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*For I, the Lord thy God am a jealous god, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me.
The Bible.*

Tina

We are here to celebrate the life of a man who has done great things, a man of integrity, who never wavered in his beliefs, a man who returned to his maker, says the priest. They are trained to say nice words.

Our children and our friends also tell the funeral assembly that my husband Franc was a well-respected and dearly loved man.

Well chosen words inspire the mourners to sniff into their white handkerchiefs. The beauty of the words from the Bible makes crying almost enjoyable.

It is the fifteenth of June 1988, the beginning of winter in Australia. The afternoon is pleasantly crisp and sunny.

I remember my wedding day in June 1938. It was the beginning of summer in Slovenia and the day was just as bright.

We lay his body to rest but everything that Franc was, he still is. Although he is with god now, he lives on in our hearts and in our memories. Franc made peace with his maker and received his last sacraments.

The main thing is to make your piece with god.

As a child I regularly confessed that I was sincerely sorry for not praying more and for being distracted in church and sometimes being angry with my brothers and sisters. I didn't have wicked thoughts to confess yet.

Franc and I confessed and received the Holy Communion before we got married. We wanted to have a clean start to our new life. During our wedding ceremony the priest reminded us that almighty God sees our every thought.

During the fifty years of our marriage I often prayed to God to save me from evil thoughts.

After my wedding I heard a woman say that the little bitch got her claws into Franc's money. I was the little bitch.

I didn't know why people became unfriendly towards me after I married Franc. I did the right thing and mum was pleased.

Here, Tereza passes a clean tissue into my hand. I think Tereza cries professionally. In her capacity as a wife of a funeral director, she often has to deal with bereavements with the same kindness and solemnity as her husband.

Tereza was also a trusted employee of my husband.

I always loved the exquisite beauty of the funeral ritual. The intensity of life and death, the grief and the relief washed with tears, joins people into a web of tenderness. We are humble and pure and forgiving as we face death. God is watching.

Even as a child I was awed by death. I walked alone on the narrow paths between the graves in the local cemetery thinking of God and angels and life and ghosts. Only children can experience the wholeness of things so thoroughly.

Death is the fulfilment of everything life was. I am next in line. That's all there is. I hope to die a peaceful death. I made many novenas for that purpose. As a little girl I prayed for a happy last hour as directed by our parish priest and my mother. I confessed every Friday and received Holy Communion every day for months and months to make sure that my last hour on Earth would be happy. That is all one needs to pray for really.

Franc's friends stand close to me in their black funeral suits, their faces shining from the morning shave. The freshness of the day makes them cough occasionally and they wipe their glasses from time to time because the warm moisture of their bodies obscures the view. We are all next in line and that unites us. The invisible thread of life is leading us towards the grave.

I will always remember his face glowing with happiness on the day he died, whispers Tereza.

The awesome finality of death excites people. There is a rebirth in the hearts of the mourners. Smooth loveliness is spread over the funeral assembly like a veil over the bride.

Mum and dad had fifty happy years together, says my daughter Martina as part of her eulogy.

I drop a handful of dirt into the grave. There are fifty red roses on the coffin one for each year of our marriage.

Franc was 86 and I am 66. In their speeches people praise Franc and express sympathy for me, the poor widow.

It would be abhorrent to say that Franc's death came as a relief. Nobody would dream of admitting it even in their own hearts that Franc's death was overdue because he became a cantankerous and contemptuous old man who enjoyed causing misery to people around him.

People will always remember his generosity, says the priest who barely knew Franc. Funeral is a celebration of person's divinity not his frailty.

Nobody would dare say that Franc's greatest joy in life was to squeeze another dollar out of the person he did business with. People understand that you have to be prudent in business. Franc wasn't mean, he was prudent. To the last day of his life.

Franc kept telling me that whatever he did was for the family. That was supposed to make everything right. He made me an accomplice in squeezing money out of those that were weaker than him.

We learned to be grateful to Franc for keeping us wealthy despite difficult circumstances. Money helps you survive and make something out of your life. People take notice of those that made something of their lives. The rich sing better, I heard somewhere.

Poor people dream of being rich, said Franc. They believe that all their dreams will come true if and when they will win the lottery. They wait for the winning numbers all their lives. They don't know how to make their dreams come true, so they are jealous of those that do. Even God will not help you if you don't help yourself. It says in the Bible that one has to use his talents.

Everybody seems to have moments of happiness. I wonder if the poor really dream about the day when their bank account will be sufficiently sound. Maybe the desired winning ticket, like God himself, moves a step away, with every step we make.

I thank God that nobody sees the thoughts that pass behind my grieving exterior.

Whenever someone says: I don't care, they really care. When they say: Not that I am jealous, they are jealous. When people say that money means nothing to them I know that all they think about is money, said Franc.

Franc was probably right, he was an educated, experienced, older man.

Some people dedicate their lives to the poor, I tried to outsmart Franc once.

They invest in heavenly stock market. One way or another we all gather the riches. Some of us leave them behind others get their rewards after death.

I always believed that Franc is deeply religious although we never talked much about God. We never talked much about anything, come to think of it.

I forgot about sex long ago but these days every film announces right at the beginning that there will be explicit sex scenes, violence and coarse language. The government warns us that these ingredients may be disturbing and offensive to some and they might choose to refrain from watching. When I am alone I cry watching unhappy love stories.

Turn off that trash, said Franc. He never liked me watching love stories or sex. He chose sport or news or war or politics or crime. He read stories about Hitler and Stalin and Napoleon. They are probably less dangerous to my moral well-being than sex.

I don't mind watching sex. Occasionally one gets a knot in the stomach and a sort of a dizzy fit of desire while watching sexual activities on television. Sometimes I have a pleasant dream after watching sexual scenes.

My doctor asked me about my sex life when I began my menopause. I told him that there was very little sex in our marriage for the last thirty years. He suggested that I take Valium.

During the first years of our marriage Franc liked to have sex every day and I willingly participated. I was too scared to refuse Franc anything. I had my three babies to think of. I considered myself lucky that Franc found me so desirable and that he came home every day.

Since Franc lost his property in 1946 he gradually lost interest in sex.

Recently I overheard him talking about sex with his friend Jack. They were drinking red wine while I cleared the dishes after lunch. The door was ajar and I heard snippets of what they said.

It's not fair that one still thinks about it when the body can no longer respond, said Jack.

Sex is not everything, said Franc.

Actually it is, said Jack. You grow up to have sex. You get married so you can have a steady supply and when you have everything else, you want some extra sex. When you can no longer have sex you think about it. I believe that you die when you stop thinking about sex.

I thought that Jack was joking but I did not hear them laugh. Old men probably understand each other even when nobody else does. Maybe they were joking but did not bother to laugh.

I was rather relieved that I still sometimes thought about sex. I suppose I found sex disturbing at the beginning. Franc didn't watch sex but he liked violence and coarse language.

Jack and Franc turned to television.

Look at that skirt, said Jack.

I glanced at television. It could barely be called a skirt. If it was any shorter it should be called a belt. You could see where the legs started as the girl's bottom wriggled on top of her high-heeled legs. Long strong legs, almost fat.

I like big girls, said Jack.

Women, said Franc. A necessary evil. I wonder if he meant women generally or a particular woman like myself.

Sometimes I felt that I was a necessary evil. I brought it all down upon our family.

It is for the best, mum said when I married Franc.

The world needs another Hitler to bring some order, said Franc to Jack.

War and crime and violence fascinate people, said Jack.

The media glorifies criminals. If they were presented as hopeless vulgar creatures they would cease to be popular, said Franc.

Artists compete in vulgarity to escalate publicity and sales, said Jack.

I am not going to be here long, Franc kept saying. Everything will be yours when I am gone.

Nobody dared upset daddy because he accumulated all this wealth which he was going to leave to us so we could live happily ever after.

If only Franc was willing to be pleased.

Franc lived a good life and reached a good age, says Tereza's husband.

My son Damian and my daughters Vera and Martina are happy that they reconciled with their father and that we celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of our wedding as one big happy family.

With the funeral prayers done, close friends hug me, kiss the air near my ear and tell me how very sorry they are for me. Acquaintances shake my hand and whisper their sympathies. Some kisses touch my neck and others land on all sorts of places by accident in the awkward rush of sympathy and etiquette. People avoid my face because it is stained with tears. I taste the tears as I move my face this way and that to give people a chance to kiss something rather than the saltiness of my face and the bitterness of my lips. My face is respectfully left to mourn the loss of my husband.

I last cried like this at the Christmas concert where my granddaughter Tina played an angel. She looked angelic in her wings and she reminded me of when I was young. My other grandchildren also had eyes on me as they sang and danced. I felt an intense pain of pure pleasure. There is life after death after all.

How great you are, God, I sing behind the mask of a crying face.

I don't remember ever crying because I was sad. Maybe people cry because they are sad, maybe they don't. What is sadness really? Or happiness? Or love? People make words and spend lifetimes searching for their meaning.

Happy marriages like yours are rare these days, says Tereza. She barely knows me. Only Franc knew me. He knew my place in the scheme of things. I was his servant and he was there to point out my mistakes. I feel alone without Franc, maybe

loneliness causes sadness. Maybe I am crying for Franc, maybe I am crying for myself.

I am overwhelmed by emotion like I was at fifteen before I met Franc. I want to frolic among the flowers like I used to when my father was alive.

I want to shed my old skin. I don't have to hide under the old skin any more. Why is it that only snakes can shed the old skin? The old skin is hiding my young skin. People probably wouldn't recognise me in my young skin; they came to the funeral to comfort the poor, sad, widow in her old skin.

I got used to hiding in my old skin. Perhaps it isn't wise to let people know what is underneath. Maybe they would not like who I am.

I am grateful that we all loved each other as we celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary before Franc slumped in the chair and died. We parted as a happy family. There is nothing to feel sad or guilty about. We have done the right thing and everybody can now rest in peace. RIP. To rest in peace must be the ultimate blessing. The dead seem to be under an obligation to rest in peace. That is all there is. RIP is an order.

I hope Franc will rest in peace.

I was fifteen when I met Franc.

I was singing through the woods on my way from school one day when my little sister rushed to tell me that our father died in a logging accident. I was the oldest of six children and I had to grow up fast.

My father was working for Franc, in fact everybody in our village worked for him. Franc came to see us after my father's funeral. He had shoes made for all the children, he brought a pig, and a sack of potatoes and wheat and beans. He also brought a bag of clothes his daughters grew out of. These clothes were much better than any new clothes we ever had. Mum told me that Franc was the most generous man.

Mum often cleaned Franc's home to earn some extra for our family. Mum kissed Franc's hand when he gave her money to buy things for us children.

In spring Franc offered to take me into service as a maid in his big house so I could help mum provide for my brothers and sisters.

You are almost sixteen, said mum. You will have a good life in the big house.

Franc's wife was dying of tuberculoses, she has been bedridden for over a year. His three daughters were almost the same age as myself. I shined their shoes, washed their clothes and prepared their meals. I used to iron girls' dresses, plait their hair and cut their lunches before they left for school.

Sometimes we chatted about clothes and boys and toys like we were friends. In the end, though, I was always made to remember that I was there to serve them.

I felt lucky, really, because on Thursday afternoons I was free to go home and show off my new clothes and my white hands. My people worked on the land and their hands were cracked and callused and red.

There was an inside water tap in the big house and Franc just bought a big bath. Most people in the village have never seen a bath like that and the running water inside the house. I felt very lucky.

I washed the bath every morning after the girls left for school. Just before my sixteenth birthday Franc followed me into the bathroom. He put the finger on his lips telling me to be quiet, as his wife was asleep in a room next door. He grabbed for my breasts and kept crushing and squeezing them. I remember the smell of his breath as he kissed me. He pulled my pants down and pushed my legs apart. I leaned on the bath and nearly tipped over but he held my bottom to himself firmly. I felt little pain because the fear paralysed me. It didn't last long but Franc was breathing real hard and seemed exhausted.

You drive me mad, Franc smiled as he heaved himself away and zipped his fly. He smacked my bottom in a friendly gesture before he left the bathroom.

I saw blood stains on my panties and I quickly washed the stains and myself.

I stood there leaning on the wall. My stomach turned and twisted me into a knot. I retched into the bath. It was no use running away from it. The damage was done.

Franc came after me every time I was in the bathroom and the girls were at school.

Franc's wife died a month later and he married me before my pregnancy became obvious.

I didn't understand why Franc's daughters began to hate me since our marriage. I served them as well as I did before but they wanted nothing to do with me. Franc sent them to the boarding school and we saw little of them since then.

Mum was grateful that Franc married me after I disgraced him by becoming pregnant.

Franc employed most of the local people on his fields and on his sawmill. They blamed me for seducing a decent family man. I heard the village women sniggering close enough for me to hear.

They talk about me, I complained to Franc.

They are jealous of you and they are afraid to admit it.

They respect you but they are nasty to me.

Fear is the best reason for respect, said Franc.

Franc told me that people, like dogs, know when you are afraid and they attack you. I couldn't help being afraid. Maybe being afraid comes from being poor or young or weak but there it is and you can't do much about it. People sniff your fear and they peck at it like chooks peck at other bleeding chooks. The memory of fear follows you your whole life.

Hitler invaded Slovenia. Our daughters Martina and Vera and their brother Damian were born during the war. People forgot about our family. I suppose they had more important things to think about. They talked about their children being killed and about their families being transported to the concentration camps. Some talked about the victory against the rich and powerful.

A lot of older people wore black. There was excitement, fear and adoration, hope and horror.

Nothing much changed for our family. I was too young and too busy with my children to know what it was all about.

Hitler knows what people need, said Franc.

Satan leads Russia, said mum. The Christians have to unite against the godless communists.

I only knew what mum and Franc told me.

After the war I heard the words unity, equality and democracy. I had no idea what the words meant.

Democracy is not won in a revolution, I heard Franc argue with the man from the shire. You won dictatorship. You order people to be equal, they are not free to run faster, be smarter, and become richer. They are not allowed to compete and improve their position. They are not allowed to think for themselves or to look after themselves. You can compensate the poor and the stupid and the lazy for being born what they are but they will never be equal.

We will change all that, said the man. We will get rid of your old bourgeois mentality.

It's funny how some words stick in your mind.

The man from the shire used to work for Franc before the war and revolution. In 1946 he brought a paper that told Franc that they nationalised his property. His accounts were closed. People called Franc a traitor and Hitler's collaborator. Franc knew that our days were numbered.

People became openly hostile towards us after we lost the war and our property. I heard a woman say that God punished my family because Franc and I had sex while Franc's wife was dying. God apparently never sleeps and he saw that I took

advantage of a desperately sad man who was grieving for his dying wife. There is God, she concluded.

I wondered how God would have anything to do with communists since mum called them Godless but then I knew nothing about these things. Maybe God was always on the side of winners.

She brought a curse on the family, said an old woman.

The poor woman dying in the same house, said her friend.

They will pay. God will see to it. He will punish into third and fourth generation. She brought a curse on herself and her children.

Apparently it wasn't enough that we lost our property.

Children learned the songs of praise for their leaders. Someone wrote a song saying how nice it was to be young in our homeland.

Privileges are the easiest way to convert masses. Communists distribute to the poor what was once mine, they never had to sweat for it, and they never produced anything, said Franc.

People spy and report on each other to get privileges, said mum. They would sell their souls for coupons. A metre of cloth or a litre of oil means more than god.

It's a new religion. It's always religion, said Franc. They had to get rid of god so they can be god.

Equality, brotherhood and unity, the slogans said.

I have no time for politics, said Franc. The nation changed its leaders and the borders have to be re-drawn and all these things take time. Nobody is willing to give anything away without a fight. In the meantime I intend to look after my family.

People on the land will be happier because they will work for themselves, mum tried to understand the way of the poor. Since I married Franc mum almost forgot that she was the poor.

Everybody loves Robin Hood, laughed Franc. I had no idea why and who Robin Hood was. The poor have to be made to believe that their leaders are working for them. Until now they were governed by those that produced and owned the means of production now they will be governed by those that have stolen the means of production in the name of the poor.

A feeling of hope was in the air. There was a promise of justice, liberty and success. I couldn't understand it then, of course, but there was much excitement and enthusiasm. Even those who didn't believe in communism were hopeful. They won the war.

The cream always comes to the top and the poor will always be poor, said Franc.

There was a five-year plan to rebuild the country and people were ready for the sacrifice. We were told to be generous, brave, and patriotic and to trust our leaders.

Factory workers are given rewards if they work beyond their norms. They work harder than they ever did, said mum. They achieve record norms because they can't survive without them.

The people gradually realised that working hard won't save them. Some escaped, some gave up, and some tried to get into management. But the poor remained poor. The heart has gone out of their victory, their work suffered and the production was poor. Nobody dared criticise the government or complain. They heard of arrests and disappearances. Anyone, who wasn't happy, was a traitor and had to be converted or eliminated.

Mum and Franc agreed on everything. I never saw things as clearly as they did. Maybe they saw things the same way because they were the same age. Or maybe mum just wanted to be like Franc, to please Franc, because she was grateful to him for marrying me.

Communists gave the land to the poor to work on, but the poor are allowed to keep very little of what they produce. They have to sell the surplus to the co-op for almost nothing. They realise that however hard they work they will always remain poor. The surplus they produce does not pay the cost of producing it. It is simple mathematics but our communist leaders are not good on mathematics, said Franc.

You are not allowed to buy milk from your neighbour. You can go to jail if you sell a litre of wine outside the Co-op. When you buy from the Co-op you pay three times as much, explained mum.

People only work more if they can keep more and sell more on the free market, explained Franc.

They are taking back the land they gave to the poor, said mum.

It's all a learning process for them. I could have told them before they started, but then they would not have a reason to take my land.

I rarely said anything political, because I didn't know what is the right thing to say. I also didn't quite know which group of people I belonged to.

When the beggar becomes the boss the poor suffer most. The beggar is always more greedy than the person who always had money, said Franc who knew about those things.

They became the law and the judges, says mum.

The winners are always right. The losers remain losers. But only until they change things for themselves and become winners again. I will never allow my children to grow up as losers. If you can't prosper within one system choose another.

Franc told me to pack our belongings because we were moving to Austria.

Luckily Franc had money in Switzerland.

Pays to be prepared, he explained.

We can't carry everything with us, I said.

I sold the house. Take what you want and give the rest to your family, said Franc.

The day we moved my whole family came to pick what we left behind. I remember them carting our beds and wardrobes and tools on the big bull wagon. Ours were the only proper mattresses in those parts of the world and people came out of their houses to see the treasures my family inherited.

Most villagers slept on bags of husks they peeled off corncocks or simply on straw. During winter they made soft doonas out of feathers.

My father was born near Graz in Austria, explained Franc. The caretaker now lives in the old house. Franc bought another big old house next to his father's home.

When we moved to Austria I tried to forget about communists and especially about Franc's daughters. I tried. Luckily I had much to do and little time to think.

The border between Slovenia and Austria was tightly guarded. Although we only moved fifty kilometres North into Austria we never returned to Slovenia.

In Austria we lived much like we lived before in Slovenia. It was like moving to another village really. Half of the people spoke Slovenian; the shopkeepers and the priest were Slovenian. Franc hired Austrian workers and I quickly learned enough German to deal with any help we had on the land or in a house. Most spoke the sort of German we spoke before the war, half German half Slovenian I thought but Franc said that it was deformed, Slovenianised German.

Franc was a powerful man in Slovenia but in Austria he was a foreigner. Maybe even his father wasn't a real Austrian.

Before I left for Austria mum told me most solemnly: Wherever you may go, you will find our people. There are invisible ties between you and your people. When you need them they will be there for you. I think mum felt that she had to give me something for my journey, so she gave me all Slovenian people as my people. There must be an umbilical cord holding us together.

Franc believed that people are a genetic mixture and one has to decide what one wants to be. He didn't like me mixing with Slovenians in Austria but I was happy to

hear them speak in the shops. It made it easier for me, knowing that they were there.

The reasons for Slovenians living in Austria, as a minority, were as many as there were people. The borders between Austria and Slovenia were never very clear. Most Slovenians in Austria felt prejudiced against and were making demands from Austrian government.

I don't want to waste time with your useless nationalistic ideals, said Franc to a man who invited him to join in traditional Slovenian activities.

Slovenians decided in the referendum that it was better to be under Austria than under Serbs but if they had a choice to be independent they would all want to be Slovenians, the man argued.

You hope, laughed Franc. It is easy to be patriotic if it does not cost you. If Slovenians had to choose between a good pay packet and a poor pay packet they would choose money.

Franc's daughters were doing really well in Slovenia. They finished universities and worked in the management. One of them said that I was dragging Franc down. I wonder what she meant. I followed Franc.

Mum eventually came to live with us. Gradually most of my family moved to Austria.

Austrians in these parts are really Slovenians, said mum.

Why come to Austria if you want to be something else, said Franc. He refused to be treated as a foreigner in Austria, he was Austrian by birth after all. The fact that he used to own a part of Slovenia was the only reason why he lived in Slovenia.

We all received Austrian citizenship and our children went to school as Austrians. They never considered themselves foreigners. Some Slovenians said that we were more Austrian than Austrians. I don't know if that was good or bad.

I believed that everything was as it should have been.

Just count your blessings, advised mum. Think of poor people who suffer under communists.

When Franc gradually lost a desire for sex, he became grumpy and criticised me for little things I said and did. I tried harder and harder to please him but he just withdrew into himself and ignored me. We were getting older, of course. I felt a little bit sad that he didn't want to sleep in the same bed with me but I got used to it. I can't expect to have everything my way.

Franc sometimes said that I had no idea what I was talking about. People become bored with each other, I suppose. We did not want to have more children anyway so why bother with sex.

All Austrians were with Hitler and now they deny it and are ashamed of it, said Franc.

I could tell that Franc wasn't happy in Austria. In 1951 he applied for us to go to Australia.

In Sydney I took care of the family while Franc organised his business. I never knew exactly what his business was, but he gradually became happier. Our new big house in Sydney is overlooking the ocean and from the balcony we can see the hotel Franc bought. Franc also bought a king-size bed and we started to sleep together again for awhile. He never worked in a hotel but we looked down at it perched, shiny white, near the ocean. Franc was happy as we stood on the balcony and admired the evening view and the lights of his hotel. Franc decided to have sex once a week. He bought a bottle of wine for those occasions and our dinners were brought in. I was relieved that Franc found me desirable again.

Franc had an office at home and Tereza came twice a week to take care of his paper work. She is German but she came to Australia as a child.

Franc began losing his memory somewhere in the seventies. I suppose people do that after a certain age. He constantly blamed me for misplacing things, losing things and forgetting things. He also accused our children of stealing things from his office.

In 1987 I went to our daughter Martina's place. I thought she would understand that I couldn't take it anymore but she didn't.

Don't be melodramatic mum, you are both old enough to be able to talk things over, advised my daughter. She is as practical as her father.

I can't take it anymore, I said.

Of course you can take it, mum. Think of your children and grandchildren. Don't just think of yourself. We all want to see you together. Don't be selfish, mum. Anyway, what could our old daddy have done this time, my daughter asked. I am sixteen years older and she treats me as a child.

He is convinced that I am hiding and misplacing things. Most of the time the things he is looking for are there right in front of him. If I point that out to him he says that I want to make him look stupid.

Poor daddy, said Martina patting my hand. You promised to be there for each other in sickness and in health.

I am sick of him. My rebellion frightened Martina.

Be patient, mum. We all have bad days.

I am not going back.

Where will you go? What will you do? He is eighty-five, mum, he might have a few more months. We'll organise a big party for Christmas.

If we last that long, I said feeling suddenly foolish and guilty and unreasonable. We shouldn't be good just because we are waiting for someone to die.

Mum, you could never manage on your own. Dad has always done everything for you. You have never done a day's work in your life, said my daughter.

Funny how one can deceive oneself. I thought I did everything for Franc. He never opened a cupboard door to find his shirt or a drawer where the spoons were. His shoes were always shiny and his clothes always ironed, his meals fresh and his garden immaculately weeded. His children were always presented to daddy respectful and clean. But I let everybody believe that Franc did everything for me, because he knew everything and was able to do everything. Franc was happy when I pointed out to others that I could not manage without him so I pointed this out to others often. I suppose if you hear something often enough you begin to believe it.

Mum, just be happy while you still have daddy.

Nothing makes him happy.

Humour him, he is an old man after all. I'll talk to him, if you like, promised my smart counsellor daughter.

He is cruel and mean and he always was, I muttered under my breath. I don't know what came over me. Maybe I watched something on television that made me behave recklessly. No wonder Franc didn't like me watching television.

Dad didn't change as much as you did, said Martina, shocked by the change in me.

I had to change all my life. I don't know who I am any more, I said.

You are confused, diagnosed Martina. She is smart; she knows the law and all, working in the law office all these years. Vince, her boss, relies on her. They must be helping lots of confused people.

I bought a bag of apples and one was a bit rotten at the stem. He told me how careless I always was with his money and how I never check things out. He went on and on all evening about me throwing his money away. In the morning I had to take the apple back to the shop.

Did you?

I threw it in the bin inside the shop and bought a new shiny apple while he waited in the car.

You bad woman, you, cheating on daddy, teased my daughter.

He gets angry if his every wish is not granted.

Men are like that, said Martina and I wondered what she knew about men. She worked all her life and so did her husband. They never seemed to have had time or

reason to argue. They couldn't do without each other. I really don't know my daughter or her husband well. Franc was greatly disappointed when Martina married Joe. Joe was Franc's mechanic, a hired help. I think it was then that he chose to sleep in his own room again.

You fool yourself that you will change somebody but you can't even change yourself. If you are born poor you will be apologising for it all your life. Poverty is in your blood. People smell the poverty in you, I told Martina. She probably does not know what I am talking about. She was always better off than those around her.

Dad is not going to last long, said Martina.

I didn't like her implying that we were all waiting for him to die. It is not nice or Christian. Especially with Christmas coming.

He is just forgetting things, I suppose. He is saying that you kids only come to steal from him, I smile to justify my anger.

Poor daddy does not know what he is saying. The senility is normal at his age.

He follows me all the time and demands to know what I am doing and why and how. He insists I peel potatoes the way he would do it. He never peeled a potato but he saw it peeled on television and he wants to change the way I peeled potatoes all my life.

He is an old man.

He is obsessed by waste. He tells me over and over what I could do with stale bread. He spends thousands of dollars lavishly on his associates and pretends that he never considers the cost yet he checks if I threw a slice of old bread or a worn out rag in the bin. He tells me that people who never learned to save on little things will never have a chance to spend big.

Our whole family arrived for Christmas 1987. Our grandchildren invaded every room. Franc was happy but the excitement proved too much for him.

You let them get away with murder, said Franc to our son Damian.

Oh, stop barking about it, laughed Damian. You never stop criticising.

I knew at that moment that the festive mood ended. You don't say that your father barks. Your father is not a dog. Of course I know that Franc used to say to anybody who complained or raised his voice, to stop barking. Damian picked the phrase and used it without thinking.

Franc stopped talking.

Vera's little toddler lay on her back and kicked the wall. The brown polish of her shoes made a stain on the white wallpaper.

You let the bastards wreck my home, said Franc.

We'd better go, said Damian.

And don't come back. Goes for all of you.

What did we do?

You will remember the day you called me a dog for Christmas, growled Franc.

Like father like son, Damian tried to make a joke of it.

Franc locked himself in his office.

It's all your fault, he growled at me after they left.

I suppose I should have reprimanded Damian but he is almost fifty and anyway he is Franc's son and not easily corrected.

A week later, on the New Year's eve, Franc called his daughters in Slovenia. He talked to them like they were still his little girls. He laughed and joked and promised to come and see them. He also invited them over and they promised to come. I became frightened of them like I was frightened of them as a little girl. Nobody here knows about Franc's daughters and even our children forgot about them. Now I had to deal with them again.

I realised that I was afraid of his daughters all my life. I never knew what they could do to me.

Christmas is a stressful time. Everybody tries to be on best behaviour but people get tired of smiling and kissing and wishing. Too much togetherness is not good for anybody, laughed Tereza. She probably knew that our Christmas didn't turn out well.

Franc began to talk about his daughters' visit. He became more agreeable. I think he wanted them to see how happy he is and how well he has done.

We'd better kiss and make up, advised Martina. Your 50th anniversary is coming up in June and we should make a big get together. I will hire the restaurant so the kids don't wreck dad's place, she laughed.

Martina doesn't know about her stepsisters coming. She never related to them and she always considered herself to be the oldest in the family.

Franc knew nothing about the wedding anniversary party. I invited him out for lunch and as we entered the restaurant everybody was there singing and congratulating us. Franc was pleasantly surprised. He drank the toasts and by dinnertime he loved everybody. After dinner he slumped in the chair and his gargling breathing sound made me aware that something was wrong. Damian called the ambulance and Franc died on the way to hospital.

I phoned Franc's daughters that Franc died but they couldn't make it for the funeral.

They arrived from Slovenia when they received a letter from the solicitor saying that Franc left to them most of his assets.

Franc changed his will after the Christmas argument and then forgot to change it back again.

Franc's three daughters look older, wiser and more confident than I could ever manage to look. I am a child again and they are the mistresses of my home. My children do not want to meet them and the three old women have nothing much to say to me. They book into the hotel while directing Franc's solicitor what to do with their inheritance.

We'll let the solicitors take care of that, said Damian. We will contest the will.

We have to prove that dad wasn't in the right mind at the time he changed the will, said Martina who has most of the legal knowledge.

Franc told us over and over that everything he had would be ours one day and we put up with things to show gratitude. I depended on the life we had and on the money Franc had invested. One gets trapped like that.

Don't worry mum, says Martina. We never expected anything from you, anyway, she adds.

I am disappointed that my children didn't expect anything from me. Why did I try so hard? Why did I follow Franc and his money? Nobody will ever depend on me like we all depended on him.

I wish I could be fifteen again. I hate the old skin my life is wrapped in.

Martina's daughter, Tina, reminds me of me when I was her age.. I am especially fond of Tina. I bought her a ticket for a holiday in Lightning Ridge for her high school graduation present.

I wonder if Tina knows how radiant her fresh young skin is and how her eyes sparkle.

It is rather unfortunate that only the old can properly appreciate the fresh, young skin.

Part 2

War babies

Life levels all men:

Death reveals the eminent.

Shaw

Ivan

I am named Martina after my mother. Mum's name was shortened to Tina but my father never allowed anyone to call me anything but by my proper name. Tina sounds cheap, he said. My father was a serious man and people took notice of what he said. He was a tall broad shouldered man with his face half hidden in a shiny white beard.

My daughter is also named Martina but my mother was the first to call her Tina. I used to look around if dad was listening.

I had Tina when I was thirty six and my two boys were already in the boarding school.

I grew up as an Australian but I suppose I am a migrant. You are who you are within the system you are in, said my father. You have to rely on yourself to fit in. You have to develop a sense of yourself regardless of what others say about you.

My father said that no particular nation or social order is better than the other. People take for themselves what they can get away with. First they fight for power and wealth and then they fight for peace. Rich and powerful always want peace, he said. In his opinion people are rich or poor, powerful or weak, diligent or lazy, sick or healthy, smart or stupid. Regardless of nationality.

To be truthful, I never paid much attention to nationality and politics until my father and my husband died. Being Slovenian or Austrian or Australian was much the same to me. I can't explain why all of a sudden I feel more strongly connected to Slovenians now.

At the beginning I spoke German with my dad and Slovenian with my mum but we soon all learned English. Dad said that if you choose to live in a foreign country, you have to become one of them. You re-establish yourself faster if you forget about nationality and politics.

My father also said that people are the same everywhere. If you get along with people around you, you will get along with people anywhere. We meet the same problems wherever we go because we carry the problems within us.

I wonder what nationality really means because for most migrants it seems to mean everything.

Nationality is like a straw they clutch to belong. Some people dig into their origins to find their identity but I prefer to live in the present. I fail to see why incidents from the past should rule my life. All extreme beliefs seem to stem from some historical events.

Helena tried to explain that Slovenians were the natives of Europe. She showed me evidence that Veneti-sloveneti-Vendi or whatever they were called lived in the central Europe before Roman Empire. She was disappointed because I wasn't as excited about this as she was.

I work in the law office. Work was always a source of satisfaction for me. I am happy when I file the documents neatly but I am equally pleased when I clean the house or weed the garden. I love the feel of freshly ironed clothes and the look at shiny surfaces. I like to solve problems or simply make someone's life less complicated.

Vince, my Slovenian boss, is a top lawyer. He was always my link to Slovenians, I suppose. Many of our clients are Slovenians. They chat with me while they wait for my boss.

Since many of us are separated or widowed, we no longer fit with other families so we became a family to each other. We cherish our independence but need each other to share some of the things we used to share with our partners.

Vince's clients trust me with their secrets like they trust a sexless, sinless priest in their confessions. I work for their legal representative to whom all secrets are revealed anyway.

I met Helena, when she was Tina's teacher but I only got to know her better since both of us became widows. She is a born organiser. Comes with a job. You never stop being a teacher, says Helena.

You are like a breath of fresh air, my husband Joe once said to Helena who joined the men on the bowling alley. I remember these words because it was so unusual for Joe to pay compliments. He didn't know that I heard him. Maybe I didn't know my husband as well as I thought.

Helena and I are standing in the shade of a tree as we watch the mourners arrive for Ivan's funeral. We let close friends and family find their places in the small Slovenian church.

It is a pleasantly fresh spring afternoon. The days at this time of the year can suddenly turn cold or hot or windy or just perfect as it is now.

It's going to be huge.

Every Slovenian in Australia knew Ivan or at least heard of him. They are coming from as far as Sydney and Perth and Brisbane. They travelled thousands of kilometres to pay respects.

He was the heart of our nation in Australia.

Some hated his guts but they bought his sausages and craved his attention. An invitation from Ivan was an order and an honour, says Helena.

Ivan escaped because the communists oppressed the church so God help you if you were not properly Catholic and anti communist.

I believe that Ivan suspected us all of being secret communists, smiles Helena.

Ivan was a Catholic first and Slovenian second. Most Slovenians were brought up as communists and in some corner of their psyche they still see the Church as their rich oppressive enemy. Ivan represented the church; he was successful and rich; he became an easy target of their envy.

We are a jealous lot. God forbid that one of us should step out of the herd and succeed says Helena.

Toni once said that religion is just old fashioned politics.

Traditions and beliefs are part of our upbringing; they make us who we are.

The fashionably dressed women in black hats and men in white shirts and dark suits show respect for death. The flowers and wreaths are mounting up.

Ivan's wife, Ana, and his daughter, Natasha are dabbing at their eyes in their black designer outfits.

Ana once said that she never felt young, whispers Helena. She is only five years older than Ivan yet knowing that made her feel old.

She looks ten years younger than Ivan, I say.

When she dies they should write on her tombstone: she looked ten years younger.

Is that her greatest achievement?

I don't know if she achieved anything else, says Helena.

Ana dedicated her life to elegance. She even changed Ivan into an elegant man. He was no longer a simple butcher from Slovenia by the time he died. His family became our aristocracy.

When Ivan is away Ana laughs about the duplicity of her life. She is half Italian and half Slovenian but she was never allowed to speak Italian. She was never religious but had to present herself as a pillar of the church. Unexplained aches and pains helped her avoid and evade the functions Ivan had to attend.

If Ana and Ivan broke a loaf of bread, he would rejoice and thank God for it while she would moan that it is either too hard or too soft.

Ivan once said that his daughter Natasha would go from his hands directly to her husband's home, remembers Helena. He believed in his vision of a perfect family.

Natasha broke all the taboos.

And Ivan's heart, agrees Helena.

Ivan's son, John walks behind his mother and sister.

John is a handsome man.

No collar or tie, just black skivvy and the gold chain, whispers Helena.

He has an earring and a beard like a rabbit tail.

John is not half a man his father was, says Helena.

John is not a butcher; he is a computer programmer.

And a poof, I heard. Please don't say that to anyone but people are talking.

Our sons will never be what their fathers were.

People keep coming and many cannot fit into the church. The outdoor magnifiers are provided so we will not miss on the words of the service. Helena and I remain in the shade of the tree. The soft solemn music from the church mingles in the warm breeze. I wish they had seats; we have been standing for over an hour.

Men have only ornamental value these days with their pierced bodies and bleached hair. Women look like men used to with short straight hair and black suits, says Helena.

Women's breasts are still getting more attention than their I.Q.

We handed our I.Q. to men long ago, says Helena. Men convinced us that kicking a ball on the oval is of international importance while a woman watching soapies on television is considered demented. Choosing fishing tackle is a serious protracted business but a woman should choose her shoes instantly.

Natasha went with Pero to spite her father. Since then Ivan focused his energies on Robert but Robert turned out to be like his mother.

Would be sad if they had no grand children.

Some would say that it serves them right.

Natasha must be close to forty but she looks like an eighteen years old. It's not fair that some people never age.

She has her mother's younger looking genes.

It broke Ivan's heart to see Natasha bashed by a man he despised. The rage killed him.

His dream of a perfect family died; he lost hope and the will to live.

Ivan was a simple peasant boy when he came to Australia fifty years ago as a teenager with a cardboard suitcase of old clothes. He got a job with a butcher from Poland. Ivan killed a pig and made sausages and hams like he saw his father make at home. His kranskies became instantly famous among Slovenians. Soon Ivan opened his own butchery and delicatessen. Slovenians came from far and wide and asked for parcels to be sent to friends in other cities. Ivan's shop became a meeting place for Slovenians. That's where the idea of a Slovenian club was born. When Slovenian clubs opened Ivan became a supplier. The rest is history.

It has been thirty years since Ivan made his last sausage but kranskies found a place in every delicatessen and many restaurants and clubs in Australia. Ivan became an entrepreneur. His meat-works employed over one hundred people. The business seemingly ran itself.

Ivan returned to Slovenia in 1970 to organise imports of Slovenian small goods for his delicatessens. By 1980 he was selling small goods from all European countries. When Asians started to migrate to Australia in the eighties Ivan began importing Asian goods. His employees told him what the market wanted and he got it.

You only have to listen to what customers want, Ivan said to Vince once.

Ivan carefully chose his employees and paid them well.

The difference between ordinary wage and good pay is small compared to the extra work and care I get from the employees. A happy employee wants to make the employer happy. If you give the employee a hundred percent, he is likely to give you a hundred percent. You get what you pay for, said Ivan to Vince.

We read from the prayer booklets prepared by the family:

This is what Lord asks of you, only this: To act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God.

They will canonise him before he is buried.

Eulogies are made to turn sinners into saints, whispers Helena.

So much sadness and so much misunderstanding in one lifetime. We don't really know each other until we are dead. It is nice that at the end of the road someone remembers who we were.

Perhaps it is right that we are examined after we are done. At any other stage of our lives we are still becoming whoever we were meant to be.

People love and hate and ignore you at times although you are as lovable today as you were yesterday. Only perceptions change.

The ancient prayers echo over the graves: I am the way, the truth, and the life.

Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which spitefully use you, and persecute you.

The first will be last; and the last shall be first.

That's what it is all about. The kingdom of heaven is promised to those that missed out on Earth.

Ivan was a successful, respected man. We wanted him to be more like us but we knew that he had to stand above us in order to look after us. We tried to please him, emulate him, and destroy him, says Helena.

Ivan was a solitary tree that gave shade to smaller trees but did not need the protection of other trees.

He went out like a light, whispers Helena reverently.

Ivan died at the age of sixty-nine. He watched the television when his heart failed.

He died respectfully. I remember poor Metka who died recently. She was drunk and crashed her car into a wall. You don't have to live with your shameful death but your loved ones do, says Helena.

Rejoice with them that do rejoice and weep with them that weep.

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, and neither do they spin.

In our minds we return to the lily white splendour of our youth. The worries and the toils of our everyday life are behind us.

People line up to farewell Ivan. Ivan used to speak at funerals. Now his friends are going to say what he would have said, what needs to be said. We learned from Ivan what to say.

Janez was one of Ivan's earliest and longest serving employees. He is the closest thing Ivan had as a friend so he is first in line to speak at the gravesite.

Thirty-five years ago Ivan asked me to help build the Slovenian club, says Janez. My wife and I were annoyed. We haven't built our own home yet and I haven't learned to speak English yet and my children were learning to walk and talk.

We must have a place to meet and celebrate, Ivan urged us.

We have no time to meet and we have nothing to celebrate, I argued.

Our children will grow roots in Australia but it's up to us to teach them how to be Slovenian, said Ivan. We need a place where they can learn to speak Slovenian without being ridiculed.

Our children are going to be Australians, argued my wife.

I am working six days a week, I protested.

On the seventh day you can bring your family along and we will build our Slovenian home in Australia. Our children will be history makers, begged Ivan.

We all came to the piece of land that was to be a Slovenian club. Women planted flowers and served refreshments; men levelled the ground, laid the bricks and cut the wood. Something changed in all of us as we worked into the early Monday morning. We realised how much we needed our togetherness, concluded Janez.

It seems easy for Janez to express gratitude, admiration, and appreciation. Ivan in his coffin isn't a threat to men any more. He made room for others to be what he was.

Nada didn't come to the funeral with Janez.

When our new home neared completion Ivan came to see me, Helena begins her eulogy.

He knew that I was a teacher in Slovenia. He asked me to prepare a cultural program for the opening of the first Slovenian club in Australia.

I have no books or music or costumes, I protested.

You are the best we have so use everything you have. If you need more, tell me and I will find it, said Ivan.

Nobody will want to perform on the stage, I tried to get out of it.

Convince them that they are good and that their children need them. They sing and read and speak and some play instruments. Find them and teach them.

We celebrated the opening. Slovenians from other cities came to celebrate with us and they decided to build their own clubs. That's how we survived.

Little did I know that I will spend the next thirty five years preparing programs for Mothers' days, Fathers' days, Santa Claus, yearly concerts. I had to be prepared for an endless string of celebrations so I organised a Saturday school for Slovenian children and gave them whatever knowledge I had. Nobody ever mentioned a payment for it. Money would never give me as much satisfaction as the knowledge that I contributed a little to a new generation of Slovenians.

In the seventies Ethnic Radio began to broadcast programs for all ethnic groups in their own language, continues Helena. Ivan said that I have a pleasant voice so would I read Slovenian programs for half an hour a week. Little did I know that I was to become a permanent broadcaster and scriptwriter for the rest of my life. I had many sleepless nights compiling news and thinking of interesting little bits I could share with the rest of Slovenian community.

I was twenty-two when Ivan persuaded me to cook for the opening of the Slovenian club, says Mojca. I told him that I was a boarding school girl who never cooked before

we came to Australia. He taught me how to make sourcrout and how to boil kranskies. I couldn't get out of it. He always got what he wanted. Since then I cooked for many festivities but I never felt as proud as I did on the night Slovenian club opened.

One day Ivan came with the typewriter under his arm, says Marjan. He heard that I worked at the library. He asked me to type a letter for the fifty Slovenian families. He had the envelopes and the addresses. This letter was the first news bulletin Slovenians in Australia had. I became a publisher and the journalist and the typist for the last thirty-five years.

Ivan was a grumpy, manipulative, pushy old politician, says Marjan after a pause. I came to the club to argue with him but he always showed me the other side of the coin.

Ivan said that Australians not born in Australia needed recognition, which only the people from the same country can offer. He promoted multiculturalism while the government policy was assimilation. Our children assimilated but, thanks to Ivan, they also know where their parents came from.

I often wonder how did Ivan, a twenty years old peasant boy, away from home, know that our children would need the support of their nation before they began weaving a new identity for themselves?

Ivan told me that he never ate strudel as good as mine, says Rozi. Her bony, tall body is erect and her features are motionless. I baked more strudels for the club in the last thirty-five years than any family could eat in a lifetime.

Rozi's husband Jim died last year. When Rozi smiles, which is rarely, her face becomes pretty with dimples forming close to her nose.

Ivan asked me to invite my brother's singing group from Slovenia to perform in the club, Marty begins his eulogy.

Who will pay for them? I asked.

We will, said Ivan. We will take them around Australia, feed them and accommodate them.

You don't expect me to drive the group all over Australia, I protested.

We all need a holiday, said Ivan.

Meeting Slovenians in other Australian cities was the greatest experience for all of us who went with the group. Of course we protested that we missed a few days work, spent dollars that should have gone towards building our own homes. Now we realise how lucky we were that we found each other. Ivan said that you could never run away from who you are. I always remembered his words, concludes Marty.

I always liked Marty, whispers Helena. He is such a nice man.

Is Helena looking for a nice man? The thoughts of a nice man visit in the lonely nights. We both lost our husbands over a year ago.

When Slovenia demanded independence Ivan urged me to join the demonstration in front of the Embassies, says Vince. We petitioned Americans and Australians and British and Germans to help us. There was a Slovenian Ambassador representing Yugoslav regime. He advised us not to demonstrate. He refused to join us. To become Yugoslav ambassador he had to prove it to Yugoslav government that he was more Yugoslav and more communist than Slovenian. After we won Slovenian independence this same Yugoslav ambassador became the Slovenian ambassador. Opportunists never miss an opportunity.

Ivan counted on me to arrange public and private meetings with Australian politicians and explain to Australian public the history and the will of Slovenians. I remember that freezing day in June 1991; we were more united and felt more Slovenian than ever before as we pleaded for Slovenian independence, says Vince. His words bring tears to my eyes.

I always admired Vince. Everybody calls Vinko Vince. He just finished his law studies before he arrived to Australia. I worked for him most of my life. Now towards the end of the millennium we are both facing retirement.

I do not speak at the grave but I was a part of the celebrations and a part of the protests along with Vince. Ivan counted on us to be there and stand for what he stood for during the heady days of Slovenian independence. Slovenia was on the front page of every newspaper, every news segment began with the news about brave, honest, hard working Slovenians who deserve to have freedom and independence. I think that for the first time I became intensely aware that I am Slovenian. I think even our children became proud of being Slovenian. We were reborn as a nation.

Toni stands near the grave silently for a moment.

Ivan and I have been pig-headed and rude to each other but we both wanted the best for Slovenia, Toni begins.

Ivan said that I co-operated with Yugo embassy. I did. The ambassador approached me and offered to bring Slovenian singers to sing for us. I was happy to organise their tour. When they arrived they told me that they are not allowed to come to the club unless the Ambassador comes with them. The ambassador said that he is not allowed into the club that had the Slovenian flag without a communist star. I compromised and took down the flag. They brought cassettes, videos and books. We needed what they offered and I took it.

The funerals remind us that we are weak and old and our numbers are dwindling. Death shakes us to the core; we have to believe that this final curtain is really the beginning of new life. We confess that we need each other and that perhaps we weren't there for each other at times.

Eternal rest grant unto him o Lord, and perpetual light shine upon him, says the priest.

Receive his soul and present him to God the most high, we finish the Commendation.

We humbly acknowledge our sins and ask God for forgiveness. We re-establish the ties with people that travel alongside. We are all we have.

We live in hope to meet again in the eternal Jerusalem, says the priest.

Suddenly I realise that in twenty years none of us is likely to be alive.

A group of mourners begin to sing a Slovenian funeral song about the forest that will be green again while the one we mourn will never be with us again. The words of the song *Gozdic je ze zelen* reverbrate over the graves. The birds will sing again, the spring will come again but you will lie under the black soil, we sing and the voices tremble and brake and people cry openly leaning on each other. I think we cry for ourselves and our vulnerability. We regret our arguments and divisions as we hug and kiss.

May the peace of the lord, which is above all understanding, echoes the voice of the priest.

Lord hear us, pray those who believe and those who don't.

We deprived our children of Slovenian heritage, we only offer them our graves, says Helena.

I wonder if they will bring their families to the cemetery for All Saints Day. Chinese carried the bones of their ancestors with them when they moved. Maybe our bones will help them feel at home in Australia.

We can jump on the plane and have our home and family and memories in Slovenia but our children have nothing in Slovenia. With us gone they will be cut away and cast loose, says Helena as we go towards the car.

Slovenian club has never been as full as it is for Ivan's wake.

Ivan had done what he tried to do all his life. He reminded us who we are. We are united here.

Communists and Christians promoting unity and equality, says Marjan as we meet in the club.

People will destroy communist monuments while Jesus lives after two thousand years, says Rozi.

I believe that Ivan is watching from some corner of heaven very pleased with himself, says Helena.

Rows and rows of tables laden with delicacies, people hugging and kissing their partners, children, friends, opponents and even enemies. We are compelled to show that we mean everything to each other.

We remember baptisms and weddings and funerals. Ivan organised a fishing family and a special ritual of baptising new fishing members. There was much rejoicing, drinking and singing. Fishermen remember every fish they ever caught and the ones that got away. They remember the wild pigs they chased, the goats they shot, the lake they almost drowned in and the surf that pulled them into the ocean.

In the end memories are all we have, says Helena. Ivan was with us in sad times and happy times.

Only memories can take us to where we were, says Mojca.

We have never really developed the taste for Australian cuisine. It looks nice but it is tasteless, says Rozi as we load our plates with the best Slovenian cooks prepared..

Flowers without fragrance, food without taste, love without warmth, says Mojca.

Instant friends who never remember you when they move away, says Rozi.

At home we would never feel as intensely Slovenian as we do holding onto the memory of it, says Helena.

It is hard to imagine that we ever argued, I observe.

Ivan single handed built the first bowling place and bocce was played ever since in every Slovenian club in Australia, says Marjan.

The club is the only Slovenia our children can relate to but all they see in it is old drunks fighting, grumbles Janez.

The old rogues don't trust their children any more than the queen Elizabeth trusts Prince Charlie, says Toni.

Just as well the young don't suffer from nostalgia. What you never had you never miss, says Janez.

We succeeded despite everything. There is a higher percentage of second generation Slovenians with University education than Australian average, says Helena.

We also live longer than Australians do, says Marjan.

Because they only chose us healthy migrants, says Janez.

I appreciate what Ivan did but he was an arrogant bastard all the same, says Toni.

We pray: Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespassed against us but the words never touched our hearts, says Rozi.

Ivan worked like mad on his own projects but he never supported anybody else's ideas, says Janez.

Why should he? He started it all and then the embassy recruited people like you to destroy it, says Helena.

Ivan recruited people like you to work against the embassy and so he deprived our children of everything they offered, says Toni.

The embassy got the order from Yugo government to get the foot in the clubs and destroy them, says Marjan.

Politics, sighs Helena. All men are politicians.

A history is the version of events that people have decided to agree upon.

Napoleon Bonaparte

Slovenians have as yet not agreed on the version of their history. The story of their past events is still changing.

Janez

After the war I used to earn more in a day than other people earned in a year, Janez boasted in the club. I smuggled meat and spirits to Italy and brought back stuff to sell on the black market.

Tom listened with a grin on his face and said: Bullshit. In your head. You heard of smuggling but you never had the guts to do it.

Janez needs to impress people, whispers Helena to me. Tom knew him from home. Janez was a poor little boy who had to do a man's job to save his family from starvation.

I heard that he once pretended to be Austrian but when his work-mate began to speak German Janez excused himself and left because he can't speak German. I wonder why he would like to be Austrian.

Italians, Austrians, Yugoslavs, Germans, Russians, they all wanted us to belong to them. Over generations they managed to convince some that it was shameful or sinful to be Slovenian. What Janez wants to be must be so vivid in his mind that it wiped out what he is. He needs so desperately to look significant in someone's eyes.

I like Janez. Maybe Janez likes me because he considers me Austrian or maybe he would like to be Austrian because he likes me.

Janez came to see Vince about his divorce. Vince is in court. Janez does not mind waiting. Waiting rooms are much like confessionals. People talk to fill the silence.

He invites me for lunch. I think he needs to talk to someone. There are few people willing to listen. When you are nobody in particular your story is not worth listening to. He begins at the end because the end and the beginning meet in the cycle of life.

If I had a wife like you I would be a millionaire, says Janez and I have no idea how to respond to that. It is obvious that Janez isn't happy with who he is.

Look at me. I am an old man and what have I achieved? I left my home and my mother and nothing to show for it. My father died for Slovenia but they kicked me out.

What would you like to have done?

I was a slave all my life.

You are still young.

People are dying at my age. Nobody knows that I am alive. I worked for Ivan for over twenty years. Nada convinced me to take a job closer to home. Ivan knew that Nada wanted to keep me away from Slovenians.

Janez tells the fragments of his story as we eat. I am glad he does not expect me to respond. He is listening to his own words as he tells his sad story..

In the middle of the day Janez sits on the park bench smoking. He was stunned when his boss paid him redundancy money. With a cheque for twelve thousand in his pocket he feels free. I can pay for the repair of my car now; the happy thought comes to him.

Losing a job comes as a relief. It makes it easier to admit how he hates Nada. Janez carried this hate like an invisible burden for years. He had to report and justify things to Nada. Ivan and Nada were two gods in his life.

As he sits on the bench Janez notices spring flowers open before his eyes, the new leaves, soft and green gently move in the branches of the tree. The memory of spring and home and wonder and love is in the air as he draws on the cigarette. Free. Like a bird out of the cage with nowhere to go.

Janez was stunned when Nada bought their daughter a car for twenty first birthdays.

Surprise, Nada squealed as they delivered the shiny new car with a huge birthday card on the windscreen.

She did not even bother telling Janez that she took thirty thousand dollars they had in the bank for a rainy day. Janez planned on going home for a holiday but the trip was postponed every year. Nada did not want to go to Slovenia.

The thought comes to Janez, the immoral, horrible thought. How simple life would be if Nada was to die suddenly. Maybe an accident, a heart attack, something quick and clean like losing a job. Half of Janez prays for forgiveness of sinful thoughts and the other half enjoys the vision of Nada's death. Janez would no longer be a failure if Nada disappeared. He would be a king in his castle. He hated going home but with Nada gone his home could become a castle.

He couldn't do anything to make Nada disappear but he silently prayed that God himself would somehow take this burden from him.

If only I stayed with Ivan, I would never be without a job. I am sick of work. I have nothing to work for.

Nada never liked Ivan because Ivan never liked her. There have been just Ivan and Nada since Janez came to Australia. Ivan is dead. If only Nada...

Janez feels that Nada stopped him from being what he could be, what he wanted to be. He almost forgot what he wanted to be but he knows that what he is, is not it. He blames Nada for being who he is.

If Nada died I could get drunk, the thought cheers Janez.

People understand grief. Janez wants to get drunk so he could cry without shame. He wants to drown the past and swim to the new beginning.

I barely remember my father, continues Janez. He died in a concentration camp when I was six. I had to look after my mother. I was seven when mum remarried. I had two stepsisters in the next two years before my stepfather injured his leg in an accident and could never work again. I had to work for the family of five by the time I was ten.

I hated Germans and applauded communists for fighting Nazis and fascists and for winning the war. I learned at school that the Red Army liberated the world. If only my father was alive to share in the liberation and help the family. In the evening I had to kneel with the family as mum prayed for the forgiveness of sins and for the conversion of the communist Russia. She insisted that I go to church every Sunday. There was a constant battle between the two gods in my life.

Mum's new husband was a former partisan whom mum converted into a Christian. He hobbled with her to church early every Sunday and after mass he stayed in the nearby hotel. He returned late and he often cried, prayed and cursed before he dozed off. Nobody took him seriously; he was just a useless cripple. Pity and compassion made him angry and he cursed when mum wasn't listening. Mum didn't mind him drinking on Sundays as long as he went to the Holy Communion first.

His conscience is bothering him, mum explained.

I went to a ten o'clock mass so I didn't have to sit next to them. Sometimes I sneaked out halfway through mass. Sometimes I didn't go at all and the priest reported me to mum. The priest had no real power after the war, but he exercised all the power he had over the souls of the true believers like mum.

I was hungry most of the time. I remember us children rattling the spoons long before the corn meal was ready.

I had to go to mass early every morning during May. I was freezing going to mass when a miracle happened. I found one hundred dinar note in the snow. I ran home to give it to mum. She went to the parish priest and handed the note to him so he could announce from the pulpit and return the money to the rightful owner. The priest said: Nobody needs this money more than you do. I am not going to announce it but if someone tells me that he lost it, we will give it back. If nobody claims it for a week you go and buy food for the children.

Nobody claimed the money and mum bought about one hundred kilos of corn for it. I was a hero who helped the family survive on sourcroust and cornmeal that winter. That was the best thing that ever happened to me.

Our goat was the worst. This wicked animal kept me in trouble forever. I grazed it from sunrise until I had to go to school at eight in the morning and again after school. If I took my eye from her for a minute she would escape into someone's field and ate cabbages and other vegetables.

The goat was our most precious possession. In spring it had a kid and we sold it to buy the necessary provisions like cheaper beef meat, oil and salt and clothes. The young goat's meat was considered a delicacy by the rich. The owners of the leather factory had a permanent order for the kid. After we sold the kid, the goat gave us up to seven litres of milk a day and we exchanged this milk for double the amount of cow's milk. People believed that goat's milk was a remedy for those suffering from tuberculosis.

Every spring we bought a piglet so mum could fatten it. We killed it before Christmas and carefully preserved the meat to last through the year. The fat was reduced into lard. Even the head was cut into pieces that were later smoked and cooked with barley.

The shire made it possible for Janez to get an apprenticeship and he became a butcher. There was always something left over in the butchery that he could bring home. He will never be hungry, said his mother. Like a girl who married a miller. Never without a crust to eat.

Janez was conscripted into the army at the height of communist indoctrination program. It was a relief for Janez to get away from home. The army transformed him into an obedient follower of the party. The soldiers' life was scheduled to the minute. There was no time to think there was only the time to follow the rules, the teaching, the officers and the instructions.

On Sunday afternoon soldiers were given two hours freedom to do what they liked. Janez went with boys to the nearby farmer where they bought wine and drank it sitting under the tree. He liked Serbian hospitality. The girls liked Slovenian soldiers. They hoped that these soldiers would take them to Slovenia, which was much like America in their understanding. They just wanted to get away from poverty and frustration of their own lives. Slovenia made their eyes shine. Close to the West with the forbidden fruit of the rotten west just over the border.

Janez could not go to church even if he wanted to. There were no masses on Sunday afternoon. He only had his uniform and one could not go to mass in a uniform.

On the first Sunday night in the army Janez felt an enormous guilt for not going to mass. Maybe he was just homesick for his mother's preaching and scolding. He was also drunk. When the lights went out Janez prayed with all his heart to Jesus and his mother and all the saints and angels to help him get back on the right path to God. His pillow was wet from the tears of despair before he cried himself to sleep.

For a few weeks Janez prayed every evening. Gradually he prayed less and less and almost never cried again. By the end of the first year the praying and the crying stopped. He liked friendly Serbian people, their food, their drink and their girls. The brotherhood and unity with other Yugoslav nations made sense. It was the only way to peace and prosperity. Nationality, language and religion are obstacles to unity. He learned that a good person only cares for common good. Janez also learned how lucky he was to live in the socialist republic where every kind of work was honourable and nobody exploited the worker. He learned to fear the rotten capitalist West that took so many Slovenian migrants.

In the second year of army service the confusion and guilt disappeared. Janez forgot the teaching of his old ignorant mother and totally accepted the teaching of his officers. He learned to speak Serbo-Croatian official language fluently. Brotherhood and unity was worth every sacrifice. The army helped soldiers forget that their ancestors were Slovenians, Serbians and Croats. They became Yugoslavs along with Montenegrins and Macedonians. The last year in Serbia was the best time of Janez's life.

When Janez returned home, he heard the villagers whisper against the party and their leaders and against communism.

There was a five-year plan to Utopia and then there was another five-year plan.

Janez left home but couldn't find accommodation in Ljubljana. A friend from his village let him share his basement room as he started to work in the abattoir. He hated his work and his dark, damp accommodation. His friend decided to escape to Germany where there was a lot of well-paid work and accommodation and freedom. Janez knew that a person who once tried to escape could never again be trusted. He felt guilty about knowing about his friend. He was supposed to report him. Escaping was the ultimate betrayal of the communist ideals and there was no chance of redemption.

Janez couldn't sleep. He knew that capitalism exploits the workers. The capitalist employers squeeze the blood out of the worker. Not like in communism where workers were the owners of the means of production and everybody was equal and every kind of labour honourable.

Janez wondered why didn't the workers from the West try to escape from capitalism to enjoy the communism? He tried to banish the thought.

With his friend gone Janez would be without accommodation. He joined his friend and was caught on the border. He was convicted and sentenced to six months hard labour. He was also severely beaten on the border. He began to hate the police, the system, and people around him.

As soon as he came out he tried again.

I knew a friend who worked with cattle transports to Germany, tells Janez. He cleaned the wagons and put hay in the middle for cattle to eat on the way to

Germany. He and I hid under that hay. Yugoslav and German inspectors checked the wagon before they sealed it on Friday. When they opened the wagons on Sunday morning we were in Austria. As we moved out of the wagons we saw people going to church clean and fresh while we smelled like cattle. The stationmaster yelled at us and called the police.

They took us to a refugee camp. Many refugees were returned to Yugoslavia in those days. I applied to go to Australia and landed in Sydney in 1964.

Nada and Janez came from Austria refugee camp to Australia with the same transport. They were two young homesick people with stars in their eyes as they came in the Bonegilla barracks. Nada's black curly hair was tied into a ponytail and her lips were red as cherries. The world was unfolding with a huge shiny promise.

They met in the laundry. Nada offered to do the washing for Janez. She also invited him to her room for coffee. The canteen only served tea. The aroma of freshly ground coffee beans brought them closer to home. Nada baked cakes in the camp kitchen and the familiar food made those first days in Australia less sad. Bonegilla was full of migrants but Janez and Nada only had eyes for each other.

Nada neatly ironed clothes she washed and Janez felt enormously grateful. Nobody ever fussed about his clothes like that. Nobody ever fussed over him. After a couple of months Nada announced that she was pregnant. She washed and ironed their best clothes for the wedding in the registry office.

Janez felt enormously lucky to find Nada in a camp full of young European men. There were a few families but Nada was the only single girl from Yugoslavia where they both built brotherhood and unity.

In communist Yugoslavia Janez and Nada stopped going to church so their different religious backgrounds didn't matter when they met in Australia. Nationality and God and politics had no place in their cosy togetherness.

Nada and Janez moved from Bonegilla to Sydney where they met other Serbs and Slovenians.

Nada was close to having a baby when Slovenian Franciscan priest sent Janez to see Ivan about the job.

Ivan was a church going man so Janez felt obliged to follow his boss and become a small pillar of the same church. Nada joined Serbs in their Orthodox Church.

Nada came with Janez as they began to build the Slovenian club. Janez spoke Serbian with her and most Slovenians followed.

Why did we bother to escape from Serb communists if we are going to speak Serbian in Australia? said Ivan. Speak Slovenian; we are building Slovenian club.

Nada doesn't understand, others defended themselves. Janez felt guilty.

There are twenty of you speaking Serbian because one person is not willing to speak Slovenian. She can learn if she likes.

Nada pretended that she did not understand but she left soon after and never came to the club again.

You keep your sausage friends and I will keep mine, said Nada. She said that Serbs consider it treason if any of them spoke Slovenian. Migrants from Yugoslavia had to build brotherhood and unity at home and what they learnt to believe at home many accepted even in Australia. There was a constant battle between Slovenians who followed Ivan and those who were instructed by the Yugoslav Embassy.

Janez followed Ivan. It was an honour to be Ivan's friend. Ivan and his wife Ana made Janez welcome in their home. Gradually he became more a member of Ivan's family than of his own. Janez saw Ivan's children Natasha and John grow up.

Natasha drifted from one unhappy relationship into another. Ivan and Ana introduced her to many eligible families with sons of marriageable age. Ivan even took Natasha to Argentina to meet sons of the religious Slovenian migrants there. As they returned she settled with Pero who was a Serb twice her age with teenaged children. Shame and horror and sin descended on Ivan's family.

Ivan is dead. Things became less important and sinful since he died.

People divorce every day but it would be easier if the divorce could be bypassed by death. Death feels good and easy and almost sad. Nada might develop some mysterious sickness or she might have an accident; an accident would be the most tragically convenient.

Janez sits on the park bench after he lost his job. As by some magic he sees Natasha coming towards him, her fair hair moving in the wind. He doesn't want anyone to intrude on his new thoughts. He wants to enjoy the spring and his imagined grief of Nada's death. Natasha seems so alive and lovely. He pretends that he is searching in his bag for something but he only wants Natasha to pass. What will she think of him sitting on the park bench in the middle of the day?

Janez first met Natasha when he got a job in her father's butchery almost thirty years ago.

Natasha was a primary school girl then and Janez was newly married. He still remembers Natasha's platts neatly inter-woven with blue ribbons that matched her maroon catholic school uniform. Janez always liked Natasha, she was eager to please and she never looked down on him.

Ivan bought a beautiful house for his daughter but she remained single until she met Pero at the age of twenty-nine. At the time Pero had a court order to keep away from his wife and their three children. He moved in with Natasha. Pero's wife died soon after from breast cancer and the children joined Pero and Natasha. Pero let out his own house so the children had some income from it.

Natasha became an instant housekeeper, mother and wife.

Janez once saw bruises and cuts on Natasha's face but she explained that she fell off the ladder while pruning.

You should find a single man and raise your own family, said Janez.

Men my age are either married or determined not to get married, Natasha laughed.

You are too choosy, said Janez.

Divorced men cry for their ex-wives, Natasha said more seriously. Some become depressed and impotent and they frantically search for a woman to restore their self-esteem. Many turn to their ex to have sex with because they can't break the habit of having sex even after they separated and divorced in every other way.

You know a lot about men, said Janez a little afraid of her knowing. He was like an uncle to Natasha.

Natasha told Janez things she would never tell her father because he would be shocked and angry.

Everybody talked about Natasha when Pero bashed her. She had to go to hospital to have her jaw stitched together. Ivan brought her home. A week after Ivan died Pero moved back in with Natasha.

Janez feels very alone. He always felt alone. Other men came to Slovenian club with their wives and children but Janez felt out of place with families. He drank more to overcome the feeling of being out of place. With a few drinks he relaxed. He knows that people whisper about his drinking like they whisper about Natasha and Pero.

What are you doing, smiles Natasha as she sees him on the park bench.

Nothing, smiles Janez.

They look at each other like that with nothing more to say or do. Their smiles fade away and the sadness meets in their eyes.

She sits on the bench and rummages in her pocket for a tissue to wipe her sunglasses.

Lovely day, she says.

Beautiful, he agrees.

Are you busy, she asks.

No, he says and becomes ashamed of not being busy.

Come for a drink, she says simply. Her house is in a mess. Natasha pushes the clothes on the couch to one side for Janez to sit close to her.

You moved back with Pero, says Janez. He hopes that she would deny it but she only smiles.

It's my house, she says placing a bottle of scotch and two glasses on the coffee table.

Why don't you throw him out, says Janez.

Don't worry about him, Natasha gulps down her first whisky and then pours another.

Where is Pero? asks Janez.

Let's forget Pero for today. I'll change into something more comfortable, says Natasha. She pours another drink and sits close to Janez. Her dressing gown is half opened. She has nothing underneath.

Both smile awkwardly. Neither of them has any idea of what should be done next or what they want. They have seen scenes like that on television. There is no sexual desire but they need to be close.

Hold me, giggles Natasha. Her eyes are brimming with tears, her whole body is trembling.

Janez was separated from Nada's bed for the last five years but his God did not allow him to look at another woman with lust while he was still married. In the eyes of God one of them had to die before the other could resume sexual activities with another person.

Ivan would not like that either.

Janez had no sex life for five years when Natasha put her head on his chest.

Confused and intensely excited Janez kisses Natasha's hair and then they just can't stop kissing and touching. There is a great need for comfort, there is a desperate need for unity. Janez carries Natasha to bed. He caresses her body over and over. She tells him to lay still as she undresses him and runs her fingers over his legs and arms. She smiles at him getting aroused. He turns her under him and can't wait any longer. She laughs and tells him that it is OK. Her eyes are full of tears as she lays on his shoulder. Janez strokes her hair and her back. She is a little girl again. They hold onto each other without saying a word. They don't think about sex. Sex isn't important. Janez feels closer to Natasha than he ever felt to another human being. He wants to cry with Natasha. He never cried since he was in the army. Nobody saw Janez cry before. There is a mutual desperation that needs to be cried about. He is looking at the ceiling and feels tears running down his cheeks. They hold onto each other without speaking.

Natasha cries herself to sleep in his arms and he covers her up and kisses her hair before he leaves.

Janez wants to begin a new life. He suddenly knows that there is a new life.

If only Nada would die. Janez often wakes up in the middle of the night and the thought of Nada's death is always present. Nada and their two children are the only family Janez ever had.

Now the children left and Janez wants to be free. He imagines Nada dead in every possible way. Sometimes he finds himself crying at her grave and he has to wipe real tears running down his face. He prays for forgiveness of sins because he is afraid of his dreams and of his God.

Nada is waiting for Janez. She cooked his favourite dinner. She seems especially pleased about something. Janez and Nada haven't eaten together for a long time.

How is Ana, asks Nada almost friendly.

I don't see much of them since Ivan died.

Poor woman finally got rid of him, says Nada.

I don't think that she wanted to get rid of him.

He bashed her.

Ivan would never hit Ana.

He never gave her a black eye. He was too cunning for that. People would notice and lose respect. He hit where she covered up. I know a woman who had seen his black shoe-prints on Ana's buttocks.

You have an evil mind.

Not half as evil as his.

You never liked Ivan.

He served a restraining order on Pero. Ana should have done the same against him.

You stick up for Pero because he is a Serb.

Janez stands up, not hungry any more, most of his dinner still on his plate.

As soon as her daddy was buried Natasha crawled back to Pero. She needs a pimp, hisses Nada.

You bring people down to your level so you can spit in their faces, says Janez.

She wasn't good enough for Pero, laughs Nada.

Janez hates Nada and the fact that beautiful Natasha returned to live with a Serb bastard who has children her age.

You knew that Natasha was one of Pero's hookers, says Nada with glee.

Nasty news travel fast among you gipsies, Janez mutters to himself.

Australian law won't let her throw his children on the street. She looked after them for the last five years and they became her responsibility, says Nada.

What has Natasha ever done to you?

She will never find a man that is good enough for her because no man will ever do as much for her as her daddy did, says Nada. She needs a new daddy.

You hate the whole family because Ivan ignored you, says Janez.

Would you like me to sleep with Ivan? Most Slovenian women did, snarls Nada. His daughter is the same.

Janez knows that Nada was always jealous of his friendship with Ivan's family. She knew that Ivan disapproved of her. He is afraid that Nada will find out about him and Natasha.

The whole world hates Serbs, spits Janez.

I am proud to be a Serb, says Nada. I never say that I am anything else but you pretend to be Austrian because you are ashamed to say that you are Slovenian.

I would be anything that is not contaminated by Serbs, said Janez.

Janez hates Nada more passionately than he ever loved her. Janez is a handsome hard working man but Nada tells him that he is less than her Serb friends, less than other Slovenians, less than Nada herself. Janez tries to ignore Nada's words but deep down he believes what he is told every day.

Snatch at today and trust as little as you can in tomorrow.

Horace

Rozi

I met Rozi in front of our local Australian church. She asked me to help her decorate the church and she even talked me into doing the Sunday reading. I am the only other Slovenian in our suburb. Rozi is often ridiculed for her overzealous religiosity.

Dad taught me to read and write from our mass book. He wouldn't let me go to school so communists could not contaminate my mind after the war, Rozi tells with pride.

Rozi invites me to her home for lunch. After lunch we plan to go to the club and watch a film they sent from Slovenia.

Jim was an attractive young man, I say to Rozi looking at their wedding picture proudly displayed in the lounge-room.

Jim was christened Jernej but someone called him Jim when he first started to work in Australia. He did not mind; the new name was much easier and didn't need spelling. People forgot his real name.

He died a day before his sixty sixth birthday, tells Rozi. A gipsy told Jim when he was fifteen that he will die at the age of sixty-five. Jim never forgot her prediction. I often told him that gipsies know nothing. At his sixty fifth birthday party Jim told everyone not to believe gipsies but he was dead just before his sixty sixth birthday.

He was a good man, I say because you only say good things about the dead. I wonder if Jim really believed the gipsy. Maybe he just wanted to die.

You had a good marriage, I say.

After I married Jim he urged me to go to evening school and I became a qualified cook. I worked and cooked and paid bills. Jim depended on me for everything. He never once touched housework, remembers Rozi.

She never stops nagging, Jim said to me not long before his death. My home is not my home since she stopped working. She stands behind me waiting for me to make a mistake. I have to wipe my behind the way Rozi likes it. Sorry for being crude.

He liked gardening , I try to find something positive about Jim.

He did that, says Rozi. I suppose he had to find something to do when he wasn't fixing the car. He would fix everything in the house if I let him. In the end it always costs more if you don't call on a professional.

You were lucky. Some men can't hammer a nail into a wall.

Jim tried, poor man, says Rozi. I am tempted to tell Rozi how Jim hated being called a poor man. Maybe he knew that he was sick before he told anyone. He must have known.

I miss a man around the house, says Rozi.

I know how you feel. I never realised how much Joe meant to me until he passed away..

You should marry your boss now that you both retired, laughs Rozi. She almost never laughs so the idea of me marrying Vince must be very amusing to her.

Vince and I are just friends, I say evenly.

Jim wasn't eager for me to retire. I am glad Rozi returns into her own story.

He knew how happy you were at work, I try to find an excuse for Jim. Rozi's job as a cook in the hospital gave her a perfect opportunity to spread the Good news about God's kingdom. Sick and dying need Good news.

Jim asked for an early retirement. Not so early after all. He worked hard enough, poor man, says Rozi.

He earned his rest, I say.

That's what it's all about, says Rozi. Jim enjoyed being on his own at home for the last three years. A king of the castle. He retired at the age of sixty three because his lungs were troubling him. All that dust at work, he used to say. He became annoyed every time I mentioned his smoking.

The more she nags the more I smoke, Jim told me.

Your husband was very quiet, Rozi turns to my family only because it is polite to include me in remembering.

Joe was a good worker and husband, and father, I pay respects to the man that was my whole life.

I get a phone call occasionally from my children. It is too much to hope for a card. They are busy. Jim and I insisted that they use every minute wisely, laughs Rozi.

Busy keeps them out of mischief.

My husband was a cool person, says Rozi. Not warm and not cold, that kind of cool. He worked and came home reliably at five every day to watch news, relax, have dinner, read the paper and potter in the garden. I could never fault him. He dressed well, shaved religiously and spoke clearly. We planned our lives and holidays and retirement and children's lives. I objected to his smoking but I only rarely mentioned it. I am glad he retired early. At least he had three years of freedom. He received the sacraments before he died, thanks be to god, Rozi is making an inventory of her life.

My husband and I were virgins when we met, adds Rozi. We never looked at other people with lust. Low libido, they call it, I think.

You had a good life, I say to give recognition to Rozi's testimony.

Janez reminds me of my late husband, says Rozi. Her long, bony arms dangle around her awkwardly. She seems too tall to flirt with men who have shrunk to five foot something, but she does it despite her low libido. Most men our age shrunk, unfortunately. Men like Rozi. I think she reminds them of their mothers as she tries to steer them on the path of righteousness. Rozi does not worry about Janez drinking and smoking. She dealt with that before with Jim.

Rozi has a still in her kitchen to extract alcohol out of the fruit her late husband, Jim, grew in their large garden. She made gallons of slivovic and everything else that can go under that name. Jim would spend money on whisky if she didn't distil her own. Rozi didn't let Jim out of her sight because Jim became poetically drunk in the pub and sang romantic songs with strangers. He also wasted money.

It is illegal to distil alcohol in Australia without licence but Rozi considered it her duty to stop her husband from sinful temptations of the pub.

What else could she do with all the fruit?

Schnapps' always comes handy for medicinal use, of course. Waste not want not, says Rozi as she picks buckets of plums and apricots and grapes her late husband so carefully nurtured.

Maybe Rozi hopes to convert Janez. It is her Christian duty to make him see the light and make him happy. I wonder when she decided that Janez needs her.

Rozi seems to be a neutral gender removed from the sexual games ordinary people play. She is a practical person and not anxious about the uselessness of it all.

After lunch Rozi dresses carefully and sprays all her secret places with perfume before we go to the club.

I hope they didn't bring more pornography. They can't make a film these days without pornography, says Rozi.

They make what sells, I say.

Let's go then, says Rozi. She probably wants to pass the judgement on the film.

Janez arrives on his own.

What are we drinking, says Janez as Marjan and Mojca and Helena join us. People without partners stick together. We don't fit in with families anymore.

I'll have a beer, it's such a hot day, says Helena.

I might as well, Mojca and I say almost at the same time.

Rozi and Marjan have orange juice.

Marjan is a teetotaler. By the time you reach retirement you adapt to being one thing or another.

Rozi abstains; she abstains from almost everything so she could gain eternal life.

We should be grateful to our alcoholics who are risking their health to keep our club going, says Helena.

We watch the film in silence. The story leaves us sad because it gave us nothing to take home in our hearts or in our minds. It gave us nothing to play with before sleep.

The usual. Sex, violence and coarse language, says Mojca.

I'd rather have an old-fashioned love story, smiles Helena.

The love story just walked in, whispers Rozi. We all follow her eyes to the door.

Natasha and Mario, Janez seems astonished. What are they doing together?

Mario never came here while his wife Metka was alive, says Rozi.

They probably came for a drink, smiles Helena.

Metka and Natasha were friends, says Janez.

Mario was in business with Pero.

What business?

They had an office somewhere. Natasha worked there, I think, says Mojca.

I heard that Mario is Natasha's new pimp, says Rozi.

Natasha always liked older men, says Janez.

How would you know, teases Helena.

Metka was twelve and Mario was fifteen when they came to Australia with their single mothers. They met at school and discovered that they had everything in common. They learned English quickly but they never felt that they belonged with their peers at school. Their friendship isolated them even more when a couple of years later both dropped out of school, left home and found jobs.

It was rather sad for them at the time when life was supposed to be happiest. They felt out of place with the oldies in the club, they felt out of place with Australian youngsters. Their mothers married and had other children. Mario and Metka found a

flat and got married in the registry office. They had two children and nothing much was heard about them until Metka died.

She smashed her car into a brick wall. She was drunk at the time. Nobody ever saw her drunk before. Maybe she was a secret alcoholic. Maybe she got drunk after a fight with her husband or lover.

I was with Metka a few months earlier when a car rammed into her. I didn't tell anyone about the accident and the money Metka paid to the man, who smashed into her car. I don't know what that was all about. Nobody knows about the video Metka left at my place the day she died.

They think that they are better than us, says Rozi.

Maybe it is us thinking that they are better than us, says Marjan.

Mario does not know who his father is, what his nationality is or religion. One day he is Italian the next he is Slovenian or Croatian, says Janez. He resents Natasha's apparent intimacy with Mario.

I think we are jealous, says Marjan.

What's there to be jealous about, says Rozi.

It is obvious that Rozi dislikes Natasha. Maybe she hates her because she lives in sin or maybe Rozi is afraid that Natasha would sin with the men she wants to sin with.

He is going, says Janez looking at Mario after a few minutes. Natasha is trying to explain something to him but in the end she follows.

Natasha is taking over where Metka left, says Rozi.

Janez becomes silent. His eyes are on the door, a part of him left with Natasha. Maybe Rozi knows it too.

Janez would like to pretend that nothing ever happened between Natasha and him. It probably meant nothing to Natasha anyway. Both laughed a little nervously when they next met but they were never alone again. Both knew that the other knew how sad they were that day. They both wanted to forget the sadness.

Ivan wanted his only daughter to remain a virgin until she married a worthy Slovenian man, Helena brings us out of our thoughts.

He was in a rage when Natasha ended in hospital, says Mojca.

It killed Ivan. He could not stand to see his daughter so wronged by a man who could never be her equal. How could a daughter of the most prominent Slovenian in Sydney become so humiliated and disgraced, says Helena.

The bastard humiliated all Slovenians, says Janez.

Natasha returned to Pero of her own free will as soon as Ivan died, says Rozi.

How do you know why she returned, says Janez.

Nada told me, Rozi turns to Janez. Ask her.

Janez has no intention of talking about Natasha with his wife.

Pero went to the Gold Coast with his new girlfriend and Natasha found out. She got a man to get even with Pero. Mario saw Natasha bring a man to her house while Pero was away. He told Pero. Pero almost killed Natasha, says Rozi.

Who was the man? asks Mojca.

Janez is scared. A part of him wants everyone to know that Natasha and he made love when both of them most needed love. But he would never tell.

Nobody knows, says Rozi.

Maybe there was no man, says Helena.

Janez would like to go after Natasha and make things right for her. He can still see her sad face and feel her tears on his shoulder. She turned his life around. Janez began to dream about love and sex and intimacy and Nada's death. He had to stop himself from planning murder.

There is a curse on that family. Ana was never happy with Ivan despite all the money, says Rozi.

Some people just don't know how to be happy, says Mojca.

Ivan was everything most women want, and what most men want to be, says Mojca.

Women go after the rich bastards, says Janez.

Men try to look like rich bastards, laughs Mojca.

On Sunday we meet again in front of the Slovenian church.

I am not religious but I don't feel right if I miss Slovenian mass, says Helena.

A little less scared of God after this little community sacrifice, teases Marjan.

It is good to hear a man admit that he is scared, teases Helena.

Scared of what, asks Mojca.

Scared of being scared alone, laughs Marjan.

Faith always united Slovenians, says Rozi piously.

Since Jim died, Rozi devoted herself to God. Her back remains straight as she kneels at the altar of the Virgin.

Janez meets Rozi in the aisle of the church as she is coming from the Holy Communion and he is going up to receive it. They lift their eyes as they pass each other and their souls meet. It's a miracle.

Janez and Rozi knew each other for years but in this moment everything changes for them. Both feel the warm aura of love like a Holy Ghost descending on them. The knowing comes to them while the holy bread still sticks to Rozi's tongue and Janez's hands are ready to receive it.

It must be God's providence, thinks Janez as both stop for a fraction of a second.

Rozi is very close to God. She wears the assurance of the self-righteous that has nothing to regret and nothing to feel guilty about. She says the right prayers.

Janez and Rozi are painfully aware of the fact that Janez is married. They decide to talk to the parish priest about their predicament. The wise old priest tells them that God wants everybody to be happy. The priest can't forbid or condone sex outside marriage but he is sure that God would understand and forgive. They feel blessed since they talked to the priest and decide to make the most of the years they have left.

The priest assured Rozi and Janez that it is possible to annul Janez's marriage especially since Janez was only married in the registry office. To someone outside the church. Their union could eventually be properly blessed in the church.

I am going to move in with Rozi, Janez tells me after he talked with Vince about the divorce.

Rozi must have prayed to the Virgin to intercede and let Janez move in with her even before they became joined in the Holy Matrimony.

Janez can't bring himself to tell Nada that he is leaving. He never told her that he lost his job. Eventually he found other employment and he comes home dutifully every evening. At weekends he mows the lawn and cleans the garage. He gives Nada his pay and she gives him back his smoking money.

I need more time, he tells me as he goes home to sleep in his single bed in his single room.

Janez and Rozi abstained from sex for years so their union becomes almost as joyous as the first love should be.

The news of their love revitalises the gossip groups.

Rozi glows with fulfilment and Janez walks on air, I say to Helena.

Love is the best beauty treatment, says Helena. We should use it more.

Rozi does her evangelical work wherever she goes. Since her love union received the priest's consent and blessing she feels even more obliged to embark actively on spreading the good news of the Gospel.

Rozi has a prayer group coming to her home every Wednesday and they collect money for the poor. You have to show God that you mean well.

Holy Virgin urges us to give up sinful ways and begin the life of prayer and good deeds, says Rozi as she brings to Slovenian club books of messages our Holy Mother gives to her seers.

There is a pilgrimage to Penrose park, Rozi tells.

Is that some new religion, asks Marjan. We are afraid to stray from the ways of our parents.

I will always be a Catholic, Rozi reassures us. Our Holy Father allows the publications that deal with private apparitions and revelations as long as these revelations contain nothing contrary to our Holy Father, our Holy Church, morality, and our Holy Faith. Anybody is allowed to tell their story about meeting with Our Mother Mary and her Son, Rozi explains the booklets she distributes.

Janez becomes preoccupied with thoughts of becoming a respectable widower. He could fix the brakes of Nada's car or take her to the mountain and push her over the cliff. It would be murder, he shakes all over; he could never commit murder. He prays that God himself would organise his widowhood. He is afraid to lose his home and family. That's all one has.

Janez has been separated from his wife for most of their marriage. Their dreams and hopes lived separately from the beginning. Their children kept them in the same house.

We are going to Berrima on 26.8.99. says Janez.

What is Berrima? I wonder what significance the date and the place have.

Berrima is in Penrose Park between Canberra and Sydney. Polish Fathers and Brothers of the Order of St. Paul, the first Hermit, built a Shrine to the Miraculous Image of Our Lady of Jasna Gora. People express devotion to Our Lady there, according to the Church's teaching, explains Rozi.

Come along, invites Janez.

Helena and I go along to Berrima. We look over the Penrose Park valley where thousands of people confide in the Virgin Mary. Most have nobody else to confide in.

Janez knows that it is not appropriate to pray for Nada's death but the thought follows him. He prays to the Virgin to keep the temptation away.

Only one thousand can fit in the church so monthly devotions are held in the open, explains Rozi as we catch up to them.

Most of the congregation are old migrants and their grandchildren. Thousands of pious people with rosaries and hearts open to God. I can see panic and despair in their hearts. I am sure they have panic attacks in the middle of the night. Most reached the end of the road and are scared.

Some are widowed like us some are separated like Janez, says Helena.

Rozi walks with Janez from shrine to shrine and they kneel down piously as they cross themselves. They don't hold hands but their togetherness is obvious. I am sure the Virgin will bless their union.

Janez was always afraid of God. He knows that he did not believe in god enough. He became pious to make up for the lack of faith. Following Rozi who is a true believer gives Janez hope that God will do something about Nada.

The forest is full of little shrines, says Helena.

The candles are burning, the flowers are fresh. Every group of migrants gathers around their own shrine in the forest and they march in the procession under the banner of their homeland united in their faith.

Thousands of old migrants on their knees begging the Holy Mother to intercede for them with her Son and let them find peace and be holy and loved recites Helena.

We built a shrine to our own Madonna so we can kneel as a nation on our own ground, explains Rozi reverently the meaning of this holy place.

One in ten Australians is an old migrant who never fully learned to speak English to feel at home with the rest of Australians. These old people cannot return to the country of their birth because their children are born in Australia. They can only return to their Holy Mother and God of their parents to make sense of their lives.

The unknowable God is like love that has never been fulfilled and defined in our earthy existence, I try to put in words the awesome experience.

We listen to the nervous, young Polish Prior proclaim the virtues of the Blessed Virgin Mary in a broken stuttering English. Mary's humility, her chastity, her generosity and willingness to surrender to god's will should inspire us all, says the prior.

Brave Slovenians walk up to the pulpit to say prayers to the Virgin in Slovenian like Italians do in Italian and Portuguese and Filipinos do in their own tradition.

We are among our own stuttering broken English speaking people who fight foreign demons. We are strangers in a strange land with no hope left that we will ever feel at home anywhere. Our mission is to die and make a sacred site for our children.

Rozi often prayed for me here as she placed flowers at the feet of the Black Madonna, confesses Janez, sentimental in front of the holy images of the Slovenian shrine.

The valley reverberates with holiness.

The Virgin Mother was never tempted because she was without the original sin, she was the Immaculate Conception, says Helena on our way home. I know that Helena doesn't think much of the Virgin's Immaculate Conception. She was indoctrinated by communists and has no proper respect for religions.

St. Joseph must have died as a virgin since he never consummated his relationship with the Virgin Mary, adds Helena. It must have been harder for him with original sin and all hanging over him.

Janez stops for a moment.

I hope I did not sow doubt into his devotion to the Holy mother, whispers Helena. I think Helena teases Janez and Rozi.

The virgin and her son were the only ones who never succumbed to the temptation, explains Rozi.

I wonder if Rozi feels at all guilty since the wise old priest gave her a licence to sin.

Our priest said that hell and heaven are only the states of mind, I say.

Joy and sadness, love and hate, despair and triumph, fear and courage, all these things are states of mind that matter more than your daily rituals, says Helena.

Janez takes Helena and Rozi home. I am last to be dropped so he stops for a cup of coffee at my place. He wants to confess his weaknesses and his fears and his anger. He does not have to impress me or hide his secrets. I am the only person who knows about his plans for the divorce.

I wake up in the middle of the night and feel really bad, says Janez. Taking a sip of coffee.

The demons of the night scare me like that sometimes. My doctor diagnosed these sensations as panic attacks, I try to smile. I know that people don't like to talk about panic attacks. Some take sleeping pills to overcome the midnight wanderings, others have a drink of milk or alcohol. Many pray.

It is a hollow, scary, sad feeling, says Janez feeling closer to me because I also have demons visiting. The demons attack people who are afraid of the black hole that is their life.

My doctor said that anxiety causes my panic attacks, I say.

Every night is worse, says Janez. I feel my heart racing and chest pain makes it hard to breathe. When I get up I feel dizzy.

When you cross the magic age of fifty, you suddenly see over the mountain.

If you want to or not. There is a sad smile on his face.

Life's mountains are always in front of us. The past is spent and we cannot change it. Your body begins to betray you.

I realise how short life is.

We only live a day at the time.

My life is finished, he says.

We are gradually fading away, I try to laugh at the predicament we face. The lines on my face are not laughing lines, the colour of my hair is artificial like the perfection of my dentures. My bifocal glasses sit comfortably on my nose.

Even the jokes I hear I heard before, smiles Janez.

The jokes I tell, everybody heard before, I laugh.

Being cheerful and positive and comforting makes me essential to Janez. To laugh at my own fears also helps me forget how scared I am.

When I was young I never woke up in the middle of the night with this hollow pain in my chest, says Janez.

You and Rozi have your life in front of you now, I say.

I told Vince that I am moving out.

Did you tell Nada?

Nada knows. I will be dead if I wait any longer. My doctor said that I only have two months if I continue like that.

Like what?

He didn't say.

Didn't you ask him?

He will tell me when he gets the results. You are the only person that knows. I don't want anyone to know. I want to leave peacefully. Next month everybody will know that I left.

We sip our coffee in silence.

Nada is poisoning me, says Janez. Even the doctor said that there is an unidentified substance in my blood. I have to go or I will die. Don't ever tell anyone. I don't want a scandal, she is the mother of my children. I just want out. I did not even tell Rozi.

Maybe it is his imagination. Of course it is his imagination. He became paranoid about Nada. He is moving out.

Why don't you ask the doctor to make tests?

I don't want my children to know. It is enough that I know, he says. I can smell it, I can taste it, I don't feel well.

I believe that fear and guilt make Janez feel sick.

There is the house. Nada wouldn't want to lose half of that. Janez hopes that God will forgive him if he moves out and leave the house behind. Maybe Nada wants to make certain that the house stays hers. Of course I don't believe that Nada is poisoning Janez.

We didn't have sex for the last five years, Janez tells me. He has to confess to someone.

I wonder what he did with his sexuality for five years. Doesn't sexuality die after years of neglect?

The nights are the worst. I turn the light on but even the light does not help, says Janez.

Some people deny the effect of the full moon but statistics show that people act differently during the bright moonlit nights, I try to turn the scary feeling into a frivolous superstition.

My thoughts scare me. I want to start my life but I know that my life is at the end, says Janez.

You are going through a difficult time, I try to make the fear less scary.

I want to rub out everything that happened the last thirty-five years, says Janez.

Men spend much of their time with other men but it is a woman that brings up a boy and it is the woman that has to comfort a lonely old man.

Ignorance of the law excuses no man; not that all men know the law, but because 'tis an excuse every man will plead, and no man can tell how to confute him.

Selden

Vince

Vince seems changed on his return from Europe. We go for lunch to a nearby restaurant. We are not as busy as we used to be so we often take a longer lunch break.

I think I will gradually retire, he says as we find a spot in the restaurant's garden.

Why? I ask quickly, scared for my job. And scared to lose Vince.

I needed to distance myself from my work to see how insignificant my life really is; my holidays made me see how meaningless my work really is, says Vince.

What happened?

My plane flew low over the Mediterranean coast and I looked at the little cement holes rich people built for themselves on the hills along the sea. From the air the houses looked like swallows' nests. When I was a little boy, I could never figure out how the swallows knew which hole under the eaves belonged to which. But they knew. I don't know where I belong, says Vince looking at the blossoms in the garden.

Your clients will miss you. I will miss you.

I keep crooks out of jail while people everywhere are rejuvenated by crime. They like to watch wars and murder, poverty and violence and abuse so they can thank god for being the lucky ones who live in peace and prosperity. What would they watch if there were no crooks.

We would have to invent poverty and crime, I smile.

I spent my life making money. I believed that I owned things but these things will stay where they are after I am gone.

That's life, I say, suddenly scared of my own insignificance. Did you see your family in Slovenia?

My father died at the age of forty-six. I was in high school at the time. His only wish was for me to become a lawyer. He left a trust fund for me. He left no money for my mother.

People died young in the olden days.

I heard that mum's boyfriend killed him, says Vince ever so quietly.

Why? I simply have to say something.

Mum said that he died as he fell on the cement steps into the cellar. She forgot to mention that he pushed him. People become less careful with secrets after time. My mother died when she gave birth to my half brother. I was in Ljubljana at the time beginning my university studies. I did not see her die. I lost both my parents within a year.

Did you see your half brother?

We saw each other but we have nothing in common. He lives at home and works on the land. We never mentioned our mother. His father also died.

Has he got a family? I try to squeeze something beautiful out of life for Vince.

He never married. He is a bit slow. Mum was forty two when he was born.

We sit in the garden restaurant and the scent of spring brings memories of other springs.

Trees have many lives. They flower every spring, I say to cheer Vince.

It might take awhile to sort it all out but I need a change, he says. I will call on you to do work for me if I decide to take a case after I retire.

Slovenians trust you, they need you, I have to tell him how important he is to us, to me.

They believe that I have the magic wand to bring them the old European kind of justice. They forget that they escaped from the old Europe because there was no justice. I hear men who were political prisoners at home say that Hitler or Tito or Stalin would know how to deal with hooligans in Australia. They grew up in totalitarian system and ended up craving what they grew up in and escaped from.

People often return into their childhood after they retire.

Or die. Like Ivan. Like Joe. Like Tom.

Do you believe in life after death?

I am glad nobody knows what is beyond. It makes death kind of exciting. Most of our life we spend guessing what's beyond. God must be having fun watching as we try to interpret his intentions.

Everybody is guessing what is beyond but the surprise would not be a surprise if we knew. Maybe we will meet in some other place, I say.

Maybe in our next life all our thoughts and emotions will become transparent and we will know everything that was hidden from us while we were alive, teases Vince.

The surprise could kill you, I laugh with him.

Maybe that's why we have to die first. There must be a reason for everything happening inside our minds and hearts, smiles Vince.

I wonder what we'd see if fear and shame and respect were removed, I say. I wonder what secrets Vince hides.

There must be a purpose for everything we think and feel and do. We are going to be reincarnated one way or another.

Will I be your secretary again, I joke.

I wonder if you would want to be my secretary if you knew everything I am.

Maybe some things should remain hidden. If everything became transparent we would not need the justice system, I steer us into our professional life.

Justice system prescribes rules to make life easier. You grease the wheels so they squeak less. There is no real justice in nature or in the justice system. The world is an enemy you fight to stay alive. Everybody is your competitor and therefore your enemy.

Civil libertarians always complain about the draconian laws taking freedoms from people, I say.

Every law restricts personal liberty but it provides for more fair distribution of liberty. The law tells us how loud my neighbour's music can be before it interferes with my right to sleep.

It is good that everybody is equal before the court.

The criminal and the victim are represented by legal practitioners who are supposed to be equal, but no two lawyers, like no two other people, are equal. Even if two equal boxers fight in a ring one becomes a winner and the other the loser. People are only free to hire a lawyer they can afford.

But there is a judge.

In America the judge has some power and responsibility to look like he is searching for the truth and the justice. He is the prosecutor and the judge really; he conducts inquiry into the matter. This old inquisitorial method of justice reminds people of Spanish inquisition, which presumed a person guilty until he proved himself innocent.

American judge can investigate the crime but Australian judge is a spectator watching the prosecution and defence battle in a ring.

In our adversarial justice system the court is the lawyers' battlefield. The accused is presumed innocent until the prosecution lawyers prove him guilty. The truth and the whole truth are of little importance. The accused even has the right to silence so he

does not incriminate himself by his own testimony. The judge is not to interpret the silence of the accused as a proof of guilt.

The jury of reasonable people decides if the accused is guilty, I add.

How many reasonable people do you know? The jury is brainwashed one way or the other by the lawyers. The prosecution has to prove the guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. If one reasonable person on the jury expresses doubt that person has to be convinced or there remains a reasonable doubt. The judge is usually careful not to influence the jury.

The first thing you learn in the law school is that Justice system has nothing to do with the justice itself. It has nothing to do with finding the truth either. To win a fight in the court is much like winning a boxing match. The harder you fight the more likely you are to win. If you are not convinced in your strength you better stay out of the ring. There is no such thing as a fair fight. The fittest wins. If you are not strong you better do as you are told. I often felt sorry for those I won against. I felt sorry for the weak lawyers and specially for those that paid those lawyers in the belief that they will make them equal before the court and win justice for them. You have to pounce on every weak spot of your opponent and sometimes the blood of it all sticks to you.

It must have been hard for you.

It was extremely hard at the beginning. I had to fight a convincing verbal fight in a language that is not my own. It took me years to sound confident enough to fight convincingly enough to win. I knew how to do it but often the exact, right words failed me in critical situations. The opponent lawyer jumped on my every slip. He is paid to do that and has a duty to do. I just had to dig my heels in and never expose any weaknesses. As soon as there is a whiff of vulnerability, they pounce on you. The best weapon for a lawyer is his unwavering confidence, his arrogant consistency, his battering, and his mastery of the words. If you say something over and over in a clear, confident voice it sinks into the souls of a daydreaming jury. You have to convince their hearts rather than their minds. Of course you have to know the law and the language. I survived because I fight better than others do.

It is all up to the judge at the end.

The judges have the discretion to pass a sentence. The whole thing again depends on the judge. You see a range of punishments for the same kind of crime, says Vince.

You think the judges are corrupt?

Judges try to be seen to be just and dignified and beyond reproach or bias. Generally judges are lazy people; they do the bare minimum that is required of them. They sin on the side of failing to do what they should do. The less they do, the fewer mistakes they make. They are appointed for life.

What about lawyers?

Legal representatives work harder than judges, because they are engaged for each case individually. They are thrown in a ring like gladiators and have to fight until one loses and the other wins. The criminal lawyer has to assume the personality of the criminal and fight shamelessly to win the hearts and minds of the jury who would otherwise go to sleep during the boring legal jargon. The lawyer has to know people's prejudices, says Vince.

Are you prejudiced?

There is not one totally impartial person in a multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-national and multi-cultural society.

I feel favourably inclined towards Slovenians. I understand Catholics better than Buddhists; I am white before I am yellow. I know what it is to be a minority. I even empathise with Slavs despite their communist tendencies.

I like this old saying:

Me and my clan against the world;

Me and my family against my clan;

Me and my brother against my family;

Me against my brother.

Doesn't it bother you to protect the criminal?

A criminal is usually an unhappy, often abused, uneducated slow witted, cruel, savage person. I don't like senseless cruelty and arrogance but the roots of evil can almost always be explained by something evil being done to the criminal in the past. I help make an inadequate person equal.

You like to be a champion of the inadequate?

Lawyers always work hardest for those that pay best, laughs Vince. I couldn't afford to pay you if I didn't.

It is rather noble to keep the poor sods out of prisons, I tease.

A good lawyer can make an angel out of the devil and a devil out of an angel.

How can you separate your work and your private life?

I try not to let my beliefs and emotions colour my professional decisions and I try not to pass judgements in my private life, says Vince. You have to lose your innocence quickly in this job. If you don't, you better get out. You are not there to decide what is good or bad, you are only there to represent the one that pays you.

It must be difficult to calculate your every move, I say.

There is a thin line between good and bad, the scales can tip either way most of the time, says Vince.

A lawyer must never let anyone anticipate his next move. You have to surprise the prosecution and the jury and act while they are still surprised. You have to trick them into believing that you are not dangerous, that your client is not dangerous.

Lawyers work with simple people who don't know how to get what they want by legal means.

People believe that criminals are too protected.

I was a prosecutor for many years because I felt that I had to punish criminals to satisfy victims. I was a good prosecutor but gradually I realised that criminals are usually victims of circumstances. As defence lawyer I defend the criminals. Whichever way you go, you do some things you don't believe in. You have to be convincing even when you are not convinced that what you are doing is right or just or fair. You manipulate the truth and evade and avoid. It is easy to become a crook yourself.

Nobody likes a crook.

His lawyer must make the jury believe that there is something likeable in him. Especially when you can't prove that he is not guilty.

You represent mostly men.

I represent Slovenian friends but I specialise in criminal law and majority of criminals are men.

Majority of business people are men as well.

Every man wants to be more of a man than the next man, to impress women, so all men are greedy, laughs Vince.

Not all men, I laugh.

Small men are greedy for a few dollars big men are greedy for millions. They all crave admiration and hope that being bigger than the next man will make them more desirable.

You like to be desired? I tease. I have no right to know. Soon I will no longer be employed by Vince and then I might never see him again.

I became addicted to power and money, laughs Vince. The centre stage of the court room is a lure hard to resist. I loved myself and forgot my family and my friends. The wish to shine and be admired meant everything to me. The fame and money seduces you and swallows you. You can't do without it. All addicts become slaves to their addiction.

Barristers in their silks and wigs play God in the courtroom, I say.

There is little glamour on the battlefield. Sometimes the blood is on your nose sometimes you inflict pain to others. I have to make the jury feel the way I want them to feel even when I know that a person I am representing does not deserve these feelings and the sympathy I try to inspire. I know the bastard I am defending is a dangerous criminal but as his lawyer I become him and have to find the good in him that does not even exist.

The criminal lawyer also has to find something suspect in the victim to convince the jury that maybe the victim is not as innocent and as wronged as claimed. It is the duty of the criminal lawyer to make the victim at least partly responsible for the crime. I have to inspire the sympathy of the jury for the criminal. I have to weave the web of words and create a smoke screen to trap the unsuspecting victim. You ask unrelated questions to stun him into trusting your chatter before you snap your trap.

Did you enjoy your work?

Probably as much as anybody enjoys his work. It paid well, it provided moments of exhilarating pleasure, and the adrenalin was pumping. In the end, though, there is nothing but the wages to show for it. Well paying clients made it possible for me to indulge in interesting cases in which a lawyer is seen as the hero and the champion of justice. This is good for one's image. There is no deeper, lasting pleasure or a sense of achievement. I didn't change the world for the better.

Did you want to?

I think everybody wants to make the difference. As you retire you want to look at your life and count the people you made happier. I wonder who remembers me and how.

You would like to be remembered by someone special.

Everybody has those silent moments when it is good to think that someone somewhere is praying for you. I worked hard. I was thrilled when I found an unexpected, sudden new angle to the case or a quotation came to me that summed it all up. People like clichés. Anything you hear often enough sounds like eternal truth. I was a lawyer twenty four hours a day. I forgot my family and they forgot me.

We are coming to the end of the road. One more year or ten, it does not matter. At thirty you feel that forty is a lifetime away but after fifty the future becomes the past and the road ahead leads into oblivion.

Why stop now?

It seems easier to go while I am on top of things.

What will you do with your time when you retire?

Tidy up. Will you help me tidy up?

What?

My office, my thoughts, my feelings, habits, priorities and relationships. I am still a consultant to my close associates. If the case is interesting I like to research and help with advise. Working in the background is much more comfortable.

It was good working for you.

I couldn't do as well if you weren't there. You were my rock.

Do you see much of your family?

I let my wife organise our family. I wanted to be free for my work. I gained recognition for my work but she didn't. She left. She probably deserved acclamation. I didn't even have time to ask her how she felt. I didn't have time to be sad or lonely or angry when she left. We are divorced but we are on friendly terms.

What about your children?

I didn't have time to talk to them as they grew up and they have no time for me now.

They would probably want to know you now that they are grown up.

I am a selfish person. I don't even like sharing my time with most people.

Should I feel grateful or privileged?

Deserving.

You will be just an ordinary Vince soon.

Being ordinary is fine. I never had time to be ordinary. The thrill was making more and more money. You don't spend more or need more, you can't take it with you but you are thrilled. It's really a cheap thrill. You become a prima donna and your performance is measured by the fee you command. By the time I realised that money is everything I also realised that money is not very much. One thousand more or less to my name makes no difference.

What does?

I want to find out if anything does. It probably doesn't.

We sit in the silence and watch the people choose their seats and their food. Vince is a good-looking man. He is going to be an old man in a minute. He might die of a heart attack. His wisdom and his dignity will fade away and his corpse will rot under the flowers. I want to hold him and protect him from death. I like him. I looked after him for most of my life while he was my boss. Who will look after him when he becomes an ordinary man?

Sometimes a person walks away from the thing he loves best, because he is afraid to own something so precious. When you have something that is very precious you become afraid of losing the thing, says Vince.

Or a person, I say.

Why haven't you remarried? asks Vince. I wonder where he travelled in his thoughts.

I want a perfect husband but the man that would choose me would have to be faulty, I laugh.

Why?

A perfect man would choose a perfect woman.

Perfect is as perfect does.

Are you going to marry again?

I need a wife who does not need a husband. I'd like a woman to come along and do her own thing, I would be happy to share some of my time with her but I can't be held responsible for her happiness.

You had a lovely wife, I say.

She is as French as I am Slovenian. I look at my daughter and she is a French Australian. My son has nothing that remind me of me. I never showed them how to be Slovenian.

I am toying with a little romantic idea of love.

I never want to be just a husband, says Vince.

Men still like to play the field, I say.

I don't, says Vince. At least I don't play to win but to share. I have nothing to prove to anybody.

Vince and I play on the level playing field. As long as we don't give any ground the field remains level. I sometimes think about sharing his bed. When our eyes play little tricks and the word gets stuck, we laugh to get over it.

I remember my mother entertaining dad's friends. The entertainment was always formal. The elaborate preparation for entertainment kept idle female hands away from real business, said one of the visitors. Impeccably ironed tablecloths and polished silver to celebrate class, my father's class.

The breeding will always tell, said my dad. The breeding sounded like a cheap perm or plastic flowers. Putting on your best manners and nicest underwear helped to display breeding, according to mum.

I feel nostalgia for the times when the boundaries between public and private were rigid and we always knew what was appropriate.

We all have our secret vices, says Vince.

Once a month I like to go to my Chinese masseur. He is worth every cent. He takes every ache and pain out of my body, I change the topic.

You like Chinese men, smiles Vince .

I could never be attracted to a Chinese man so he remains an excitingly pure, neutral energy that heals my body and my spirit. He is generous with his muscle power and oils. I like the bubble bath he prepares and the way he dries my back with thick warm white towels. This man is my only vice. I spend half a day each month with him.

I sometimes camp near the river and sleep under the stars. I take a bottle of good red wine and light the fire. The silence and the sounds of nature rejuvenate me. I tell God that he had done a fine job. I also tell him that I have no grudge against him and hope that he has nothing against me. Sometimes I feel like singing.

I think we are all desperate to go feral. To let go. To get lost in the outback and get in touch with the spirits. We are craving to hear the silence and to talk to the almighty.

Outside life became so interesting that we have no time to touch our inner selves. Maybe we should learn how to pray.

You like being alone, I probe.

Maybe we should try it together sometimes, Vince smiles.

You would share your God with me.

On a night like that God is very big. You remember the words of the prayer: with him, in him, in the unity...

On some nights I foolishly play with the idea of everlasting love. I know that there is no such thing. There is no need these days for anything to be everlasting but I grew up with the romantic notion that love should last forever. I haven't got forever.

It would be good to enjoy a day or a year with someone but the notion of everlasting was written on my young soul. Vince is one of the few friends I have. I should find someone less important to sleep with. Someone cheap and dispensable.

There is still a little bit of life in me, Vince laughs. I want to live that life.

What did you enjoy most in your life?

As long as we talk about real life we can skirt over the issue of our sleeping together. We know each other too well to ever sleep together. Sleeping together is like an

exciting introduction. You touch lips and legs and the skin greets the skin while everything that is under the skin remains untouched. Vince and I touched much under the skin but the skin remains untouched.

The law took most of my life.

Justice made you a wealthy person.

And hard work.

Your Slovenian background provided no precedents English speaking people rely on.

I used the knowledge Australian lawyers were not prepared for. I studied and read while I should have played with my children.

At least they had their mum. My husband and I were both busy with other things, I say.

Life is short. Before you know, it's over.

We sip red wine and the bees are doing what they are born to do and the flowers are busy blooming.

Everybody has a certain number of years to be what he chooses to be. I am yet to find what I want to be, says Vince.

You just learn how you want to live and then it's all over.

There is no danger that we would embrace in the freshness of the spring and to the buzzing of the bees.

You should write your memoirs, I say.

People will remember what they want to remember. Everybody writes memoirs and nobody reads them. My memoirs are deposits and debits. That's what you do for me, tidy up my deposits and debits.

There is much we don't understand about life, I say looking at the pigeon puffing and strutting around his bird in the park.

Migrating birds first used navigating skills pilots now use, says Vince.

I believe that God wanted us to fly, so he gave us brains to copy birds.

Everything is possible for God and those that believe in God, smiles Vince.

The essential in daring is to know how far one can go too far.

Cocteau

Playing a detective

Remember Metka, I say to Vince during our coffee break. Her husband Mario came to the club with Natasha.

Did he, says Vince lightly.

I would like to find out more about Metka, I confess.

I thought you and Metka were friends, says Vince.

I met Metka when she first came to see you.

She opened a trust account for her children, says Vince.

Nobody knows exactly what business Metka and her husband Mario were in, I say.

They were doing all right, I think. Metka transferred her house in Bondi to her children. They had a home out of Sydney as well.

One day after work Metka and I went shopping in her car. On the way home a van rammed into the driver's side of Metka's car. On purpose. It was almost dark. Metka came to see you about the accident.

They caught the driver who caused the accident, says Vince.

I was called as a witness.

The man demanded her purse if I remember it right, says Vince.

He didn't, really. Metka gave him an envelope.

You never mentioned that.

You only asked me what the man looked like.

Metka said that he took four thousand dollars. Why did she have all that money in her bag?

She did not have it in her bag, it was in an envelope locked in the glove box. I did not know what was in the envelope. I still don't know what it was all about. Why didn't you ask her?

You only ask a client what a client wants to be asked. That is the advantage of the Australian courts. You only disclose what you want to disclose and argue about those things you choose to argue about. The truth and the whole truth does not come into

it. Neither the prosecution nor the defence were instructed by their clients to disclose the truth.

I believe that Metka knew the man, I say.

He was known to the police.

Why?

One of his specialities was blackmail.

How come it never came out in court.

Nobody wanted it to come out.

Do you ever breach the clients' confidentiality?

It is the most dangerous thing for a lawyer to do. Your clients must have a complete trust in you. If one can buy you then you are for sale to everybody and you lose your value. I used the information I had but I never gave it away or sold it. You always had access to most of my information. You never used it either, says Vince.

I wouldn't dare, I smile.

Did Metka call the police? asks Vince

Actually I called them on my mobile. Metka seemed nervous when they arrived. She gave wrong description of the man. I thought at the time that maybe she didn't see him in the dark. I saw him but I did not want to contradict Metka. Maybe she did not want the man convicted.

Why did she let you call the police then?

Maybe she had to explain the accident and the money to insurance or her husband. She seemed very shaken.

She was a pretty woman, says Vince with professional detachment. Red hair and green eyes and huge red lips. So unusual for a Slovenian woman.

Were you attracted to her?

Most people would be attracted to her. Ripe, wholesome and sensuous. She wasn't one of those sickly skinny, sculptured models, one is afraid to touch. Metka was comfortable in her skin.

The man who rammed that time into Metka's car came to her funeral after she smashed her car against the wall.. I would like to track him down. I think he has something to do with her drinking and her death.

You don't believe it was an accident.

Maybe a suicide but more likely murder, I guess.

What makes you think so?

I think Metka got involved with the wrong crowd. She seemed terrified.

I don't tell Vince about the video Metka left with me.

You would like me to find his address.

Could you?

Since Metka was a friend of a friend, I will see what I can do. He must be out of jail by now.

I feel privileged to be considered a friend.

You want to play a detective, Vince teases.

I would like to find out why she gave him four thousand dollars. I would also like to know why she had two accidents in the same year.

She was drunk and smashed the car into the wall, Vince looks at me.

That's what they said. I want to know why.

You want to tidy up my case.

I have nothing much to do since you closed your office. Playing a detective might be fun, I smile.

Be careful, warns Vince. You might be playing with fire.

Metka left a parcel with me the day she died, I finally tell Vince but he is not really interested. He brings me the address of Santini whose name is on the parcel Metka left with me.

I could have taken the video to the police but I don't want to be involved in a scandal. I don't want Metka's children to find out. I saw Natasha with Mario and I want to see if she is involved. I owe it to Ivan and Metka. Maybe Natasha is in danger. Since Metka died I planned on meeting Santini anyway.

I made a copy of the video and sealed it back into the parcel. Why do I need to see a man who sent it to Metka? Is it only the curiosity?

If Natasha was to have an accident I would feel guilty, I justify my actions.

Was Metka on medication, asks Vince.

Why?

During autopsy drugs were found in her body.

I really did not know her that well.

I thought you women tell each other everything, says Vince.

Nobody tells anybody everything. I don't even know everything there is to know about me, I laugh.

I know a few things about you, says Vince, and they are all good. I wonder if there are any wicked secrets hidden behind the saintly exterior.

Vince and I tease each other like that but we keep the distance. I think we are both scared to get too close.

I think it was GBH.

What?

The drug in Metka's body.

What does the drug do?

GBH induces symptoms similar to alcohol. It is odourless and tasteless and extremely difficult to trace. It leaves the body during the first 24 hours. It is volatile and unpredictable. There is a risk of dying. There is no safe level. A drop that may make a small woman high can kill another strong heavy person.

Where do you get GBH?

Sometimes men spike women's drinks with it to make them more lively and willing.

Where do you buy it?

When you mix with certain people they let you know.

Rohypnol is another drug sometimes used on date rapes. Men slip it into a woman's drink and she often goes to sleep and doesn't remember anything afterwards. Women don't usually report it because they are ashamed of putting themselves into a position where a man took advantage. They feel stupid. Even when rape is reported only about twenty percent of men are found guilty. Only half of these twenty percent go to jail.

Did you ever try drugs, I try to joke.

Only politicians tell about their inhaling to make them look more like the average person on the street. Taking drugs would do nothing for my image.

You don't even smoke, I say. You must have some vices.

Confessions help you justify your sins, smiles Vince. I never ask anyone to confess more than they want to.

I wish confessions were compulsory, everybody needs a priest or a stranger or psychiatrist to tell him what one can never tell the people one lives with. If Metka confessed she might still be alive, I say.

My job is keeping people out of jail, not saving lives. What I don't have to deal with I don't want to know about. Priests hear confessions for free.

Confessions are good for your soul, I smile. It's a pity Metka wasn't a churchgoer.

In the evening I ring Janez.

Could you do me a favour, I ask him.

I'll be only too happy.

I have a little parcel to deliver. Metka left it with me the day she died in that accident. I found the address of the man whose name is on the parcel.

What is in it?

I don't know, I lie. I didn't tell anyone that I opened the parcel and saw the video. Metka was the star of the porno film. I didn't know the two men with her. Santini wasn't one of them. I couldn't actually see Metka's face but I could tell it was her hair and I recognised the ring on her finger. One of the men seemed familiar. I must have seen his picture in the paper somewhere.

I made a copy of the video and then I deleted the faces and the ring and sealed the deleted video in the parcel.

I wonder why Metka begged me to deliver the parcel to Santini. Couldn't she deliver it or post it. Did she know that she would die? I don't want to cause a scandal for Metka. I am just curious. I would also like to protect Natasha.

Why don't you deliver it yourself? Asks Janez

I would feel better if you came with me.

Janez knocks twice before a girl opens the door a tiny crack. She looks Asian and wears a silky golden dressing gown. Black lingerie is visible underneath.

I have a parcel for Mr. Santini, I say.

Just a moment, says the girl.

Just a second, calls another girl inside the house. She is wrapped in a towel and has her back to the door. When she turns around, her mouth falls open.

Hello Natasha, I say cheerily.

Do you live here, asks Janez. He seems stunned.

I am staying with a friend, says Natasha.

I wonder if you can give this to Mr Santini, I place a parcel in Natasha's hand.

That's fine. He is asleep, says Natasha.

Come and see me sometime, I invite.

I will.

When? I try to pin Natasha down. I have to talk to her. Maybe I have to tell her about Metka. Maybe I have to save her life.

One day soon, she smiles.

Can you meet me for lunch. I would like to ask you something.

Right.

Twelve o'clock in the club.

I'll be there.

Janez and Natasha look at each other and I feel strangely out of place. I am intruding on some understanding passing between them.

We end the meeting because there is nothing more we have to say.

Janez lights a smoke and we lean on the car and look at the house before we drive away.

They shouldn't let these Chinese prostitutes into the country, says Janez.

What makes you think the girl is a Chinese prostitute? She might be an Australian born medical student or a Korean refugee, for all you know.

I don't like it.

You don't like Natasha being here.

There is something wrong with the place. Didn't you smell something?

You think they don't wash, I try to sound funny.

You know what I mean.

I see the curtain open a little in the upstairs window. Behind the curtain is Santini. He sees me looking at him. He knows me. We met in court. He met me at the funeral. He knows where I worked, he can find my address. He is out of jail but somehow I suddenly feel imprisoned. I have to escape.

Something is wrong, says Janez.

A few days later Janez dies respectfully at home. It is the week before he was going to move out. He had a stroke, writes his doctor. His blood pressure was dangerously high.

I think stress killed him, says Helena.

I could add guilt and sadness and fear and anger but Janez wouldn't like me to reveal that.

Janez began to drink regularly. He felt worthless. Can one die from worthlessness?

Drinking and smoking killed him, was the verdict in the club.

Did Nada poison Janez? I feel silly thinking about it. Nobody else knows about suspicions Janez had. They would think me silly if I said anything. I have no evidence. He saw the doctor. If his doctor found nothing, why do I have to think about it when I wake up in the middle of the night. If I don't say anything I have nothing to worry about.

It is enough that I know, said Janez. I don't want to cause a scandal for my children. I only want out. His words ring in my ears. He would not want me to cause the scandal now that he is dead. I can't bring him back. Maybe fear killed him. Maybe he couldn't bring himself to kill Nada so he killed himself. Maybe he willed himself to die.

Nada is sobbing and her children are supporting her during the funeral.

Rozi stands next to me and her face is grey. Maybe the Holy Virgin did not approve of her love after all.

I am sad and scared and alone.

Could Santini have something to do with Janez' death. I shiver thinking about it.

I know that one day I will have to explain to Santini how I found his address and the video. His number is not listed, his address is known only to the police because he has to report to them. He will not believe that I did not see the film. He might suspect that I deleted the faces.

I didn't know what I was getting mixed up in.

The club provides a simple wake but neither Nada nor Rozi come to the club.

Rozi asked us to drop at her place afterwards.

Toni brings a bottle of wine. Marjan brings orange juice. Mojca baked a cake. I bring chocolates.

Rozi might need some cheering.

Pictures of her family surround Rozi and we admire them.

There is no picture of Janez. Rozi does not mention Janez or her loss.

Janez is at peace now, I say as Rozi brings a bottle of her best slivovic.

Let's drink to Janez, says Toni emptying a little crystal glass of schnapps as we sit in Rozi's gleaming kitchen.

In the olden days kitchens were stuck at the back of the house. Now everybody wants to sit around the stove, I try to lighten up the mood.

The kitchen became a sweet smelling, gleaming white centre of a home, says Helena.

Kitchen appliances are white to match the white bride who becomes a new kitchen appliance, teases Marjan.

In my time women worked in isolation so they could surprise their man with their delicacies, remembers Toni.

You wish, says Helena.

Food and cooking means nothing if you are on your own, says Toni.

I wonder if Toni is planning a future in this kitchen with Rozi.

Eating together is as important as sleeping together, agrees Marjan.

You eat until the day you die, says Toni. He would show proper appreciation of Rozi's skill in schnapps making. Maybe he will one day soon look after Rozi's lawn and prune her fruit trees.

We chat to fill the silence and readjust our lives after the loss of Janez.

Rozi brings another bottle and explains the intricacies of her blended produce. We must have a taste.

Slovenians soak their medicines in schnapps so they can have a legitimate excuse for drinking it, laughs Helena.

Rozi's poor late husband taught Rozi all she knows about soaking the medicinal herbs in schnapps.

Toni and his wife divorced, whispers Rozi as we prepare coffee.

I can see Rozi's line of thinking. She just got rid of one alcoholic and she wants another. Maybe Rozi loved her husband after all and wants to replace him with another alcoholic and a smoker. Maybe she only needs to organise someone's life. One has to be sensible about life.

I always thought that Marjan and Rozi might make a sensible couple. Only Marjan is not a drinker. And Janez is dead. Since she can't have Janez, Rozi might pick Toni.

I am amazed how quickly we forgot Janez. Maybe we try not to think about him because death frightens us.

Janez came to talk to me often during the last few months. He needed to tell someone what he couldn't tell the people he wanted to impress or the people he loved or hated. There was no pretence between us, we were as we were, two lonely aging foreigners needing a friend. I miss Janez. We talked in my kitchen about the fragile thing called life. People rarely bare their souls like Janez did as he cried into the cup of coffee. He told me about the people he loved and about people that loved him. I feel his spirit still hovering. I lost a very dear friend.

Men are all the same, says Rozi as she pours more slivovic. We silently agree that Rozi is taking it well. Janez was a gift from god and she returned him to god. Maybe men really are all the same. Maybe people are all the same.

I want to share with Rozi something I shared with Janez but Rozi is not Janez.

I remember Janez saying that the weaker person dies first. Nada and Rozi are strong and Janez died.

So many die from smoking and drinking. The body can only take so much, says Rozi.

Weak have anxiety attacks and they smoke and drink to forget them. Janez became a chain smoker. The more he drank and smoked the guiltier he felt. The panic attacks came every night. He was tired of it all. One day he wanted to start the new life the next he wanted to give up life. What's the point of going on, he said. He was tired of his old life and had no energy to start a new one. He couldn't make it. Maybe he willed himself to die. Maybe he was poisoned by life itself. Maybe he saw Nada pointing the bone at him. I wish I was with Janez the night he died. One is only fully born to life when life becomes illuminated with eternity on one's death.

I wish I could see into Rozi's soul. Does she have panic attacks in the middle of the night? Does she pray them away?

I don't want to upset poor Rozi but death is on my mind.

I always wanted to be the lady of leisure but when you are on your own there is so much to do, says Rozi. I need someone to take care of the garden and the car.

I wonder if Rozi decided that she needs Toni while she poured slivovic for him at the wake for Janez.

Vince didn't make it to the funeral. I am sure he has an explanation. I have to see Vince. I have to talk to him. Vince will know what to do. He is used to criminals. He is on the side of the criminals. He thinks like a criminal.

I find Vince in the office.

How is my little detective? Asks Vince.

I don't want to be a detective any more, I confess.

Being a detective can be dangerous. Especially when you have no gun.

I am so glad I have you.

I should not say 'have you' because nobody has any other person. I certainly don't have Vince.

It is good to know a good lawyer, I correct myself.

What happened.

When I started this thing, it was only a curiosity.

You forgot that curiosity killed a cat.

I am scared.

When you play with fire, chances are that your fingers get a bit hot.

Vince is patting my fingers. Our eyes play tricks. I feel a little spark, maybe Vince is a spark, maybe he does not even know about the spark. Vince is used to real fire. I am not. I feel a little spark and become afraid that the fire would consume me. What's a little spark to an experienced fireman like Vince. I have to stick to the case. It has nothing to do with how I feel about Vince, I warn myself. I have to save my friendship with Vince.

What about lunch, says Vince.

We sip crisp semi dry white wine and agree that the weather is lovely. We touch bits of each other playfully but we skirt around the big issues carefully. Maybe only people who fight and argue violently get to know each other well. Maybe the pain of knowing unites them. I am waiting for Vince to come a little closer but I am keeping a safe distance.

It's a shame that Metka and Janez died so young, I step outside us.

People who die young are remembered the longest.

They shall not grow old as we that are left grow old. Age shall not weary them nor the years condemn...I remember the phrase we repeat on the Remembrance Day.

Now tell me how I can help you.

I would like you to help Natasha, I look at Vince seriously. I owe it to Metka and to Natasha. I owe it to Ivan. I have to finish what I started.

Is she in trouble?

She is scared of Santini.

Since Janez died I became really afraid. Who knows what Janez died of.

You were Ivan's attorney and friend. I know that you will do whatever needs to be done for Natasha.

Tell me everything. I can see that you are worried, Vince invites.

If I could only have his arms around me. I need someone to comfort me, to tell me that I am safe and loved. Vince is holding my hand and I want to cry. I have to be sensible.

Natasha will tell what she wants to tell you, I suppose. I feel we owe it to Ivan to do what has to be done.

What happened, asks Vince again.

I found her with Santini who rammed into Metka's car. I think he is evil. I am terrified of him. I persuaded Natasha to talk to you. I don't want to know what it is all about. I know that you will do what needs to be done.

I can only do what Natasha wants me to do with the evidence she presents.

You are a friend. We need you.

I am not Natasha's spiritual adviser, laughs Vince. I can only act on her advice.

She needs someone to advise her.

Couldn't you, says Vince.

I could do with some advise myself.

I must not cry so I laugh and pat his hand.

I will see what I can do, promises Vince.

You are taking a great burden from me, I say.

We might have to visit my god up in the mountain, laughs Vince with my hand in his.

I certainly need to get away.

What if we make a date for the end of the millennium?

I'd like that.

I am not sure why I am crying.

I am half in love with Vince. I am scared of Santini. I am grieving for Janez.

I feel safe with Vince. I want to stay close to Vince.

I don't dare tell anyone about the fear of loneliness. I simply cannot live in fear of losing Vince. As long as Vince is not mine, I cannot lose him.

I should never get myself mixed into something I know nothing about, I say through tears.

I will look into it, promises Vince.

I will visit Tina in Lightning Ridge after the New Year, I say.

I hope you will come back soon.

I don't tell anyone that I decided to stay with Tina.

I don't need to worry about Vince. I will get away from Santini and Vince and fear.

Toni

Toni is a victim of WWII. He recently asked me to write his application for compensation.

Toni still has that larrikin boyish charm. He is tall and broad shouldered but lean and wiry. He hasn't shrunk yet with age.

Germans transported my family to Serbia. I was seven when we left and eleven when we returned home. I missed out on my schooling, Toni begins his story.

Tell me about it, I ask so I can build his compensation case.

Dad was drunk one night and on the way from work he passed the hall where Sokol had a party. He called out heil communism. Everything became quiet. He walked home. In the forest a couple of boys caught up with him and wanted to fight him. He turned around, put his hand into the back pocket and said: Come, boys, come.

He has a pistol, one said.

I don't know if dad was boasting or if the story was true but a couple of weeks later they arrested him on suspicion that he was a communist. He told the judge that he made a mistake. Instead of saying: heil Sokol, he said: heil communism.

When the war started Germans transported intellectual's clergy and communists.

In Serbia we got a mud house and villagers gave us some food. Serb partisans made isolated attacks on German occupiers; they sabotaged works and blasted bridges and railways. For every such incident Germans killed many Serb civilians. If partisans killed one German soldier Germans killed one hundred local Serb civilians. For a German officer they killed thousand Serbians.

Serbs were terrified. The town's people were engaged by Germans to guard the railway so partisans would not damage it. Every grown up man had to serve a certain number of times on night patrol. The rich town's people paid dad to do the guarding for them. He had no other income so he accepted. The job was very dangerous. If the partisans damaged the railway the guards were first to be shot by Germans. These guards were saving Serb lives by protecting German transports. Were they traitors or what?

My father said that it is a waste of energy to resist someone you know is too strong for you. He only tried to make everybody as safe and happy as war would allow it. I suppose he was a traitor. I suppose Serbs who assisted Germans were traitors.

There were army barracks with about 1200 Germans. When Italy capitulated Germans brought over 200 Italians from Albania to look after their horses. In the afternoon they came to town. Dad bought wine from the farmers and he sold it to them. He was drinking with his customers.

Once an Italian soldier offered dad some bridles, reins and chains in exchange for wine. Germans had lots of that stuff in the barracks and Italians helped themselves to anything they could sell so they could get drinking money.

Peasants brought produce to sell on the market once a week. Dad offered them the horse gear Italians sold to him and the peasants paid for it with wine. Horse gear and chains were valuable commodities during the war.

Farmers began bringing bottles of wine then small barrels then bigger barrels. Once they brought a barrel that wouldn't go through the front door so they had to cut a bigger opening into the mud house.

Dad bought and sold hundreds of litres of wine each week. When Russians came they wanted vodka and drank it from big wineglasses.

By now dad had quite a business going. He tested the wine by putting a strip of newspaper in the glass of wine and the wine soaked the paper and the water ran out on the outside. He told wine producers that they put too much water in their wine. In that way he had to pay less. I don't know if that really showed that water was added but the farmers believed him. I think it was only a trick dad used to get wine cheaper.

About fifty regulars came most evenings. They sang and told jokes and laughed and drank. Italians, Slovenians and sometimes even a few Germans.

Someone must have told Germans about dad doing trade with horse gear and they came to search the house. They had a Serb interpreter and he looked through the straw on the floor. He saw the chains but quickly covered them up again. Dad liked Serbs since then.

After Russians liberated this part of Serbia Italian POW joined partisans but they were still trading with dad to have money for wine. They sold old uniforms and other clothing. Once dad bought a jumper and sold it to a villager. A woman saw the man wearing the jumper and recognised it as the jumper she made for her son who was Cetnik in the regular Serb army. Cetniks were fighting Germans but were not a part of Tito's liberation army. This boy's mother came to dad to find out where he got her son's jumper. Dad asked the Italian who sold it to him. He said that partisans brought a group of Cetniks to the barrack and ordered them to dig the trench. When the trench was big enough they hit them with the shovel on the back of the head so they fell in the trench. Some were still alive and they begged Italians to let them go but they had to hit them again with the shovel or bury them alive. Before they buried them they took their clothing and sold it later to dad.

Dad couldn't tell the woman that her own neighbours killed her son. He lied that Germans killed him and Italians sold his clothes.

When we returned home in 1945 our house was burnt down. We had nothing but rags on our backs. Dad was very bitter.

We stopped with relations while dad and mum looked for work. I was fifteen and started working in the factory.

Dad was drinking more every day. I don't know if he was sad or if he just got used to drink. I couldn't leave home because I had to protect the family.

A few years later I was taken into the army. In the meantime dad hung himself on the linden tree in front of the house. He had liver cancer. Mum had a stroke and died soon after.

When I returned from the army I escaped.

Toni turned out to be much like his father. He is popular with men and women but neither takes him too seriously. He is a good dancer and women love dancing with him. His wife used to sit long faced and thin lipped at the corner of the table pretending not to see how Toni pressed other bodies to himself. Toni's ex-wife is much like Rozi, all bones and muscles. She said that Toni was an alcoholic and that he has herpes. I think she wanted to warn away other women.

Toni knew that his wife and her family frowned every time he had a drink or a smoke. They made him feel worthless so he distanced himself from them until his wife suggested a separation and eventually divorce.

On Sunday we celebrate the Mass for Janez in the Slovenian church. After the mass we stop in the club for lunch.

I haven't seen you in church for ages, says Mojca to Toni. He is not a regular churchgoer but he came to pay respects. Rozi invited him. She ordered the mass for Janez.

I've been overseas, explains Toni.

That's where we would all like to be, says Helena.

What is stopping you, says Toni.

I sometimes wonder if we emigrated because we were unhappy or we are unhappy because we emigrated, says Marjan.

We couldn't resist the opportunity to get rich, says Toni. I like Australia. Nobody forced me to come here and no one is stopping me from going anywhere I want to go.

I am finally a free man.

What do you mean?

He is divorced, whispers Rozi to me.

I wish divorce was this easy when I was young, says Toni.

Some people should never stay married. Like my parents.

Why?

Dad bashed us when he had too much wine and when he had none.

Must have been terrible for you, says Rozi.

Marriage should not be a life sentence.

When we had partners we blamed them for being miserable. now we are miserable because we lost them, says Helena.

When we were poor we blamed poverty, says Mojca.

You don't know what you want now that you have everything you ever wanted, says Toni.

Half the world's population would want to live where we live. We are better off than ninety five percent of people on Earth, says Marjan.

I still miss my home, smiles Mojca.

You would still be old and miserable at home only much less comfortable, says Toni. Here we have sunshine three hundred fifty days in the year.

We want something more, laughs Helena.

We left home because we wanted something more, says Toni.

Now we know that there is no more, says Marjan.

If life offers you lemons you learn to make lemonade, Rozi picked this Australian saying somewhere.

If your husband plants plums you make slivovic, Helena laughs at her.

We come to church so the priest fills us with good thoughts then we come to the club so our women fill us with good food. They win our hearts and minds, says Marjan.

People left church in droves since the fear of God was taken out of religion, says Mojca.

We are still scared, says Marjan. We make sacrifices. More sacrifices less fear. But there is always fear that our sacrifice is not sufficient. There is always fear of death. And fear of losing what one dares to love.

If you believe in god and life after death you have nothing to fear, says Rozi.

Underneath it all, tries Mojca. She is like that, always searching for some comforting fundamental good.

Underneath it all is a whole heap of insecurities, says Marjan.

Marjan is our philosopher, I say.

And you are our Switzerland, says Marjan.

What do you mean?

You are always neutral, explains Helena.

The spokesman for the Vatican said that there would come an evil generation, which will not believe that God really exists unless he gives them a personal sign, says Mojca.

If you have the sign you know so you no longer need to believe, says Marjan.

The signs are all around us, says Rozi piously although she hopes that god will reassure her with a personal sign.

Television evangelists made a proper circus out of god and faith and prayer, I say.

Australians don't even know to which god and for which country to pray. Is it Jesus or Allah or Buddha or Krishna or Osiris or a host of lesser-known deities? Is it the country they were born in or any other country they lived in? To me the idea that everything self-assembled is just as miraculously mysterious as believing in a particular God. In the end it doesn't matter one way or the other, says Marjan.

We keep recreating god in our own image, says Helena.

God or Big Bang by any other name is all the same to me. Planets are like bubbles floating in the infinite time and space. New bubbles coming and old ones bursting without the beginning or the end., says Marjan.

Scientists never discovered anything that wasn't created before. I am Alpha and Omega, says Rozi.

Religion is the story about Alpha and Omega. Perhaps it does not matter what name we give to our God.

We just guess his reasons and his plans, says Helena.

Blessed be the poor in spirit because they find it so easy to believe, laughs Toni.

Blessed are those that have been tamed into believing. The creatures that gave themselves up for domestication prospered, while the wild ones became extinct, says Marjan

Man's greatest achievement was domestication. We tamed wild animals to do what we want them to do, says Mojca.

Men tamed wild women to make them do what they want, says Helena.

Global economy domesticated men and women, says Marjan. Multinationals want to synchronise, standardise, and monitor the masses. Soon we will graze like sheep in the paddock.

The more common you are the more you fit in, says Helena.

Since Pavlov noticed that his dog began to salivate when he rang the bell, the whole world market rings the bells. They advertise, we salivate, I add.

We get what we want by pressing the right buttons so everybody is pressing buttons, says Helena.

People who don't press the right buttons have to break the doors to get where they want to be. Jails are full of people, who didn't know the right buttons, says Marjan.

Domesticated animals consume tons of antibiotics to grow our meat faster and cheaper, says Mojca.

Technology will kill us, warns Rozi.

Technology makes it possible to produce more food on less land with less labour. Developed countries have cleaner waters, improved soil, improved health, longer life, more animal species, more trees. In the West they plant trees while developing countries cut them down, says Marjan.

When I arrived to Australia the mighty Murray River was still surrounded by the lush rain forest, tells Mojca. For millions of years the river ran. In the last two hundred years farmers overused the water for irrigation, the river almost dried and the salt rose up like a ghostly white death. The natives did not do it, the Western settlers did.

We hang there in silence for a moment travelling our own road of change.

There is not even sentimental value attached to anything. Nothing reminds you of anybody, says Helena.

Art one day and trash the next. Films and books and music get out of fashion at the end of the season, says Mojca.

People give unwanted things to people who don't know what to do with their unwanted things.

We replaced God with trash, says Rozi.

Our garages and homes are full of trash, says Marjan.

If we don't support mass production and the global market there will be unemployment and drug abuse and war, reasons Helena.

You have to buy something when you go shopping and sell something when you have a garage sale. That's life, I say.

You see unwanted gifts still tied with the ribbon at the trash sales. I sometimes buy these gifts and give them to people who give me their unwanted gifts, says Helena.

Multinationals are trying to divert our attention while THEY are destroying the planet we live on, says Rozi.

They are genetically mixing components of different species. Soon we won't know who we are. How many fish genes do I need to become a fish? Helena takes us into another line of thinking.

How many human genes does a fish need to become a human? asks Mojca.

We never knew who we are or why we are as we are, I add.

Soon babies will come in a bottle like everything else, we won't need to worry about sex, laughs Toni.

What will we watch on the telly then, says Helena.

Men prescribed sexual taboos for women to make sure they were feeding their own offspring. Women always knew, says Toni. With DNA men will always know.

The next generation will have a computer chip implanted under their skins, says Mojca. They will shine a light on your DNA structure to see who you are.

You won't be able to hide behind the pretty face, says Toni.

I will never let them plant the mark of Satan on me, says Rozi.

Global economy gathers information about our most intimate secrets so they can predict our desires and our impulses to target us with their advertising. Computers know us better than we know ourselves, says Helena.

The shops are open non-stop to tempt us to buy what we neither need nor want, says Rozi.

Maybe it is safer to shop than meddle with the meaning of life, smiles Mojca.

The devil never sleeps, says Rozi.

Maybe we are chatting to forget Janez, maybe we are exchanging bits of ourselves because there is nobody else wanting any bits of us.

Helena's daughter Vesna took her family to Slovenia for a year. Helena reads her letter.

Now I am in the same position as you, mum. I will never again be completely happy in Australia because there is a hole in my heart that can only be filled in Slovenia. But when in Slovenia there is an even bigger hole that can only be filled in Australia.

My children loved the spring and the summer, they enjoyed the changing colours of autumn but they fell totally in love with winter. They experienced hot and warm and not so hot in Australia but to live in the crystal white of the freezing winter is a real fairy tale for them.

I grew so much that what I became can no longer be contained on one continent.

Australia is like a huge mirror that hasn't got my soul, says Marjan.

One day our children might return to Slovenia, says Rozi.

Or to Scotland or Japan or Greece. They married the children of other migrants, says Marjan.

A thing is not necessarily true because a man dies for it.

Wilhelm II

Marjan

Marjan invites Mojca, Rozi, Janez, Helena and me for dinner. He just returned from holidays in Slovenia. It is a pleasant day in spring 1993.

Saves me telling the news over and over, he says.

Marjan is slightly bent in shoulders; he seems to have bent much in life to be at the eye level with people. He is a boyish wiry man with a bony face and eyes that seem dedicated to paying attention to the people around him.

Marjan was a failed nineteen years old student when he came to Australia. He started as a labourer on the Snowy Mountains Hydroelectric project. Single men of the Snowy travelled to Sydney on a payday to find drinks, girls and friends. Marjan met Ada who encouraged him to do a librarian course with her and he spent his life as a librarian and Ada's husband.

Ada was a happy, frivolous woman who made fun of Marjan's pedantic behaviour. She drank and smoked and maybe shortened her life.

I don't want to prolong life beyond enjoyment, she reasoned. Being old would not suit me. She died of breast cancer two years ago. Marjan removed himself from people after her death and then he went on an extended holidays to Slovenia.

Marjan started publishing a little Slovenian newspaper soon after he settled in Sydney. Over the years Marjan's newspaper became political, philosophical and literary enlightenment for Slovenian migrants in Australia. We read what he wants us to read, we think, as he wants us to think we swallow words of wisdom that he finds in his library or his mind or his heart. Marjan argues that arguing is reasoning and reasoning is our human duty. He believes that there is a logical explanation for why people are as they are and why they do what they do. Everything is a part of some kind of eternal universal system.

Marjan is the brain of our group, says Mojca. I think she likes Marjan. Like all of us lonely old single people she is probably fantasising about what could be if... We all dream of a new beginning.

Since Ada died our house is no longer a home. There is nothing for me to do here. I decided to return to Slovenia, Marjan tells us as we order the desert.

You'll be bored in Slovenia, says Helena.

I will find something to do. I might even do some good, says Marjan. It might take a year to sell the house and all, but I am going, says Marjan with a happy glint in his eyes.

I might be going to Lightning Ridge, says Mojca. Mark tells me that there are lots of old European opal miners. Mojca's son Mark and my daughter Tina are in Lightning Ridge.

Is Mojca trying to make Marjan jealous? We all feel the loss when one of us is no longer with us.

If I don't like it in Slovenia I will come after you, says Marjan turning to Mojca. First I want to find out about my father.

What do you mean?

You know that Ivan suspected me of being an agent of Yugoslav embassy. He once saw me read a Slovenian paper and asked if I got it while I was at the Yugoslav embassy's party, tells Marjan. I refused to explain that I simply ordered it because I like to know what is happening at home.

I wouldn't worry about Ivan. He accused everybody of being a communist, says Janez. He was mad at me when he found out that I subscribe to Rodna Gruda. You are paying for communist propaganda, yelled Ivan. You forgot where you escaped from. I wanted to explain that I like the pictures of Slovenia in it, but Ivan walked away.

Rodna Gruda is meant to be a voice of migrants. Publishers of Rodna Gruda were in direct contact with us traitors but if they wanted to survive as publishers in Ljubljana, they had to prove it to Yugo regime that they were their true and trusted agents, says Marjan.

Ivan knew that communists are still in charge of Slovenian media. I showed him a newspaper in Ljubljana that published my observations on Aborigines in 1998, says Helena. A certain Dr. Zalokar complained to the editor that Belogardist, religious, capitalist, western sources should not be allowed to contaminate Slovenian media by having a voice in our prestigious newspaper. Zalokar accused me of being all of the above. He added that his letter must never be shown to anyone or be used for publication but some mischievous person from the newspaper faxed me a copy and I showed it to Ivan.

What does all that have to do with your father, I turn to Marjan.

My father was a partisan, says Marjan.

So?

He was killed in 1943.

Who killed him?

Mum once whispered that partisans killed him but I could not understand that. I told mum that she was lying. Her family was fiercely Catholic and anticommunist. They never wanted dad to be a partisan.

I heard my grandfather say to mum that communists were terrorists. Mum looked around and I knew that she was scared. Nothing lasts forever and I hope you will live long enough to see communism destroyed, said my grandmother. I hated my grandparents because of it. I worshipped the memory of my hero father. I became afraid that people would find out that partisans killed him and that he wasn't a real hero. I was afraid that people would discover that he was a traitor and antirevolutionary. I heard a lot about the traitors and deep down I began to feel like a traitor.

While in Ljubljana now I stood at the newspaper kiosk and read the big black headline in the newspaper Democracy: Communists were terrorists. I shuddered and looked around. Someone must have put that headline on the stand to test me. I leaned on the bridge and pretended to look across the river in the centre of the capital. Nobody took notice of me or of the headlines. I expected to be punished. I expected something like God's wrath coming down on me. Nothing changed on the outside but inside of me one guilt was replacing the other. The wrath is an invisible thing. Was I guilty reading the headlines or guilty of forgetting what they say?

How dare they? My father wasn't a terrorist.

The frightening headlines collect dust as people walk past me casually. The breeze is brushing my skin, the sun is warm, and the cars are noisy. People are rushing to and fro lugging heavy shopping bags. The shops are full, people look prosperous, and everything is as it should be.

The headline in the middle of the Slovenian capital says that communists were terrorists and nobody protests or sings or cries because of it.

We demand a decent burial for Home guards, says a smaller headline and I stand like a pillar of salt next to the news stall with my eyes on the paper. People rush to their work and to their resting places as they always did. Women try to walk straight in their high heels. Men have flat shoes and nothing in their hands. Children demand attention like they always did.

My world is turned upside down.

My grandparents and my parents are long dead.

I decided to find out more about my family. I think I owe them. At least I owe it to myself. I have to study Slovenian history. I have to reconcile with the past.

When I was about eighteen mum told me about her last conversation with my father. At the time Northern Slovenia was occupied by Germans. Partisans were supposed to resist Germans but instead they were killing prominent Slovenians in Ljubljana. Dad asked his commandant why they were killing Slovenians in Ljubljana instead of trying to liberate Stajerska. But Stajerska is under Germans, said the commandant. Aren't we fighting Germans, asked dad.

A week later dad disappeared.

I did not understand it then. Partisans were heroes. I wanted to have a hero for a father but mum insisted that dad was shot by partisans. I became confused in my love/hate for my father.

At school I learned about the heroism and wisdom of communist leaders but I could not forget that maybe my father wasn't a real communist. I escaped from my family and from the fear and confusion of it all. I did not belong. I came to Australia.

Now I began to think about the events of the war and after the war. Bad people always whispered bad things about the heroes of the revolution. Bad people escaped because they were afraid of punishment. Bad migrants whispered against the representatives of their communist homeland. Bad people were like Ivan. He meddled in politics. We were told often enough to leave politics to politicians.

Nobody ever openly talked about Slovenians killing other Slovenians but the dark knowledge of the killings mingled among Slovenians.

I was about ten in the autumn of 1945, Marjan begins his memories. I looked after the cows grazing on the paddock near Krka. Two older village boys came home on holidays from the university in Ljubljana. I heard them boast how they bashed naked anticommunist Home guards that marched to their death after they were returned from Austria. These older boys ignored me because I was just a little boy.

Poor sods were more worried about being naked than being dead. Some prayed with their hands covering their dicks, laughed one boy.

The one at the front cried like a baby, laughed the other. Others were gibbering their prayers.

These university students were ordinary boys who believed that it was their duty to bash Domobranci because the allies returned them to the communist Yugoslav regime to deal with, says Marjan.

It was funny seeing their bare bottoms move in a straight line. You would expect them to fight or try to escape, said one boy.

I suppose they could not fight without a uniform, laughed the other boy.

Rudi bent over to shield himself. He put his hands over his head but he forgot his balls. I pushed a stick from the back right between his legs. He picked his bleeding ding dong and tried to walk but couldn't. They had to carry him and throw him in the pit, laughed the boy.

He squealed like a pig when they turn the knife, said the other boy gleefully.

You saved them a bullet, agreed his friend.

Rudi was their neighbour. They roasted chestnuts together as they looked after their cows in the paddocks along Krka. They walked to High School five kilometres every day from Saint Cross to Kostanjevica. They were part of Saint Cross, the village of one

hundred houses. They talked about girls as they walked to church. Rudi's mother was a godmother to one of the boys. The other boy was courting Rudi's sister.

I wonder if he was still alive when they bulldozed the ground on top of him, said his friend.

Maybe he crawled out of the pit before they covered him with dirt and rocks, said the boy and they giggled uncomfortably like boys do just before they become men.

The two boys eventually became important men and good fathers, says Marjan. I wonder if they ever managed to forget how they tortured the boy they used to play with. Did they live with nightmares about the tortures they were compelled to perform?

I didn't dare tell anyone what I heard. I had no idea what was it all about.

For years I had a recurring dream about Rudi climbing out of the pit with blood running down his legs. In my dream he begged me to help him but I kept running away. I supposed we were all scared.

I became afraid of Kocevje, the silence of the forest seemed filled with screaming ghosts. People whispered about the horrors that happened there. When the words Kocevski Rog were mentioned, mum lifted her eyes in fear.

While in Ljubljana now I wanted to learn what really happened. I wanted to find out who killed my father and why.

Did you?

Not yet. An old woman told me that my father had an argument with his commandant and that he was found dead in the forest the next day.

Did you find the commandant?

The old woman said that he was the friend of the family but she was afraid to tell me his name. She died while I was in Slovenia. I have to go back and search.

We should all find out what it was all about, says Helena.

There was an exhibition called the Dark side of the moon in Ljubljana, says Marjan. They exhibited documents of communist brutality during and especially after the war. The disappearances, the bashings, the imprisonments and the nationalisation of private property, the killing and intimidation, nothing happened by chance. Communists carefully planned how to make people scared and obedient.

So things naughty migrants whispered about until now have finally been proven, says Mojca.

Nobody cares any more, says Marjan. The children of communist heroes are still in charge and they don't want to know.

They finally remembered us, says Helena.

They never forgot us, says Marjan. Ivan was right; the evil angels at Yugo embassy followed us to the end of the world to monitor our activities. The ambassador invited more gullible migrants for drinks to Yugo embassy where they instructed them how to cause feuds in our clubs.

They interrogated us when we came begging for visas to go home, says Helena. Our people are easily scared.

And readily grateful. They boasted about the invitation, they couldn't help shining in the glory the invitation meant to them, adds Mojca. They told the ambassador whatever they knew and imagined they knew. Then they felt ashamed of telling and they began to hate those they told about.

They sold out their friends for a bit of music and a bit of propaganda. Yugo embassies split every Slovenian community in every city of the world. As long as they made us hate each other, we posed no threat to them, says Marjan.

Embassy offered much to our community when we needed it most. Communism wasn't all bad; it provided medical care, jobs and education, says Janez. They looked after people.

One looks after one's tools and animals and cars and homes, but people are supposed to think and look after themselves, says Marjan.

We looked after ourselves well. We built our clubs with our own hands and money but ambassadors demanded to be invited in. Those poor ignorant sods that were the guests at the embassy became embassy's agents and voted that ambassador be invited to the club, says Helena.

How could people who love each other so much, hate each other so much?

They held the key to Slovenia. They knew that we left our hearts there, says Helena.

Let me tell you a bit of WWII history I learned.

Hitler and Stalin agreed to divide Europe between them.

There was a pamphlet issued by the Communist Party of Slovenia just before German invasion. Stalin instructed Slovenians: Officers and soldiers do not respond to mobilisation. Germany is a friend and protector of all working peoples.

When Hitler attacked Russia Stalin ordered communists everywhere to begin communist revolution.

Slovenian leaders were collaborating with Germans, says Janez.

When Italy and Germany invaded Slovenia in 1941 nobody in Slovenia co-operated with Hitler. From 22nd June 1941 until 17th July 1942, communists killed 1500

prominent Slovenians who were suspected of opposing communist revolution;; they killed them for no other reason but to assume power and leadership. Their killing had absolutely nothing to do with the German invasion. They took advantage of this most vulnerable time in our history for communist revolution. 1500 prominent citizens killed in a year is a lot for a nation of one million people. They had 25.000 Slovenians on their killing list. The fear of death created antirevolutionary movement. Communists created the split of the nation. They called antirevolutionary movement collaboration with Hitler.

My father saw what was happening and he dared to question it. They had to get rid of him.

But Domobranci swore allegiance to Hitler, says Janez.

The occupier, according to international conventions and practise, is bound to keep peace and order in the occupied land. If the occupier can't keep the population safe, a domestic force under his control is necessary, says Marjan.

Italians agreed in 1942 that anticommunist force called Village Guards-Vaške straže be formed. Later Slovenians under German occupation organised Home Guards-Domobranci.

Why didn't they join the partisans in the Liberation Front, says Janez.

When Germany attacked Soviet Union Moscow sent the order to Slovenian communists to organise a Liberation Front. Everybody in the Liberation force must accept communist leadership. Prominent cultural leaders and people from other political movements were recruited into the Liberation Front but these outsiders had no decision making power. My father was one of these outsiders, says Marjan. He was a Shire official with some influence but he was ordered to toe the communist line.

The fact remains that Domobranci killed Slovenians with German guns, says Janez.

My father wanted to resist Germans so he joined partisans but Stalin ordered that partisans' first priority was to get rid of the existing government and assume leadership and power. At that very moment Slovenians were facing imminent mortal danger from partisans, not from Germans. The only possible source of arms was the occupier, says Marjan.

Communists killed with Soviet guns, says Rozi.

Germans and communists targeted the intellectuals and clergy, because they both knew that without Slovenian leaders it would be easier to rule Slovenia, says Marjan.

Germans came and Germans went but dead Slovenians never returned, says Rozi.

Germans admitted their guilt but communists still deny it. The families of Nazi victims are getting compensation but Slovenians who had their loved ones killed by communists are not even allowed to know the truth, says Helena.

We became afraid to love the people we needed to love, says Mojca.

The regime wanted us afraid. As long as we were afraid of each other we would not unite against them, says Helena.

The winners eventually win the hearts and minds of those they rule, says Marjan. Slovenians are just people, rich people and those that want to be rich. The poor still believe in the common good but the rich never did.

Domobranci knew that it was suicidal for the small nation to fight Germans by themselves. They tried to save Slovenian lives by waiting for allies' help, says Helena.

Stalin ordered partisans to provoke Germans because he knew that German retaliation would force Slovenians to join partisans and help the revolution, says Marjan.

When Italy capitulated the allies told Italian partisans to wait for the right moment when allies will help liberate them, says Mojca. Why couldn't Slovenians wait?

Even now they say that we should forget the past and stop the witch-hunt. Only we are the past, says Helena.

I looked through the video shop for a film that would touch on what happened in Slovenia during and after the war. Every killing field every other Massacre has been identified and documented but nothing has ever been said about anticommunist movement in Slovenia or about the refugees that were returned from Austria to be killed by Tito's lynch mob, says Marjan.

The tragic fate of Jews has been forever imprinted on the conscience of humanity. The hideous cruelty of the Germans was exposed and condemned. Nuremberg court heard about the atrocities perpetrated by Hitler's supporters. Solzhenitsyn exposed Stalin's Siberia.

Slovenians were always fighting other Slovenians, says Janez.

Killing your own people to please some foreign political power or ideology must scar the whole nation, says Mojca.

Maybe killing your own people in peacetime is too horrible to remember? Says Helena.

European Union will force Slovenian government to come clean, says Mojca.

I doubt that anyone outside Slovenia cares if we live or die, says Marjan. They will buy our land and squeeze us out.

My brother was among those refugees. I need to know who killed him and why, says Helena.

It was a soldier following the order of his officer. This officer followed the order of his superior, who got the order from Belgrade who got the order from Stalin. Like Nazis they all followed orders, says Marjan.

Hundreds of thousands of anticommunist refugees from Eastern Europe escaped to Austria after the war.

On 19th of May 1945 General Low agreed to repatriate all Slovenian refugees. As a payment Tito's army volunteered to retreat and let Austria keep Carinthia, explains Marjan.

Communists paid with our land so they could murder Slovenian anticommunist opposition, says Helena.

It was more important to communists that they kill their opposition than to hold Carinthia. Tens of thousands of anticommunists were a threat to the new totalitarian regime, says Marjan.

The West wanted to contain communism within the boundaries of former Yugoslavia so they agreed to the deal. It was more important to them to stop the spread of communism than to save our people. To me this pragmatic deal is the only logical explanation of the events. I have no proof, perhaps nobody has proof but I am determined to find out more about it.

You have a big job ahead of you, says Helena.

Tens of thousands Slovenians escaped to Argentina and other non communist countries. There were twelve thousands Slovenian refugees left. They poured on the fields of Austria and surrendered to the Field Marshal Alexander along with hundreds of thousands of other East European refugees, says Marjan. May 1945 was a miserable wet month. Everybody wanted to get rid of refugees camping in the southern fields of Austria. The world was tired of the war; they had to solve problems quickly. Sending refugees home was practical and sensible as far as British were concerned.

On May 23 1945 Field Marshal Alexander gave the order that all Yugoslav Nationals should be returned to Yugoslavia UNLESS this involved the use of force; OTHERWISE they were to be evacuated to join their compatriots at Distone in Italy.

Harold Macmillan was responsible for political decisions in British occupied Italy and Austria. Macmillan and his British officers had a task to conduct the repatriation.

Macmillan knew that the refugees were likely to cause trouble if the guards told them that they are being returned to communists. He ordered his officers to lie to refugees that they were relocated to Italy. Slovenians entered the transports

peacefully because it didn't enter their minds that British officers would lie. They lied. Once the refugees were in Tito's hands it was too late, says Marjan.

What happened was a ghastly mistake, according to the statement issued by British Foreign office.

On 26.5 1945 a Serbian Chetnik returned to Vetrinje in Austria with the news that Tito's partisans are waiting for them across the border before the Loibl-Pass tunnel.

After the refugees received this information it was no longer possible for officers to carry out the transportation peacefully. Violent force was used although the orders were that nobody should be forcefully repatriated.

The Field Marshal Alexander, the British and American government deny any knowledge of deception or the violence used to get rid of refugees, continues Marjan.

Why would Macmillan take the risk on his own, says Janez.

After Domobranci were returned to Tito there remained about six thousands Yugoslav civilians in Austria, mainly old men, children and women.

These civilians witnessed the deception and the force used in the repatriation. British officers were afraid that these witnesses might bring the nature of their activities into the open. It was best to return them to Tito who was known to have effective ways of silencing these inconvenient witnesses.

By 30th May 1945 everybody knew that the hand-over was a clear violation of the international law.

Canadian Major Barre was in charge of repatriation of further 2700 civilians but he refused to forcefully repatriate them. He consulted with his superiors and the order was reversed.

We only whispered about our lost generation until now, says Helena.

Macmillan became British Prime minister. Brigadier Toby Low who was directly carrying out the assignment of repatriation, became Lord Aldington and a member of Parliament immediately after relinquishing the post as General Keighley's chief of staff. They enjoyed the prestige and respect of British society, says Marjan.

Macmillan and Aldington are dead now. It is time to tell the truth, says Helena.

It must be abhorrent to the whole Western world to suggest that honourable British leaders are capable of knowingly assisting communists in a mass murder, says Mojca.

They share in our national guilt whether they like it or not, says Marjan.

There were one thousand Ukrainian refugees in Liechtenstein. Russians demanded their return but Liechtenstein government said no and all of those refugees were saved, says Marjan.

It is hard to believe that anyone could shoot thousands of innocent boys tied together, says Mojca. Your own brothers, neighbours and friends. Twelve thousands dead Slovenians may not mean much to the world but Slovenia was cut in half through the heart. For every dead Slovenian there must have been many who mourned him or agreed with his ideas. No other nation ever called half of their people traitors.

My two cousins were in the war, says Rozi. Domobranci took one and partisans took the other. The partisan became a director in the new regime; Domobranec was killed in Kocevski Rog. When I was in Slovenia in 1994 they erected a monument in the village cemetery for Domobranci who were fighting against communism.

My cousin said: What a joke. My brother had no idea what communism was.

But we learned at school that Domobranci betrayed the glorious communist revolution, I said.

There was no revolution, said my cousin.

Why did Slovenians kill each other, then, I asked.

It was the war, he said.

Your brother was killed after the war, I said.

He became silent and I almost felt sorry for him. He lost his only brother and he does not know why. I think he also lost the faith in what he was fighting for.

We have the Revolution Square and the monuments to revolution in most Slovenian cities, says Mojca.

After the war Serbs moved to Slovenia to take key political and economic positions. They came to keep us under control. Now Slovenians rewarded them by giving them Slovenian citizenship, says Janez.

There is a fine line between love and hate; there is even a finer line between friends and enemies. Serbs had been friends and enemies during our lifetime, says Marjan.

Serb children go to Slovenian school and the next generation will forget that their parents weren't born in Slovenia, says Rozi.

It's the same everywhere. Our children and grandchildren will forget that we weren't born in Australia, says Helena.

Serbs will never become Slovenians, says Janez. Identity is all that is left to them.

Your children are half Serbs, Helena reminds Janez.

After centuries of interbreeding and assimilation it is hard to say how much we are Austrian or Serbian and how much Slovenian, I say.

I wonder if nationality still means the same as it used to. People travel, intermarry, migrate and move, says Helena.

Haider, Austrian leader of the Freedom party is trying to be nice to Austrian Slovenians in the hope that they will become good Austrians and forget about being Slovenian.

It is rather senseless to claim any kind of racial or national purity since our genome shows that everybody carries the genes of many nations and races, says Mojca.

I wonder if nationality is written in our genes or in our understanding or in the way we look or feel or believe, says Helena.

In the New World order nationality and religion won't mean much, I add.

I rather like being European, says Janez.

For a moment we silently examine who we are, who people think we are and who we would like to be in a constantly changing world.

Jews are still hunting Nazis; they are still opening the mass graves. Aborigines in Australia are seeking compensation for the wrongs done two centuries ago. But Slovenian leaders call us witch hunters because we demand the truth, says Mojca.

I hope that some brave film-maker will bring out this missing piece of history and produce a human drama that will transcend the politics, says Helena.

The film would offend Britain, says Marjan.

Maybe a Jewish... says Mojca.

What would Jews get out of this story?

They might see the irony of it all. They are good story tellers, says Helena.

Do what you want with them, they are your people, said Macmillan to Tito. Pontius Pilate said the same when he handed Jesus to the Jews, tells Rozi.

Sometimes it is hard to tell the good guys from the bad guys, I say.

People are neither saints nor sinners they are only winners and losers, says Marjan. Every person with power, supports the system that keeps him in power. Most have only a little power but they still protect the power they have. The system is like a house of cards. If one betrays the power the whole power structure may collapse.

We sit in silence pondering the senselessness of it all.

Are you going to Slovenia to look for a film producer, I ask?

I will try, says Marjan. The West should admit that part of the Slovenian nation resisted communism even when Soviets and the West were allies. It is time that the West acknowledges that refugees they returned to communists died not as traitors but as anti-communists.

Jews won their statehood, says Janez. Germany and Japan prospered. What did Slovenians win?

I was in Slovenia to learn new educational methods with Slovenian teachers from Argentine. These teachers were the children and grandchildren of escaped anticommunists. I was impressed with their innocent, humble behaviour, their talents, intelligence, kindness, discipline, knowledge, determination, success, and hard work. Maybe they are what we won, says Helena.

Their parents prepared them to one day live in a free Slovenia, says Marjan.

We published a booklet about our experiences in which twenty years old Luke from Argentina says: They are all present in my being, generations and generations of Slovenians. The tree is growing within me, they are all part of me, mother and sister and brother all mine, says Helena.

They never had to change their beliefs. We changed too many times. I wrote Tito-Stalin on our school in 1945. A little later Stalin was painted over. You could still see the traces of his name under the paint, says Janez.

In the end you forget who you are and if you are anybody worth knowing at all, says Mojca.

They say that an honest politician is the one who when once bought, stays bought. Our politicians have been bought and sold too many times, laughs Helena.

Women who sell themselves once are called wives but those that can be bought by anyone are called prostitutes. Same goes for politicians, laughs Marjan.

You will miss us in Slovenia, says Helena.

When you visit me in Slovenia we will remember Australia like we remember Slovenia here in Australia, says Marjan.

The bitterest tears shed over graves are for words left unsaid and deeds left undone

Helena

It is All Saints day so Helena and I visit our husbands in the local cemetery. We look at the inscriptions on the gravestones. In the loving memory from a loving husband and children. Forever in our loving thoughts your loving wife and children, we read.

In the end it is only love and relationship. We pretend that life is more but it isn't, says Helena.

You can't write on the stone that someone worked seven days a week or had two millions in the bank.

Or built a house or invented a sausage. Good and bad deeds are forgotten and only loving relationships remain, says Helena.

We struggle through the ambiguity of life to be finally embraced and accepted in an eternal oneness of the family.

I wish I could talk to Tom, says Helena as she places a rose on her husband's grave.

Half of me died with Joe. All our memories are buried with him, I pay respect to my husband.

After Tom died I could not look at the television, read or eat or talk. I rang my best and worst friends but when their phone rang I put down the receiver. I had nothing to say. It wouldn't be polite to talk about Tom and death. Nothing else mattered.

I remember those endless sleepless nights. I listened to the wind making noises in the dark. I missed Joe's warm body next to me, I say.

I locked my front door and my heart. In the late evening I went out to buy bits of food but for the rest of the time I slept with the television on to distract me from thinking. I wanted to cry because it seemed indecent not to cry. I felt a huge rock of tears in my chest. I had to get rid of them but I couldn't. People rang and left messages of sympathy. I listened to the answering machine but I never answered.

Come over on Saturday. We have much to remember, I invite.

I set the table on the veranda.

The weather is gorgeous. We should bottle it and send it to the less fortunate, says Helena as she puts down a bottle of wine she brought.

What shall we drink to?

To all the guilts of my life, Helena smiles.

We always wanted to be something more and better. Now we are free to be whatever we choose to be.

While we had husbands we covered up the shit we had to put up with, to impress each other. Now I am free but there is no one to do things with, no one to go with. No one to comb my hair for, no one to argue with, no one to cook and set the table for. I eat from the pot if I cook at all, says Helena.

We had to preserve the myth of perfect families, I admit. Everything that glitters... I think we were too proud to admit that some of it was brass.

We complained about our darlings who annoyed us but now we only wish to have them back.

Joe was melancholy sometimes, I remember. I wanted him to talk to me about his sadness but he would not. I suppose he had the right to keep his sadness and his thoughts. He was happiest repairing things in the garage. He just loved putting things apart. Once he put my iron apart and reassembled it for the best part of the weekend. I became seriously annoyed by Sunday lunchtime and told him that I will buy a new iron anyway. He was hurt. He went to the club without saying a word.

Tom loved to play balinc/ bocce with Joe.

I went with Joe that first Sunday afternoon; I was in the club's kitchen boiling kranskies for the players. They were sitting outside under the kitchen window drinking between the games. Pepi and Toni and Janez and Joe, and Tom and Marty.

So she finally let you come, said Toni to my Joe.

Must have been a good boy, teased Tom.

A break for good behaviour, said Janez.

There are two kinds of men, some admit that they are henpecked and the other thinks that they are not, says Marty.

I admit it freely, said Joe.

Not me, said Tom.

When you say jump Helena only asks how high, laughed Joe.

I escaped all that, said Toni.

I am still fighting, said Janez.

I left my sergeant major and her army, said Toni. There was sadness in his voice.

She wouldn't last a week with me, said Tom.

Marriage is a war zone however you look at it, said Janez.

I moved closer to the wall to hear more but the men emptied their glasses and went to play. I began to wonder how Joe really felt about me.

Once on the bowling alley men seemed to forget women. Their shrieks of laughter, angry arguments and light-hearted teasing were related to the balls. They measured with deadly seriousness the distance from the small ball to their ball.

Slovenians from all over Australia come to play. It gives men a chance to connect and boast and tease and challenge each other.

I wonder if my Joe ever told anybody about my faults like I did about his. Women talk about their men.

I complained all the time. Now I wish I could tell Tom that it was my fault that he behaved as he did, Helena begins her story.

As a teacher I reinforced children's positive behaviour and every time they behaved a little better. At the same time I rewarded Tom's negative behaviours. I believed that Tom was right simply because his voice was sharper and more confident. He shouted I cried, he called me worthless and I cooked his favourite meals; he looked at other women and I tried everything to be a better lover; he gave me a silent treatment and I begged for a word. Tom was constantly in a rage. For forty years it paid for him to be angry. He was angry because I was less angry at the world than he was. I inherited this false perception of the world from my parents who were never in a rage.

You would let anybody walk all over you, Tom yelled. Nobody ever walked over me, I protested. But they will, I guarantee that they will because you are stupid enough to let them. I pulled my head in to silence his rage.

He counted everything he did for me and ended with: At least you could do one thing for me; whatever that one thing was at the moment.

Tom's voice cut into me and I moved deeper into the shell pulling the protective curtain over the opening. I pretended that people loved me inside my shell. I was grateful to whoever stopped Tom's rage.

Men fight to win respect but my Joe just liked to keep peace and make his family happy, I pay respect to my late husband

.

Right from the beginning I knew that I took the wrong road but every day it was a little harder to turn back. I blamed Tom but maybe it wasn't his fault at all, maybe he also chose the road that took him away from the right road.

Tom was forever that hungry little boy, who had to fight for survival, says Helena. I could have loved that little boy but the little boy became a big, grumpy man.

He spat his dummy every time he didn't like what somebody did or said. Children and I lied to please daddy. We learned to agree with daddy, we voted conservative and criticised bludgers and the poor that multiplied uncontrollably.

He was once poor.

He wanted to erase that from his memory.

Tom would do anything for you.

I failed to be grateful, smiles Helena. I wonder why it is so difficult to be grateful. I look at my old photographs and see this gorgeous child, this perfect, young girl. I was never grateful for that. I believed that my eyes were too green, my hair too thick, my breasts too obvious, and my legs too fat. I never noticed people who loved me. I rejected and ignored those that wanted to make me happy. Instead of being grateful I focused on my shame and on people who hurt me. I always needed more; I needed compensation for my shame. I had to have what was out of reach. Whatever I had seemed worthless. Tom was worthless. Now I wish I could tell him...

Tom's family won the war. Every time Tom remembered his childhood, he painted the times before the revolution a little grimmer and the fruits of the revolution a little sweeter.

Tom told me about a sadist Scripture teacher who called out students for punishment. This chaplain clamped the boy's head on his knee with one hand and leaned back on the chair as he hit him on the backside with the stick. Many boys wet their pants in fear. If he broke a stick on a boy he had to bring a new stick for the next Scripture lesson. He never hit the rich kids.

Once someone said that I murdered birds but it wasn't true, said Tom. The chaplain grabbed the short hair on the side of my head and holding it moved my head from side to side until I could only see the lines in front of me. He dropped the chunks of hair on the floor and kept grabbing new hair until I admitted that I killed the birds. He made me hate god and religion and church. My father noticed a bold patch on my head and he wanted to know what happened. He went to the priest and told him if he ever touches me again he will kill him.

The story of the chaplain who tortured Tom made not going to church easier. Gradually I learned to cope without praying. I almost felt fine about becoming an atheist or Marxist or whatever one becomes when one wipes out any traces of superstition my parents believed in. Things like Virgin Mary and a guardian angel.

Tom was one of nine children. His father walked ten kilometres each way every day to work in the brickyard. He had a bad leg and could barely walk but he walked. Tom's mum took over a paddock of land from the rich farmer. She had to give half of the produce to the farmer for the use of the land.

Tom told me that I did not love him as much as I should. There was an unknown element of love that I did not have and this element was vital for Tom. It was my

responsibility that he felt as loved as he was entitled to. I tried to love him better. I blamed Tom's rages on full moon and testosterone and neglect and growing without food and love. And all the time I rewarded his rages. I licked myself into my shell and ignored his rages but he did not like being ignored so he raged against our children and so I begged forgiveness.

Tom convinced me that our children would become criminals if he wasn't there to discipline them. I became afraid of the crimes my children might commit without Tom there to punish them. They might end in jail. He told us that this is where they will end for sure. I stayed with Tom to keep the children out of jail.

He told them that it is no use running away because they will have to come and eat and they will first be punished for running away. It was better that they have belting done with before they ran away so they bent over and he slowly took his belt and got his rage over on their legs and bottom. I watched. I didn't dare cry with my eyes because it is not good for children to see me cry when they receive just punishment. I must never give children comfort when they are punished because that would take away the effect of punishment and then they would have to be punished again.

Our children never asked me to leave daddy. Maybe they believed that the punishment for leaving would be greater than the punishment for other crimes. Maybe I should have left anyway.

Every family has to compromise if they are to stay together, I try to comfort my friend.

We both needed to feel loved, admired and appreciated. We blamed each other when we were not. One day not long before Tom died I told him that he fucked up my whole life. Fuck yourself from now on, I said in anger without thinking.

I never heard you swear.

That was the only time I did. I knew that swearing is not my style so it had to carry some weight. We never kissed or made love after that.

I actually began to enjoy living close to Tom but outside his mould. We still had the mould but I refused to get in, first to be squashed for my own protection and my own good so people would not use and abuse me or laugh at me as Tom predicted. I discovered that people laughed with me and I liked being used. Since we abandoned our genitalia, Tom and I discovered that we were actually nice people. We became friends.

Men don't feel good about being close. They like sex and then they like to have space.

I love closeness. I loved the closeness I had with the children I taught. We changed together, at the same moment sometimes, as we moved towards the future side by side holding hands to empower each other and reinvent ourselves all the time. Other children never seemed as beautiful as the children who travelled with me on the road

to our becoming. I feel enormously fortunate to have had so much love and kindness. Being close and knowing each other goes a long way towards loving.

I was teaching children with physical and mental disabilities, which caused behaviour problems, learning problems and life problems. In the past these children attended special schools, they were called spastic, problem children, troubled children, handicapped, disadvantaged and culturally different. Now they are challenged.

I was challenged to find their talents and shine them for everyone to see. My happiest memories are of the times when I discovered a talent in a child and showed that talent to the child and explained to the child what can be achieved with a talent like that.

When a student said: I can see, I got it, now I know, both the child and I became enveloped into the warm glow of being special to each other because we both became a little stronger together. I hugged the children that needed hugging.

I think that teachers these days are not allowed to have any physical contact with their students. Touching children can be misinterpreted as abuse. Specially male teachers and fathers and stepfathers.

I feel sad for children whose bodies and souls are never touched; who feel that they cannot hug and laugh and cry because being who they are and feeling as they do may be inappropriate. My students wrote me love notes every day and these little expressions of love helped me survive.

Times have changed, I remind Helena.

I never told anyone about Michael, says Helena. I found his message on my answering machine. Sorry about your husband, I am going to see you tomorrow.

Who is Michael?

He was one of my first students in Australia. I was twenty-four and he was twelve. We went on a school excursion and we sang. I always loved singing.

What did he want?

He brought flowers and a bottle of wine.

Why?

To express his condolences for the loss of my husband of course. Actually he was going through a divorce and needed a bit of cheering himself.

I need the bottle opener, said Michael. Do you remember how we used to sing Seasons in the sun, he added as he poured the wine.

Skinned our hearts and skinned our knees, I hummed the tune and the words of the song came back.

I was the black sheep of the family, added Michael.

We had joy we had fun we had seasons in the sun, I remembered.

But the stars we have reached were the starfish on the beach, adds Michael.

We had joy we had fun we had seasons in the sun but the hills that we climbed were just seasons out of time, we sang together.

Goodbye papa please pray for me I was the black sheep of the family; you tried to teach me right from wrong; too much wine and too much song; I wonder how I got along.

We had joy we had fun, we had seasons in the sun but the wine and the song like the seasons have all gone, Michael and I sang remembering days forty years ago.

To seasons in the sun, I toasted.

Too much wine and too much song I don't know how we went along.

We were both very different people then.

We hummed the tune saying the words stored in the memory as we sipped the wine on the couch. Neither of us ate that day. The wine took us gently down memory lane and we sang the song over and over. Our singing was sprinkled with laughter and tears until the bottle was empty. I brought out the best wine Tom stored for a special occasion, which never came. Michael and I sang all the songs we sang on that bus forty years ago. We didn't know when our hands came together and we were kissing the bitterness of each other's tears as we laughed though singing and drinking.

We ended in the bedroom and kissed all our memories and made love to all our hopes and fantasies. We slept well into the sunshine of the next day. Michael was still asleep when I moved out of the bed to look at him and remember where we have been. We revisited the people we were so long ago. I showered and dressed and became busy with cooking breakfast.

But he was your student, I say.

He is no longer my student. Anyway there was nothing indecent in all this. We cried and sang together and the wine and the singing helped heal the sadness and loneliness.

Are you still seeing each other.

We were never seeing each other. We are not in love or anything like that.

People may misconstrue it for child abuse.

He is close fifty two. I love him enormously but there was never an inappropriate thought when he was a child. Even now we just love each other in a gentle, friendly, kind way.

Did he suggest seeing you again.

He felt that it was a kind thing to do. I had to absolve him from that responsibility.

What did you say?

I told him that I am going home to Slovenia. I decided on the spot that I would accept the invitation to a school reunion. I promised to write and we promised to keep in touch.

And you never got together again.

We saw each other if that is what you mean. We like each other and I hope that we will always like each other. Just in case we need to have a good cry again sometimes.

And a song and some wine.

We were nice to each other. I think it was important that we separated painlessly. I couldn't allow us to be dragged down by any kind of obligation or explanation. It was difficult not to become attached and romantic and emotional about it but I managed.

I never loved anyone but Joe.

Maybe you never slept with another man but you must have loved other men. What about Vince?

I suppose I like Vince but,

You are afraid to say love. It is not a sin to love.

Love complicates things. I suppose I am afraid to complicate things. Actually I am afraid to be rejected. I could not let myself do what you did. I wish I could though.

I loved what we were that night and I loved what we were that day on the bus when the song was enough. We laughed about the funny things and cried for everything sad and beautiful in our lives. There was nothing disorderly about it; we just remembered the song we liked. We made each other feel fine. What you freely give to others it comes to you the same way. Sharing is the only heaven I know. We did not question the right or wrong of it, we just enjoyed being there with each other.

Memories are the only playthings worth collecting. The more you look at them the more they shine. I wish there was someone I could embrace like that but I would not dare.

I remember Tom with more affection now. He couldn't understand why I wasn't more like him. The way he was seemed to him the only right way to be.

He looked up to you even when he tried to put you down. Perhaps he thought you were too high so he needed to be big and important for you to admire him.

Slovenians are the only people who know that we are alive. If nobody notices us living, we are dead.

I remember travelling through Canadian virgin North. A man came out of the only hotel in the forest and he yelled in Slovenian: Look at you. I barely recognised you.

He mistook me for another Slovenian woman. When I answered in Slovenian we hugged and laughed and remembered all the people we knew in Slovenia.

Tell me about your childhood, I change the subject.

It was towards the end of the war. I was about four, begins Helena. Milan, our neighbour, came with a gun. He ordered us to go outside and kneel on the snow. I kneeled next to my parents. Milan wanted to know where Emil, my brother, was. Milan and Emil went to school together. I admired these two seventeen years old men who sometimes let me walk behind them. I liked to listen to their grown up talk.

Now Milan became a partisan and Emil became a home guard.

Milan pushed my father into the snow and hit him on the head with the butt of the gun. Blood sprinkled the snow. Mum tried to help my father but Milan pushed her down with his boot and spat into her face. He yelled that he would shoot us all if we don't tell where Emil was.

There, I chirped pointing up hill. That was my first lie. Lying helps.

We lie when we are scared or ashamed to tell the truth.

Milan tortured and humiliated my parents and they could do nothing about it. The memory of them kneeling there and the drops of blood on the snow, this first real memory, is still crystal clear. I see my mother's face spat on. Fear and shame never died.

What goes around comes around.

My brother never returned. My father was an influential man before the war, a pillar of the church they called him. My parents owned the only shop in the village; they supplied everything. One day two men in black came and searched the house. They found a bale of black cotton my father hid in the attic. The man said that my father did not declare the cotton or something. Black cotton was very popular after the war. Most mothers wore black because they lost their sons.

They accused dad of being antirevolutionary. They imprisoned him for five months so they could confiscate his property. They sealed the house and the shop. We had to move out. Eventually a shire official settled in our home.

We went to live with my mother's brother, Miha, who told people about apparitions in which God talked to him. People laughed at uncle Miha and we all felt laughed at.

If he was rich, I suppose he would be called eccentric but he was only a failed student-farmer and people considered him slightly mad. Not dangerously mad, of course, but just someone to laugh at. I hated being related to the man who had a knack for interpreting dreams and signs of nature but wasn't able to provide a decent living. Mum's family was never good at making money.

I once heard someone say that mum's family lacked ambition. Apparently that was the reason none of us ever amounted to anything.

I remember these words now because I understand what they meant. I am much like Miha. I am searching for love rather than success.

Your children succeeded, I remind Helena.

They are also Tom's children and I don't think anyone would say that he lacked ambition. It amazes me to see our characteristics imprinted in our children. We have been reincarnated.

Daniel became a doctor mainly to please Tom and to impress him. Vesna became anthropologist because she is inquisitive. Vesna was always confident, ambitious and manipulative but Daniel is a pleaser.

I wish my children were more ambitious. Specially Tina.

My uncle Miha composed poetry. Just imagine a poor peasant talking in rhymes. He was the proverbial black sheep of the family. His father wanted him to become a priest but in the middle of his studies Miha returned home. I once asked him why he did not try again but he said that life is too short to repeat things. I want to learn something new, he said. I never really knew any of my relations or why they did what they did.

Did you like uncle Miha?

I loved him in some part of me but in the main part I was ashamed of him. We soon moved from Miha's house. Dad's uncle became a widower and mum came useful as his maid. We knew all the time that we lived on charity. Mum cooked and cleaned the house and my father worked in the fields but we lived on charity.

You didn't like dad's uncle.

He was well respected and men lifted their hats when they met him. I was afraid of him. I think mum passed her scared genes onto me. We were all rather ashamed of mum's family. Nobody ever said so but we all knew. Dad was considered smart and we were proud of his family. Emil was so like me, dad once said to mum. Maybe dad was disappointed because my brother died instead of me.

My brother was an only child for the first twelve years. I came as a pleasant surprise when my parents were both in their early forties. I became a plaything rather than a serious heir to the family name.

Maybe your father was afraid to become attached to you like he was to his son.

I remember the day I realised that mum and dad did not love each other anymore. Mum ran her fingers through dad's grey hair but he brushed her hand away. She smiled but his face remained grim. Mum went into the pantry and I followed her. Silent sobs shook her body. I asked her if she was crying but she smiled and said that she caught a cold and had a runny nose. She kept smiling and wiping her eyes.

Dad's uncle always growled about the work not being done and about mum's cooking.

Dad ate in silence. Mum lost a will to live.

Your father probably knew that your mother was dying.

I went to school with the children who knew that we were the outcasts. I felt that thirty pairs of eyes were looking at my shame every day. I lost the war at the age of four. I lived as a loser and lied all my life to save myself, smiles Helena.

Lies make life bearable.

Mum read to me about the lives of the saints. Maybe in her innocence she wanted me to believe that I was chosen to be a saint. The saints were tormented and humiliated and tortured. All I thought about was becoming a saint because mum made it clear that this was the highest aspiration one can have. She made me believe that greatness comes through pain.

I searched for god and Virgin Mary in the clouds and in the wonder of the spring. After my mother died I used to go to church to cry with my head on the hands of the Virgin Mary. My tears warmed the cold plaster statue. I looked into the blue paint of her eyes and believed with all my heart that she became my mother. I almost felt her gentle hands caressing me.

When the tall grasses produced seeds I saw a clear face of Jesus on the cusp of the seed where the new life emerges. The symbolism of the new life for me was Jesus in the seed of the grass. I hoped that god would make his face visible to me on the host I received at the Holy Communion. I would do anything to make mum happy but she became pale and refused to eat.

I was eight. We had no milk that winter. Mum liked milk in her coffee. We received milk for lunch at school and I poured it into a little bottle to take to mum. A boy bumped into me on the steps, I fell and the bottle broke. The boy fell over me and cut his hand. The milk soaked my new reader. Everybody laughed at me and crooned over the boy whose hand was bleeding.

Mum died the following day. Dad said that she died of a broken heart and I wondered how her heart was broken.

Dad ignored me while mum was alive. I knew that I did not please him and must have caused him to dislike me. I was afraid of his ignoring. I wanted to please him so he would laugh with my mother.

After mum's death dad changed. He told me about poor Cinderella every night until I believed that Prince Charming would come to change my life forever. Dad knew how I needed to believe in everlasting happiness. He told me all the fairy tales and in those tales good always conquered. He wanted me to believe that one-day everything will turn right for me and I will live happily ever after. I looked for a frog to kiss so it would turn into the prince charming that would love me.

And it did. You met Tom.

I knew Tom all my life. Tom and Milan went to school with my brother.

After the war Tom became the president of the local branch of the Communist party. He had the power to hire and fire. Everybody did favours for Tom. People were grateful. Tom liked grateful people. He was popular and handsome and he knew it.

Tom's family and Milan's family were one and the same to my father. He blamed them when communists killed my brother after the war. He considered them murderers. They are power mad dogs, said my father.

Everybody who was anybody pretended to be a communist only my stubborn parents refused to pretend. I was ashamed of them. Now I am ashamed of my shame.

When I married Tom, dad told me that I sold my soul to the devil. He died of a broken heart, or so I believed.

You know that it isn't so.

My subconscious does not know. I also lost the will to live after Tom died.

One guilt replacing another. All my life. When I married Tom I pushed all my earlier guilt out and replaced it with the guilt of marrying the enemy of my family and of the church.

Tom and I married in the registry office one afternoon. He brought another couple to witness our vows. I never saw those witnesses before or after. My father wasn't there. Nobody was there to drink to my happiness; nobody was congratulating us or wishing us well. Tom took me to Venice for a honeymoon. I cried most of the time while he checked Italian shops for goods he could smuggle to Slovenia.

He was a practical man.

I am glad I went home for a school reunion, says Helena.

School reunions sometimes spoil the memories.

My reunion was much nicer than my memories. I finally confronted my fear and my shame and my guilt. I walked the streets of Ljubljana. Most of the faces are new; they were not born when I first became ashamed and scared.

My guilt travels backwards. German words grew into Slovenian speech for centuries of German rule. Most objects we used had German names. After communist liberated Slovenia we had to weed out any traces of German contamination. In the meantime Russian and Serbo Croatian songs saturated Slovenian air. Now English is cool, neat, and no problem.

Nothing lasts forever, I say.

When I was home Milan's son called me. Milan was sick and he wanted to see me, Helena continues.

I looked at Milan on his deathbed and for the first time I remembered something I locked away since I was ten.

One spring day I went home from school. The newly green branches of the forest met on top of the road. Through the greenery seeped the specks of yellow sky and I felt very close to god.

Milan came behind me with his horse-wagon and asked me to sit next to him. I would have taken a ride with any person from the village but I knew with the knowing of some primordial wisdom that my parents wouldn't be happy if I went with Milan. He jumped down from the wagon and tried to scoop me up. I said no no no but he said don't be silly I don't bite and we wrestled and then I fell into the grass and he fell on me and pulled my pants down and put his hand between my legs and then he smelled his hand. He kept one hand on my throat so I could not even scream. Then he lifted his hand off my throat and with his knees on the ground on each side of me he tried to unbuckle his belt and then with some supernatural terrified strength I pushed myself backwards from under his bottom and ran into the forest fast and faster and with my last breath. I ran and ran and never looked back until I fell into a hollow on the moss and laid there under the magic of the spring forest and the yellow sky and there in the stillness of everything I could hear the silence and god was speaking the words of comfort.

I never told anyone about this because I was ashamed of it. Who could I tell anyway? Dad was himself bleeding there in the snow when Milan hit him and he could not even defend himself. Mum just died. I never took a short cut from school through the forest again.

Thank you for coming, said Milan as he opened his eyes a little. His chest rose with every breath. He was gasping for air. I said nothing, he had things to say; it was his dying moment. Impotent and pitiful and ugly and yet there was life saying goodbye.

A thought came to me then that I could take down my pants and stuff them into his nostrils but there was no more anger and even my pain and shame disappeared. I could see the yellow sky of the spring through the green of the forest.

Milan closed his eyes. Death is death. There is something holy about dying. Maybe the good and the evil angels come to fight for the soul. I could almost touch the spirits hovering over Milan's body.

I am sorry, he whispered.

It's all right, I said and touched his hand.

Thank you, he wheezed and his chest stopped rising. I almost felt the good angel rejoice as he carried Milan's soul and my shame. God was right there in the silence of dying. It was one of the greatest moments of my life. I could laugh at my fears my shame and my guilt.

I went to the river. The branches of the weeping willow and my tears touched the water. I sang songs others sang when I was young and ashamed.

The river is old now; it does not remember the bodies I saw floating on it. Or the cross with Jesus on it face up floating on top of the river. Or my blue, wet, cold feet as I walked in the morning dew. These things are locked in the box to forget. What happened, happened. Not even god can change what once was and is no more.

Your father was a rich man and Milan's father was a poor man. The rich man is a natural enemy of the poor man, I remember my father's words.

Milan was grateful to me. I was humbled by that. In the end I had the power over him, the power to forgive. He had to live all his life with guilt and remorse.

What were your school mates like? I return to Helena's reunion.

Old, laughs Helena. Twenty retired teachers looking back and saying nice things about each other. They wanted to know about teacher's wages and what you can buy for them in Australia. Dollars are tangibles; the borers that drilled holes inside of me are imaginary. They asked about the price of petrol in Australia but nobody asked about the price I paid for freedom.

You look so young, said my school friend as we tried to recreate the intimacy we once shared. I wonder what signs of my aging were visible to them. To me they became less formidable and potent. Everything grew smaller. I could love them all without fear. They have nothing to do with my fear or with my shame. Soft grey hair, dentures shining friendly smiles and their efforts at camouflaging old age turned the young brave heroes into benign benevolent senior citizens.

Some remembered my father giving them lollies when they came with their mothers to our shop. Some remembered my mother who taught them to sing in the church choir. I was grateful for their attempts to restore my parents to their rightful position.

Nobody mentioned that my parents were traitors, bourgeoisie who exploited the worker and had to be punished.

We had to believe what our teachers had to teach. Our parents followed Jesus teaching and church rituals because their teachers were made to teach Jesus teaching. Communists told us that Jesus was superstition. Now Jesus became a tradition. Almost as popular as a folklore. Cultural heritage.

My fellow teachers admitted that they had to be careful. Some were hiding in secret places with Jesus teaching in them while they taught their students that Jesus was a fairy tale and that communist leaders were the only teachers worth listening to.

Everything that was, shrunk while I grew in an enormous invisible proportion. I became more than the things that shrunk, were. I wasn't less any more. It seemed that everybody noticed my growth.

God was restored to a neutral position. The line between good and bad was totally blurred and the line between precious and worthless disappeared.

Peter spoke at our reunion. I had no idea that Peter became a politician.

Who is Peter?

I last saw Peter when I was fifteen going on sixteen. It was towards the end of the school year before I went to Teacher's college. I will never forget Peter coming from the back of the schoolyard with Katja. Both were flushed red by their first kiss.

You were in love with Peter.

Most of us girls were in love with Peter. He was the most popular boy in our class. Peter remembered me, says Helena. He called me by name as soon as he saw me. After forty years.

Of course he would remember you.

Most people make no imprint on you while others colour your whole life, says Helena. I only remembered Katja and Peter from High school. Peter remembered me. Imagine my name written in his mind all his life.

Did you tell him?

At sixty I kissed a man I would never dream of kissing as a young beautiful girl.

When I was fifteen I dreamed that you will kiss me and I would turn into a fairy princess, I confessed my Cinderella hopes to my hero as we hugged and kissed.

What did he say?

I did not give him a chance to say anything. I needed to say things. If I did not say them in that first moment I would never again have the strength or opportunity.

I saw you kiss Katja behind the school and you both came back to the class changed. I became ashamed of my dreams and of my sadness and jealousy. I felt like nothing, I told Peter as we strolled in the park.

I said it all and the Earth did not swallow me.

I knew that my shame was obvious to you and your friends, I said to Peter. I never told anybody that I was in love with you but everybody knew. The boys followed you because you were the first to be kissed. They probably wanted to please you by laughing at the girl you rejected. Katja was also the greatest and all the girls wanted to be Katja's friends.

It wasn't like that at all, laughed Peter.

The stone in my heart melted. A handsome man came then and kissed me. I did not remember him. I could not recall his name. He showed me a photograph of our farewell and then I remembered. Miro was the boy I locked in the box of things to forget.

You made my life hell. You used to point at me and blow kisses at Peter, I told Miro.

All of you girls were after Peter, said Miro.

Why did you torment me?

Because I was hopelessly in love with you, said Miro.

Losing Peter to Katja destroyed what little confidence I had. I believed that I was something so ridiculously ugly and stupid that people who were great couldn't resist laughing at. Katja's father was something important in the police. She simply had to have what she chose.

Was Katja at the reunion? I ask.

Katja couldn't go for a walk. She had a hip replacement. I helped her to the seat in the park. Her face crinkled up with pain as she walked. Her bony fingers dug into my arm. I could not believe that brave, freshly kissed Katja from my memory would ever turn into an old woman. She wasn't flushed any more. Her lips almost disappeared into the cavity of her mouth and her shoulder bones stuck out on top of her hunched body. She smiled and her face became soft and I wasn't afraid of her any more. She never knew how afraid I was of her.

I mentioned Peter, her first love. Puppy love, Katja smiled. I married a musician. He is a famous composer. We have a son.

Any grandchildren, I inquired. No, said Katja. I wish I had, she added quietly.

I felt so enormously rich, says Helena. I wanted to take Katja with me to enjoy my health and wealth and specially my grandchildren. The shadows disappeared.

Maria, a fat girl with red cheeks from my class, entertained everybody with stories about her twenty-one grandchildren.

How many children did she have?

She has five, but most other classmates only have one or none.

Teachers are supposed to love children, I say.

They indoctrinated other people's children with lessons they no longer believed in. Teachers are not ignorant, they knew that it was all a lie.

You were the lucky one at the reunion.

I never knew how lucky I was to have Tom.

Were you ever unfaithful to Tom, I ask.

Only in my mind, says Helena. I had my private little romance with David.

Who is David?

David was my first and only love. He was a university student when he came to the Teacher's college dance. He asked me to show him my classroom and we sat on my school desk and kissed. My life was never the same again.

I walked all night in the fields telling the moon that I love you, said David the next day.

There was no doubt about us loving each other. I was never so sure about anything. He loved me and I loved him and we both felt loved. Life seemed perfect in its unfolding.

We were both virgins. On my nineteenth birthday we walked up to the top of the hill where cattle was grazing. People were far away in the valley, we could see them moving but they could not reach us. We made love on the haystack. Our world turned into a fairyland. Life was glorious. Everything was in place and a part of everything else. The universe and the eternity and God were part of us. Lovemaking was a small compliment to the wholeness we felt. I am still grateful for the memory of that total immersion into the creation.

I began teaching. I rented a flat and David spent most of his time with me. He was still a student and he neglected his studies.

David's mother was a widow struggling to get her eight children through school. David's father was a war hero. The shire was paying for David to finish university but I was leading David astray. His mum asked the shire president to intervene. The principal told me in not uncertain tones that David had to be left alone. I never dared to ask why. I promised to do as I was told. Neither of us could resist authority.

We promised each other that we would marry as soon as David finished his studies.

I cried myself to sleep every night. My soul and my body ached for David. He was my wonderland and my soul mate.

Tom was an important grown up man when I left David. Tom followed me around and I felt flattered by his attention. Tom invited me to his place to show me a surprise he had for me. I had my first taste of champagne as he put a necklace with a golden heart around my neck. Look inside that heart, he said. In the locket was my name next to his.

I knew that something was not right. I felt chained. I knew that it wasn't love but I accepted the gift. That's when I took the wrong turn. I knew it even then but I didn't consider it important.

Tom told me that he loved me. We had more champagne and we kissed and the lines between right and wrong became blurred. I felt an enormous guilt. I cannot even claim ignorance because my heart spoke to me and I did not listen.

Tom had a knack of making people obey. He bullied them, begged them or paid them. He argued until he made you believe that he was right and you were wrong, says Helena.

Vince explained that lawyers sometimes shout until their victims forget that they are innocent. Sometimes they lull them into a false sense of security by speaking softly and seductively and when the victim forgets his defences, they trap him.

Not loving Tom was the only weapon I had. He knew and he punished me for not loving him.

I met David in the park and told him that I was going to marry Tom. David stood there and the tears were in his eyes and we both cried. We just cried. After a while we kissed goodbye. The tears made the kiss bitter. We felt fragile and vulnerable as we held onto each other. He did not ask me to leave Tom and stay with him. He did not offer to escape with me or to marry me. He didn't even say that he loved me. He just cried. We were two kids out of a love story. I wanted him to ask me to wait for him. I would do anything for him but he never asked me to do it.

I was leaning on the tree and David was leaning on me and we could not let go. Tom saw us; he rushed towards us and pushed me away. He hit David to the ground. He kicked him in the face until it was covered in blood. He spat on David, grabbed my hand and pulled me along.

I tried to explain to Tom that we were saying goodbye but he said: forget it, David won't bother you again. I will kill him if I find him near you again.

I wanted to tell him, I tried to explain.

Leave it now, it's over, said Tom and I became afraid of his voice. He hurt David but he made me afraid.

I could never forget David's eyes following me. I wanted to hold him and make him well and strong. But I wasn't strong enough. What David and I had was a little rose bud while Tom was a strong tree determined to subdue or kill anything that grew under his shadow.

Tom took me to the jewellers and he bought me an engagement ring and our wedding rings.

We never mentioned David again. I didn't dare.

David became my secret refuge. I believed that our love lived on within us. I escaped to this fantasyland whenever I felt threatened and alone. David was my lifeline. Tom could not reach us there in our shell.

Love is usually sweeter in longing than in the realisation. David was never given a chance to hurt you, I say.

Over the years I created David in my likeness like God created Adam out of clay. I needed to be loved by a perfect man so I created my perfect David. When Tom's words made me want to be dead, David kept me alive, smiles Helena.

A girl never forgets her first love, I say.

Was Joe your first, asks Helena.

The first and only. We had no regrets.

What about Vince?

Vince and I depended on each other.

After we married, Tom opened a shop close to Italian border. I never knew what made Tom drop out of the party and join the private sector.

My colleagues accused me of betraying the communist ideals. Marrying money was the lowest thing a teacher could do. Specially money from the private sector, money with the rotten west capitalist exploitation flavour. Money on the border between good and bad.

I left my job to manage the shop while Tom travelled and organised the business. I heard about Tom dining with elegant young women but Tom told me that women were the clients and business associates.

I think Tom was a born businessman who used his communist past to get where he wanted to be, I observe.

I need a car, Tom told me. His friend bought a car in Germany and he came home and the girls admired him and hoped that he would take them for a ride. He took many nice girls for a ride, they were eager to be taken. A car was a sure sign of power and prosperity and potency and desirability.

Tom gave the money to an Italian acquaintance to buy a car in Trieste. I was to tell the custom officials that my aunt sent the money from America to my relation in Italy for me to buy myself a car. By then I became an accomplished liar.

People told each other what lies to tell to get through the system.

Tom became a dashing cavalier, as desirable as his friend who took girls for a ride.

Tom bought a house. He bought a television set even before Slovenia began to broadcast. I had nothing to complain about. I was the best dressed and housed woman I knew. Right there on the border between virtue and sin.

Tom said that in his position he had to dress well. He spent a lot of time dressing, he spent a lot of time in front of the mirror, he bought new scents and ties and suits in Italy. I found expensive perfumes and nylon stockings in the car. He told me that he bought them in Italy for the wives of his business acquaintances.

Synthetic fabrics and parkas became popular and Tom carried samples of those in the car as well. Everything was as it was supposed to be. We lived a life of luxury for a few years while our children were born. I look at that time as my happiest because Tom was happy.

I was really happy when I was expecting our first baby. This was the only time I felt grateful and relaxed. I almost loved Tom. He ignored my mistakes and my faults did not bother him. His demands for sex and attention diminished.

I realise now that Tom was preoccupied with his girlfriends. In his euphoria he forgot that I was his wife and treated me with the same charisma he used for customers and business associates. A month before I was to have a baby I saw Tom arguing with a girl in front of our shop. They were leaning on the car and did not see me behind the curtain of our second floor apartment. I did not want to be seen. I convinced myself that they argued about some business transaction.

Don't even think about it, Tom raised his voice and there was a sharp threat in it. They were neither friends nor friendly.

If you don't make a decision I will, the girl slammed the car door. Tom flinched and looked up but I stood wrapped in the darkness and protected in my secrecy. I will go to the police, yelled the girl as she walked away. My eyes followed her enormously high heels. Her legs almost reached up to her long blond hair falling straight and bouncing on her back as she walked. I almost felt sorry for the girl and for Tom because they both seemed unhappy.

Tom was in a foul mood when he got in. Just leave me alone, he said and drank his whisky in one gulp. He changed his mind then and became very attentive. He patted my stomach and put his head on it and I was grateful for his love. Our baby needed us. We went to bed and he very gently initiated sex but for the first time his body did not respond. He kissed me all over and whispered to the baby in my stomach.

We have to be careful because of the baby, he said and I was grateful for his consideration. It never occurred to me that he could not make love. I did not even consider that he was having sex elsewhere.

The next day police arrested Tom. I forgot about the girl with long legs. I had to think about our business, about Tom and about our baby. My father's death left me vulnerable. I realised that Tom was everything my baby and I had.

The Italian who smuggled Tom's money, confessed and they accused Tom of all sorts of impropriety. They closed our business and our accounts. Currency smuggling was highly immoral and illegal. It came next to spying. We were traitors.

Tom was free again a day before the baby was born. He paid to have the charges against him dropped but he became weary.

You can only bail yourself out so many times, he said.

Tom became very attentive to our baby and me since his arrest. He took every opportunity to have sex with me. For awhile we had sex for breakfast, lunch and tea. I really became sick of it. I almost wished that he would have sex with somebody else, laughs Helena. Soon I was pregnant again and his demands decreased.

Tom soon opened a shop on the Italian side of the border.

My father said that everything and everybody is for sale. Whoever pays you buys a part of you. If nobody is prepared to pay, you have no value.

How the words of our parents stick in our mind.

Tom eventually decided to go to Australia. I believe that he wanted to get away from something but we never really discussed his business. Australia sounded fine to me. In Australia Tom invested. I had my life at school and he had his business.

I was pregnant by the time we got married. I wished it was David's baby but it wasn't. I noticed Tom comparing his hands with the baby's hands in the cot. Tom often looked at different parts of Vesna probably checking if David was lurking in any part of her body. Vesna could not look more like Tom. She became Tom's princess. Vesna was the reason I stayed with Tom. He loved and spoiled Vesna until she became a rebellious teenager and began to backchat him and side with me.

What about Daniel?

Daniel was an intrusion into our happy family. Tom was preoccupied with Vesna. I paid more attention to Daniel to make up for it but Tom became jealous of Daniel. He

became annoyed with his crying and his demands for attention. I protected Daniel and spent ever more time with him. Daniel looks like me, he is like me and like me he could never resist Tom. We were all in the business of pleasing daddy. We followed Tom's orders but we never performed to his satisfaction. I couldn't stand being rejected by Tom so I forced the children to say sorry. Every time it took him longer to forgive us. Often we had no idea what we did wrong. He sulked until we all begged forgiveness. Tom married a little girl and demanded that I remain a little girl. I became one of the children.

Tom was afraid that you would grow bigger than him.

I created a monster out of Tom. The children knew that I would be upset if they upset daddy so they said sorry.

They don't have to say sorry any more.

They say sorry to their partners and their children but there is a rebel in both of them. There has to be. The rebel has to live on something. They smoke and apologise but I see frustration eating them from inside. Daniel says that he wants his children to have everything he missed out on, tells Helena.

Daniel is a successful doctor. He surpassed his father.

I suppose in his head he knows it but in his heart he still does not measure up.

I think Tom blamed me for not finding whatever he was looking for in life. He eventually became impotent. I was happier but Tom probably wasn't, smiles Helena. We had a stupid argument.

Other people's arguments always seem insane.

We went into a shopping mall and arranged to meet in half an hour outside the newsagency.

Why can't you be where we arranged to be? He snarled after I finally found him in the car.

We arranged to meet where we parted.

Are you saying that I am lying? I never lie, said Tom.

You don't have to, I back-chatted.

You always lied.

Only when I didn't dare tell the truth, I made a joke of his anger. I could have said that I never lied but I simply couldn't lie any more. He wanted to see me cry but I could not cry any more either.

You were whoring yourself with him in your mind. That's why I can't do it anymore. Bitch, he hissed.

Suddenly I realised what we were arguing about.

A day earlier a woman from Slovenia came to see us.

We chatted about olden days. We both knew David so David was mentioned in our chat. Tom was reading a newspaper. When the woman left, Tom never mentioned David.

I can still see you with him, said Tom on our way home.

I see you with your girlfriends, I back-chatted.

Bitch. You were thinking about him when I was fucking you.

You were thinking about your girlfriends.

I was never thinking about anyone but you, said Tom and his voice was more sad than angry.

That's when I said to him that he fucked my whole life.

I wonder if men's strength is their sexuality. I stopped being afraid of Tom when we stopped having sex.

I visited uncle Miha while on holiday. I found him sitting next to the window in a nursing home. He was ninety-six.

He likes this window. They get funny like that with age, explained the young nurse, who held uncle Miha's hand. She does not know that uncle Miha was funny like that all his life.

He rarely opens his eyes, the nurse pressed herself close to uncle Miha's face so he could hear her. One can say anything to a ninety-six years old.

The nurse put her arm under Miha's neck and lifted his head.

She is my angel, uncle Miha patted the nurse's bottom as he pressed his face into her chest.

I can see her better near the window, he coughed a little laugh. I believe that he opened his eyes a crack.

I'll leave you alone now. Just ring the bell if you need me, the nurse smiled.

I told uncle Miha how afraid I am of loneliness and old age. I would tell that to a dog.

There is nothing to be afraid of, he whispered. Fear is like a loaded gun. Throw away your gun and look for love.

It's too late, I muttered to myself. One can say anything in front of the man whose death is overdue.

Love has nothing to do with age, uncle Miha breathed his words of wisdom on me. Or sex, or money, or power. There is a little child in you that needs to be hugged until the day you die. We all grow old if we live that long but the child still needs hugging. Don't let the child be afraid. Love is love, it is all there is. Take it as it comes.

Miha died a couple of months after I left.

I am glad you found what you were looking for.

I only wish I could share all these with Tom. My classmates and I learned about the rotten West in the same class in the same year yet they said that it was easy for me in the west. Nobody knows that I was ashamed of being a foreigner. I became illiterate because I could not put into English the knowledge and experience I had. Nobody knows that I escaped into the secret safe places within myself whenever I felt that I was less than I should be.

As a child I was always afraid of some hideous secret punishment because my parents did not believe in communism. My schoolmates were proud communists and now they became proud anticommunists.

I stood on the riverbank and wondered how could something so right turn into something so wrong.

Maybe we should shut the lid on the past because there are places nobody dares to visit because the smell of decay and disease and ignorance offends, I conclude.

Slovenians hope that United Europe will embrace us. Germans, Italians, Hungarians and Serbians tried to swallow us for centuries. Now Slovenians would do anything to be swallowed because the president says that it is a good thing. Now we adore the west, we are the west, we are grateful that the west wants us at all. We offer our land for sale. We sold our souls to the devil.

Marty

Marty is so easy to talk to, says Helena looking at the man at the bar.

Marty comes into the Slovenian club dressed in an old check shirt and jeans. He is the only Slovenian sheep grazier I know of. He always comes alone.

What a waste of a good man, says Helena.

You could change that, I tease.

I wish I could, smiles Helena.

Marty told me his story as he waited in my office to see Vince. I think Slovenians tell their story to each other as a way of introduction. Most of us travelled the same road, most of us are connected to the same people and places. We only have to activate the connection that was there from the beginning.

The Australian government paid Marty's passage from Austria to Australia in the fifties. In return he had to work for two years anywhere they needed him. They sent him on a large sheep station near Sydney.

Marty was born in a little village near river Soca as a fourth child to a subsistent farmer. Their ten acres of land was a rocky mountain slope that had to be tilled by hand.

For me, the vast, flat Australia was a paradise. The land was rich and after the rain the luscious grass grew wild, said Marty.

I knew straight away that one day I would become a sheep grazier. I saved every dollar and after two years I had a deposit. After the drought the land came cheap and I bought a farm near Sydney well stocked with merino sheep.

My first two years in Australia were most valuable. I learned about sheep and what I needed to know to be a grazier. The suppliers told me what I needed to buy, the shearers told me what to do with the wool and the abattoir told me about the meat. I subscribed to the farmer's newspaper, Land, and listened to other farmers.

I knew that knowledge is money and money is everything else. I learned English fast because I knew that I had to if I wanted to be successful.

I had a fair idea about the drenching and crutching and mulesing and shearing. I bought well-trained sheep dogs. I kept asking questions and never took offence when anybody corrected me.

People told me how hard life is on the farm but those people knew nothing about making a living on a rocky paddock at home. How can one go wrong with sheep? The wool grows while you sleep and it grows on something that you eat.

He makes it sound like fun, says Helena.

Soon Marty no longer had to work on the vast green paddocks. He was marketing his stock and the men who know about sheep produced on his paddocks what sheep is supposed to produce.

Few Slovenians ever visited Marty's home. There are rumours that his Irish wife doesn't like to mix with Slovenians.

Can't blame her really if she feels left out when Marty speaks Slovenian. He loves to speak Slovenian, says Helena.

Marty is not an intellectual; he just likes to do his job thoroughly. He was one of the first farmers who used Internet for his business.

In the marketing you have to keep up with the bastards, he said. Marty doesn't swear, a bastard can be a competitor, a mate or a nasty individual. A poor bastard is any individual who doesn't know how to manage his affairs.

Marty never seems to agonise about the meaning of life.

When you get stuck you have to figure out how to get unstuck. Problems are there to be solved, he jokes.

Marty laughs at himself and at life generally. Everything amuses him, he seems a genuinely contented man, says Helena.

Marty lost his hair when very young and hides his bald patch under the big Akubra hat that became his trademark. Other Slovenians try to make fun of his boldness but he laughs it off saying: God was just and God was fair. To some he gave brains to others he gave hair.

Marty comes to Slovenian mass occasionally. He also goes to his local church to meet with other graziers and hear the farming news.

Now that you gave up work you can come to help with shearing, Marty invites Helena.

Marty and Helena are joking but their flirtation is quite obvious.

Will you teach me, she laughs.

You start as a roust-about and the shearers tell you what to do, laughs Marty.

Wouldn't you rather have me as a housekeeper?

The shearer's woman keeps my house.

When are you going to retire, Helena wants to find something in common with this simple farmer.

Why should I? I want to live.

Is work all there is? I enter into their conversation.

Work offers you a chance to win.

Win what?

Anything.

Like what?

Money.

Is money so important?

Money is everything. Nice people pretend that it isn't but when they stop pretending they know that it is.

What does money do for you?

If you have money you think of how to make more money. If you have no money you think of money all the time, smiles Marty.

Making money is one way of escaping life, says Helena with eyes glued on Marty.

And family, says Marty.

I don't want to win any more, says Helena.

When you don't want to win any more, you are dead, says Marty. Life is climbing the mountain.

I like to remember, smiles Helena.

We can remember together.

I wonder if there is a hint of romance. Should I disappear?

Nobody cares what we do, says Marty oblivious of my presence.

Is that good or bad?

I worked since I stood on my back legs.

Were you four legged for long? Both laugh.

Wouldn't it be nice if we just drifted along without thinking?

Now we can afford to.

I can feel sparks between Marty and Helena. Just tiny sparks that wants to be lived and shared and laughed at. I pretend to read a club magazine.

I was too serious all my life, says Marty. I should have made my kids laugh. I taught them how to make money and save. They hated my teaching and they never learned. They are just drifting along.

We couldn't afford to fail at anything. We were afraid to laugh. We represented all Slovenian elders and all the lessons of hardship to our children, says Helena.

We saved and worked so our children can spend and enjoy but now we resent them spending.

I would like to go home again, says Helena.

Where is home?

Where I grew up.

I was forever hungry when I grew up.

Do you still have your family?

I lost touch with my brothers and sisters. Dad tried to escape the war. He pretended to be a partisan when partisans came and when Home guards came he pretended to be a Home guard. In the end Black Hand shot him. Mum was left with four little children and couldn't cope. She was labouring for farmers and she found places for us to do the same. She married again, had more children, so she never had time to worry about us.

It was hard for everybody after the war.

I started work when I was eight.

Didn't you go to school?

Sometimes. I quit in second grade during the war. I never learned to read and write properly. I had a good excuse not to write home, Marty tries to make a joke.

Couldn't you go back to school after the war?

I was a big twelve years old farm labourer by then and nobody told me that I could. They had more important things to do when the war ended. I slept on the hay above the stable and worked on the fields from morning till night. Nobody cared that I could not read or write. Later I wanted to find a job in a factory but I was too embarrassed to tell them that I cannot read or write. It was easier to escape. Lots of people of my generation missed out on education.

You have done well in Australia.

It was different here. They knew that I did not read or write English so they made it compulsory for me to attend English classes in the evening. Learning was fun. In the first two years I learned to read and write and speak and run the farm. They were the best years of my life. I was really proud of myself. I like reading, I read everything.

I suppose every cloud has a silver lining.

If I wasn't that dirt poor I would never learn as willingly or earn as much as I did. When I learned to read I just did not want to stop. Everything I read helped me.

You should go home. I am a different person since I went, says Helena.

Maybe, smiles Marty.

It is good to take a look at what we escaped from.

I don't remember ever sleeping in a proper bed until I came to Australia. Or eating at the table. I was a stable boy.

Wouldn't you like to see your relations.

The only relations I said goodbye to were my pigeons. I knew they would miss me.

I raced pigeons. At an arranged time every Sunday morning the owners of the pigeons released groups of up to five pigeons from their homes. Some stayed up in the air for up to 8 hours. They placed bets on whose pigeons will stay longer in the air and make more summersaults. One sort of pigeons raced in circles. Other sort flew high and did up to ten summersaults going down. I let my pigeons circle up and when they came close to the ground again I whistled to them to make them go up again.

The ones that stayed in the air the longest won the race.

That's how I made my first fortune.

I bought a pair of pigeons of really good breed. They mated and had young every month. When chicks were still in the nest there were already new eggs. Both parents looked after the young, bringing the food and sitting on the eggs. The males were very protective towards their females. They wiped their beaks and then they kissed before they mated. After mating both pigeons fly around a couple of circles.

The farmer I worked for sent me to buy him tobacco in bulk. When I sold some pigeons I also bought tobacco for myself. I made small packets to sell to other boys. I made quite a bit of money like that.

You were a businessman from way back.

Once I exchanged a pair of young pigeons for two piglets. That was quite a deal. Usually I sold them for corn and wheat, which I then sold to poor families. I had about a dozen pairs of pigeons but someone came and stole them. I found the thief and told him that I will report him to my uncle who is a policeman. I didn't know any uncles policeman or otherwise but the man didn't know that. He returned the pigeons and paid for the loses.

The thief re-established my pigeons at his place. He did not let them out until they had young and then he let them out knowing that they will return to look after the babies.

You should visit the grandchildren of those birds and create new memories. I did.

Maybe we could do it together.

The year of Seniors

1999 is the year of us Seniors, I say to Helena who is telling Bible stories to her grandchildren Daniel and Nasha during school holidays.

It should be called a year of grandmothers, laughs Helena. I could never allow myself to enjoy my children in the way I enjoy my grandchildren. They are like sponges soaking up words. I think they should know something of what our people believe. Helps them to imagine.

I can hear them imagining, when you tell stories.

God felt a bit lonely in his beautiful heaven so he created the first two people, Adam and Eve, Helena begins in a slow husky voice as her grandchildren cuddle up on each side of her on the couch.

He took Adam and Eve into the garden called paradise. He told them that they can pick all the delicious fruit but they must not touch the fruit from one special tree.

One day a devil came disguised as a snake and said:

Why don't you eat from that beautiful tree?

God told us not to, explained Eve.

If you eat from that tree you will be like god, said the devil.

But god told us not to, said Adam.

God does not want you to be like him, teased devil.

Adam and Eve started to think what it would be like to be god.

Do not be afraid, urged the devil.

Eve picked the apple.

Why didn't Adam pick it? Asks Nasha.

Maybe he could not reach it, I help.

Eve probably wanted to make Adam happy, says Helena.

Maybe Adam told her to pick it, I wink at Helena.

Anyway, they both took a bite but the fruit tasted the same as all the other fruit. Adam and Eve looked at each other but they didn't feel smart or powerful. They felt ashamed and threw the rest of the fruit away.

It's sour, said Eve.

We are naked, said Adam.

I am sorry, said Eve. I will make clothes from fig leaves to cover our shame.

I am afraid of god, said Adam.

We won't tell him, says Eve.

Let us hide so god will not find us, said Adam.

The snake followed them but Adam threw a stick at it.

Now you know good and evil and you will always be tempted to do evil, laughed the devil.

Adam and Eve were hiding in the bushes. Eve was sewing a tunic for Adam.

God called out to them.

We cannot come to you because we are naked. We are ashamed, said Adam.

Who told you that you are naked. Who made you feel ashamed, asked god.

The snake made us do it, they both said.

You ate of the forbidden fruit, roared God.

God sent Adam and Eve out of the paradise and from that day they had to grow their own food. The work was hard because Adam and Eve had no tools.

God gave Adam and Eve disobedient children who snarled at each other baring their big teeth. They even began fighting each other.

Do not listen to the devil, Adam and Eve begged their children but devil changed into all sorts of creatures and the children didn't recognise him. They worked hard to give their children everything they needed but their children wanted more all the time. Adam and Eve told them to share but they showed their strong teeth and snarled at each other. The devil told Cain that god loved his brother Abel better than him. Cain killed Abel.

God felt sorry for Adam and Eve's family. He created ideas in their heads and these ideas helped them create tools, domesticate animals and make fire. They began to cook their food.

Their teeth grew smaller and began to rot away. They could not bite each other anymore but they began to call each other ugly names and tell lies. They discovered that words can hurt even more than bites. People invented sharp words to make each other sick. The aching hearts refused to heal and people began to die of

mysterious illnesses. Nobody lived to be thousand years old anymore. People searched for mighty words to cast spells on the illnesses but they couldn't find the remedy.

Did god eat of that forbidden fruit, asks Daniel.

Helena looks at me for help.

Did he, asks Nasha.

He created it, Helena tries to avoid the answer.

Can devil tempt God, asks Daniel.

Who is stronger, devil or god? rushes Nasha.

God is good and devil is bad but they both try to make people follow them, Helena diverts the question. When more people follow God, he becomes stronger than devil but when people decide to follow devil, then devil becomes stronger.

Why does God let people follow devil? Asks Daniel.

God let us decide whom to follow. Those that choose to follow devil become ashamed and unhappy, says Helena.

Are God and devil worried about who is the boss, asks Nasha.

I suppose we decide who is the boss.

Daniel and Nasha look at each other not quite sure what to make of Helena's answer.

Who do you think will win? Devil or God?

I hope god will win? I believe that he will win, says Daniel.

Can god kill devil, asks Nasha.

Why doesn't he kill devil, says Daniel.

How long did Adam and Eve live in the paradise?

How many children did they have?

Will god ever let us live with him in that garden again, asks Nasha.

God sent his son, Jesus, to show people how to live if they wanted to return to a paradise. Jesus was the only one who could resist temptation. He was in the desert hungry and thirsty when devil told him that he will give him anything he wanted if he followed him. Jesus said no.

Did Jesus die in that desert? Says Nasha.

Devil killed him, says Daniel.

People who followed devil killed Jesus, says Helena.

I wish Jesus killed devil, says Nasha.

Was Jesus God?

Jesus came to tell us that we must love each other rather than hurt each other, I say but the children ignore me. Their eyes are on Helena.

Will we be allowed to eat all the fruit when we go to heaven, asks Nasha.

Will the devil still be there to tempt us, asks Daniel.

Is the forbidden fruit still there?

What did Jesus look like, asks Nasha.

He had long red curly hair and a beard, explains Daniel.

And blue eyes, adds Nasha.

I need a cup of coffee, says Helena and we go to the kitchen while Daniel and Nasha watch the Superman on television.

Children relate to temptation, disobedience and punishment, says Helena.

We used to believe in the magic of it all. Children need something secret and sacred and magic like God and heaven and angels and devil.

I don't understand the magic of Harry Potter or The Lord of the rings so I tell them what my mother told me, says Helena.

Just as well they don't ask if Catholic Jesus is better than Protestant Jesus. We create people and gods in our own image so we can love and worship them.

Daniel told me that he is going to get the genes of different creatures to make new creatures. He will animate this mixture with electricity and then download it on the computer and combine it with other minds to create a superman.

The Frankenstein legend will soon become a reality.

Children are over stimulated these days.

The creation was taken out of their hands. Everything around them is battery operated.

People no longer smack them but put them on Ritalin, says Helena

What is Ritalin, I ask.

It is called a junior's helper. Many children suffer from ADHD-attention deficit hyperactive disorder. They can't concentrate, are disruptive and aggressive. Doctors prescribe Ritalin to make them manageable. Millions of kids worldwide are on Ritalin. I wonder sometimes if a smack on the bottom wasn't more humane. We are no longer willing to intimidate children into compliance but we are willing to drug them into it. I would like my grandchildren to inherit the world that is peaceful, kind and gentle, the world in which people are more important than things.

There is no such world. Life is a race and those that push ahead get bruised and those left behind get rejected.

Daniel once asked me where does the sun go at night and I told him that it goes to Slovenia. Sometimes I take my grandchildren to the beach in the evening and we watch the sun go to Slovenia. God seems very near as we wave goodbye to the sun.

When I was young I looked for the man in the moon now people walk on the moon.

We used to meet in the park now people meet in a computer chat-room.

Helena's diary

Since Tom died I had no one to confess to so I began to write a diary, says Helena passing me an exercise book.

I will never again be what people remember me to be. But then I never was, I begin to read Helena's story.

Inside our shiny shells we are all soft and vulnerable and the same and hiding our fragile sameness from each other.

I used to teach moral education when I first came to Australia. The major part of my own moral education was learning respect for others.

Those that need respect tell you from day one to respect them.

Tom demanded respect and I let him have it. For the sake of peace and for the good of our children. I did not win the war. He did.

These days respect is no longer compulsory. A person has to earn respect. I told my students that good always wins against the bad.

Bolshie, said Tom. People bully others to believe that.

We signed the international convention on children's rights. Parents must not interfere with the children's right to choose who they respect. The child has the right to choose his peers and his god and his toys. Children are to work to their potential and it is their right to do so and they should not be hindered or pushed. When I was a child children were to be seen but not heard. Now there is a shortage of children in the Western world. The child is the icing on the cake of their prosperity.

Parents book the child into the right school at conception. And to the right beauty contest and modelling agency for the child to get where everybody will watch him shine. Parents stick close to the child to be illuminated by the glory of the child's becoming first and best in the competition where equal ribbons are given to all competitors. The child has to do this for parents who could not themselves reach the top where the view is.

We know that nobody is fooled by the ribbon; every child knows who is first and best and who pushed the hardest. We tell other people's children that there should be no pushing ahead in the enlightened egalitarian society where everybody gets an equal portion of respect and love and admiration and lollies and toys.

Religious people tell others that it is fine to be last because the last will come first in the KINGDOM.

It's up to us to satisfy our child's need for self-esteem and confidence and love.

Designer clothes and toys fill our children's living spaces. We entertain them until we are blue in our faces. Our children have no reason to lust for the light on top of the hill. Most children could not even be bothered about the hill or the light.

What could possibly tempt our children? Except the forbidden fruit, of course. We would like to believe that the forbidden fruit was cut down and it is rotting in the ditch. Only the forbidden fruit has the power to change into any unseasonable fruit, which does not rot. It shines as invitingly in the ditch as it did on the tree. Children wander in the dark and stumble upon the light of the forbidden fruit that turned into new source of knowledge of good and evil. The spectrum of universe opens when you taste this fruit and you become like god and want more and more fruit to be continuously like god in his heaven with all the forbidden fruit he can or want to eat because there is no one to tell him how much harm the fruit can cause you. People want to eat forbidden fruit until it kills them.

Parents beat their chests proudly because they provided a proper environment for the growth of their children's self-esteem and then they beat their chest again because they forgot to warn against the forbidden fruit.

We have Jesus in our hearts to tell us what we must know, Nasha told me when the Scripture teacher introduced her to god.

Shit smells because parents tell their babies that it smells. Flies have no such prejudice, said Tom.

Our parents told us about God's eternal wrath and about the bottomless pit of eternal fire if you stop praying or if you yield to temptation or covet other people's entitlements.

Now God became an all-loving entity. Gods are no longer there to spy on our coveting. The loving universal god has no prejudice and does not need to be prayed to.

The priest offers general absolution so people don't have to remember their sins. Gods are no longer interested in sins.

We replaced the wicked witch, the big bad wolf and the cruel stepmother with the electronic games that kill imaginary creatures on the computer. All the killing is done by remote control.

I am travelling to work on a school bus with fifty high school students trying to excel in arrogance and bravery.

They snigger and make rude finger signs I don't even know the meaning of. We did not use rude finger in my day.

Six years old Daniel came to me one day with fat shiny tears rolling down his cheeks and said: He showed me a rude finger.

Which finger is a rude finger, I ask to update my knowledge of the sign language.

You know the rude one, sobs Daniel.

I have no rude fingers, I say to him and he looks at me as if I came from another planet.

I see Daniel's little fingers forming signs.

Show me a rude finger, I say and he brings his hand up ever so slowly with the middle finger up, palm to his face.

What does that mean, I ask and he gives it another minute to think about the safety of telling me the rude facts of life.

To stick it and twirl, he says in one breath.

Up yours, helps his friend.

Up what, I ask. One can ask little ones anything. They are still in awe of their teachers and parents. They still love their grandmothers.

You know, up yours, Daniel looks pleadingly into my eyes.

Up your bum, helps a boy from year two who is already dangerously knowledgeable in these matters.

Up yours and twirl, Daniel's tears dry up as he waits for my decision about the rude finger.

Miss, miss, calls a little girl. He made a dicky sign at me, she points at an older boy that runs away.

What is a dicky sign, I ask.

You know, miss, says the girl and her left hand curls to make a hole for her right hand pointing finger to fit in.

Is that bad, I ask.

It is rude, miss.

What does it mean, I ask the girl who is six and still has no malicious thoughts about teachers. The girl's right finger moves in and out of her curled left hand as she looks into my eyes to make me understand what she still can't put into words.

What are you doing with your hands, I ask.

Dicky, she says.

It is exciting to be naughty and to tease a teacher.

I sway from side to side on the bus as we travel to school seventy kilometres away. I was late on the bus and there are no spare seats so I stand and try to keep balance. I am not scared to fall over but I am terrified of looking ridiculous swaying.

Paper aeroplanes flying in my direction over the heads of other students in the bus, are only meant to defy authority and scare me. I am a primary teacher and have no authority over these high school students and they know it. It is exciting to tease a pompous old bag.

There are hundreds of fifteen-year-olds I once taught somewhere. I hope one of those might be brave enough to defend and protect any old bag, a teacher or not.

I should have spent more time on teaching respect but technology demanded that I teach important things.

Teenagers laugh to cover up their insecurities. Laughter unites. Peers let you know where you stand. They are not bad kids really; they are just at the stage where they have to make sure that everybody notices how confident and arrogant they are. I know that half of them would like to give a little room and let me squeeze on the seat but how would they live that down in front of their peers. The only people that matter are peers.

I have no peers. There is strength in numbers. I stand alone. I stood alone all my life because I was afraid to confess to other Slovenian migrants that I was as insecure as they were. We pretended to impress each other and all the time we were the only people that mattered.

We were collectively hiding the flaws of our families.

We soon discovered who was the boss and who was to be respected in each family. We protected the myth of a marital bliss and success to be an inspiration to our children. We left our families and wrote home about the beautiful life we had. We sent glossy pictures of our happiness.

When I was a child the beautiful pictures of my American relations inspired me to dream of faraway places. In 1972 I visited my ninety years old auntie in Cleveland. She told me how she used to go from house to house looking for work during the great depression. She was a dressmaker and she made beautiful clothes for her three children from other people's rags. Her husband died from alcoholism and disappointment but she survived. Every Christmas she saved for family photos to send home to us.

I travelled on the last road between the northern edge of Canada and the North Pole. There are no sidetracks and few settlements in this virgin country. I stopped to get a drink from the only hotel for many miles. A man came towards me, his eyes alight, his arms outstretched, big smile on his face: I barely recognised you, he said to me in Slovenian. I almost fell into his arms before I remembered that I have never seen the man before. We stood speechless for a moment and then he said in English: I am sorry, I took you for someone else. The smile left his face, the eyes lost the

shine, the arms hung beside him. You are Slovenian, I said in Slovenian. Yes, yes, yes, he came to light again and we shook hands. My Slovenian face was familiar to him; he mistook me for a Slovenian woman he knew. We hurried with explanations of who we are, where we come from, what we do, where we live, where we were born, when we were last in Slovenia. We discovered friends and acquaintances in common; soon we were sitting in his log cabin discussing history, geography, philosophy, and childhood memories. He was my peer.

I stand on the school bus alone.

A girl is uncomfortably looking in my direction and I know that her mum taught her to respect oldies but she is afraid of the laughter of her peers. Let the old bag stand and sway. Maybe she will fall over after all.

How can an old worn out woman command the respect of the brave young students on their way to becoming popular and important.

I am not their mother or grandmother or their teacher. I cannot do anything spectacular or remarkable for them to take notice and say: This lady deserves our respect. I would have to impress the ring leader and hope that he would give a sign that it is alright to respect the greatness of this lady and give her a chance to put her fat behind on a seat.

One of the smallest boys mentioned the 'fat wobbly behind' to his older friend and they both looked in my direction. The little boy gained a bit of status in front of the big boy as others joined in the laughter.

They are desperate for the anonymity and unanimity. Being different can be fatal for their self-esteem.

Oh, leave it out, yells an older girl in an attempt to restore some order but others respond with giggles. I feel guilty, because the girl is almost a woman and the boys laugh at her attempt to protect another woman.

Heroics are for the rich and handsome and clever. There are few of these around without pimples and hormonal interference. Students feel intimidated by the possibility of ridicule by the bus full of peers who can make one's life miserable. One has to maintain a sense of self-preservation. To laugh with the group is the only way out. Laughter covers up fear and jealousy and shame and guilt.

These days the weak and the old don't dare walk on the streets, said Tom.

This is my fault. The sick and the old have no opportunity to earn respect in the shopping mall or on the bus or on the street, so the brave young generation pushes them into the gutter in every way possible.

Maybe I should have spent more time on teaching respect.

I forgot that in my old age I would not be able to earn respect while travelling on the bus full of students who believe what my generation taught them. I can't perform miracles.

Fuck the old bag, is only a whisper because the bus driver, who has the authority on the bus, is not allowed to allow the fuck words on the bus although she is well known for using the fuck words in her ordinary life.

The starving children have respect for anyone with a bowl of rice, said Tom.

The starving children would give me a seat on the bus because they would covet my rice bowls.

There are no starving children in Australia. Government looks after the poor. The poor have nothing to lose so they have nothing to fear and they enjoy tormenting those who have.

I try to ignore the little paper ball as it hit my arm. I look up trying to maintain my dignity, my aloofness and authority as the students on the bus wait for me to complain to the bus driver.

They are nice kids, really.

I hold on the frame of the seat and the two girls sitting on the seat move a little away from me but not enough for my fat behind to squeeze onto the seat. They only move away to show disgust for the authority and age. It is disrespectful of me to invade the space of the young generation.

Anger creeps on top of the basket of my insecurities. I have done much damage following trends. When my babies were born, young mothers were told that baby milk formula contains everything the baby needs so we used formula instead of breast-feeding. They told us that cuddling the baby in between feeding times breaks baby's routine so I stopped cuddling.

Maybe the unfairness of it all wiped the smile I tried so hard to maintain.

The students enjoy my discomfort.

We must strive from the cradle to the grave to be better. A better you is essential even if you believe that you are practically perfect. I updated my knowledge so I could be better and better all the time and so earn the respect of all those around me.

There was a course on assertiveness in my school. Suppressed anger makes you sick. You lose the will to live and your body can no longer fight.

I had stones sitting on my chest and my heart felt heavy and I was angry. I just smiled and went along and people came along with me and they smiled back at me and I felt warm and soft under the cold stones. Then the teacher told me that one must

never carry stones on one's chest because it isn't healthy to carry a cold dead burden.

I began throwing stones at people and people moved away in shock. They never expected that behind my smiles was hiding an evil person who throws stones. People believed that they were better judges of human nature. They will think carefully before taking anyone at their face value.

Faces lie.

They are angry because they were not smart enough to see it before. It was there before them for years and years and they ignored it. Just shows how wrong one can be.

Nobody should ever be so brave to wear himself inside out for all to see, Marjan once said.

I told Tom how I felt and he chose to die rather than live with the new assertive me.

I told my friends how I felt.

I thought she was a nice person, I overheard my former friend talking about me with her new friend.

She fooled everybody. Underneath she must have always been a real bitch.

Maybe everybody is a real two-faced bitch and they hide their bitchy part so everybody could love them. Maybe the counsellors were wrong about getting it all out.

I arrange a half smile, the ignominy of my interior safely hidden again. What is inside is tucked under the skin and my skin is getting thicker. I shame my inside into hiding and arrange my exterior to appear cheerful. It is enough that I appear cheerful. It is much safer to swear inside your head or inside your bed or home. Nobody cares what is happening inside.

The world chewed me from outside and I chewed myself from inside, I remember the words of a poet.

I swallow my inequities and the world swallows my smiles.

Follow the way of the lord, said Rozi. If they hit you on the right cheek offer the left as well.

Honesty, said my teacher, is the first step to recovery.

I don't know why I need to recover.

You need to grow and become a better person.

I thought I was a good person.

Maybe God retired; maybe his daughter succeeded him. maybe God's mother replaced him. Maybe she finds it easier to forgive our trespasses. Mothers know how children are.

Maybe the third millennium will be the time of peace.

I am so glad we can finally trust each other enough to talk about real things, I say as I finish reading Helena's journal.

Mojca

Mojca and I wander through the shopping mall.

Men would look peculiar shopping with a friend, says Mojca.

Shopping used to be entertainment but now there is nothing I need or want to buy.

Pepi loved going to Revolve. People unload their unwanted gifts and things they bought by mistake. Revolve sells these items for a fraction of the price. Sometimes Pepi would come from Revolve with a brand new gadget beaming happily like he won a lottery. Saving money gave him more satisfaction than spending it.

Everything revolves around money, making money, saving money.

I first met Mojca and her husband Pepi when they opened a little corner grocery shop in our street. Over the years they expanded and employed other people to work for them but at the beginning it was just Pepi, Mojca and their two children.

We stop for coffee in a little Austrian cafeteria.

We followed our husbands all our lives, I say

I don't know if I followed my husband or he followed me, smiles Mojca as we settle at the corner table.

What do you mean?

I suppose my hormones interfered with my common sense at eighteen. I just wanted to break free. Those were pre-pill, pre- sexual harassment and pre-social security days, says Mojca. There was a great pressure on girls to have sex but no protection. A girl only hoped that the boy, who impregnated her, married her. Unmarried mothers were not popular yet.

Were you pregnant?

I was pregnant. At eighteen I just enrolled at university. My parents had great hopes for me. I knew that I was a disappointment to them but I was so proud of my rebellion.

You loved Pepi.

We couldn't keep our hands and eyes off each other. I wanted him; maybe I made him do it, as they say. First time we made love on the moss in the forest. As I returned home I discovered that I was bitten by ants all over. Mum demanded to know how I got bitten. What was I thinking falling asleep in the forest like that? Anything could have happened to me. I could catch something nasty on the damp ground.

I can still see the first spring leaves swaying in the air above me as Pepi laid me on the moss. I never noticed ants. I was in heaven. I would easily risk my life for one more time on the moss but dad advised me to take a cushion to sit on, if I felt like it, as I went to look for mushrooms and wild strawberries.

That was my last summer at home and I picked mushrooms every day. Dad said that the fresh air made me look healthy and beautiful.

Pepi was an electrician engaged to be married. He told me that he wanted to come to the city with me but he didn't know how to break the news to his family. His fiancé was hoping to get married before she had the baby.

I knew that I was pregnant the moment it happened. Maybe every female knows. I knew. I changed. I became instantly jealous and wanted Pepi for myself. Once women get impregnated, they follow their impregnators like lambs, laughs Mojca. I did. I refused to admit how stupid I really was.

What about his fiancé?

I didn't even think about her until I became pregnant, says Mojca. Let's escape, said Pepi a week before his wedding. Those were the most romantic words I ever heard.

Pepi's friend lent us a small boat and we paddled all night until we reached Italy. Anything could have happened to us on the open sea but the only thing we were afraid of was that our parents would catch us.

In the excitement of our escape we clean forgot that one cannot live on love alone. Starved and exhausted we reported to Italian police and they placed us in a refugee camp. I was single and could not stay in the same barrack as Pepi. I was penny-less and could not speak Italian but I was desperately infatuated. We were young and stupid but we were also excited and felt heroic about our adventure.

Pepi went out in the evenings with other boys to pick cigarette butts on the streets, they unwrapped them at home and made new cigarettes. They sold some and smoked some. They sold blood to the Red Cross to buy little luxuries. At night they went to green grocers' shops and picked cases of half-rotten fruit and vegetables that was left for garbage collectors. They sorted and refreshed what could be salvaged, they sold some, ate some.

Being scavengers was a new experience for both of us. Pepi came from a respectable working class family and I was a terribly spoiled child of a local vet. I couldn't see past Pepi's deep blue eyes.

We were so happy that we never even considered other people. We did not realise how stupid and selfish we were.

You were in love.

It was better to escape than watch my parents suffer the condemnation of the village. It was always a girl asking for it when a boy became overcome by his hormones. It was a girl's fault that she let herself get pregnant. She was asking for it.

Why didn't you just get married?

I figured that my parents would not want me to get married at eighteen. Marrying a simple electrician would be a disgrace; marrying a simple electrician who made another girl pregnant would be a disaster. Being a single mother at eighteen would be a shame for the family.

Pepi's wedding invitations were out and gifts were bought.

Most of all I enjoyed being rebellious.

In Australia I went to see a doctor about my pregnancy. The receptionist wanted to know my husband's name.

I am pregnant and I am paying for the visit, not my husband, I told the receptionist but she wasn't interested in me. She insisted that the bill goes in my husband's name, says Mojca. So we quickly got married.

You have a big reunion for 50th anniversary of the Snowy Mountain Scheme, I say.

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 attracted migrants. The work was hard and dangerous but the pay was good, the overtime available and the meals and accommodation provided.

The dams they made, look like natural lakes scattered over the Mountains and overgrown by native fauna. The scheme is a memorial to migrants of the sixties. Men reminisce about the wild freedom of the bush, drinking in the pub, the hunting and the fishing. Many travelled to Cooma or Sydney on their paydays to find girls, grog and gambling.

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 of 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.

By diverting the Snowy, Eucumbene and Murrumbidgee rivers they directed the water through a series of tunnels to power stations that generated enormous amounts of electricity. Water was also made available for irrigation.

European migrants built the Snowy Mountains project but British bosses got the credit for it, says Mojca. When the queen and Prince Phillip and Lord Mountbatten came to see the Snowy Mountains scheme, the bosses ate with labourers to convince the royals how we were all one big happy family. Only we weren't.

In the sixties Australia was Anglo-Saxon country but now they are giving the credit to migrants, I say.

They make it sound glamorous but for me it was a misery. It seems obscene to celebrate.

You were history makers.

First non-English speaking migrants came from Baltic countries. When we arrived some Australians called us Balts. To them all non-English speaking people were Balts. I hated the name. Pepi thought that they meant Balks. He did not like to be called Balk because he hated Balkan. He also hated being called Yugoslav because he hated Yugoslavia. Even a new Australian sounded cheap and nasty.

Men of the Snowy organised themselves into gangs of people who spoke the same language. They found a bit of comfort and strength like that. Pepi's gang were Slovenians. They did not necessarily like each other but at least they could argue.

Snowy Mountains Scheme brought you together, I say.

Into the same place but not together. I had no one. Thousands of single men and no women, says Mojca.

Lucky you.

I hardly met anyone while in Jindabyne.

Why not?

Pepi knew what boys are like so he kept me isolated.

He protected you.

I was eighteen when we escaped. We got married a few weeks before I had our first baby. By the time I was nineteen I had another baby on the way.

We came to Australia in 1961 with rags we wore and we didn't speak a word of English. They took us to Bonegilla migrant camp.

The officers found jobs and accommodation for migrants but Pepi heard that on the Snowy one could earn quick money. We packed our baby Mark and left for Cooma. Pepi got a job and we got a house in old Jindabyne. Pepi started working five days after we arrived in Australia. He worked until the day he died, poor man.

You were lucky to get a job and a house, I say.

We felt lucky that we had a roof over our heads. We found old pots and crockery and cutlery abandoned in the shed. We found an old mattress and some clothes people left behind. People from old Jindabyne down in the valley moved up on the hill into new houses in new Jindabyne. The old abandoned houses in old Jindabyne were

made available to workers on the Snowy Mountains Scheme. When the project was finished they flooded the old town and covered up all the dirt with beautiful blue water.

These days refugees choose the furniture of the houses they get from the government; they have to have mobile phones to communicate with their families overseas. What did we get? And we came legally. We were qualified, young and ready for any work.

We were given nothing but thank god there were plenty of jobs.

You didn't like it in Jindabyne, I say.

There was no water supply. Pepi patched and cleaned the old empty rainwater tank, took out dead birds and cats and smaller unidentifiable animals. He didn't even let me see all the rubbish he took out. I brought buckets of water from the Snowy River to wash the tank and then we waited for the rain to fill it with rainwater.

A man passed by as Pepi cleaned the water tank.

Any rats, he asked.

No, said Pepi.

I never saw a rat in my life.

They come inside during winter for warmth, said the man.

It was January and beautifully warm so we took no notice.

At weekends we went fishing in the Snowy River or shopping in Cooma but most of the time we stayed home because Pepi needed rest. He worked a lot of overtime.

You must have been lonely.

Pepi said that he didn't want to expose me to the riff raff because I wasn't used to their kind of language. At that stage I would happily mix with gipsies. I was jealous because Pepi saw people and talked with them.

When I went to hospital to have the baby, Pepi worked a double shift. They wanted him to do the third shift because the man did not turn for work. Pepi said that he had to go to the hospital so the supervisor took his place.

Pepi came to the hospital after sixteen-hour shift. Dirty and wet he slumped onto the bed and stared into the ceiling. He didn't ask about the baby. He was shaking.

There was an accident just after I left, said Pepi. Explosion. One man is dead. A man lost his legs. Another man had his chest crushed by a rock. If I stayed a few more minutes I could be dead.

How did it happen, I asked

The detonator didn't explode, said Pepi.

What do you mean?

You know nothing about the things I have to do.

I knew only that Pepi prepared lights on the face of the tunnel before they blasted another metre of the mountain.

I want to know, I held his hand. He came to see our baby, he was supposed to comfort me but I knew that he needed comforting. He saw it all happen. There were no trauma counsellors in those days, so I had to comfort Pepi. The nurse brought our baby and while he suckled at my breast Pepi told me about his work.

There is a two-story platform at the face of the tunnel. The big jumbo drilling rig with about a dozen air drills

comes and the miners set the drills into the rock. There is a big hole in the middle and about sixty or more smaller holes on the face of the tunnel around the big hole. The miners place a gelignite and a detonator into each hole. The air pressure pushes it into the hole. Then they fill the hole with the nitrogen powder mixed with diesel. Next they place another gelignite and detonator at the end of the hole.

All detonators are connected to the wires and to the firing switch. The switch is under the lock so nobody could turn it on accidentally.

When all holes are ready the jumbo drill and the wagon with the gelignite and the miners move back about half a kilometre where the firing switch is. The supervisor checks that everything is in order before he turns the switch.

Each hole has a number. The holes around the big hole in the middle explode first, then those next to it and so on. The whole lot crushes and caves towards the middle where a big hole is.

After the explosion the face electrician is the first to go towards the face of the tunnel to install the lights. He can't see in front. Some rocks are hanging loosely from the ceiling and can kill you.

After the lights go on the man called chip monkey, dislocates and removes the loose rocks from the ceiling.

The loader comes to load the rocks on the carriages and clear the ground for the next drilling.

What went wrong, I ask. It is hard for me to comprehend and visualise every detail of the operation.

There is a strict rule that miners should never drill into the existing holes because the first detonator and the gelignite in the hole may still be alive. It rarely happens but it did. One of the miners drilled into the old hole and it exploded into his face. The rocks were flying all over the face of the tunnel.

How could he?

After the miner prepares his set of holes he can take a nap. One miner took a short cut. Drilling into the old hole saved time.

Do you know which miner?

It isn't important, we all learned a lesson. I was on the way out when they called me to help put the lights on.

How long ago was it?

Less than an hour.

Go home and have a rest, I said. Pepi never asked how long the labour took and how heavy the baby was. Those were the luxuries we talked about later.

Pepi was at work when I brought the baby home. He worked every available hour of overtime, often he worked double shifts and came home only to sleep.

I hated night shifts. I was scared to sleep in the isolated house without Pepi. During the day Pepi slept and I had to keep the children quiet so he could get his rest. I was lucky sometimes when they all went to sleep for a few minutes and I slept with them.

We waited and waited for rain. Mark was three years old and he followed me half a kilometre to the Snowy River to get a bucket of water every morning and every afternoon when our baby slept. I couldn't carry the baby and the bucket. As I went to get water, I also washed the rags we wore and the rags that passed as nappies. I found old sheets in the shed and tore them for nappies.

I rinsed them in the river in the morning, soaped them and spread them on the branches of the trees to sun bleach them during the day. In the afternoon I rinsed them out and hung them on the branches to dry.

On Sundays we went to church and prayed for rain. Church was my only outing.

We should take a bucket with us to church so God could give us water, suggested Mark.

I found a box of comics and short stories abandoned in the shed. The little Mills and Boon romances were easy reading and bit by bit I learned the words and their meaning. The rats and mice nibbled the books covered in dust but I cleaned them and read them. I had no radio or television or magazines. Those romances saved my sanity. Everybody needs some romance, smiles Mojca. At least every woman does.

Luckily we brought the dictionary with us. I learned a bit of English at school but I couldn't speak it.

You and Pepi were real pioneers.

We managed to buy a new mattress by then and we found an old frame of the bed.

You appreciate every improvement after you experience that kind of life. What about Australian neighbours? I ask.

Who would want to know a poor migrant woman with two little children? People keep away from poverty. And I couldn't speak English. They probably considered me illiterate and backward and I considered their life primitive.

We had the first frost in June. Pepi cut a pile of wood to keep us warm through the winter. One evening I put the baby in the basket near the fireplace while Mark was asleep.

I took a book and sat near the fire.

I heard a sound and looked up quickly. There were two pairs of beady eyes looking back at me. They didn't blink and neither did I. I sat frozen to the chair for a moment. A tail hanging out of the hole in the fibro wall suddenly moved, the heads of the creatures nodded to each other and moved towards the basket with my baby. I grabbed the baby and ran out into the freezing night. I stopped up on the hill, leaned on the tree and cried. I could hear the ice forming on the branches. I shivered. The wind touched my bones.

Suddenly I remembered that Mark was asleep there alone amongst rats. I took the baby and the stick and returned to the house. I rattled all the walls to frighten the rats away before I sat in the middle of my bed with my children on each side and the gun next to my bed.

I read out aloud to learn to speak English and to frighten the ghosts and rats away. I read and re-read those books until I knew them almost by heart.

Pepi wasn't worried when I told him about the rats. He bought the poison and spread it into every hole.

Once in the middle of the night I heard the footsteps under my window. I looked out and saw a man. I grabbed the gun, turned the light off and waited. The man went to the back of the house. There was a little slope and the ice formed on it. The man slipped and came crashing on our back door. My gun was going up and down, I had no strength to hold it straight, let alone shoot. When I heard the man's footsteps running away I crumpled to the floor. I never again closed my eyes when Pepi was on night shift.

When Pepi came home I told him about the man.

Who was he? Pepi asked.

I did not recognise him, I said.

The man coming to our home at night scared Pepi. Maybe he was scared that the man would harm me or take me from him.

I am going to resign, said Pepi. We have enough to put a deposit on a little place in Sydney.

The face pressed on the frozen window was imprinted on my memory. There was something familiar about the face. There was a man, a boy really, who once came with Pepi. He looked at me like he was a ghost. It scared me. I was sure it was him but I did not want to worry Pepi.

We stayed for three more months.

I was overjoyed. I sat in my kitchen sometimes and watched mice play on my wood stove. There would be half a dozen of them jumping from one pot onto another looking for morsels of leftover food. They took tiny crumbs into their dainty hands and nibbled like little children. They became my pets.

We are going away, I told them. I kept the thought always in my mind. There was going to be a better life. Spring was coming and life wanted to be enjoyed. The wild flowers sprung out, the rats moved out of the house. Maybe Pepi poisoned all the rats and they lay somewhere behind the fibro walls rotting away. I wanted to believe that they went away.

Three months later we paid a deposit on a tiny corner shop in Sydney and our life was beautiful once more. Both of us worked twelve hours a day seven days a week for a few years. Our children grew up in the back of the shop where we had a tiny flat. Mark helped in the shop even before he started school. Both our children had to work hard until we bought a bigger place and employed other people.

Everybody thinks we were born millionaires, says Mojca. We were well off at home, of course but here we made our own luck with hard work.

Did you ever go home?

When Pepi was diagnosed as diabetic, he retired from work and we decided to take a holiday in Slovenia. I thought he should see his other daughter and make peace.

Did he?

He saw her but he never spoke to her. She grew up as another man's daughter.

How was his girlfriend?

She is an old, fat woman. His daughter is a middle aged fat woman.

Were you jealous?

I was never jealous of either of them. There was nothing to be jealous about.

One day I saw Pepi sitting in the park looking at the boys playing soccer, continues Mojca. The ball was kicked sideways. Pepi caught it and passed it to one of the boys. The boy stood there facing Pepi for a second and Pepi smiled at him. The boy was a spitting image of Pepi. Pepi was watching his grandson. A girl came and sat next to Pepi. She was waiting for her brother to take her home. Pepi talked to her.

Blood is thicker and all that, you know, says Mojca. I became jealous of Pepi's grandchildren. I was jealous because he did not tell me about meeting them.

After we returned to Australia Pepi began to drink more. He began hiding his drinking and his blood sugar results. He was playing bocce the day he collapsed. Toni told the doctor that Pepi drank mineral water and did not eat all day.

Maybe he wanted to keep his sugar down, I say.

He did not tell me. That hurts. He gave up everything for me.

You gave up everything for him, I smile.

I decided to move to Lightning Ridge, says Mojca. Mark married a local nurse there. I suppose they want me to look after the children. If I don't go now I will never bond with them.

Tina moved to lightning Ridge so her son can see his father.

You follow your heart at eighteen and you can never turn back, says Mojca.

What will I do without you?

You might want to come and stay with Tina.

Lightning Ridge is eight hundred kilometres from everywhere. What would I do in a little mining town in the middle of nowhere.

Marty and Helena

Did you hear about Marty, asks Toni.

Hear what, says Helena.

There are rumours that he is broke, says Marjan.

Someone said that his wife cleaned him out, says Toni.

Nobody saw Marty for months.

I have to find him, says Helena on our way home. Maybe he needs a friend.

A friend in need is a friend indeed, I recite an old proverb.

I just want to be there for him.

Why don't you ring him?

I ring from the public phone every day so he cannot trace my calls, admits Helena. I don't want him to know how anxious I am. He is never home. His answering machine speaks to me all the time and I am happy to hear his voice at least.

Why don't you leave a message?

Maybe he does not want to hear a message.

Go and see him.

What would he think?

Maybe he is waiting for you.

Would you go to a man you liked? Asks Helena.

I think about Vince. I would go to Vince as long as we are just friends.

If I knew that he needed me, I say.

How do I know that Marty needs me? Says Helena.

One always needs a friend.

He might reject me.

He can only reject the expectations you have.

I want to help.

He might not want help. He might want to have someone to get drunk with.

I have been to more hotels and clubs in the last month than I saw in my lifetime, Helena tells me bursting with excitement a few days later.

I found Marty standing at the bar. He was one drunk man talking to another drunk man.

Have a drink, Marty offered as I approached.

I only wanted to buy a bottle to take home, I lied.

You are not going without a drink, Marty staggered towards the barman.

I really shouldn't, I am driving. I'll give you a lift home if you like.

It was easy to say that to a drunk person.

If you promise to come in for a drink.

If you insist.

I helped Marty into his house and he opened a bottle of red wine. He drank too much and the wine overflowed into tears. He was embarrassed and quickly wiped his cheeks.

I wanted to surprise you. No, I wanted to surprise myself. I wanted to disgrace myself and I did, sniffed Marty. I let Helena tell the story uninterrupted.

You always drank beer, I said.

In my other life, smiled Marty with tears rolling down his face.

What are you talking about?

Let's drink to us, said Marty with his arm around my shoulders. We emptied the first glass in one go as if to seal our friendship. The strong red wine washed away the tension and we both laughed through tears.

My family was my biggest disappointment. I suppose I was their biggest disappointment. When my wife and the boys left, I had to prove it to them that I am strong.

You have done well, I said.

They were never really my family. I was a poor boy from Slovenia they didn't want to know. I wanted us to go to Slovenia but they had no time. I haven't been home for almost fifty years.

Now is as good a time as any.

I wanted to retire in Slovenia. I sold the farm.

Maybe you will find there what you are looking for.

I wanted you to come with me.

I was there snuggled on Marty's chest.

I invested with Smetana and Smetana investment firm. The old man gave me a lot of good advice in the past and I trusted him. His sons run the firm in Sydney, you must have heard of them.

I think I've seen his name in the paper. I am sure you made the right decision.

The bastard left the country. Interpol is after him. He has taken over ten million dollars with him.

Your money?

And the money from other stupid old migrants who invested with him.

They'll find him.

I don't think so.

His sons are here.

They say that they know nothing of their father's dealings.

How much did you invest?

Half a million.

How could you, I said and regretted the words.

Because I am stupid. Maybe I was greedy. I liked making money and I never failed in business. I invested only for six months with the option to renew.

Smetana introduced me to all his politician friends to impress me and I fell for it. He said that he will invest off shore and earn eighteen percent interest, tax free. He paid me interest for the first six months up front and then he disappeared.

They'll catch him, I tried to bring some hope.

He is a bloody German Jew. I have always defended Jews. I like smart people. I insisted that people are jealous because Jews are smarter. I was right, the bastard was smarter than me.

Every nation has crooks. I am sure the authorities...., I tried.

Authorities work for money. I don't want to waste what I have left.

You still own this lovely house.

I hate the place and this country and the system and the whole bloody business.
Most of all I hate my greed and my stupidity.

It's your money, you earned it and you can do with it as you like.

I wanted to leave it to my grandchildren so they will know that their Slovenian grandfather made it good in Australia.

You have done good.

Let's drink to that.

Let's have something to eat, I suggested.

We haven't kissed yet and I was already organising his kitchen, Helena smiles to herself.

In the fridge was sour milk and stale bread.

We'll have to call room service, I laughed, almost as drunk as Marty.

I don't think that the bell works.

We both roared with laughter.

I might find some nuts, he remembered.

I can see two, I said and we sat on the lounge room floor laughing like two naughty teenagers.

Can you order pizza while I open another bottle of this beautiful shiraz.

Marty mumbled about his Jewish grandmother. Her family disowned her because she married his gentile grandfather.

We cried and laughed until we fell asleep fully dressed.

A bit of wine helps you discard the respectability.

A bit of wine helps you be who you are. When you like somebody, you want to be likeable so you hide the parts that even you can't like.

We are going to Slovenia, I need to show Marty where I grew up. I think he does too.

He might break your heart, I smile.

Maybe he will put the pieces of my broken heart together, says Helena.

You can't go wrong, I agree. Without love the whole process of living becomes the process of dying.

I might make a fool of myself but who cares. We might move in together when we come back.

Women are like that. We begin weaving love stories.

Ask Vince to come to Slovenia with you.

I don't think so.

Why not?

I am not as brave as you.

Don't think of it as a great love affair, take it for what it is. Marty and I will revisit our own memories. I might even see David again.

Why would you want to see David with Marty?

Nostalgia, I suppose. To see where we have been and where we ended up.

Wouldn't you rather do that on your own?

I feel stronger with a partner. I trust Marty. Travelling together like that will be fun.

He is a lucky man.

We are both lucky.

How is he taking it? We are both thinking about Marty's lost money.

I hope that he is not going just to look for Smetana.

I wouldn't blame him if he does. He has many addresses in Germany.

What if he finds him?

I don't know Marty well enough to know. I hope that we might have something going for us by then. I will try to make him forget.

Is he talking about Smetana?

Only when he is drunk.

Does he drink much?

When he drinks, he drinks too much. He tries hard to dismiss his losses but when he is drunk it all boils over.

Helena returns from Slovenia alone and sad.

Where is Marty?

He is chasing Smetana somewhere in Germany. Marty's life was making money. He showed the bastards that he could do it. Now he will die chasing Smetana.

Give him time, I say.

I told him not to worry about money. He has a beautiful house in Sydney. I have a house and my superannuation. We still have more money than we will ever be able to spend. Why can't he forget Smetana?

Marty used to say that every bludger gets a pension in Australia but if you manage to save a bit, you get nothing. Now he might be eligible, I say.

It isn't the money. Half of his life was taken away. He was proud of his achievements.

Did you argue?

No. We are what we always were. Friends. He rings from Germany.

Are you sorry that you went?

I am sad but not sorry. I said goodbye to the two men, who were my life, says Helena. Tom and I were always there for each other. He was a good man. I realise now that no marriage is perfect. No man is perfect. Or woman.

While Marty was in Germany I also visited David's grave. David died two month ago, says Helena. The flowers were still fresh. I placed a bunch of forget me nots in the middle of the grave where I hope his heart is. I wonder what his family will make of them if they notice them at all. I was again a young girl there kneeling on his grave.

You never had a chance to fall out of love. You will meet in heaven.

We will build a Slovenian club in some corner of heavens. Close to Jesus and Virgin Mary, laughs Helena.

Don't joke about those things.

I met David's cousin Sara in the cemetery. She must be over seventy and sees David through motherly eyes. I told her that David was my friend from school so she invited me to lunch and told me about David's misspent life.

Poor David could never sort out his life, said Sara. Women always liked him, I suppose they wanted to mother the romantic, sad man. When he finished school they sent David to work in a remote little town. He hired a room in the inn. The wife of the innkeeper came to clean his room. She was twice his age. Her husband was an alcoholic. He blamed the war for his drinking. She became David's lover. She spoiled him like mothers spoil their favourite child with sweets of all sorts.

David had his first child with Irene, his boss's wife. Irene wanted to leave her husband but David was scared of losing his job. He was a weak person. Irene left and had David's baby on her own.

David became sick. His mother sent a good village girl to look after him. He made her pregnant and married her to please his mother. He had a decent little family but he felt obliged to visit the fat innkeeper's wife from time to time. They never wanted more from each other so they never disappointed each other.

I think David was too weak to refuse any woman who wanted a bit of loving, said Sara.

Ten years into his marriage David was called into the army reserve training in Serbia, continued Sara. A Serb general invited him home. David felt so honoured by the invitation of his superior that he slept with his daughter, Ruza. Ruza became pregnant and David eventually married her. Ruza's father was transferred from Serbia to Ljubljana and he provided David with an important job in the army. David finally lived in the capital and shared a beautiful apartment with his father in law who was also his boss. Life was good for the general and his daughter's family until Slovenia became independent and the general lost his position. David lost his boss and his job.

Ruza is a fashion designer. She worked for the big fashion house before she established her own little business in the new capitalist Slovenia. She provided jobs for her father and her husband but David and her father couldn't make a go of it. David felt more and more vulnerable. His Serb father in law was no longer an important man but he still had power over David because David lived in his apartment and worked for his daughter. David became depressed and began to drink. He caught pneumonia and was hospitalised. He died alone in a nursing home.

It was always women, mostly other men's women, said Sara. I don't know why women had the need to love him but they did. Maybe they rebelled against their husbands who had affairs with their young secretaries.

Poor David, I say to Helena. Maybe all those other women said the same.

My David was only a figment of my imagination, smiles Helena.

He probably believed that if only you two were together you would be eternally happy. Maybe you would or maybe you wouldn't. You were each other's first love so you were both searching for each other.

I had a moment of heaven with David. I always believed that jealousy is a useless emotion. A person either loves you or he doesn't. It does not matter really who you sleep with.

People say that one should not dream about the past but dreaming was the reason for my living. David and I believed in who we were. I feel that nobody ever knew me like David did. I feel that the only person I know was David.

Maybe dreaming is the only lasting reality. You made each other happy that way, I say.

Maybe I wanted to rebel against my husband like all those other married women David slept with. David made me feel loved and alive, says Helena. I needed to believe that somebody loved me.

Maybe Marty and you will find what you both need.

Drinking when we are not thirsty and making love all year around, madam; that is all there is to distinguish us from other animals.

Beaumarchais.

Millennium

There is a sense of doom as Mojca and I look at half-empty club hall. The place was always full for New Year's celebrations.

People stayed home for the millennium celebration because they are scared of what will happen at midnight, says Mojca.

Maybe we are just getting too old.

Someone said that we don't stop playing because we grow old but we grow old because we stop playing.

I used to spend days preparing for New Years Eve. I miss the glamour and the festive spirit.

Marjan joins us. I am glad Marjan is a teetotaler and doesn't stand at the bar like other men who come on their own.

I hope you prayed for all of us, Mojca smiles as Rozi and Toni return from a prayer group.

You have to be prepared just in case the world ends at midnight, I smile.

Toni introduces his cousin, Stan, who is on holidays from Slovenia. We make instant friends. We come from the same nest after all.

Here is to a happy new millennium, says Stan pouring wine.

People pray for their happiness so they can abstain from it, laughs Toni.

Without a drink it is hard to remember how to be happy, says Stan looking at Rozi.

I am happy, says Rozi.

Love makes Rozi and Toni almost beautiful as they dance cheek to cheek. Tall and slim they make a handsome couple.

Helena comes late.

You look nice, I say.

What's the use getting dressed up if nobody takes any notice. Now I can afford to buy a shop full of dresses but I have no one to admire them.

Are you calling us nobody, says Stan.

Slovenians are the only people we masquerade in front of.

Let's drink to that, toasts Toni.

Nobody else knows that we are alive, says Mojca.

Most of us never made any lasting connection to Australians, says Rozi.

Now that we are retired we don't have to pretend about it anymore, says Marjan.

We are only special to each other so let us enjoy what we have, says Mojca.

Out with the old and in with the new, toasts Marjan with his orange juice. I had to throw out things because I am going to Slovenia. It's a relief to start a new life.

If you don't throw it away yourself others surely will when you are gone, says Marjan.

I had my own funeral when I burned my collection of teaching aids and qualifications. It took me over thirty years to collect them but they turned into ash in a few seconds.

I could almost hear my colleagues counting hours for me to go, so everybody could move one notch higher. Every time someone said that they won't be able to do without me, I became tempted to withdraw my resignation. They must have sensed it because they tried to be nice by saying that there will never be anyone like me. There will be somebody else, of course, says Helena.

You were very successful, says Marjan. Actually we have all done well.

We are paying compliments to each other. We deserve them. We are on the crossroads waiting for the beginning of the new millennium.

In our minds we travel back where we left bits of ourselves. We need to go home where the mountains and the seasons carry our memories and there unite with everything we once were.

I am afraid to tell anyone that Vince asked me to go to his mountain for the New Year's Eve. At the last moment he had to go away. Vince is a distant star, there is no room for him in my pocket.

To the third millennium. The second glass of wine always tastes better than the first, says Helena.

Helena is thinking of Marty and I am thinking of Vince but we both try to be happy with what company we have. Sometimes it is safer not to expect too much. Or plan.

You are getting drunk, I tease Helena.

It's all Stan's fault, she says.

We must look ridiculous to Rozi and Marjan.

We should go out to watch the righteous taken to heaven, says Marjan as we are coming closer to midnight.

The weather all over the world changed. It's a sign, says Rozi.

El Nino, says Marjan.

Call it what you like, says Rozi.

There is a phone call for Helena. She returns from the office quite changed. An aura of absolute bliss surrounds her and she squeezes my hand and whispers: He is coming back. Marty is coming home.

Great.

I hope Smetana rots in hell and Marty forgets about him.

Let's have a drink, says Helena.

Armageddon has been cancelled, says Marjan at the countdown to midnight.

Maybe postponed, says Rozi.

Whatever, says Helena.

Vince walks in at midnight. I had enough wine by now to laugh at anything. He takes me to the dance floor and I surrender into his arms without hesitation.

Everybody greets Vince.

I hoped we would go to my little mountain and catch a trout and cook it on the fire tonight, he whispers into my ear. There is nothing sweeter than the trout straight from the water and onto the fire, says Vince.

There is nothing sweeter than Vince whispering into my ear.

Can you swim there, I ask into his neck.

There is a bend in the stream where it's really deep and you can dive in.

That would be fun, I purr into Vince's ear. The euphoria of wine and the loveliness of the moment make me forget the reality. We dangle our feet in the imagined loveliness of the mountain coolness, a part of me wants to merge with the blue of the water but the rest of me holds onto the safety of the riverbank. I know the riverbank. Nobody knows how far down the force of the stream would carry me before it drops me as debris on another riverbank. How far do I want to go? Vince is holding me firmly and I can feel every fibre of his body for the first time.

Kissing at midnight is an obligation and I blame wine for kissing Vince longer and more passionately than I should. The magic moment of 2000 is here, new life is beginning, and the world hasn't ended. The lights go out, I close my eyes as Vince kisses me again. I hold on the moment. I think about the deep in the bend of the mountain creek and of us being one in the blue of the water.

I know that eventually the water flows on over the rocks, it cascades in sunny magnificence of a waterfall until it finds another bend to rest awhile.

Vince and I might have some time in the deep. Everlasting unity of two souls and bodies does not happen. I wonder about thoughts and feelings Vince hides. He did not have much wine, he has to drive and be responsible.

I had too much to drink, I make wine responsible for my behaviour.

You cooked so many meals for me. Would you let me be your chef for the start of the new millennium, smiles Vince.

We spent years in the same building but I never had a dinner date with Vince alone in his house. We met for dinner occasionally with his wife and my husband. That was in other lives.

You can help me catch up with the news, he adds before I gain enough composure to joke about the invitation.

Is it safe to eat the food prepared by a lawman? Do you know how to open a tin, I laugh.

I survived on my own for years, says Vince.

I'll see you tomorrow then, I say lightly.

Promise not to be too critical. Delighted by wine and music and kissing I would promise anything.

Vince is so dreadfully sober, he sips his wine slowly.

He sits next to me and I believe that he came to bring me a happy future. I'll be sober tomorrow and the memories of tonight will have to last.

Want to come for a drive and see the fireworks, says Vince.

I had too much wine and Vince is too sober.

Some other time, I say.

I have to go, says Vince and we kiss at the door. Where is Vince going, a little voice in me is asking but I ignore it.

There is a song coming from the corner and I join the singers.

With arms around each other we raise our voices and for a moment it is like it always was. Someone starts Preseren's national anthem that toasts the wine and Slovenian boys and girls, Slovenian history and future. We are one and it is easy to love each other.

To the new millennium, says Toni and our faces glow as we drink another toast.

Jesus made wine as his first miracle, says Toni, urging Rozi to toast with us.

Marty is coming for good, Helena says again.

Did he find Smetana?

I hope the old bastard died.

You are going to get married, I say and realise how alone I will be.

One day at the time.

At home I cry. The tears wash away the past. Out with the old and in with the new. Maybe the future is just around the corner.

I take a pill and sleep for a few hours. When I wake up the events of the evening come flooding over me.

Have you recovered, Helena rings.

I made a complete fool of myself last night.

Nobody noticed. We were all too busy making fools of ourselves.

What will people think.

You'll be lucky if anyone thinks anything. What are you doing today?

Sleeping, I say. I am afraid to tell Helena about having dinner with Vince.

Keep cheerful, casual, and calm, I tell myself as I drive to Vince's place.

The house I have been in before seems different now that I am in it alone with Vince. I never noticed how much wood there is, dark, masculine wood, much like in his office. Even the brick walls are dark.

Something sobering and cold comes over me and I try to rearrange my heart. I hope that Vince will never know how carefully I chose my underwear for the occasion. Beautiful lingerie and perfumed moisturisers make me feel a little more confident.

The love scenes were just solitary playthings. I don't want to have an affair with Vince. I don't need the anxiety of it. I keep the conversation and my eyes on the furniture. His hand under my elbow guides me through his house and I make funny comments about the curtains and the books. We come to the dining room with the

huge table covered with a white tablecloth. I wonder who ironed and starched it. There must be a woman in his life. I realise that I know nothing about Vince although I worked for him most of my life. Does one ever get to know anyone?

What are you going to drink, asks Vince.

Both of us act as strangers and search for things to say. Vince is not the same man I kissed last night. He is not the man I worked for either. I have to become familiar with this new man.

The pockets of stillness and silence need to be filled. Avoid the eyes, keep the distance, don't let him know about the carefully chosen lingerie sprinkled with subtle French perfume.

Whatever you are having, I say.

Ice? He asks as he mixes a cocktail.

O. K. You keep your house so orderly, I look around to avoid his face.

I haven't been home much, he says.

Where were you, I inquire casually.

On a case in Perth. I stopped in Melbourne on the way to spend a day with my daughter for her baby's Christening.

Vince was a father and grandfather in Melbourne. Maybe he was a lover in Perth. I know nothing about him.

I have to become familiar with his austere furnishings before I can feel warm towards my chef. There are so many barriers to closeness and I hold onto them.

It smells nice, I point to the kitchen. We are both dreadfully sober.

It's only my fifteen-minute recipe, Vince minimises the importance of his cooking.

He has been my guest in that other life when we were both married. I wonder how simple his recipe really is. I will have to cook for him one day and choose the recipe that will say who I am and what I want him to like in me. Something as natural and simple as my new hairstyle which I was arranging for hours.

I had highlights put into my hair in the hope that Vince and I will go to the mountain. I wanted my hair to shine in the sun. The hairdresser created a natural look with a wispy fringe and added body from a tube. I used to pin my hair firmly back while I was working for Vince but now I want to look natural. Looking natural is a lot of work.

I like the colour of your tracks, says Vince.

I am glad he feels that the most expensive exclusive golden mauve pant-suit is as casual as tracks one wears for gardening or mountain climbing. I don't tell him that I bought the tracks to go to his mountain.

It feels nice, he runs the back of his hand over the sleeve of the softest piece of material I could find in Sydney. I am glad he likes the part of me that chose the material he caresses.

It doesn't need ironing, I dismiss the importance of the garment I spent days to find in an Italian boutique.

Does Vince wonder how I happen to look so wonderfully natural. Does my skin look as good as it feels from inside. How does he feel inside the body that seems so uncomplicated?

Can he see my fine lines without glasses?

I knew all along that I would not sleep with Vince on our first date. I don't want to have an affair at all but why did I choose my underwear so carefully? The black lingerie is caressing my body. The push up bra is perhaps a little too pushy. The lacy pants flatten my stomach. What hides under my casual tracks says that I am in control.

I smile at thoughts that sneak into my consciousness. It would probably be nice having sex but we need more from each other. Maybe we haven't got what we need. I am essentially what I am within my skin and he has no idea what is hiding there. My skin wants to open up to him and know him as he is inside. I only know myself from inside and I only know Vince from inside of me and not how he is inside of himself. Maybe to him I am not as I see myself. There is no way of knowing each other without merging into one. Does anyone ever painlessly becomes one with another?

The command to love each other is easier to obey when one becomes a part of another. I don't know what Vince wants. We kissed and our bodies responded but we know each other well enough to know how hard it is to surrender.

My suit moves with my body, it has no shape of its own. I searched the city to find something that was willing to surrender and be me.

Want to see the garden.

The summer sun is setting with red flames over the horizon.

Typical men's garden, I observe.

What do you mean?

No flowers, no vegies.

I have a herb garden, fruit trees, and bushes. There is a patch of lawn.

Slovenians were born with one finger in the soil.

Growing things is like shooting roots into the land, Vince is as serious as I am and that helps to keep the distance.

We return to the dining room as formal as always.

Here is to us, he raises his glass and we look at each other for a moment. There is a spark. Gazing into his eyes would betray our friendship. We need our friendship.

What did you do on the first day of the new millennium? Asks Vince. I am glad that the moment passed.

I tried to forget what a fool I made of myself on the New Year's Eve, I laugh. What did you do?

I slept most of the day. Too much wine, says Vince.

I don't tell Vince how I cried after our New Year's celebrations. Crying cleaned the residue of the past. The solitary tears were warm and welcome. I was ready to start a new life.

I haven't really cried for my husband or my mum or my dad. Now I cried for my daughter Tina and my grandson Toni because I missed them and I wanted to be with them. I also cried for a man that would love me.

I owe you a meal now, I try to repay Vince for the hope we shared. I keep my invitation light. I resist the urge to invite him for breakfast tomorrow.

I will give you a ring to see when it suits you.

I will hold you to it, says Vince. I was afraid that he will say that I don't have to repay his hospitality. We must have time to think how far we want to go.

Around the bend are steep rocks and swimming is not possible. We can only hold on the deep until the force of the stream will sweep us over. The water is too fast for the moss to grow.

Coffee, Vince turns to the stove.

Sounds great, I say. The freshness of the aroma is exciting. I know that I should not drink coffee at this time of the night but I am not going to sleep anyway. I want everything Vince is offering.

Have some Bailey with it, asks Vince. I love the dash of Bailey Irish coffee in my instant coffee but not in the real coffee and not tonight.

Just sweet and black please, I say. It would be a shame to spoil this perfect aroma.

We are careful not to spoil anything.

I have to go, I promise after coffee.

So soon, says Vince. Maybe he is relieved.

The cat will scratch the walls, I search for a reason to return into the emptiness of my existence.

Thanks for coming, he says.

Thanks for a lovely evening, I say.

You made it lovely, he smiles. We kiss goodbye, just a friendly kiss before I rush to my car without looking back.

We will know soon enough if we want to go to that mountain and dive in the deep.

You can see every pebble on the bottom of the deep, said Vince ages ago.

What will you do now that you have retired, asks Helena as we meet a few weeks into the new millennium.

I thought you retire to do nothing, I laugh.

Do you still see Vince? Asks Helena.

He calls when he needs me to do some work for him, I dismiss the invitation to confess.

He is a handsome man. Would be fun to tame him, smiles Helena.

When you get to know him, he is very tame and ordinary. He is a hard working man, I tell.

You two were pretty friendly for New Year's Eve.

I am friendly with anybody after a few glasses of wine, I defend my behaviour.

I hoped you two will become an item, says Helena.

We have known each other forever and we are just friends. I can't imagine changing the terms of our friendship, I laugh at my description.

I saw him having dinner with an elegant young blond. Must have been his daughter, says Helena.

When, I ask before I could stop myself.

Marty and I went to a little Italian place and there he was. She looked like his daughter.

It probably was, I say again composed and casual.

Vince is an attractive man, says Helena.

I don't know much about his private life, I say casually.

He likes Slovenian company, says Helena.

When one gets old one wants to be what one started out to be. He had a very stressful life studying and working. He regrets that he never had time for the family.

I think he likes you, says Helena.

We were always good friends.

There is no need for regrets. Vince and I never promised each other anything. We never declared love or made love. The fear of losing Vince would be too much for me. You can't lose what you never had.

Mojca moved to Lightning Ridge. Rozi and Toni will marry. Helena and Marty are always together. Marjan went to Slovenia. I can't blame them for making a life for themselves but my home and heart are empty.

Vince asked me to dinner again but I said that I was busy packing to go to Lightning Ridge.

I drive the endless road into the flat centre of Australia to be with my grandson and my daughter.

Thank God that nobody knows how I long to be with Vince.

Your feet take you where your heart is.

The magic of opal fields.

I was named Tina after my grandmother. Nan paid for me to go to Lightning Ridge after I finished high school and have been accepted to Teachers College.

Tina, darling, said Nan, find out what the rest of the world is doing. Don't grow old and sorry for not doing the things you could have done.

I have no idea why Nan likes me better than her other grandchildren but I know that she does. Maybe she wants me to live her life for her.

Since my grandfather died my grandmother became a new person. She sold her big house and moved into the granny flat next to our home. Nan confessed that she has taken up ballroom dancing. I always wanted to wear beautiful dancing outfits, said Nan with a spark in her eyes.

Mum demands to know where Nan goes, she is Nan's oldest daughter and gradually she became Nan's mother for all practical purposes.

So here I am in Lightning Ridge with the bus load of tourists for the Easter weekend. Two of my girl friends came with me.

Lightning Ridge Bowling club is a meeting place for all the misplaced adventurers, the bus driver tells us. You'll meet interesting people.

We meet Anthony. He is incredibly handsome and both my girlfriends and I fall for him on the spot. Tall, dark, Italian man, his eyes shine, his gleaming teeth show in an incredibly attractive smile. He moves like a dancer.

He is adorable.

He's got the nicest butt I've ever seen, says my girlfriend.

We flirt with Anthony and our girlish laughter attracts other young men to our table. Anthony suggests that we come on a sightseeing tour next morning. He takes us around the opal fields and shows us his mine and his camp and his cutting gear. We are fascinated by the primitive bush existence.

In the evening we drink our first beers under the gum trees while Anthony barbecues steaks for us. Other miners join us and tell amazing stories about the opal they found and the fun they had finding it.

Bill must be close to sixty and he still goes up and down the ladder every morning, explains Anthony.

We escaped from real life, says Anthony's partner Jim. Jim has a crop of curly red hair and eyes so green that they dazzle you.

What real life, says Bill. Are computers real life?

In the city you watch TV and you think like TV and talk like TV. You begin repeating the opinions of the journalists who repeat the opinions of the politicians who repeat the directions given to them by their party leaders paid by the multinationals who are building their global markets.

We can think for ourselves, I protest.

Of course you can. You can cook as well but it is cheaper to buy ready cooked food. They teach you that it is more sensible to do nothing.

I can cook, I say. Mum made sure of that.

Of course you know how to cook but will you cook? Will your children know how to?

Most miners here are on social security and pretend that they are self sufficient, laughs Jim.

I have never been on social security, I would not put my name on their computer, says Bill. Nobody knows that I am alive.

Anthony and Jim are in their twenties. Jim lives in a caravan right next to Anthony's camp. He tied a large piece of canvass to a tree and he lives under this annexe most of the time.

Ridge is a place where you can become nobody, says Bill.

Who would want to be nobody, says my girlfriend.

The time will come when you will want to escape the merry go around, says Bill.

I suppose when you get old, says my friend.

Age has nothing to do with it. I came here as a twenty years old to do whatever I fancied, when I fancied it and however I liked to do it. Nobody is watching you here. You can call yourself Red or Blue or Charlie or Mary.

You live outside the calendar and business hours and identity papers.

Anthony chiselled the white sandstone into brick like blocks and made four walls on the slab of cement. He covered them with corrugated iron and moved in.

I don't need doors and windows. I have nothing worth stealing. When I get on opal I will put the locks on, laughs Anthony. I sleep outside under the mosquito net anyway.

People from the big smog would pay for all the fresh air we enjoy, says Bill.

Somewhere between the sunrise and sundown you work like mad to find a bit of colour. The rest of the time you spend as you like and anyway you like to spend your time is fine, says Jim. There is always hope that opal will be in the next load.

When you join the system you put yourself in line for promotion and then you wait for promotion and pay rise. You are constantly afraid that you will fail because you may not be good enough. When there is no more chance for promotion, you slip away and die, says Bill.

Bill lives in a tin shed near the dam about hundred metres from here, explains Anthony.

Here you believe anything you like and live in anything you like, says old Bill. Perhaps he wants to explain that he lives in a dusty hot tin shed because he chooses to.

I could never get used to this, says my girlfriend.

In Lightning Ridge you are either high with excitement tired from digging. You don't need drugs or plastic cards, says Bill.

If you pay cash you don't have to explain where you come from or where you are heading. Think about that. Opal miners are the only people moving incognito. You only stay on the opal fields if you value your freedom highly enough. No sane person would stay in the dust and heat if freedom wasn't their highest priority.

I am surprised that taxation allows cash industry, says my friend.

The government is happy that mining keeps the men out of mischief. They know that we are a rare breed still willing to break our backs for less money than the social security offers you for watching videos. They allow us to sell opal for cash, because they have it on computers how much opal is sold. They know that this amount could not keep ten thousand people either in prison or in a mental hospital.

People say that opal miners want to get rich fast, says my friend.

Getting rich is only a dream. Miners know how unrealistic this dream is but you have to have a dream to survive.

As long as you have hope, you are rich, says Jim.

Here you live in an unspoiled future. It does not matter what mistakes and wrongs were in the past because the past is gone and finished with. The only important time is the time ahead and only in the future can we achieve anything remotely like perfection. To dream about the future is the only happiness, says Bill.

You are telling fairy tales, laughs my girlfriend.

Fairy tales promise that sometime in the future the prince charming will kiss you and you will live happily ever after. It is only a dream. Like opals, says Bill.

Fairy tales make you believe that there is actually someone who will make you happy. Nobody makes you happy. You are happy or you are not.

The boys want to impress us and we are totally impressionable after a stubby of beer. Our eighteen years old innocence is making it possible for us to fall in love with anything. We are in love with life, our future seems promising and the excitement of being a grown up is totally intoxicating.

I will never forget the magic of this sunset. The sky is unbelievable. The deep purple changes into green and red and pink as the sun is setting. You can see pictures of anything you want to imagine in the sky. It is easy for us, eighteen years old girls, to imagine.

When you are in love you see the colours around you and remember them forever.

Jim brings out an old guitar and begins strumming popular tunes. We end up singing old Abba songs that have been out of fashion for years in the city, but these romantic tunes vibrate anew with the night and the company.

Anthony holds my hand in the privacy of darkness.

We are leaving a few days later and Anthony gives me an opal ring. We kiss passionately.

I return to Lightning Ridge a month later. Mum and dad are horrified, they threaten to disown me and they tell me never to return if I go. They even call the police but they can do nothing about it. I am old enough and free to do as I like.

I am eighteen and in love for the first time. This love is the greatest thing that ever happened to me and no reasoning enters into it. I could climb Rocky Mountains barefoot.

I help Anthony finish building the camp.

My hands become rough, my fingernails are dirty, my hair is straggly, and my clothes are impregnated with clay dust. My eyes shine.

Anthony is always surrounded with friends. They bring him opal to cut and they talk opal and mining as they drink in the shade of the gum trees. I serve their drinks and food like I saw mum serve anybody coming to our home.

After six months I become sick of the dirt and grime and poverty. There is nothing for me at the Ridge. I need my parents and my friends and the buzz of the city. For Christmas I move back to Sydney.

I want to go to uni and finish my degree. Maybe I will do teaching. Maybe I will come back, I tell Anthony.

You'll do as your heart tells you, says Anthony. We kiss good bye.

Anthony isn't ambitious, he isn't going anywhere. He likes the lifestyle and the bush but that isn't enough for me. It isn't enough for my parents either.

Back in Sydney we celebrate the New Year's eve in the Slovenian club. Everybody is kissing for the New Year. I dance with Mark. Mark's mum Mojca is mum's friend. They look at us approvingly as we dance cheek to cheek.

At midnight Mark and I walk out and kiss under the decorated Christmas tree.

On the New Year's day I have my first morning sickness. I try to fool myself that it is just a hangover but I know that I am pregnant. The knowledge comes from within. I miss Anthony and I want to tell him that we are going to have a baby. I want my child to have a father.

I return to Lightning Ridge and marry Anthony in the Lyons Park. Mum and dad refuse to come and witness my vows to the man who ruined my life.

Jim is Anthony's best man and Marilyn is my witness. I met Marilyn in the courthouse, where she works as a clerk. I inquired about the marriage licence and we became instant friends. When you are alone and new in a place it is easy to attach yourself instantly like that.

In March I go down the shaft to surprise Anthony. I slip on the ladder and fall down about two metres. I don't worry about it but next day I lose our baby. Anthony and I comfort each other. There will be another baby. We settle down and I learn to cut opal while Anthony mines.

I am too ashamed to run back home. I am married.

Mark arrives in April for the Easter weekend.

I wanted to see the famous goat races you told me about, says Mark. Mark became a blurred memory but I am happy to see him again. I am sad and vulnerable after the loss of the baby and Mark seems to be there whenever I need a sympathetic friend.

I am happy that Mark decides to stay. Anthony and Mark do some crazy things together and often forget that I exist. Anthony spends more time with Mark than with me. He is teaching Mark to cut opal. They peg and register claims together.

Mark buys a big house on the main street of Lightning Ridge. It is almost covered by a jungle of old grapevines, which he carefully prunes and cultivates. It produces a bumper crop of delicious grapes. Mark and Anthony decide to make wine. Anthony makes a winepress.

If the grape vines produced as well in Slovenia I bet my father would never have come to Australia. His family had a winery, explains Mark. It will keep in the mine best, because the temperature is even underground.

We could lower the drum into the shaft near my camp, says Anthony.

You will come to visit regularly then, I smile at Mark.

There will always be an excuse to come over, Mark winks at me.

Mark and I communicate at some level nobody knows about. This intimacy is welcome and disturbing. Mark is a link to my other life in Sydney. We are just friends, of course, but he is the reminder that there is life outside Lightning Ridge. I haven't been anywhere for over a year and I am becoming restless for that other life.

In Sydney my family's friends are also Mark's family friends. Migrants are like that, they meet at funerals and weddings and protest marches.

The three of us were born in Australia to parents who came from places only a few kilometres apart. We grew up with our parents' nostalgia for Europe and the good old days they escaped from, I joke.

Italians and Austrians and Slovenian are Catholic and as good Catholics they interbred through centuries, says Anthony.

I don't really care where we come from. We are Australians, I say.

A couple of Italians from Sydney are coming for Easter. I bought a pig and you can help with the spit, says Anthony.

I wish you would get a phone connected so we could arrange things, says Mark.

If I put the phone on, people will stop coming to see me. Anthony shuns modern conveniences.

But you are never home, says Mark.

But when I am home there is always someone coming.

Sometimes we have no rain for a year and then for Easter it rains every year, says Bill as he comes to say hello to our visitors Gino and Mario.

Mark and Anthony prepare wood for the fire.

After breakfast men taste the new home made wine.

It takes a bit of getting used to, but it has great bouquet, says Gino after his second glass.

It's a strong, real wine, says Mario.

Come I'll show you the traces, says Anthony and the visitors follow him underground.

I seem surrounded with men who barely notice me. They come to get drinks and food and to be told where the towels and the socks and the glasses are. I miss the

intimacy Anthony and I used to have. Mark and I flirt in an unintentional, obscure way that makes me even less contented.

I am homesick. I want to escape. I remember my family, our traditional Easter breakfasts, our going to church and our remembering. I want to be part of all the traditions mum so carefully preserved. Everything in our home was as it should be, the right crockery the right table cloth and the right dress and the right food for the occasion. Propriety was the most important thing in mum's life.

Mark sits in the shade of a gum tree turning the spit. I prepare the salads and the tables.

You miss your family, Bill senses my unhappiness.

I hide my tears.

I remember mum and dad. I know they are thinking of me.

It takes time to accept solitude but it can be a great substitute for people. You realise how big you are when you become a part of everything, says Bill.

I feel small, I say holding back tears.

You have to disappear into smallness before you become a part of greatness, smiles Bill.

They must be finding opal, calls Mark.

Wine more likely.

The pig is ready, Mark calls down the shaft.

Be right up, yells Anthony.

We can't wait, calls Mark.

Come down for a minute, calls Gino.

I'll be right back, says Mark going down the shaft.

Bill follows.

To Lightning Ridge, toasts Anthony.

To Mark and Anthony, our winery experts, toasts Bill pouring a second glass for Mark.

Viticulture, man, says Anthony.

It's too strong for me. I have to eat first. I am out, says Mark.

Let me go first, says Mario. He tries to lift himself up the ladder.

What's wrong with you, says Gino. Let me. His hands don't hold him and he settles back on the opal dirt roaring with laughter.

You are drunk, you bastards. How much did you have? Says Mark.

I only had two glasses, insists Mario.

Yeah, right, the first and the last, laughs Mark. Go up in front of me and I'll help you.

I don't think I can make it to the ladder, says Mario.

What's the matter with you, you don't look drunk, you can't get drunk on a couple of glasses.

Of course not, says Anthony as he lays next to Gino.

If you don't get up the flies will eat the spit, I call down the shaft but there is only laughter coming back.

Throw down some rugs and pillows, the bastards are drunk, answers Mark.

Where is the opal, you promised to show them, asks Mark but Anthony is fast asleep next to Jim, Mario and Gino.

I drop old blankets in the mine and Mark and Bill put them under the men. The damp dirt is dangerous for your joints.

Bill and Mark help me pack the food in the small kerosene fridge before they go home. I try to forget about the stupid drunks and go to sleep.

I feel painfully alone. Fay, a pregnant Aboriginal girl is staying with Jim next door, but she is too shy to come out and join the party. I wish I had someone to share my misery with.

Fay never shows any emotion. She doesn't even come out of the caravan to see what the men are doing. I call her for a drink but she doesn't want to drink. I sit with her and she offers me a smoke. I have my first cigarette. I feel silly trying to make friends with this native girl. Fay wouldn't understand how I feel but she is all I have. At this moment I would tell a cat how I feel.

I want to go home, I want to start again, I want to go out and have fun with my school friends. I want to forget that I have ever been to Lightning Ridge.

I cry myself to sleep for the first time.

The men come up after midnight. The next day we eat the cold pork and they laugh about their attempts to get up the ladder.

At least you don't have to cook lunch, says Anthony.

I am only there to cook and serve and listen to their crude yarns. My resentment grows like Mark's grapevines.

Where are you mining now, asks Mario.

Here and there, says Jim. I found some traces where we pegged at Three mile.

Any colour?

Some.

What about you, Mario turns to Mark.

Mark is on opal, big time, explains Anthony.

The road is bad to Coocrain after the rain. I might start next to Anthony on Three mile, says Mark.

Mark is lucky wherever he starts. Luckily his claim on Three mile is next to mine. We pegged together, says Jim.

You might all be on millions, then, says Gino.

Jim and I have three claims next to Mark, says Anthony.

You can't miss, then, says Gino.

There will be plenty for all of us, says Anthony.

Don't count your chickens before they start to lay eggs, I warn.

Don't count on your milk until it is spilt, corrects Anthony.

Watch your milk if you are going to buy chickens for it, Mark tries to put the old fable right.

You can't buy yourself ribbons before the eggs are hatched. You sell the eggs first, says Anthony.

One thing at the time, says Bill. This long story teaches you to be patient. You put a pail of milk on your head to take it to the market. On your way you dream about selling the milk to buy some eggs to hatch some chickens, to sell the chickens and buy a ribbon for your hair. With a ribbon in your hair you toss your head up at others who are less pretty.

And spill the milk.

There come other versions of Aesop's maid and the milk-pail fable.

The moral is not to toss your head prematurely, concludes Mark. You have to buy a hen first and the hen lays eggs, you sell the eggs and then you buy a ribbon.

You only toss your head when the ribbon is firmly in your hair, says Bill.

The girl tossed her head before she reached the market and then she cried over the spilled milk, Gino sums it up.

You will toss your heads when you become millionaires, warns Mario.

Never, laughs Anthony.

It's sad how money changes people, says Bill. Only it does every time.

Tina doesn't believe in opal, says Anthony. He knows that I am upset and he tries to include me in the conversation. His arm is over my chair and his eyes are begging to be forgiven. I love Anthony.

Money would never change my Anthony. He is not greedy, he gives it away, I make my best attempt to be happy.

Tina wouldn't be here if she didn't believe in opal, says Jim.

She believes in me, says Anthony.

I'll get some coffee, I say.

I love Anthony, I keep convincing myself but first doubts appear. I don't believe in the way we live. There is nothing for me in it.

The aroma of freshly ground coffee beans fills the air. The bubbles on the surface tremble as I place the cups on the table.

You know how I like the smell of coffee, says Mark.

Have a nip of whisky with it, suggests Anthony.

No, I am right with coffee.

Mark bought the best place in town right next to the post office, Anthony tells our visitors. I think he is boasting about his rich friend.

I am buying opal and it is easier for miners to find me, explains Mark.

It is safer as well so close to the police station, says Jim.

Camp life is not good enough for the likes of Mark, smiles Anthony. It is obvious that Anthony and Mark like each other.

I wouldn't mind to live in a romantic hideaway like yours, says Mark.

When Mark first came to the Ridge Anthony let him cut mug stones on our machines but Mark soon started cutting on his own.

I did a lapidary course in Sydney but I really knew nothing about cutting until Anthony showed me, Mark readily admits.

Mark is lucky like that, whatever he touches turns out well. He started mining with Jim and Anthony but they never found anything much. Mark then found a new field. Everybody knows that Mark struck it rich at Coocrain. All the miners tried to peg around him.

Deep Three-mile is a known field but it is mostly worked out. Anthony and Jim have claims at the edge of the field where others found a lot of opal in the open cut. Jim began to build his new camp near the old open cut after they found promising traces underground.

After the Easter rain the mud roads to Coocrain close. Mark drills next to Anthony's claim at Three-Mile field.

Only until the road to Coocrain dries up, says Mark. I have to wait for the grader.

The drill brings up colour, red on black. The word spreads through town like wild fire. Everybody looks for the free ground around Mark.

Anthony and Jim mine next to Mark but they find only purple and blue-green traces.

It's only a matter of time. We have three claims all around Mark, we can't miss, says Jim.

They pay the drilling rig to drill new shafts and it brings out promising traces, but the red on black is not among them. Jim and Anthony work every day, they buy the agitator to wash their dirt, they find crumbs of red and green in the dirt but the good stone eludes them.

In their spare time Anthony helps Jim build his camp. Fay is going to have a baby and it would be hard for her in a little aluminium caravan.

The memory of my lost baby haunts me.

I envy Fay. It is obvious how much Jim loves this native girl. And they are going to have a baby.

Everybody is talking about the opal Mark finds at Three mile. Miners ask Jim or Anthony if they would consider selling their claims but they don't.

There must be opal in one of our claims. We are all around Mark's claim. We couldn't be so unlucky, says Anthony.

It looks promising, is all Mark says.

Jim and Anthony spend most of their savings on drilling but so far they are barely covering expenses.

We shouldn't have followed Mark, says Jim.

We didn't follow Mark, he followed us, says Anthony.

How can Mark be so lucky. Some miners tried all their lives, there are those who worked on and off for years and didn't make it.

Mark is lucky with anything he touches, says Jim as they rub the bits of dirt from the potch they found.

Everybody talks about Mark and his luck, says Anthony when we are alone.

He takes risks, I say.

You can pick and choose if you have money, says Anthony.

Money and Mark are creeping between Anthony and I. We try to ignore both and remain optimistic but I know that Mark's millions are on both our minds.

I have to cut for miners to get the money for mining, says Anthony.

It's not Mark's fault if he is lucky, I side with Mark.

I bet he found millions right next to our claim, says Anthony.

Our turn will come, I say.

Money brings luck.

Mark wasn't always rich. His father had a little green grocer shop where Mark started his first job.

In Sydney people still remember Mark as his father's delivery boy, I tell Anthony. When his father died a big company wanted to build a hotel where his shop and home were. Mark sold the lot for a couple of millions, which he invested.

What about his mother? Asks Anthony.

Mark's mum, Mojca, is well provided for. She is a bit snobbish. His dad was hard working but his mum was always the boss, I tell.

Mark turned after his mother then, says Anthony. I realise that Anthony doesn't like Mark any more.

Mark became interested in lapidary after he sold the shop.

When you don't have to worry where your next dollar will come from you can afford to have a hobby, says Anthony.

His father left the little country cottage and the farm next to Cooma to Mark's sister, I tell.

How much did she get for it?

Her husband planted a vineyard and an orchard. They have a winery and wine tasting. Tourists come and pick their own grapes. They also have a restaurant. It became a major tourist attraction near Canberra. I suppose wine growing really is in their blood.

Money speaks all languages, says Anthony.

Bob Dylan once said that money doesn't talk, it swears, I try to dismiss the issue.

It changes people.

Money never changed Mark, I say. Why do I defend Mark? Is Anthony jealous of Mark's luck or of his friendship with me? Maybe he is afraid that we are all attracted to Mark's luck.

Of course, Anthony is not like that, he never has an ulterior motive, I remind myself. What you see is what you get. He is an adorable, kind man. He is easygoing and not worried about money. He has never been ambitious and he says that he has everything he wants.

But is anybody really like that? Can anybody not be jealous and insecure? How well do I know Anthony? He is my husband, I should know him. Yet I know nothing about him or his family.

Sometimes Anthony's cheerful helpfulness gets slightly on my nerves. Why can't he look after our interests first like everybody else. Like Mark.

Maybe Anthony thinks that I am attracted to Mark's money, maybe everybody is attracted to money. Everybody pegs around someone who is on money to be close to the person who is a success. No hoppers bring you bad luck.

Maybe nobody can help being jealous.

Money does not buy happiness, I hug Anthony. Everybody likes Anthony. He helps out and he shares his home with those that have no home. People confide in Anthony, they ask his advice and they ask for his money and for the credit with opal cutting.

Why don't they ask Mark for a loan or for help? They are grateful that Mark talks to them. It's an honour to be friends with someone who makes things happen, who is a winner. Money makes people respectable and people like to be with respectable people.

I try to remember why I love Anthony.

Maybe I fell in love with Anthony because he gave me a beautiful opal ring and he did not even know if he will ever see me again. We only kissed a couple of times and parted like friends.

To bring you luck, he said as he saw me off. His dark eyes ignited fire in me. We knew there at the bus stop that we would share much of our life although we never made any promises.

I had the ring valued and was shocked when the certificate stated that it is worth \$8000. I never admitted it to anyone that I had the ring valued. Maybe I am ashamed of checking out on Anthony's gift.

Anthony and Jim are among the first miners that have a mobile phone. It is cheaper than the connection to the camp.

Mark often comes with us to the club for a drink.

Tina and I are with Mark in the Bowling club, says Anthony into a mobile.

Where is Jim mining, asks Mark.

Three mile. Next to you, says Anthony.

I am thinking about open cutting my claim, says Mark. It is faster than working underground.

You can afford it, says Anthony.

Any luck yet in your claim, asks Mark.

We had a couple of stones but nothing to crow about, says Anthony.

The ratters use mobiles, Russ calls from across the bar.

What do you mean? asks Mark.

Russ comes around and leans on Mark's chair. He lowers his voice into a conspiring whisper.

Miro has one of those to warn his ratting partners. There are four of them. One sits on top of the mine while the two ratters dig out other people's opal. One partner is in town keeping watch on the owner of the claim and reports his movements.

You mean this is going on and everybody knows about it, says Mark. Why not go to the police?

There is no proper legislation covering ratters. They are cunning bastards. You need evidence. You can never prove what was taken from a claim. The ratters so far got only fines for trespassing, says Russ. Miro got two hundred dollars fine but I heard

that he stole a couple of hundred thousand worth of opal. Someone put a stick of gelignite into his bed. All the windows were blown out with the explosion.

Was Miro injured, says Mark.

Miro was out ratting when it happened. Maybe next time, says Russ. I hate the bloody thieves. They are openly boasting about ratting.

Miners should do something about it, says Mark.

Who are you spying for, laughs Russ menacingly looking at Anthony's mobile.

You are sick. Everybody has one of these now, says Anthony.

So everybody is ratting, laughs Russ.

You think that opal is just waiting to be picked? Russ and Anthony are becoming aggressive. I don't know why they hate each other but one could cut the tension with a knife.

Some people are lucky like that, they know who is on opal and they go into his claim and dig it out, snarls Russ.

Is Russ making an accusation? Is he warning Mark? Why is he concerned about Mark? Everybody wants to be close to Mark since he found opal. They elected him as a committee man in the Mining Association. Mark knows the mining Registrar. People come to Mark for advice on mining.

I feel an invisible barrier come between us.

I hope you can trust your partner to rat for you, laughs Russ. Everybody for himself. If he is there on his own, you never know what he is up to.

I trust my partner, but nobody trusts you, snarls Anthony.

You don't have to trust me. I am not ratting for you, laughs Russ with an evil twinkle in his eyes.

You are jealous, you bastard, why don't you say that you have it in for Jim because Jim has your girl. Fay escaped from you, you bastard. Everybody knows that you are impotent and sterile, spits Anthony.

Watch your tongue, boy, or you might lose it. Anybody can have that black cunt, I can have her any day I want to, laughs Russ.

Try it, says Anthony.

I don't have to, I know what the slut needs, says Russ with a snarl that looks as ugly as it is evil.

You just keep away, warns Anthony.

And what will you do if I don't? laughs Russ.

You trust Jim, Mark turns to Anthony.

Once a thief always a thief, says Russ.

Watch who are you calling a thief? Anthony gets up. I am becoming uncomfortable.

Mark is getting drinks to bring back the mood of friendliness.

When did you get the mobile? asks Mark.

I hope Mark does not suspect Anthony? Anthony would never steal. He found some nice stones lately himself. Or did he? A tiny voice in me says, that he may have been ratting. How well do I know Anthony?

Why?

Oh, I might get one myself, says Mark.

Technology will get us all, says Russ. Ratters will always be one step ahead of us honest miners.

You wouldn't know what honest is, says Anthony.

Technology is the gun in the hands of the crooks, says Russ.

Depends on what you do with it, says Mark.

The bastard is looking for trouble. Let's move to the table, says Anthony.

Can you reach all the fields with the mobile?

Only about twenty kilometres around town for now.

So it would be no good for Coocrain or Glengarry?

Not from the town. Not clear enough anyway. They are working on it.

Good enough to send a message. You are not likely to chat on it with everyone listening in, says Russ.

He is a rotten bastard, says Anthony as we move to the corner of the club.

Russ has his ears to the ground. I'd like to get the rotten ratting bastards myself, says Mark.

Russ has his ear to the ground for an easy dollar. He is trouble, says Anthony.

What has he done to you, Mark wants to know.

He is picking on Jim because of Fay.

What about Fay?

She lived with Russ and ran away from him, I think. He bashed her and Aborigines chased him away. His surname is Dunn. He was running away like a bunny. The story goes that someone yelled after him Bunny Dunny. The new nick name stuck. Apparently Russ is paranoid about it. Fay came to Jim for help. She stopped with him.

Russ offered to open cut my Three-mile claim, says Mark.

I wouldn't want anything to do with the bastard, says Anthony.

He only wants thirty percent. He will do all the processing.

He knows what he wants, says Anthony. He is into everything. Russ has people doing farm work and mining and roadwork, open cutting and restoration of the mines. Miners work for Russ when they don't find opal to pay for the fuel and repairs of the machinery. Nobody likes to work for Russ but he provides work and it is better to earn a smaller wage right where you are than going away to find accommodation and work.

Russ follows us to the table. He is smiling now and slaps Anthony on the shoulder: No hard feelings, ah.

Anthony does not respond, there is not much he can do.

Russ tells a story about the tourist he found in his open cut. We all pretend that we are just having a friendly yarn.

I saw a car parked on top of the cut and the tourist digging in the cut, Russ begins his story.

I started to empty the tourist's car. Hey you up there, yelled the tourist from the open cut.

I kept on throwing out his belongings as he came up.

What do you think you are doing, he said

Same thing you are doing, I said.

Why are you looking through my belongings, asks the tourist.

Why are you looking through my mine?

But that's my car.

That's my open cut.

I didn't see the sign, says the tourist.

Fair enough, I didn't see one either, I say.

I am going to call the police, says the tourist.

You'll save me the trouble.

Put my staff back in the car, you bastard, the tourist runs up towards me threateningly. I grab him for the collar, turn him around and kick him in the backside. The man rolls down into the open cut head over heels.

Next time I'll run a bulldozer over you, I tell him. The tourist stutters that he found no opal. He empties his pockets, takes off all his clothes to be checked out. He stands there in his pants terrified.

Never try anything like that again, I say. He trembles all over as he drives away. I bet he'll think twice before he goes on the field again. I won't let any bastard get away with it. They won't even try while I am around.

Russ is telling the story to Mark. He turns his back on Anthony and I, like we don't exist. Maybe Russ tries to impress Mark, maybe he wants to make sure that nothing happens to Mark because everybody knows that Mark is on money. I know that Russ is not Anthony's friend. The tension scares me. The story sounds as a warning to us not to mess with Russ.

Russ wants to get to Mark so he has discredit us. Mark is getting millions. Everybody wants to be close to Mark, says Anthony as we return home.

Every man wants to stand next to the rich man, I remember bill's words.

Trinity said that two things get to the man's heart: gold and bullet, Anthony quotes the line from the film. Anthony is a fan of spaghetti Westerners.

Ratters

I don't trust the shifty bastards, says Russ to Mark when they are alone.

Why are you telling me this?

I hate the crooks, says Russ. We should be allowed to shoot the rats.

Mark didn't tell anybody about the ratters who dug in his claim.

What are you saying, asks Mark.

I know nothing, I told you nothing, says Russ mysteriously. But watch out for Jim and Anthony.

Russ must have seen Anthony or Jim or both going down my claim, thinks Mark. Russ has been on the field for years. He knows what is going on.

Anthony and Jim are friends, says Mark.

There are no friends where money is concerned, says Russ.

We spend most of our free time together, says Mark.

So they know at all times where you are, laughs Russ.

The suspicion casts a strange coolness on Mark. He remembers the words of his mother: Friendship is like a flower, once trampled on, it never recovers completely.

Mark goes to Anthony's place determined to find the answers. Everybody feels awkward since that time in the club.

Maybe it's all in my mind, maybe I am the only one that feels awkward because I don't trust them anymore, thinks Mark.

Anthony wants to ask what he can do for Mark but he feels that there is something very wrong. Anthony always knows because he senses a change in the mood more than other people. Anthony seems to know what people think.

Pieces have this intuitive ability, says Anthony. He read that in a book and people told him often enough that it is impossible to fool him. Anthony spots a fake a mile away.

Not working today? asks Mark.

Jim took off somewhere so we are having a late start. I have to see the wrecker just now to get a part for the ute.

What is Jim driving? Asks Mark.

His ute.

I saw his ute parked in front of his caravan.

Must have gone with someone. If you'll excuse me, says Anthony. You stay and finish your coffee. I won't be long.

Mark brushes past Tina on his way to the window. The scent of her body envelopes him. They like each other. Tina is the reason Mark came to the Ridge. They look across the table at each other. The unspoken question is written in their eyes: What do we mean to each other?

It would be so right and so easy. But it wouldn't be fair and it would complicate things. They never said a word about that New Year's eve since Mark returned.

Mark has ratters on his mind. Ever since he found opal on Three mile, someone is digging it out at night. Mark was going to tell Anthony about it but since Russ warned him, he changed his mind. Maybe Anthony and Jim mined in his claim. The suspicion made him angry and sad. Mark liked Anthony, they became good friends. Or so he thought.

Mark doesn't tell anyone about the ratter coming to his claim every night. Anthony and Jim would be obvious suspects because they have claims around him. Mark is determined to find out who the ratter is before he complicates his friendships. Mark learned quickly that you couldn't trust anyone with opal. He would like to trust Tina but she is Anthony's wife. Her loyalties are to Anthony and his partner.

Mark sat in his car hidden behind the trees near his claim many nights waiting for the thief but he never saw him coming. This fathom night miner was like a father Christmas of long ago. However long Mark was waiting for the old man laden with gifts, he never saw him coming. Mark tried to convince himself that he was imagining things. He marked his diggings and the next morning the markings were moved and the hole got bigger. But there was no loose dirt. He put grease on his ladders, he put the alarm bells on his hoist but nothing was ever disturbed. Yet every night some of his opal dirt was dug out. Not much but enough to let him know that someone was there.

Mark inspects every corner of his underground diggings. Finally he finds a carelessly covered hole at the far end of the mine. He clears the dirt away and finds that the hole is an underground passage from the claim next door. Anthony's claim. Mark goes through it and there is another hole like that leading into his neighbour's mine. Jim's claim. Mark travels from claim to claim and almost loses his way in the underground labyrinth. He could be found in anybody's claim and accused of ratting himself.

So anybody could dig in Mark's claim. The ratter could come from a kilometre away. It could be anybody, of course, but Anthony and Jim are the closest and they know that Mark is on opal. Then again everybody knows when anybody is on opal.

No wonder Mark did not see anyone go into the mine from the top. They came from underground. There are hundreds of dug out claims on the Three mile field and any one of them could be connected to Mark's claim.

Mark heard that Hainy caught his ratters by burying a plastic bag of paint into the dirt. It worked because the ratters had to go out the same way they came. Here, however, they can hide in anybody's claim until it is safe for them to wash the paint away.

Mark goes home and smashes a box of old bulbs. He brings the broken glass into his mine. He carefully takes out the dirt covering the passage into Anthony's claim and mixes the broken glass into the dirt. With the mixture of dirt and glass he blocks the passage in the same way as he found it.

The next day the dirt is still in place, the passage is carefully covered just as Mark left it but Mark knows that it was moved. He marked a stone on his side of the passage with a texta. The stone disappeared. Mark finds it in the middle of the dirt covering the passage. There is no digging in his claim overnight. The ratter must have cut himself and left.

Mark goes to see Anthony. He wants to know once and for all. He has no evidence, he cannot go to the police, he only wants to know for himself.

What happened to your hand, asks Mark.

Caught in the hoist, says Anthony.

Let me have a look.

It's fine.

No, no, I really want to see it. Mark tries to lift a bandage. Looks like there is a bit of glass sticking out there, says Mark. He wants to see Anthony's reaction.

The nurse said that I better keep it bandaged , says Anthony pulling his hand away.

You have scratches on your face as well, says Mark.

Have I? Anthony goes to the mirror.

Where?

Were you in a hotel fight? laughs Mark but there is hollowness in his laughter.

What are you saying, there are no cuts on my face? says Anthony.

What's that on your nose then, says Mark.

That's from last week when I was starting the generator and the handle hit me.

Look at him, says Mark as Jim comes in. So you two had a fight.

No, why, says Jim.

You have cuts to your face. They look like glass cuts. The bits of glass are still sticking out.

You must be joking, says Jim heading for the mirror.

It's not the April's fool day. What's going on?

Mark is having a joke, says Anthony. He senses that something is wrong.

I am off, says Jim. I just brought the batteries on charge.

Have some coffee, says Tina.

I have to go as well, says Mark.

Mark wants to know if Tina knows. Of course, if there is anything to know, wives know everything. Actually Anthony might have nothing to do with it. Maybe even Jim knows nothing about it. There is no glass or cuts on his face. There was nothing unusual about the way they reacted.

If Jim and Anthony are guilty they will know that I know if they are not they will take it as a joke, reasons Mark.

Stay for lunch, says Anthony.

You like my stuffed capsicums, invites Tina.

Nobody suspects anything, maybe there really is nothing to suspect. It would be wrong to suspect them if they are innocent, reasons Mark.

Everybody becomes aware of something new happening.

Thanks all the same, says Mark.

Anthony's band aide could cover any kind of a cut, reasons Mark. I have no evidence, not yet. But I will know soon.

A week later Mark announces that he is going to Japan.

There is a gem exhibition in Tokyo and I have stones to sell as well, says Mark casually. Would you keep an eye on my claim for me. I covered it up. I don't want anyone to fall in but just see if anyone tries to get in.

Sure, but ratters won't come while I am there. They come at night, says Anthony.

So Anthony knows about ratters being in my claim, reasons Mark. I never mentioned ratters to anybody. Then again everybody talks about ratters and Russ almost accused Anthony.

It's nothing unusual about Mark going to Japan. He is buying opal for Japanese market. He will only be away for a couple of weeks.

Anthony wonders why Mark wants him to look after his claim. He must know that nobody will come while Anthony and Jim work next to Mark's claim. You don't see anything from underground anyway.

What is the ground like in your claim, asks Mark.

Come and have a look. The ground is changing, it looks promising but so far, nothing much, says Anthony.

I'll see you before I go, says Mark.

Anthony and Jim are at work when Mark comes to say good bye.

Come to the back, yells Tina when Mark knocks on the front door. I am hanging the washing.

What can I bring you from Tokyo, smiles Mark passing clothes pegs.

I have no money to order anything. Anyway I don't need anything. Come in for awhile, Tina holds the laundry door open for Mark. He takes a quick sweep of the cutting corner. A tray of dopsticks with opal on them, about twenty fair sized stones are carelessly covered with a plastic apron.

Mark sits at the kitchen table while Tina puts the kettle on. The silence is growing.

Is something wrong, asks Tina.

I am not sure.

What do you mean. I know something is wrong.

I'll tell you when I come back from Japan.

Why not now?

Maybe you already know. Maybe you know more than I do.

About what?

When I return I will know if you know, says Mark. If you don't know I will tell you.

You sound mysterious. I thought we were friends. Don't you trust me?

I thought we were friends and I trusted you, says Mark.

I don't like the tone of your voice. Why the past tense, what have I done?

You haven't done anything and I trust you. Take care, says Mark.

The stones in Anthony's cutting room could belong to any of Anthony's customer, Anthony is a cutter after all. It's not fair to suspect him, reasons Mark.

Tina wonders if Mark ever remembers that new year's evening in Sydney and about the well wishing that sounded so much like a promise of the life together. Maybe it was only an illusion, maybe they had just enough to drink for their imagination to run wild. They both like Anthony and want to behave honourably. That makes the attraction more tantalising.

I'll see you when you come back, says Tina. They do not kiss like friends do because they know that there is a spark that may ignite.

Two weeks later Mark returns from Japan.

Anthony is in hospital, he might not walk again, Tina sobs on Mark's shoulder. He heard someone picking in your claim and went to investigate. He slipped and fell in.

How bad is he?

It's his spine, they don't know if he will fully recover.

I am going to see him, says Mark.

I'll come with you.

You better not. I have some business in Dubbo as well and don't know when I will be back. I have to be alone to sort some things out.

Mark looks at Anthony through the window of his hospital ward. Anthony's head is bandaged and only his eyes can be seen. His wrists are connected to tubes. He has a metal frame like a halo around his head.

Only he is no saint, thinks Mark as he stares at Anthony. I am almost sorry for the bastard. I thought I knew him. You never get to know anyone, you can't afford to trust anyone. Especially where money is concerned. We are both after the same thing. And there is Tina. I can't trust her either. Maybe she is on it with Anthony. Maybe she was watching while he was stealing. Maybe Jim does not know anything about it. Maybe Anthony does not trust Jim. Nobody trusts anybody on opal. Everybody for himself. The realisation that he lost his best friend leaves a bitter taste in his mouth.

If he asked me for money I would have given him. I'd even give him a chance to mine with me. I would never be here if it wasn't for Tina. Anthony introduced me to mining after all, we pegged these claims together and even intended to work

together at one stage. Of course, Anthony would not have charity. He would rather steal. Mark feels the cold aloneness.

Anthony opens his eyes and closes them again. After a while he opens them again and the two men just stare at each other.

You bastard, you'll pay for this, says Anthony.

What were you doing down my mine, asks Mark.

You told me to watch it.

I never told you to go down.

I heard someone, I looked down the shaft and saw someone move in the mine.

Probably your partner.

It was Russ peering out.

Don't try to shift the blame on Russ.

One day you will find out for yourself, says Anthony.

Russ told me about you, says Mark.

I want half a million, no questions asked. Otherwise it will be an attempted murder. Claim it on insurance, if you like, says Anthony.

You know I have no insurance on the claim, you bastard. Nobody has insurance, says Mark.

You should have it with all your millions.

You had no business down my claim.

You asked me to watch it. Tina was there. She will be a witness.

She knows I didn't ask you to go down.

She will stick with me and say what I want her to say.

I'll let you pay half now and half in a year. I will even take opal as a payment.

I will kill you first. You were stealing from my claim all along. I know how you cut your hand.

So you admit that you wanted to kill me, it was premeditated murder attempt.

I will kill you if you don't drop this nonsense. Mark's voice is steely. You will die as a rat and make no mistake about it.

You made the step loose on the ladder to trap a ratter going down. But your ratter was already down when I was on the ladder. Russ was already ratting. You will pay for it.

Next time you mention money you will die, says Mark leaving the hospital. Mark didn't even want to hear about Russ.

I need a drink, says Mark when he returns. He seems older and changed.

How is Anthony? Asks Tina. She knows something happened, something was dreadfully wrong. Maybe Anthony died. Maybe he is paralysed.

Mark slumps in the chair, he looks crushed but there is a false smile on his lips now.

I saw him. He is quite cheerful. The doctor thinks that he will recover all right.

Thank God, Tina hugs Mark. They hold each other and a feeling of freedom and relief sweeps over them. The tension and the anxiety is over. Anthony will be all right.

Mark is caressing Tina's hair. His lips are on her neck. Slowly, without hesitation they begin kissing like they did when they first danced for new year's eve in Sydney years ago. They kissed lots of people. Everybody was kissing everybody. Anthony does not know about the kissing. There is nothing to know. It was comforting to share a little secret with a friend. It wasn't an affair, they just wished each other a happy new year. Since the new year's dance in Sydney they tried to pretend that they were just friends.

There is an irresistible sweetness now, this is how things are supposed to be, they feel like two children in the wonderland. They are recovering from the shock of the accident. The intensity of desire overwhelms them.

We always wanted it, we always wanted to be together, we are meant for each other, Mark keeps saying as they move into the bedroom.

We can't, not now, not with Anthony in hospital, Tina resists mildly but she follows Mark.

What he doesn't know won't hurt him, whispers Mark.

I feel rotten about cheating on him. I never slept with anyone but Anthony.

We owe it to ourselves. The urgency is greater than reason.

When I lost that baby I wanted to come to you, says Tina as they hold onto each other spent and stunned and guilty.

Move in with me, says Mark.

We can't, not now. You are his best friend. We are all Anthony has. I can't desert him when he is down. He would never forgive me. He'd kill me if he ever found out. I know that I will regret what just happened.

The enormity of danger frightens Tina.

What happened had to happen. It would happen one day, it was natural. Pack your things. I will pick you in the morning, says Mark.

I have to think. Give me time.

Going home

I feel an enormous burden of guilt, shame and excitement as I walk into the bush. I sit on a log and watch the sunset. I sat on this log with Anthony when I first came to the Ridge, when we fell in love. I love Anthony I want to go to Anthony and be forgiven for what I have done. I cannot undo what I have done. I could never tell Anthony but I know that Anthony would know. I could not lie. I wish I could wash away what happened. I try to think about Mark but the memory is tainted. We did not make love, the hungry, rushed sex was something else. I want to forget it.

I see Marilyn coming but I don't want to talk to her so I remain hidden behind the bushes.

The images of Mark and Anthony come and go in the nightmare of my sleep. In my dreams I am running after Anthony but he is disappearing in the distance. Mark is laughing, I am crying.

Marilyn comes again in the morning.

I am sorry about Tony, says Marilyn.

So am I. Mark said that he is going to be all right.

Are you going somewhere, Marilyn asks looking at my packed boxes and suitcases.

I just packed winter clothes away, I say.

Tina, is something wrong. Marilyn seems puzzled.

No, I say evenly. I cannot tell anyone what I am doing.

I am not certain what I will do.

Anthony rang last night. He wants you to ring him straight away. He said it's urgent. I couldn't find you last night. You can come and ring from my place, says Marilyn.

I have to go to the post office anyway, I say. Marilyn is my only friend in Lightning Ridge. Suddenly I feel that I have no one. When Marilyn leaves I load my belongings in the car and drive towards Dubbo. I pretend that I have never been in Lightning Ridge, that I only woke up from a nightmare.

A five-hour drive will give me time to think. Maybe I will stop and see Anthony in Dubbo hospital or maybe I will just drive past towards Sydney and my other life. A sense of total liberation and horror overwhelms me. The tension of the last two years is shaken off my shoulders. I put a tape of Bob Dylan on and hum along: like a bridge over troubled waters.... Everything feels unreal.

I know I should cry. I should worry. I should be there for Anthony. Maybe I should have moved in with Mark. Possibilities and musts are floating in front of me but there is freedom out there and no one to tell me what I should do. I am on my own. I am free. I want to sing. Maybe the last two years never happened. I am going to Sydney to finish uni and start my career. I know I should cry but I can't. I know I will cry one day.

The grass is tall and green, big splashes of yellow flowering canola look like sunshine spread over the countryside. There are splashes of purple Paterson curse flowering on the paddocks in front of me. Lightning Ridge was a curse for me. Beautiful from the distance and prickly to touch.

Every silver lining has a cloud, Anthony once laughed when another of his stones turned into nothing.

Every cloud has a silver lining, I corrected him.

Goes both ways, said Anthony.

In a couple of hours I will have to decide to either stop in Dubbo hospital and see Anthony or drive on.

A sense of shame and fear is creeping after me but I drive on and hum the song. I have to get away, I can't make a decision now, everything will be out in the open soon.

I look at Anthony through the glass of the hospital door. He lies on his back, pale and sad. I wish I could go and kiss his pain away. He needs me and I love him. But I can't tell him that. A deceit is written on my face. Anthony would know. He senses things that are not spoken. I shudder and feel tears in my eyes. I could not lie and I could not tell the truth. I can't face Anthony. His eyes are closed and his hands are connected to tubes. I love Anthony, I can't hurt him.

I write a letter.

Anthony,

I am going away. Please forgive me for leaving you at this time. I need time to think. I may come back one day. I wish you happiness and health.

I love you.

I do not lie. I do what I believe is right.

I want a new start, a lily-white page, to write the rest of my story on. When Anthony and I first moved together we had that brilliant future right in front of us. We were going to find opal and then we would do all the fun things and be happy ever after. We wanted children and travel and clean bush adventure. Only the dream took too long to come true. Everybody else was finding opal except us. I haven't bought a

single item of clothing while in Lightning Ridge. I haven't been to hairdressers or on holidays. We built our camp. Every cent was lovingly devoted to our idyllic home.

I became restless. I try desperately to rub out everything that happened. I want to start again.

I have to finish my studies and make something out of my life. I have things to do and places to go. I couldn't be happy in a little town where nothing ever happens.

Lightning Ridge is a men's town, men are thrilled by discovery of a gem in the dirt clay but most women need more, said Marilyn when I moved in with Anthony for the first time.

I wonder what does one need to be happy?

Redfern

Come mothers and fathers throughout the land

and don't criticise what you can't understand, I hum along with Bob Dylan as I prepare the lessons for my class. I finally made it, I became a teacher.

Anthony never came looking for me. Lightning Ridge and Anthony's accident are not part of my life any more.

I wonder if Anthony knows that we have a son.

I wish you started at a better school, says mum. She has been looking after my son Toni since he was born. She knows that we couldn't manage without her. Dad died last year so mum needs Toni and myself to do good things for. She also goes to work part time because her boss couldn't do without her.

Toni is a cheerful, contented boy. Maybe he inherited his father's nature. Anthony is like that.

I only want to see you in a secure permanent job, mum apologises for whatever she remembers.

Now I have what you wanted me to have.

If you have a secure job, you have a secure life. You can go a long way, mum rambles on as she irons Toni's clothes.

Mum would have stayed in the same job all her life, cherish her security and glow with the air of importance. She has made herself indispensable wherever she worked. Lifelong job means lifelong life for mum.

In your time people lived to work, but these days we work to live. I provide for today not for some distant future, I smile.

You are never with your son, says mum. Her words echo in my subconscious.

I give him quality time, I say. Everybody is talking about quality time these days.

Once a week, says mum. If you are not out with your boyfriend.

Toni is the only important person in my life right now, I say.

Men come and men go, but your son will always be your son, mum echoes my thoughts. She considers it her duty to impart pearls of wisdom onto her unwise daughter. I will probably do the same to Toni.

My boyfriend, Jack, is a teacher at my school. He has a daughter Debbie from his previous relationship.

For Christmas Debbie stays with Jack and he wants to take her to the zoo and would I come along. I never met Debbie. Bring Toni, says Jack as an afterthought.

We meet at the entrance to the zoo. Toni says hello to Jack as instructed but he looks at Debbie. People communicate at their own level. Toni is still at an age when he is not threatened by the thought that I may love a man. Men are not part of his world. He follows Debbie and soon they run ahead of us like old friends.

Jack is as casual with his daughter as he is with me or my son. Jack is like that.

Fatherless kids become a statistic. Toni does not even have one parent. Half of his mother is out looking for a man, mutters mum.

Would you like me to be depressed about it? I have to have some life. We don't live in the dark ages, I tell mum.

Look at statistics, you don't want your son to become a statistic. You'll only have yourself to blame.

Being a single parent is not a big deal these days, I say. People don't marry for life any more, if they marry at all. Who would want to be stuck with the same person for life?

Maybe if you are told often enough that you are guilty, you begin to feel guilty.

Maybe it is time for you to settle down, mum ignores my reasoning.

Whatever that means, I snap at mum.

Sometimes I play with memories of Anthony. Sometimes I even dream of visiting him. Mum does not know about Anthony's accident. I rang the hospital and they told me that he would never walk again.

Anthony and I are not the same people that fell in love a few years ago but we have a memory of those two people. Maybe Anthony should share in my guilt. It is not my fault that he fell into Mark's mine. A tiny voice in me says that maybe it is. Maybe Anthony did it for me, because I am greedy. I admired Mark for his luck. I argue that I never asked Anthony to do it, he never told me that he did it, I don't know if he did it. Anthony does not know that I was unfaithful with Mark while he was in hospital. It doesn't matter as long as Anthony does not know. It meant nothing.

The society is breaking down, nags mum. She will next tell me how I contribute to the breakdown, of course. I know she means well but she makes me feel inadequate.

Since I got my periods at the age of twelve mum prepared me for my womanhood. Whatever you do, don't let a man make you pregnant before you finish your studies,

said mum. Becoming pregnant before I finished my studies seemed to be the greatest disaster that could befall me.

Mum refused to come to my wedding because I defied her orders to finish my studies.

I am really afraid of the future, says mum.

Life was never as free and easy as it is now. People are healthier and live longer, I assure her.

But are they really happy, says mum.

Nobody was ever really happy all of the time, mum. We wouldn't know it if we were. People want more out of life. They want to know more, they aspire to be more.

More you know, more you want to know, more you have, more you want, says mum.

You have to have dreams, I argue vaguely.

Reality is the road we travel on. As long as you have a clear road ahead, you can dream all you like.

Mum always manages to dampen my spirits.

What do you dream about, I ask. Mum never reveals anything about herself. What would she know about dreams?

I dream of your future and Toni's future, says mum sensibly. We are an extension of her; she wants to be happy in that extension, she wants to be what she was meant to be what her father wanted her to be.

I will never escape mum's words. I can deny them, I can dispute them, but they will follow me like mothers follow their wandering children.

I am just telling you how things are, says mum self-righteously. It's my duty to tell you. There is a place for everything and when everything is in its place there is harmony, concludes mum and I can't argue against the old reasoning.

In my days, mum starts reminiscing, children learned manners. You are a teacher and you are responsible for teaching them how to behave.

Blame the teachers, why don't you. Everybody else does. Parents think that they are less guilty if they place their guilt on teachers.

You are qualified, says mum.

I am not allowed to chastise a child in any way but a child is allowed to swear at me and threaten me. Nobody is appalled if the students bash a teacher up but if a teacher hits a student, all the newspapers scream about child abuse.

Police are in the same boat. They turn the blind eye when they see kids doing things they shouldn't. Kids are protected but our jobs are not.

Change the government, mum. There are lots of old people in the government. If you are right how come they don't see it your way?

They have no time for their kids so they blame teachers, admits mum. I wonder why we pay for the government, which can't keep the country orderly. Some people don't deserve to have a vote.

What people, mum? Are they women, Aborigines or poor or sick or uneducated. Which group of people?

Those, who work hard, and behave well, always pay the price, says mum.

A mother of my student said the same thing. Her daughter never received a golden award for good behaviour. I never even noticed the woman's daughter. The girl quietly plodded on with her work, was friendly and polite but she was not outstanding. The boy who annoyed kids and teachers, got a merit card for improvement. He spent one whole day without getting in trouble.

I don't dare walk on the street. Young tugs snatch your bag and trample you to the ground. In my day a young person would never struck an old person. We learned to believe that God would strike us dead if we were disrespectful to our elders, says mum.

You believed that god would strike you dead but you knew that it wasn't true, I back chat.

It is more important what you believe than what is true, says mum mysteriously.

You believe that big bully parents can smack their children but the little powerless child can not hit a parent, I say to mum. This is the same as saying that a policeman can strike you but you cannot hit him.

I don't know where you get these ideas from, says mum exasperated. Even a sparrow knows where he stands in the scheme of things. There is a chief sparrow and the soldier sparrow. One thinks the other does. Everybody should know his place.

I hope mine was the last generation that was forced to line up and swear the allegiance to the queen and God and parents and teachers, the scoutmaster, the Girl Guide, and the law of the country.

Our streets, our schools and our homes used to be safe, argues mum.

Our gender, religion or colour or culture no longer determines our lives.

Don't bet on it.

I enjoy baiting mum and making fun of her outdated ideas.

This is my life, I say.

Life is not something you own. Life is a link in a chain. You are put in place to join the past with the future. You are as much my life as Toni is yours. We work and save to give a better chance to the future generation.

You built a better future for us and we are left with nothing more to build unless we break up what you built.

To mum the whole meaning of life is saving for the better future.

Don't be so ungrateful, says mum in her perfect martyr voice. We went through very hard times so you can enjoy a better life.

Why are you trying to make me feel guilty about enjoying this better life.

Mum was always the most important person in the lives of people around her. Our family couldn't do without mum, her boss couldn't do without her and neither could our neighbours and our church. Mum organised the fund raising and the church cleaning rosters and the running of a school canteen. I am totally useless compared to mum.

Mum is a secretary to an important man and she knows that her place is to make that man's life smooth and easy. She never complains about doing the man's chores in her spare time on the way to work or on the way home. She carries his dry-cleaning and the flowers for his mistresses and the gifts for his children. She keeps his diary neat and uncomplicated, so his life events would never clash. She knows when he needs a cup of coffee and what brand he prefers.

Men are hopeless, mum warned me in preparation for my womanhood.

Maybe mum's domestic life is just an extension of her business life and she feels contented with the job well done.

Dad had his responsibilities around the home, he repaired the car and mowed the lawn. Dad also had the responsibility to punish us if we misbehaved. He would never notice our naughtiness if mum didn't remind him of his responsibility to bring up his children.

My brothers left home before I was born, they lived in the boarding school so they could concentrate on getting the best education available. Mum and dad felt that it was their duty to provide the best.

It is what you do that makes you what you are, mum concludes philosophically.

Were you happy with dad, I ask. Mum married for love and her father made sure that we all remembered what a mistake she made.

Neither of us ever looked out of our marriage and we never argued. This should speak for itself, says mum.

I want mum to tell me how they made each other happy or unhappy but you can't ask your mother that, at least not my mother. Mum was always careful not to spoil any of dad's enjoyment. Both of us got into a habit of saying: I wonder if dad will like it or approve of it or allow it. Dad was our king. Mum ordered dad to be our king. That's how things were supposed to be. She was meant to have a king so she made dad a king. I don't think that dad had any say in who he was. I am sorry that dad did not see me starting my teaching career. I finally achieved what they planned for me. I have a suspicion that dad didn't worry as much about me being a teacher as mum did.

It seems that mum's sole mission in life is to guide me towards perfection. Maybe I owe it to my mother to find this elusive perfection simply because she was unsuccessfully searching for it all her life.

Maybe all the loved ones are like that. They promise to love you more perfectly if you could manage to be a bit more perfect. There is always room for improvement. It is no longer enough that I am a teacher, I have to be at the best school. It isn't enough that I am a mother but I have to be the best mother, best daughter, and best friend. There is no one as perfect as people want their loved ones to be.

One generation builds and the next destroys and the third one begs, says mum without directly blaming me for this sequence of events.

Don't worry mum, there are still millions of people starving this very minute. There are little children making baskets and shoes and clothes from morning till night so we can buy them cheaply.

It's better for kids to work than to starve. If we don't buy what they produce they die.

Mum finds logical explanation for everything. She explains things by saying that she wasn't born yesterday.

My parents always provided me with the best of everything a Blacktown girl could wish for. I was better off than most of the kids in my neighbourhood. People say that it's a wonder I don't behave like a spoiled brat.

If you can't choose the neighbourhood you live in, at least make your neighbourhood respectable, maintains mum in her conventional wisdom.

Mum has always been an integral, invisible force, a heart of the family, a heart so steady and even and constant that we forgot about it. All the vital organs work like that, I suppose, and only when this vital action ceases, its absence becomes visible and recognised.

Mum was never without direction or unhappy about her life. I suppose dad loved the little woman at home and so she made herself little. She wanted to have a man who is bigger than she is.

Dad had the responsibility to decide where we will go for a holiday. I suppose he lacked imagination so it was always the same, we went fishing and mum cleaned his fish and cooked it and tidied our tent and kept the children safe.

Dad never asked mum what she wanted. It was his responsibility to decide what they will buy and where we were going to live.

When we lived at Parramatta dad lost his job and he found another in Blacktown so mum had to quit her job there and found herself a new job in Blacktown. It was a natural thing to do and she did it without complaining. Dad was called our breadwinner although mum earned more money than he did.

Every morning mum packed our lunches before she prepared breakfast. After we slurped our juice and ate the toast she fussed over the crumbs and the jam and butter smudged on the bench, she wiped all the stains and swept the floor, picked the towels off the floor and socks from under beds and empty food packets from our bedside tables. She wiped the toilet bowl and the hand basin, swept the hair off the hairbrush and replaced the lid on the toothpaste before she had a quick shower and tidied her hair for work. On the way out she emptied the garbage into the bin away from the house and left the small kitchen bin inside the front door to put in the kitchen on the way home in the afternoon.

In the afternoon mum placed the shopping bag on the kitchen bench and went into the bedroom to change from her good clothes into her home clothes before she started dinner. She hung her good clothes straight away and that saved her ironing it next time. By the time dad returned she had dinner cooking and dad's stubby waiting cold and open. A plate of cheese and biscuits was in front of him and he picked at it without thinking. Dad needed to unwind with the beer and the paper. He didn't like talking while he relaxed.

Mum is a thread that holds our family like a ribbon holds a bunch of flowers. We are nothing like flowers of course but she gathered us around her every so often and we had no heart to disappoint her. We were all on our best loving behaviour, my brothers and I, while dad presided over the meal mum lovingly prepared for their wedding anniversary every year. Maybe our getting together was the proof mum needed that she was indeed successfully married and that she raised a good family. We silently remembered mum's lifelong slavery and realised that she earned her celebrations by being totally devoted to what she calls my family.

Since dad died we gather less frequently but mum makes sure that we come together and visit dad's grave on all saints day.

We would have nothing to tie us together if mum did not instil in us that we owe her to remember each other's birthday and that we eat Christmas dinner at her place.

Maybe mum knows how essential she is and how hopelessly lost we would all be without her. It is clearly up to her to keep us respectable and functioning.

Maybe mum never had to search in the mirror to know who she was and what she wanted. Everything in her life is running like a clock, her clock. She is in charge. Maybe mum does not expect praise, because she knows that what she is doing is for her own satisfaction.

Mum was careful with every family dollar. She grew all our fruit and vegetables and mended and sewed our clothes. Dad told her often enough that it is a waste of time to do all these things but she did them anyway. Maybe she was afraid of poverty or dirt or disorder. Maybe she realised that she married the wrong man but couldn't do anything about that after three kids. As a sensible person she made the best of what she had. Maybe she dreamed of having some other life but she knew deep down that no other life was possible. Who else could love her untidy, unruly children?

Dad was always dirty. It was his job as a mechanic probably, but it seemed to me that he enjoyed being covered in grease. It was the greatest chore for him to get dressed for Sunday mass but he did. That was his contribution to orderliness. We also observed the Sunday dinner rule. We had to be there, rain or shine, we had to wash and put the respectable clothes on.

I want more than mum had. I want money and love and sex and success. But all I really care about is my son Toni. I love Toni. Maybe I love that part of myself that lives in Toni, maybe it is just self-preservation and a selfish self-love but the love for Toni is all I feel. I love all of Toni and I adore the part of Toni that is part of his father and part of our loving.

Mum and dad believed that Anthony was just an unwelcome intrusion into my life. I will get over Anthony.

When I returned from Lightning Ridge pregnant, They were both there for me so I could finish the college.

Mum was so proud when I decided to buy a flat in Darling Harbour. She gave me her savings as a loan for the deposit on a unit that has the ocean view she always wanted.

Mum is disappointed because I took a job at Redfern, which is quite a few notches below the working class Blacktown. In my part of Redfern I am right where dirt and grime of the society lives, where few people work and fewer still aspire to do better.

Redfern is no environment for young Toni, declares mum, scared that Redfern would contaminate Toni.

Toni goes to a good private school in a good suburb where all the nice children have learned nice manners from their nice families. Toni is safe in Darling Harbour where we live, mum.

I tell mum that there are many kids, just as beautiful and clever as Toni, who live in Redfern and don't know anything better. These kids graduate from meat pie and coke to beer and plonk and drugs. They end up injecting anything that can be injected and swallow whatever can be swallowed to get rid of boredom and despair.

I don't like you getting mixed up with that lot, warns mum.

Jack is also a teacher at Redfern, he comes from the good address as well but he likes it down in the pits. Jack and I clicked instantly.

What brings you down into our prestigious school? Jack has a curly smile dancing around his lips and you never know if he is serious or not.

I am new, I say like a proverbial ugly duckling. I have to start somewhere, so I thought I'd start at the bottom.

We are on the playground duty.

Some people look down self-righteously at kids who scratch tattoos on themselves with pins during silent reading session. How could they, why doesn't someone do something about it, they say, Jack mimics righteous people.

I am surprised that kids are not scared of punishment or of poisoning or of the future or of the shame, I say.

Their mums and dads carry same self-created pieces of art on their bodies. If mum and dad have tattoos, the tattoos must be good. They see no shame, no punishment, and no consequences.

Mum and dad are the only people who really matter, I agree.

Parents have the strings of the welfare purse. The government has their parents on the string as well. Teachers only push education that nobody wants.

We are their role models, I say.

Can you realistically believe that any of the kids here aspire to become a teacher? There is the culture separating us. They don't know how to use education, they never lived with an educated person, and there is no literature in their homes. They expect everything from the government who has this magic purse. Education and teachers are a kind of punishment government imposes on them; they have to go to school to repay to the government for giving them money for good things like pies and coke.

I remember my first day at Redfern School.

I try to talk to April, a beautiful Aboriginal girl that is enrolled in kindergarten. We are both new. She is too shy to tell me her name. Her eyes are covered with a fringe of heavy black hair. I put my arm around her shoulder and tell her my name but she

remains silent. Another little girl bumps into her and my little silent friend yells at her: Fuck me dead. Her voice is strong and clear and confident.

I ignore April's outburst. This is a whole new world for both of us.

Welfare agencies are in and out of school. They are watching out for signs of child abuse, says Jack.

We leave the kids on the street. We ignore what kids do, so nobody can accuse us of abuse. As long as we don't do anything we don't do anything wrong. Parents are scared that welfare people will take their children if they discipline them. A good smack on the bottom would save us all a lot of grief, says Jack.

Jack is just as old fashioned as mum.

Pamela told me that her dad hit her sister Suzy with a wooden spoon, says Cathy, our kindergarten teacher. Suzi is in my class.

It is mandatory to report the abuse to the welfare, Cathy tells me. I check Suzy's legs and find a bruise hidden under the longish school uniform. I ask Suzi what happened and she says that she fell over.

Cathy reports the bruise to the welfare.

Next day Suzy's mum Alice accuses me of reporting her husband to the welfare. Her husband, Amos, left them.

Alice yells at me and embarrasses her daughter in front of the class.

I am not allowed to say anything on the matter because it is in the hands of the Welfare.

Amos hit Suzy with a wooden spoon because she was disobedient. I do it sometimes. Mum smacked me and I turned all right. I loved my parents and my girls love their daddy. You broke up my family, yells Alice.

Please talk to the principal, I say calmly. I cannot even explain that Cathy felt duty bound to report the bruises.

Why don't you look at what the kids are up to on the street? They drink and smoke dope instead of going to school. At least my kids had a home until you wrecked it for them.

I would like to tell Alice that Redfern is not a proper environment for raising good children. My mum is adamant about that. For a moment I was going to take Anthony with me to Redfern school for him to see what a real life looks like but mum literally raised hell about it.

Little Pamela tells Cathy that her mum is crying at home, but Suzy just sulks in my class. I wish I could tell them that I understand. Their father is a hard working man

who provides for his family. He is much like my father was, only in my day my father had a duty not to spare the rod. We are only fifteen years apart but the whole life changed.

Amos yells at the principal: You bastard, you let Welfare destroy my family. They can feed and clothe my kids. I am not going to work for them. I am not going to pay a cent.

Amos quit his job; he applied for the dole and filed for a divorce, yells Alice. My kids are going hungry.

The Welfare advises Alice to see a marriage counsellor. The elegant young woman asks Alice if she is happy in a relationship. Alice brakes down and tells her that she puts up with things for the sake of the children. Kids need their father.

Never stay in an unhappy relationship for the sake of the kids. They learn the wrong values and attitudes. They are better off in a harmonious one-parent family than with the father who is abusive. They only learn to perpetuate the cycle of abuse. Their self-esteem suffers.

Alice realises for the first time that maybe her family isn't happy. Amos is not around most of the time and when he is, he does not allow anybody to grow their self-esteem. You do as you are told, he said. Amos makes the rules and everybody has to stick by them. I am going to keep my kids out of trouble, he said.

Ms counsellor says that these things are the barriers to self-growth.

The sophisticated Ms counsellor never made a mistake of getting married or having children and look where that got her. She is advising married people how to bring up children. She has a degree and so she must know.

If the marriage does not allow you to grow as a person than you are better off out of it. Children suffer permanent damage if they grow in a dysfunctional family, says Ms Right marriage counsellor.

Alice hears a lot about dysfunctional families lately. Criminals and drug users come from dysfunctional families. Alice wants her family to function but kids are crying for daddy and her bed is empty. Alice cries every night for her husband.

How can I function on my own, she wails. Amos made everybody function.

I listen to Alice; she hasn't got anybody else willing to listen. She realises that I have the best interests of her children at heart. I am a professional after all, much like Ms counsellor. The code of confidentiality prevents me to tell Alice that I did not report her husband. I am not allowed to tell her that I would have talked to her about Amos and her children before I would report the bruises. I must be careful because Alice trusts me to know what is right.

Amos loves his children. If I find another man I will never know if he will love my children or abuse them? Alice tells me.

Alice doesn't dare tell the counsellor that she wants Amos back. The welfare might take her children from her if she defends her husband's actions. Amos is a child abuser.

Amos is the only man I trust with my kids, Alice tells me.

I am not a counsellor and I don't work for the Welfare so I am not allowed to comment.

Noeline is in my class. Her father, Pete, yelled that he'd beat the living daylights out of Noeline if she didn't do as he told her.

The neighbour called the welfare.

Poor Noeline must have been terrified, said the neighbour.

I could have told her that unless Noeline is terrified she never does as she is told.

Pete comes to pick Noeline after school. He is upset. The welfare did not even inform him before they took Noeline away. Pete yells at me and blames me for the welfare. He has to blame somebody in authority.

Pete got custody of Noeline after his ex de-facto wife Tammy was taken into rehabilitation. She was in horrors most of the time. In the morning she used to take Noeline and her younger four children into town. She bought them a pie and a coke each. They didn't want to go to school so she found excuses for them because she loves them. Sometimes the men, Tammy was drinking with, brought coke and chips to the children. It was fun sitting on the sidewalk bench learning about real life. The children missed a lot of school so welfare took them and eventually gave them to their father, Pete. They hated staying with Pete because he made them go to school and eat those green things and wear school uniforms. The principal implored Pete to do something about kids' abominable behaviour and language. There is little a school can do since the corporal punishment was abolished and nobody is allowed to touch a child.

Pete realised that he is responsible for his kids' behaviour but he was scared to hit them because they were under the surveillance of the welfare. He was also scared that the principal would report kids' uncontrollable behaviour. His children swore at Pete in a fluent language they learned on the street. He begged and bargained and negotiated and, exasperated, he yelled and threatened but the kids just laughed at him.

Pete told me about his kids and tried to hide the tears. He blew hard into his handkerchief and looked away to compose himself and I looked away not to embarrass him.

Fuck you, you dog, Noeline snarled at Pete and ran away. You can't make me do anything I don't want to do. I'll get the welfare on you, she threatened.

Noeline's ten years old sister ran after Noeline down the road and yelled at Pete: Mother fucker. Fuck me dead motherfucker.

The word motherfucker frightens me. I never heard language like that before. The fucker is aggressive, powerful, the fucked up is powerless. Fucked up means bad and beyond repair. The fucked is a woman. Preferably a mother. In most languages.

And all the time this fuckers revere their mother. She is a defeated fucked up martyr and she has to be protected by a powerful male who is really a fucker.

Maybe the only difference between humans and animals is the shame of fucking. Animal males court the females they want to mate with but women are meant to be degraded by being fucked. Men rape, soldiers poke their dicks into the dying, terrified women like they poke their knives into the terrified dying men. The poor human monkeys snatch the bananas from under the noses of other poor monkeys.

Women defend men. Men are women's children.

Pete does not look like a violent motherfucker, he seems powerless. He begs me to help him. His eyes are red and his lips tremble, as we stand at the school gate powerless to change the world.

Now the kids are gone again, he says with tears in his eyes. What can I do?

I'll talk to the welfare, I promise. I know that welfare people don't like anyone to interfere.

After a thorough investigation the welfare return the children to Pete on probation to see how things will work out. They don't want to relinquish their power over Pete, they hold him in fear but they hold him alive. He hopes that one day his children will forget what they learned on the street.

As a year six teacher I feel that personal development is important for many of my girls who would soon become women and mothers.

You will soon become women and get married and have babies I introduced my simple lesson. Your husband will go to work and buy everything for the family.

My dad doesn't work. He spends mum's welfare money on grog and marijuana, said Rebecca.

You have to think very carefully whom you choose to be a father of your baby, I moralise.

You go on the social and get lots of money every fortnight, if you have a baby. You get rent money and you can live in your own home, they tell me.

You get a family allowance, miss, and when you run out of food you go to the neighbourhood centre and they give you a food voucher, Noeline informs us.

You get 800 dollars and you can buy anything you wish when you get a baby, said Noeline.

I realise that 800 dollars represents a fortune to a girl who never had more than ten dollars in her pocket.

Babies need a father to love them. Every baby deserves to have a father, I begin to preach. You have to choose a good man to be the father of your baby.

I am repeating mum's words. I am glad that the girls do not know that somewhere in a nice neighbourhood my son doesn't even know his father.

The kids are there sitting in front of me but most of the time their minds and hearts are far away in real life dealing with real living. I am no longer sure about things I do and say. Why do I rush to prepare my weekly programs, correct the workbooks? Nobody takes any notice of what I do and if I do it. I teach children to be kind and not to swear and they go home and mums swear and the people on television and video swear and dads come home and bash their families.

Sometimes I wish I could be on a welfare but Toni is learning now what he will become. Everything he lives now is a part of what he will be.

I don't want Toni to choose that kind of life. The children can no longer plan what they will become because they know that everything that is now will change by the time they grow up. The career they may choose may not exist. Nothing lasts a lifetime any more.

Toni starts kindergarten.

Samantha has two daddies, Toni tells me. One daddy lives with her and one she goes for holidays with. Can I go on holidays with my daddy? Where is my daddy?

Your daddy lives in Lightning Ridge, I tell.

Can we go for a holiday with him?

If you like.

I am going for a holiday with daddy, Toni breaks the news to mum.

Life keeps reproducing itself and wants to be lived. Toni's hands are as beautiful as his father's. I remember playing with Anthony's long fingers long time ago.

Toni wants his father so we are going to Lightning Ridge.

This is the first Christmas mum will spend alone with her memories. Mum loves her memories like she loves her old useless family heirlooms. She is hoping to pass the

faded embroidery and chipped pottery to me to love. She doesn't realise that these days people don't pass things down.

Grandmothers and grandfathers don't even pass down stories to their grandchildren any more. Old people are put away in a home to wait for death that will put them away permanently. Real life is work and shopping and lovemaking and orgasm and take away food.

Why are you polishing these pots, you never use them, I asked my grandmother when I was a little girl.

This silver teapot was my wedding present. I'll leave it to your mother and one day you may get it to polish it for your daughter. There are happy memories in this teapot. When I polish it I remember the best times of my life.

I loved my Nan. When Nan passed away, mum put the teapot at the back of the cupboard and she only polished it a couple of times since. Once I found her with tears in her eyes as she held the gleaming pot.

The pot will be mine one day and I will remember granny who loved the teapot more than I can love any modern convenience.

Nothing is worth passing on, or polishing. I am careful to buy things that need no care and can be replaced once they are not exciting any more.

What will Anthony remember of his childhood? What will I pass on to him?

People live together until it suits them, if it suits them. Maybe we only ever get one chance at love and all the rest is just a repetition.

Women are always in love, they can't enjoy themselves without having a wedding ring in their sights, said Jack.

Jack is happy that I am not possessive. I enjoy our relationship and never mention marriage. His mother wants to see us married when I become pregnant. Marriage means little to me, I insist. I know that something is missing, something that would make marriage necessary.

Jack and I didn't worry about the pill. We were prepared for a family if it happened. One night a terrible pain wakes me and I vomit until my whole body is twisted over the basin. I know something is wrong. Mum calls an ambulance.

You had an ectopic pregnancy. There were complications and you lost one of the ovaries and your uterus, says the doctor. You will have no more children.

Jack is really kind to me, he is not terribly concerned about not having children. After all we have a child each already from previous partners.

We are going to travel and do all the fun things we always wanted to do. The world is getting overpopulated anyway, he says. His parents are disappointed, my mum is devastated.

I read about fertility as I convalesce. A man can impregnate hundreds of women while a woman can only carry one man's child. A man can impregnate a woman even when he can no longer provide for her but a woman has to be of a fertile age. Fertility creates sexiness. The probability of fertility adds the chemicals needed to excite.

It took me a long time to get over the loss of my baby and my fertility. I saw a counsellor and he recommended psychiatric help. I was put on antidepressants.

Mum says that I am over-protective towards Anthony. But Anthony is all I will ever have. Toni will never have a brother or a sister he must at least know his father. I can't deny him that.

Toni wants his daddy

As the school year ends in December I take Toni to Lightning Ridge to introduce him to his daddy.

It's been a long time. People don't even recognise me. They just went on living and mining while I was away in Sydney. I imagined that everybody would stare at me and that vicious gossip would run through town. But people come and go and they are quickly forgotten in Lightning Ridge. They touch and celebrate, get drunk and mate and part and go on. It's not a big deal. Nobody is concerned about my role in all this.

I plan to stay with Marilyn's family for a few days. Toni and I sleep in a caravan at the back of the house. Everybody seems to have a caravan at the back in Lightning Ridge. Friends and family come and stay in this tourist town.

It must have come as a shock, when Anthony became paralysed, says Marilyn.

I pushed the episode into my subconscious but I always knew that beside Lightning Ridge there is nothing.

How is Anthony?

His usual cheerful self. He has a reputation as the best and most honest cutter, Marilyn tells me.

Honesty comes first with opal. There are so many temptations. Miners often bring buckets of uncut opal and leave it with Anthony to cut. Nobody can say what comes out on a cutting wheel. Similar stones may differ in price, sometimes a thousand dollars stone is much like another of ten thousand in the uncut state.

You can hear laughter from Anthony's camp far away into the bush. Miners bring wine and beer to celebrate as Toni cuts their stones. Anthony broke up with Mark after you left, tells Marilyn.

I leave my son with Marilyn when I go to see Anthony.

I stand in the open doorway of the camp we built together and watch Anthony grinding a stone near the window. The steps are changed into ramps so he can move in and out of the house on his wheelchair.

Anthony does not hear me coming because of the noise of the cutting machine. The strong light is illuminating his face, which is as handsome as it always was. He moves with ease, he seems delighted wheeling himself around.

I stand in the open doorway. I want to embrace my husband and delete the years that separated us but he probably would not want me. Once he said that your feet

take you where your heart is. You either love someone or you don't. If you do, you will stay if you don't, you will go.

I came back but I don't know if I want to stay.

I don't want to give him false hopes, I don't want to disappoint him, and I don't want to make him angry. I am afraid that he will reject me. I am afraid that he will reject his son.

I know how children feel about their parents. I want my son to say hello to his dad. I always knew that one-day I will have to introduce Anthony to his son. For awhile I wondered if Toni is Mark's son but he isn't, everybody can see that. He couldn't look more like Anthony. I am glad about it.

I knock.

Come in, Anthony responds.

I am there behind him waiting silently and after a few moments he turns. Neither of us says a word. His lips are still curled and I want to kiss him.

What are you doing here?

I wanted to see you.

Why.

Someone has been asking for you.

Who?

Someone who needs you.

Nobody needs me. Anthony starts rubbing the stone on the wheel.

Can you switch the machine off, I want to talk.

It's a bit late, don't you think.

Better late than never.

You better talk to your friend Mark.

I wonder what Anthony knows about Mark. And what Mark knows about Anthony.

I am still your wife.

I have no use for a wife, says Anthony.

Maybe I have no use for a husband either. I just brought up someone to see you. Can we come later on.

Maybe never is better than late. Anthony switches off the machine and we look to the floor in silence. The buzzing noise of cutting wheels separated us but now we face each other.

Will you see us.

I am not going anywhere, Anthony wheels himself around. We look at each other and I feel tears in my eyes. His lips are pressed together, maybe he is trying to quieten the trembling. We must not become emotional. We are only here for our son who expects us to be sensible. He depends on us to know best.

I get Toni. He is clutching my hand. He has no idea what daddies are like or what daddies should be like. I know that he is not expecting anything in particular, children his age get used to the newness of people they meet. Samantha must have painted daddies as something to be desired.

We only judge childhoods from the one childhood we experience. Toni has a happy childhood, he has everything he asks for. Maybe we perpetuate or recreate our childhoods to keep life alive.

Anthony and Toni look at each other, the looking and thinking goes on forever. They stand apart to admire the picture in front of them. Toni's head leans on me but he wants to move to daddy. This is the longest minute of my life.

Say hello to your daddy, I urge Toni. You can always tell a child what to do.

Hello daddy, he whispers. Toni is not shy, he just deals with this new experience in a cautious way. He is still too young to know resentment and fear and guilt.

Hello, whispers his father and the emotion in his voice scares me. He doesn't move his eyes from the boy. Something is happening between them. I see tears in Anthony's eyes, his lip trembles, his hands are shaking.

Come to me son, Anthony smiles after an eternity. Toni hugs daddy. I want to hug both of them and cry all the tears I never cried. I have to be strong for all of us. There is no hesitation, both know who they are, daddy and son recognise each other instantly.

Can I come to you for holidays, Toni breaks the silence.

Any time, you come whenever you want to, says Anthony.

Samantha has two daddies but I only have you, says Toni.

I only have you, says Anthony.

I want to say that all I have is these two boys and that I love them, but I have to take one step at the time.

What are you doing, asks Toni. He got into a habit of asking everybody what they are doing. Anthony does not know that, he does not know anything about little boys or about Toni. He forgets about me as he shows the stones to Toni and explains to him every part of the cutting process. He pulls his son on his lap and even let Toni hold the stone on a cutting wheel.

How old are you, he asks.

I am five. My birthday will be on 20th June, says Toni with five fingers up in the air.

I know that Anthony is calculating.

And so clever, says Anthony.

Did you know, he asks me.

No. What is he asking? Did I know about Mark or the pregnancy or the opal.

Why did you leave?

I wanted to finish my degree and find a job.

And did you?

I am teaching in Sydney.

Does he want to know about Mark, does he want to know if I know about the stolen opal. I suspected even then, of course, and the suspicion made it impossible for me to stay. I was as much to blame as Anthony, opal was there and Mark had enough of it. Why should he have all the luck? I didn't want Mark to know that I knew. I didn't even want Anthony to know that I knew, I suppose even Anthony did not want me to know. Perhaps we were all a little ashamed of who we were. Being a ratter is the lowest sort of being in Lighting Ridge. Only being a ratter in your best mate's claim is lower. But I don't know if Anthony is a ratter. I don't know for sure if Anthony ever did anything wrong.

It is always your family that make your life either blissfully happy or totally miserable, smiles Anthony.

Probably both.

I wonder how Anthony lives as a cripple and a ratter. Nobody knows about him ratting, of course. Except Mark. Do they have an agreement not to tell what each did to the other?

What goes around comes around, says Anthony.

The law of the boomerang, I smile.

Anthony never looked for me after I left. Maybe he felt guilty, maybe he felt, that I wouldn't want to live with a cripple, maybe he blamed me.

Did I try to make up to Mark for what Anthony has done? For what I suspected Anthony has done? Did I somehow pay for the stolen opal? The only thing for me to do was to go away.

Can we stay for Christmas, asks Toni.

Of course, son.

Toni and I put our Christmas presents in a car to go to daddy's place on Christmas Eve. We want to surprise Anthony. It is a hot summer evening and the crickets are making their mating noises all over the place. I turn the radio on. It doesn't matter how many times the old Silent Night has been sung it still carries the magic. The familiar tunes of the carols inspire love. Maybe that is why Jesus was born in the first place. Toni and I sing along as I drive to Anthony's place.

Christmas on Lightning Ridge opal fields is like a beautiful melody played somewhere far away. You can barely hear it but it stirs your whole being.

I knock on Anthony's door.

Go away, he growls.

I pretend not to hear him. Toni rushes in. Anthony holds his son and I see tears in his eyes.

Toni wants to spend Christmas Eve with you.

He can stay, says Anthony looking away from me. He doesn't say if he wants me to go. Anthony is angry. Maybe he is always angry but he hides his anger behind a smile. Tonight he is drunk and he is not worried about hiding. Maybe Christmas Eve does that to people.

Toni has no way of knowing that Anthony is drunk, Toni has never seen a drunken person.

Merry Christmas, I say bending down to Anthony's level to give him a hug. This is the first contact we had in years. I can feel him shudder.

What are you doing for Christmas?

Not much, I hope. Have a beer.

We can have lunch together?

Where?

I'll cook it here if you don't mind.

What would you like to do for Christmas, Anthony asks his son.

Can we go yabbing?

It'll be too hot, I say.

It's never too hot for yabbing, says Anthony.

We are creating Christmas memories for our son.

We can go for a swim in the bore as well, says Anthony.

Wouldn't you rather watch a nice video, I try.

I want to go yabbing with dad, says Anthony,

Yabbing it is, says Anthony. You can stay home and watch a video, says Anthony to me.

It's been awhile since I have been yabbing. I'll come.

I have never been yabbing but Toni does not need to know that. Toni and I watched Marilyn and her children catch cray fish yabbies in the bore drain. I didn't want Toni to get dirty and catch the burrs on his clothes but obviously he also wanted to catch yabbies.

I brought some fruit punch and ice cream and chocolate cake.

Can we stay with daddy tonight, begs Toni. I look at Anthony.

If you like. There is a room ready.

All right.

I love you mum, says Toni. And you dad.

Anthony puts a tape on and the silent night trembles out among the gum trees as we look at the starry night. Anthony spots a satellite and we follow its path.

I smile but all the time tears are trying to come to wash away everything that has ever been wrong.

The smell of coffee wakes me up the next morning and I hear Anthony and Toni whispering in the kitchen.

Surprise, surprise, calls Toni. We made a Christmas tree, mum.

There is a little native bush covered with cotton wool and strips of coloured paper and there are presents under it.

It's going to be a scorcher. The snow will melt, I laugh.

It's only a pretend snow, explains Toni.

Anthony opens his present. His son gave him a silk shirt.

Anthony made a didgeridoo for Toni. They try to blow a tune into it but they can barely make a hollow sound.

Let me try the didge, I grab the long instrument.

Aboriginal legend says that women must not to play it. They become pregnant if they do, warns Anthony.

I am not likely to get pregnant ever again but Anthony does not know that. Maybe he is thinking of Toni growing up all alone. Would he want me to be the mother of his child again? Would he like to father another child? Would he be able to?

Men father children in one glorious mating moment but women mother men and children for the rest of their lives, I remember mum saying.

Anthony missed out on his fathering with Toni, maybe he would like to be a real father to a baby.

I wish I had a baby brother, says Toni. Children these days know all about baby making. Is there an unspoken conspiracy going on between the three of us.

Maybe, I say. No need to spoil the moment.

This is my bestest Christmas ever, says Toni.

I gave Toni a book we made together. It is called my family. There are mementoes and pictures and letters. There is nanny and poppy and daddy and mummy and everybody is smiling. There is a picture of Anthony and myself as we were when we were very much in love. There are our wedding photos. Our heads are touching as we lean over the pictures. We are the only people in the whole world that want to see every snapshot of Toni's growing up. Nobody else could possibly be delighted about these most sacred memories.

I'll never lose this didge, says Anthony. This is my best present ever. And the book, he quickly corrects himself.

I wish I could surrender my dreams and settle here where Toni found home.

What did you get for your last Christmas, asks Anthony.

I forget. We went to the zoo with Debbie, says Toni. He doesn't even remember Jack or the presents or the party.

Are we yabbing today or what? Says Anthony.

Toni squeals with delight and hangs onto his dad.

We need some cotton and meat and a net, says Anthony.

Tell me what to do, I say.

Get some cold drinks. There is a bottle and you can put some ice in it.

Anthony wheels himself on the side of the road and we follow along the bore drain. Soon my fingernails are filled with mud and my feet are full of burrs and I am sweaty and sunburnt. The flies cover the smelly mess that used to be the chuck steak I brought for bait. Fortunately the meat smells worse than I do.

We are going to have a party, Toni chirps.

How many did we get? Father and son count the dangerous looking crayfish in the bucket. I don't tell Anthony that the long crayfish tentacles remind me of cockroaches. I will have to eat yabbies for the first time in my life.

We got eighteen, dad; Toni is beaming with excitement.

I am aware that neither of us will ever forget this Christmas. There were other Christmases I will never forget but this may be the first memorable Christmas for our son.

I remember how mum used to help me create Christmas presents for everybody. We grew little punnets of flowers, we dried rose petals and sewed little sachets for them, and we made cards. Mum made a pretty new dress for me every Christmas. She made ribbons for my plats of the same material. Sometimes she made a little handbag I took to church on Christmas. Mum put coins in my bag so I could give a gift to Jesus for his birthday.

The silent night and the baby in a manger enchanted me and I was grateful to the kings for the gifts and to the angel for giving good news and to the shepherds for keeping watch over the holy family.

Maybe yabbing is what Christmas will mean to Anthony. I hope it brings the same magic of Christmas to him.

We return to the camp.

There is nothing as beautiful as the sunset in Lightning Ridge, says Anthony to his son pointing at the crimson, blue and violet in the west sky. If you look at the sky before the sun disappears you can see anything you want to see. There are angels and Father Christmas and opals.

My two boys gaze at the ever-changing evening sky. It is easy to believe in heaven and Jesus on the evening like this.

Remember this picture because God created it especially for your Christmas. It will be gone when the stars come to cover the sky, Anthony tells his son.

Can you boil a big pot of water and drop a handful of salt in it, says Anthony to me. There is a lemon to go with it.

This is the best Christmas dinner ever, says Anthony.

Next day I bring Toni and let him look for colourful chips in front of the camp. He gets bored with opal and begins to build castles out of the opal dirt. He creates a little footpath and people walking on it. Toni is used to solitary games and he talks to imaginary people.

Anthony and I stand close to the window watching our son in the opal dirt. Toni looks at his magnificent white sand stone castle from every side. Suddenly he levels the ground again. The dust rises and settles it is easier to shape it the second time around.

Where creation ends, destruction begins, smiles Anthony.

The need to create is stronger than the wish to have, I say.

We are discovering the world and life through our son.

I'd like to play soccer with Toni, Anthony says in an even voice. What do you wish for?

I have everything I want, I say.

I hand Anthony a drink and our fingers touch. Anthony holds my hand and I lean over so our heads touch. I don't dare speak.

That was nice, he says.

We shouldn't be afraid of each other, I say.

But we can hurt each other.

We probably will.

Don't be a pessimist.

Someone once said that a pessimist is a husband of an optimist.

Toni wanders in.

Can we stay with you forever, daddy, he asks looking at Anthony. Daddy became his favourite word. Novelty, I suppose.

You'll have to ask mum, smiles Anthony looking at me.

I want to ask if he would like us to stay but I don't want to know. Not yet. I have no right to play with their emotions until I decide what I want to do.

Do you like it here, I divert Toni's question.

He knows that daddy and I love him. There is an unmistakable feeling of closeness. We belong together.

Children make things look simple, I say to Anthony.

How come Toni does not go to school with you, asks Anthony.

It isn't good for parents and children to be at the same school. It would take too long to explain that mum would never allow Anthony to mix with the children from the slum school where I work.

Can we stay with dad. I like it here, says Anthony.

Maybe.

Anthony explains to his son how the colours are made in the opal. Toni does not move from Anthony's side. Maybe I should not let him get so close to his dad. He will miss him even more. I am afraid of closeness and afraid to destroy it.

Without Anthony Toni will never have a family. I am trying to believe that family is not what it used to be. Any loving group of people can be a family. How do I explain this to Toni. Maybe Toni will accept whatever comes, but children still like mummy and daddy family.

How long are you staying, asks Anthony casually.

School starts in February.

Can I go to school here, dad, asks Toni.

Have to ask mum.

Toni doesn't even look at me.

I leave Toni with Marilyn and drive towards Anthony's place. I have to think, we have to talk.

Can I do anything for you, I ask.

Like what?

Anything.

I am all right. I have a phone now and the shops deliver, says Anthony. He shows no emotion. No anger, no love, no guilt, nothing. Maybe I do not mean anything to him. Christmas is over. I wish he would accuse me of something, say anything.

Why is Toni not with you?

I didn't plan to come here.

Why did you?

I wish to cry in his lap to bring back the closeness we once shared. The memory of our love overwhelms me.

I was just passing by. I'll bring Toni tomorrow.

That's good.

Everything changed while I was away. You have all the modern conveniences, I say. I remember how we planted the flowers under the tree there.

Everything changes.

We buy everything we want.

I don't need much, smiles Anthony.

The things you buy, don't mean the same.

I accept life as it is. I can't run away from it.

You are lucky to be able to settle down like that.

You have to stop running. You have to start living.

Maybe Anthony really came to terms with his wheel chair. Doesn't he want to go down the mine?

What makes you happy?

I can cut opal, hear the birds, watch television, read, I can cook for myself.

I am sure you can do everything you put your mind to.

Nobody can do everything. Knowing that, I am grateful for the things I can, he smiles.

What can't you do?

I can't fly to the moon.

So we'll have to stay on the ground.

Life goes on, says Anthony.

What is life?

What makes the blood flow and put fire in your eyes. It just is.

What puts the fire in your eyes, I ask.

Look at this, Anthony points to the opal he is shaping. There is fire in the stone but right in the middle is the sand.

You like cutting.

Keeps me out of mischief.

You don't wish to be rich?

What is rich? One car or ten? One house or a hundred, one lover or all lovers. No person is ever rich enough. Wanting to be rich is an addiction no money can cure. Being rich or poor is a state of mind, says Anthony.

What is your state of mind, I quiz.

I am all right, he backs away.

Are you angry with me?

No.

Anthony and I never talked this much when we lived together. We were too busy making love and building a home.

Technically we are still married.

Why didn't you divorce me? Didn't you want to get married again?

No. Did you?

What would I want with a wife.

I want to ask if he still wants me or if he still needs sex but I have no right to know.

I see Mark at the supermarket. He carries a baby and his wife wheels a trolley with a little girl hanging on. The children seem happy and their mother vibrantly contented. She is a very ordinary, rather fat girl with masses of reddish curls over her shoulders.

Mark hasn't changed, he still has the boyish slender body and his hair is cropped even shorter. He looks like most Australian boys his age.

Mark's wife, Kim, is a community nurse, Marilyn tells me. Kim works part time, she is visiting elderly and disabled.

How come she is working. She is supposed to be rich and she has two little children. Surely she can afford to stay home. I am surprised that Mark lets her work.

Mark's mother Mojca looks after the children.

I would like to say hello to mum's friend Mojca but I am not ready yet to bring Mark's people into my life.

Kim probably likes a bit of space from her mother in law, says Marilyn. She also likes her independence. She once said that she could never hold her hand out for spending money and then report to her husband what she spent it on.

Maybe Mark isn't as generous with money as one would believe.

Rich can't afford to be generous. If you begin being generous you soon stop being rich. Einstein said that if the riches were divided equally today, next year the same people would be rich and poor again.

Some people are just not meant to be rich.

I think Mark was born to be rich, says Marilyn. He is a natural accountant.

You think that he is tight?

Money attracts money. Bees go for honey, flies go for shit.

Maybe Mark's prosperity attracted me, his new car, his beautiful house, exciting people coming to do business in his home.

I have to forget Mark. I have forgotten Mark.

I was bored with Anthony that's all. I wanted out, I wanted to see what the world had to offer. I am all right now, I have a good job. Mum is happy only Toni wants to stay with his daddy.

I owe it to Toni to stay in Lightning Ridge. I have to give it a go. I gave him life. He asked for his daddy and he will have him, pain or no pain. At least for awhile.

Everybody loves Toni. He has the olive complexion of his father and my green eyes. I love this little boy more than I ever imagined loving anybody.

I have to forget the past. People go to a therapist to help them overcome childhood traumas but there is nothing painful in my childhood. Everybody liked me, everybody was proud of me. The teachers praised me, the kids wanted me for a best friend, my hair was shiny and wavy and my skin never had freckles or pimples. Mum made the best lunches for me, boys liked me, my shoes were polished, my breath did not smell, my fingernails were always clean. There is nothing to overcome, there is no pain in my past.

I have never been so beautiful or so ugly that people would hate me for it. I was never particularly clever although I am not dumb. I was never the richest or the poorest, I never stood out in any way. I am proportionally built in healthy symmetry and mum often told me that I am pretty. People say that I have a pleasant voice and this is a real asset when one is a teacher.

I don't think about the brief sexual encounter Mark and I had. I don't agonise about it or lose sleep. Mark was there when I wanted to forget about the events around me. He provided a relief when things were difficult.

I walk past Mark's place and he calls over the fence.

You are back?

Just for a holiday.

Staying with Anthony.

I am staying with Marilyn.

How are things?

I am all right.

Married?

Yes, to Anthony.

I am married.

I saw your family.

Kim sees Anthony once a week.

What does she do for him?

Physio.

That's great, I say.

Come in for a drink, Mark invites.

Inside we hug as friends do. You look good. You haven't changed, we echo each other's words. We embrace some more and kiss. We kissed before so holding back would be unnatural. The second time seems easier, only it means less. The pleasant sensation is still there.

We've been through a lot together, says Mark.

Do you have regrets?

Maybe it's best to let the sleeping dogs lie.

Does Kim know?

Nobody knows.

We don't mention what nobody knows. We don't know what each one of us regrets.

Maybe we all learned something from the experience.

You can't undo what was, says Mark. His seriousness indicates that we have Anthony's condition in our thoughts.

Everything happens for a reason, I suppose. The water once muddied is never clean again.

Unless you filter it through rocks and sand.

It would take a lifetime.

Are you happy? I ask. Do I want to know? The silence frighten us, it has to be filled.

As happy as one can be.

Is that good or bad? Do I want him to say that he still loves me. He never actually said that. He holds my burning cheeks in his cupped hands and we kiss again. We have to heal the pain we cannot talk about.

Come with me to Dubbo tomorrow, whispers Mark.

I'll see, I say breathless. It would be so easy to go, it might be enjoyable, nobody needs to know, nobody needs to be hurt, it would bring us closer, I try to convince myself. I could leave Toni with his father.

At the thought of Anthony I stand up. On the way home I change my mind about Dubbo. I don't need to be closer to Mark. I came to give Toni a chance to be with his father.

I drive to the Three mile.

I leave the car about a kilometre away from Anthony's camp. I pretend that I am a tourist specking for opal but it doesn't really matter to anybody what I do. I don't matter. I want to find out about Anthony's life before I make a decision about my own.

I peer through the bushes into the distance where Anthony's camp is. I see Kim go to Anthony's place. I get up and brush the sharp stones from my knees. I move closer and look through the window hiding like a thief. I see Kim giving Anthony a glass and a pill. She makes coffee and they sit facing each other. She laughs at something he says. She puts her cup down and massages his shoulders. Her hand comes to the front and he covers it with his hand and guides her towards the neck. Maybe he is showing her where it hurts. Kim takes his cup and puts it in the sink. She draws the curtain casually. Maybe the sun is blinding her, maybe it is too hot.

Through the curtain I see the shape of their bodies close together. Of course, they would be together if she is giving him physiotherapy. Maybe she has to change his underwear. Maybe she has to wash him.

Maybe she gave him a Viagra pill, the thought makes me smile. I am scared. Maybe she has some other pills to make Anthony happy.

I see Kim leaving. Soon Anthony wheels himself out to sit on the veranda. I am amazed at how well he manages. Maybe he doesn't need me at all.

I once loved Anthony. I left everything behind to be with him. The things one gives up are always more attractive than those one keeps.

I remember that day when I first returned from Sydney to be with Anthony. We sat on the banks of Narran Lake in the middle of the wilderness and watched the reflection of the sky in the water. Brolgas danced their love dances, they had no eyes for Anthony and me. Anthony spread the blanket over the young flowery grass. Millions of white daisies just opened their little button head flowers. We lay there until slowly our fingers met and our hands and our whole bodies merged silently while brolgas danced. Ageless white bodies of the tree trunks echoed with the mating calls of the birds. Hundreds of the water birds frolicked around us as we lay naked under the sky in the vastness of the continent.

I went mining underground with Anthony. At night as I closed my eyes I saw the colours sparkling. Anthony told me that this happens to every new miner. We talked about things we will do when we find opal. We worked for months without actually seeing any colour. In our spare time we finished our camp. Anthony made most of the furniture and I sanded and varnished it and made curtains. We never found opal. I became impatient, I wanted more. I regretted my decision to come to the Ridge. My hands became chafed, my face lost its glow.

Welcome to the real world, said my friend, as I returned to Sydney.

I often go to Three mile. I hide behind the bushes to look at the camp my son would like to live in. I feel reluctant to go in.

Once I see Kim walk straight in. She takes off Anthony's shirt and runs her fingers down his spine before she begins massaging his shoulders and neck. She stands behind him and his head is cradled in her chest. She moves to the front then and plants a casual kiss on top of Anthony's head. She unscrews a tube and spreads something on the palms of her hands. Anthony pulls her closer, his hands are on Kim's big buttocks and his head is buried now in her bosom. What are they doing? Her legs are spread wide on each side of Anthony's legs so her skirt covers both of them. She is massaging his back, bent over him she is reaching down to his hips. Suddenly I want to be where Kim is and do to Anthony what she is doing, what they are doing to each other. I feel sexual sensations I never knew existed, I want to go in and beg them to include me into the magic of their union. Kim's fleshy body is bouncing over my husband. I wish to get closer. How come they did not draw the curtains this time. What would Mark say? Maybe Kim is doing something medical to

Anthony but I can only see their closeness. They wouldn't have an affair like that almost in the open. Anybody could be watching. After an eternity Kim steps back and smiles at Anthony patting his cheeks before she moves away.

Kim spreads her legs before she puts her arms out for Anthony to put his arms on top of hers and they both get up and stand like that without moving. After a few moments they step to the side, Anthony is out of the chair. Anthony stretches to full height while leaning on Kim. He puts his arms on Kim's shoulders and she pushes his buttocks this way and that. They dance like that on the spot. Kim pulls Anthony left and right and forward and backward for a long time before they disappear into the bathroom. When they come back Anthony's hair is wet and he smiles at Kim as she helps him back into a chair.

Love is what you do, not what you dream, I remember mum's words. She wasn't talking about sex but about all the little things one does for another. Maybe Kim loves Anthony, maybe love is what she does for him.

I want to do all these things for Anthony.

Kim stays for over an hour. I wonder what they talk about. A cold sober emptiness envelops me. Life goes on as if I never existed. Time is all we have, we walk a little way, we play, we mate and preserve life and then we die. The simplicity of it is all there is.

If I choose to stay here, I will forever dream about the rest of the world and the life I could have had. If I go to Sydney I will long to be back and be a family with Anthony and Toni. I sit on the fence and all the time Toni is growing up without knowing where his home is.

Maybe Anthony doesn't want me to stay. Maybe he would never have me live with him again. He has his freedom and Kim looks after him.

Life is seeking the answers, said mum. There are no answers, there is only an eternal seeking.

My parents excluded all others from their lives and maybe the pain of that exclusion made their union more precious. They gained a sense of commitment and goodness and righteousness. They must have been tempted but resisting the temptation strengthened their commitment.

I did not resist Mark, I surrendered for the moment but the quick passionate, hungry sex did not change anything. After we dressed I felt empty and uncertain and unworthy. I could do it again, I can do it now and I know that I will not find what I am looking for.

What is Kim sharing with Anthony? He is a handsome man and maybe being a helpless paraplegic adds to the excitement like danger does.

Is there nothing sacred and perfect?

Kim takes her bag, goes into the car and drives away.

Anthony looks after her through the window for a moment and then wheels himself to the cutting machine.

Thank God nobody knows that I am hiding in the bushes.

My knees hurt from kneeling on the rough opal dirt. My body is stiff so I straighten out and walk to my car a few hundred metres away.

My loneliness turns into despair. My mind cannot reach Jack. He went bush walking with his mates. He doesn't know that Lightning Ridge holds the essence of my existence. I want Toni to have a father, I want us to have a home. I want to be loved. I need a man to love me and make love to me. A man who loves my son.

When you find a good man who will father your children, cherish him. Praise your man for the good things and he will do good things. Children come and go but the man will grow old with you and you will remember together, said mum.

I will have to give up something to get something else. I will have to do it before Toni grows up and goes away.

The starry nights of Lightning Ridge are calling me home, there are the glorious sunsets, the enormous sky and the crickets chirping all night. The primeval vastness of the unspoiled land is promising pain and joy. I need this intensity, I need to feel essential to life.

I leave Toni with his father as I go to Sydney for the weekend to bring up my belongings. I tell Jack that Toni would like to live with his father.

What about you, says Jack.

I want to be where Toni is, I say.

It's your life, says Jack. We both like the freedom we offer each other.

Toni wants to stay with his dad, I explain to mum.

I apply for a job in Lightning Ridge school and enrol my son. The Department of Education offers me a house as well as a job. I am set. Toni will have his father.

Toni is the only person I would make sacrifices for.

Without sacrifice you will never know what real love is, mum's words echo from the past. I want Toni to have a sense of a family like I had. Maybe we only know one way to live and that is the way our parents lived. Maybe the whole reason for a family is to perpetuate it. I don't know if it is possible to give Toni a sense of exclusive intimacy I had with my family. Anthony and I are not willing to admit our sins even to ourselves. We live in some pretend world of niceness but the love and commitment have been strangled with lies.

Maybe perfection remains the light on the hill.

You can only take from the family what you put into it, said my mother. Family is not given to you, you make it.

Everybody keeps telling me that these days women don't have to put up with things our mothers did but deep down girls want to live the life their mothers lived with their fathers even when the girls know that their parents did not have the ideal life. The memory of one's growing up is a magic time. We measure the childhoods by the only childhood we ever had.

Maybe children have no right to expect the same kind of life their parents had. We live by different rules, we are not willing to put as much into the family as they did. Their kind of life does not exist anymore, maybe that kind of life was wrong, maybe our mothers weren't really adoring our fathers. Maybe they weren't as faithful to them as they would have us believe.

Marriage is like a cake, said mum. Good ingredients and good timing will make sure that you will enjoy it.

I want to start again but the ingredients of my life are tainted. Maybe it is too late for me to fall in love or to love or be loved as I want to be loved. It is too late to choose the man to father my children because Toni is the only child I will ever have.

There is a chaotic disorder inside me. I wonder what horrors other people hide behind their smiles.

Maybe Toni doesn't have to have everything he wants, other children live without daddies quite happily, I try to convince myself but the years of mum's teaching follow me and I know that I will never be happy if Toni is not happy. Maybe fidelity offers its own rewards, maybe the uniqueness of experience makes the experience unique. Maybe one rose is more special than a paddock of roses.

I worry about mum. She is a lonely old woman, I say to Anthony when I return from Sydney.

Why don't you bring her with you.

Mum is attached to her routine. She used to wash on Thursdays and iron on Fridays, clean the house on Saturdays and weed the garden on Sunday. On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday she went to the office and had the same conversations with the old lawyer who does the same mundane office work she does. Mum knows the butcher and the baker and the milkman, they all know that she is alive as long as she pays her bills.

You need someone like that here, smiles Anthony.

I can hear her complain that I am risking my boy's future putting him with all the misfits and fortune hunters. It's not healthy for the boy. What sort of school is there in Lightning Ridge with all the ratbags parents coming from all over the world.

Tell Nan to come, says Toni.

I wish she would, I say.

Why not, says Anthony.

Come here Nan. It is good here, Toni chirps excited on the phone.

When are you coming home, asks Nan.

I want to stay with dad. Can you come?

How are you, I ask mum on the phone.

I sorted the photos of our family, says mum bravely.

That's good but how are you?

I tidied the house, I emptied all the drawers and cleaned all the cupboards, says mum evenly.

I know you did, but how is your life?

My house is my life now, says mum.

This was her first Christmas without us, I tell Anthony. She tried to sound cheerful but I know that she was swallowing tears as she tried not to beg me to come home. Our family and her work meant the whole life for her. Her boss retired and her office has closed. She can't escape the loneliness of our home where the memories are.

Life is as sacred as you make it, mum used to say. Traditions die if you become too lazy to observe them.

I would like to meet your mum, says Anthony.

Mum goes to the cemetery every Sunday to change the flowers and cry on dad's grave. She organised a prayer group that visits our departed every November for the All Saints Day. Mum would miss that in Lightning Ridge, I tell Anthony. Australians don't even remember their dead on All Saints day.

They have Melbourne cup to make November special. People dress in their finery to bet on a horse. It's an Australian tradition. It's almost like thanksgiving in America or like all Saints day, says Anthony.

Thanksgiving sounds better than betting. We don't cook a turkey and the family does not say grace together on the Melbourne cup day. We meet on the racecourse and eat pies, hot dogs and hamburgers made by the fund-raisers.

The funds raised go to the Catholic Church, so maybe there is some good in getting together for the sake of the church and to keep us close to Jesus, says Anthony.

Come and stay with us for awhile, I say to mum.

Maybe, concedes mum.

Why didn't your parents come to our wedding?

They hoped that I will come to my senses. They didn't know about pregnancy. Their plan for me was to rise above and be extraordinary. I suppose I ran away from this great responsibility.

It must have been hard to leave them, says Anthony.

I was in love, we were in love, we believed in love, we were enormously happy, I say.

Until you left.

There was the road and everything told me to go for it and finish what I was meant to do. I crave ordinariness like some people crave excitement.

You wanted to please your parents.

Tell me about your family, I say.

Mum died when I was young, says Anthony. She was only thirty-three. To me she looked like a young girl.

I am sorry.

It's been a long time.

What was she like?

She had soft white hands and her eyes were the colour of the sky. Her pale skin made her seem delicate. She had the most beautiful long blond curls. There was a smile on her face when she patted my hair and kissed my cheeks. She loved me. She looked happy.

Was she Italian?

I think mum's mother was a Ukrainian migrant living in Italy. She was probably married to an Italian but I never heard about my grandparents.

What was your father like?

Dad was Italian, says Anthony evenly but his eyes darken and his voice drops.

Were they happy?

Dad's family immigrated with us to Australia soon after I was born. I have no idea why. I remember dad tell his sister that he only married mum for her money. He said that the bitch does not deserve to have it all. The words followed me all my life, smiles Anthony.

I was there right in front of them, about eight years old, and they didn't even think that I would remember their words. I saw mum behind the door then and she silently moved into her bedroom and closed the door. I followed her soon after and she hugged me so hard then that I almost lost my breath.

I hold Anthony's hand. Maybe we should have talked about our families years ago.

She died to prove me wrong, said dad to his sister when she came for mum's funeral, tells Anthony.

She had to have the last word, said dad's sister.

What did she mean?

Dad was always telling mum that there was nothing wrong with her and that she was only pretending to be sick. And she was dying all that time.

Sometimes people say things they don't mean.

Dad's relations sometimes whispered as they looked towards mum's bedroom. I began to hate them.

Was mum rich, I ask.

Depends on what one calls rich, I suppose. She inherited some money from someone, I think. To me mum was the most beautiful woman on Earth. She was a bit older than dad and he sometimes called her the old bag.

What did she die of.

Breast cancer. I heard her arguing with dad in the bedroom. She was saying that he is hurting her. I assumed that he caused the tumour. When she went to hospital for the first time. I heard her tell dad that she will never let them cut off her breasts. She would rather die.

I was there so they whispered but I heard the words and I was terrified.

I lost a night's sleep worrying, said dad to his sister.

The bitch never cared about you, said dad's sister.

You don't like your father.

I was afraid for mum. I grew up believing that dad caused all her pain. I saw her crying and she tried to hide her tears from me. She loved me. Maybe dad was jealous of me. He did not love me.

How do you know that?

I can't explain, but I always knew that dad hated me.

Was mum sick long?

She swallowed half a bottle of pills to make me feel guilty, dad told his sister. If she wanted to be dead, why save half a bottle of pills.

The bitch brought this on herself. I told you what she was like. God knows she deserves what she gets, said dad's sister.

Dad was probably waiting for mum to die so he would inherit whatever it was that he married her for.

Why did they hate each other?

Who knows. Maybe mum loved him or maybe she did not love him. Maybe he was jealous because she was beautiful and he was pathetic. I don't know how she could ever love a man like that. He is a selfish bastard. He turned her into his slave.

She could have walked away from him. It's a free country.

She seemed to have invisible chains on her feet.

Maybe dad never meant what he said.

I never forgot his words.

People remember weird things.

People live weird lives.

She probably loved him.

I was fourteen when she died. I left home then and never returned. Dad soon remarried and had more children, which I never met. He married a young girl from Italy. I lost touch long ago.

I lean my head on Anthony's shoulder and he caresses my hair.

What is dad like?

Greedy and ugly. I hate the bastard.

You must have some good memories of him.

At the beginning he tried to be nice when mum was around but he kicked me when she wasn't. I kept out of his way.

I am sorry, I snuggle close to Anthony.

Why did you marry me? Anthony looks up at me.

I was pregnant.

That's an honest answer.

Did you expect me to lie?

Why did you stay with me after you lost the baby?

You were my first love and my husband.

How long did you love me?

Are we making an inventory?

It would be nice if we could be honest with each other.

Why did you marry me? I ask.

Because you were pregnant.

It would be so easy to put my arms around Anthony and wrap my body into his to make us both bigger and stronger and happier and more lovable. If only life could be a simple addition, if more bodies would mean more strength, more hearts, more love, more happiness.

I wish Anthony would say that he loves me but neither of us seems able to surrender yet. Anthony never asked me about my sex life or love life or life at all.

Why did you stay with me after you lost the baby? asks Anthony again.

I believed that you will find me a big opal.

And you left when I didn't.

Yes.

I want to ask if he still loves me but I don't know if I still love him. One is never as sure of love as in the first moments of loving.

Tell me about Kim, I say.

I know Kim from Sydney, Anthony cheers up at the mention of Kim. Her mum used to look after me when my mum was in hospital. We lived on the same block until we were twelve, says Anthony. We played together and told tales about each other.

You are the same age?

We were in the same class.

What happened then?

They moved from Blacktown to Coogee. I haven't seen her

for almost twenty years. You should talk to Kim. She is really very nice.

Should I tell Anthony that Mark is really nice and that he invited me to come with him to Dubbo.

Marilyn told me that Mark is a mining association president. He is a friend of the Mining Warden and the Mining Registrar. People look up to Mark and try to please him.

Jim came back, says Anthony.

I didn't know that he was away.

We go a long way back, Jim and I, says Anthony.

How long?

His mum took me in when mum died. He was my best friend. My only friend.

Is Jim mining again?

Russ hunted Jim out of town after you left. Jim returned to get Russ and Mark.

Why?

It's a long story.

Tell me. I am glad Anthony brings things out in the open, we had to deal with it sooner or later.

You remember when Mark, Jim and I registered claims at Three mile. Mark's claim was in the middle.

I remember.

Russ told Mark that ratters will steal his opal if he doesn't have it open cut.

I was there with you when Russ almost accused you of ratting.

Russ registered a claim down the road and he came into Mark's claim underground. He checked all our claims at night. Most of the ground on Three mile is worked out, there are underground ballrooms and corridors connecting claims. Mark's claim and our claims were on the edge of what was a very prosperous ground. They were the only solid claims.

Russ was the ratter. He wanted to be Mark's friend and partner so he had to get rid of Jim and myself. He told Mark that we were ratting in his claim.

Why?

Russ knew there was good opal; he had bulldozers and he offered to open cut Mark's claim for Mark on percentage. Both have done well out of that claim. Nobody knows exactly how much but they talk about millions.

Jim and I had three claims next to Mark's open cut. Jim built a new camp on one of them. Russ had his eye on our claims right from the start.

I don't think Mark really liked Russ. Nobody liked Russ, I say.

Russ poisoned Mark's mind against us. People know that Russ is a crook. He needed Mark who was a respectable opal buyer.

I heard someone picking in Mark's claim. I have been down before with Mark and he came into my claim whenever he wanted. I didn't go to steal, says Anthony.

We sit in silence. I feel guilty because I suspected Anthony. I don't even want to think about being unfaithful while Anthony was in hospital. I will never know if Anthony could walk away from Mark's trace? Neither will Anthony. He wasn't tested. Could he walk away if he came down the shaft and saw opal traces in the wall? How could Anthony not be jealous of Mark?

If I went down that claim and saw a stone in the clay wall, would I be tempted? Nobody would know if I took it or not. I deserve a share of Mark's opal. If it wasn't for me, Mark would never be in Lightning Ridge.

Mum used to say that you can't unscramble an egg. You can eat it scrambled or throw it away.

I looked down Mark's shaft, continues Mark. Jim and I listened and after a few minutes I saw a face look up. It was dark down the shaft but we were both sure it was Russ.

I went to investigate. The ladder was greased, one step was loose, and I slipped and fell about fifteen metres. Jim called the rescue people. They had to lift me out on a stretcher. I would have died, if Jim wasn't with me.

Mark never accused you of ratting.

He came to see me in the hospital and I threatened to sue him for compensation. He promised not to tell anyone about me being in his claim if I never mention compensation again. The hole I fell in was on the border between Mark's and my claim.

I knew that suing him would not do me any good. Mark was a golden boy with the money and I was crippled. Maybe Mark felt sorry for me, maybe he wasn't sure if I was ratting in his claim, maybe he thought that I suffered enough.

Did you tell Mark about Russ digging in his claim?

Russ told Mark that he had witnesses that he was in Dubbo that day. He also told Mark that Jim and I were ratting every night while he was away.

I would not let Russ get away with it.

What's the point? I will never walk again. If there is meant to be justice it will come around on its own.

Justice takes a long time.

Russ open cut Mark's claim and they became millionaires while I was in hospital. They have justice in their pockets. You left and I did not care anymore.

Russ became friendly towards Jim while I was in hospital. He even told Jim how sorry he was for me and that traces from Mark's claim were leading directly into Jim's claim. He offered to open-cut. Jim agreed to pay ten thousand to Russ because Russ was the only miner with the bulldozers. Jim and I scraped our last dollars to pay for the open cut. We were going to share the profits. Russ opened the claim but the opal we found barely paid expenses.

A year later the Mineral Resources office issued a letter saying that Jim had to restore the claim within six months. Russ pushed for the restoration through Mineral Resources office. We had no money for restoration.

You paid the bond for restoration? You could have forfeited the bond, I reason.

The Mineral resources office informed Jim that any future bond would be much higher if we did not fulfil our obligation and restore the claim.

Russ offered Jim to restore our open cut if I would transfer to him my claim, which was next to Jim's. Since we found no opal in Jim's open cut I willingly transferred my claim to cover restoration costs.

How much does it cost to restore a claim?

We never talked about money. It took Russ two days to push the overburden into the hole with the bulldozer.

How much do they charge for a bulldozer hour?

About one hundred dollars.

It would cost two thousand dollars at the most to restore the claim. How much was the bond?

Two thousand dollars.

You could have given Russ the bond.

We could have done that. Russ open cut the claim I gave him. He said that he found nothing. I will never know if he did or if he didn't.

Everything was settled until Jim received a Statement of Liquidated Claim from the local court for thirty two thousand dollars. This was Russ' bill for the restoration of Jim's claim. He claimed that he had to bring the dirt from a dump a couple of kilometres away.

Jim explained to the Mining Warden that I transferred my claim to Russ as a payment.

The Mining Warden asked the Mining Registrar what was the deal for the transfer of my claim. The transfer was made for one hundred dollars which is the value of the bond. Everybody knows that this figure is put on the paper every time the claim is transferred. In Lightning Ridge people deal with cash and they never state the real value of the claim.

I think it's rather silly not to get something in writing. You knew that Russ is a crook.

We all made mistakes. I was in hospital when it all started so I didn't think straight. I had no idea what sort of crook Russ really is. He can be awfully friendly when it suits him. He didn't have anything in writing either.

Did he itemise the bill?

Russ stated that there was no dirt nearby and he had to bring 18000 m3 of dirt from 400 metres away which alone cost him \$27 000.

The witnesses who carted the dirt for Russ told the court that they worked for three weeks to restore the open cuts on three mile.

What happened to the dirt taken out of Jim's open cut?

It was pushed on the edge of Jim's claim only months earlier. It should more than cover up your open cut. The loose dirt bulks up to twice the amount of dirt needed for restoration.

There were five old open cuts in the area, which Russ promised to restore at the same time as a favour to the Mineral Resources. He said that he wants to be in good books with the Mineral Resources Department so he restored old open cuts for them for free.

But all those old open cuts had bonds over them. He stole your dirt to cover other people's open cuts. Who got the bonds of those other open cuts.

Jeff the Mineral Resources officer said that he had no record of any bonds paid on those old open cuts. It was done before his time. Soon after the court case Jeff disappeared.

There must be records of inspections of the restoration? There must also be some expert opinion on how much dirt is needed.

Jim believed that justice will be done when he told the Mining Warden in the Local court what really happened. He told the court that all the dirt needed was on the edge of the open cut and that it only took a couple of days for the bulldozer to push it back into the cut.

Jeff from the Mineral Resources office witnessed that there was not enough dirt to cover the open cut. Jim argued that there was not enough dirt for all the five old open cuts but there was more than enough for his. The Mining Warden dismissed Jim claims. He said that there is never enough dirt for restoration.

Mark was called as an expert witness for Russ. He told the court how much dirt would be needed for restoration and how much the transportation would cost.

How would Mark know that?

Jim saw Jeff, Mining Warden and Mark having lunch together in the Bowling club. They were all against us. You have no hope beating the big boys.

The Mining Warden pointed out that Jim has no evidence to show that he paid for the restoration. He summed up the case saying that it looks to him that Jim tried to avoid his responsibilities. He directed Jim to pay the costs of the court and lawyers on top of the Russ' claim.

The Mineral Resources office has more power than you think, says Anthony. They are all the law and order as far as mining goes. They are the first to know where opal is found and they have the final say who is going to register and mine what.

Did Mark know that Russ stole your dirt?

Of course he knew. He wanted to punish me for something I haven't done. He punished me enough when he took my legs from under me. To think that I taught Mark everything he knows about mining.

I can't imagine Mark and Russ being friends.

People need crooks who do the dirties for them. And crooks need people who have connections.

Did Jim pay?

He transferred the claim and the camp and the machinery and the car over to Russ. Russ bulldozed the camp and open cut Jim's claim. He knew what he wanted but he also knew that Jim would not sell the claim on which he built his home.

It isn't fair.

Life isn't.

What goes around comes around.

You have to believe that to stay sane.

No wonder Jim is looking for justice.

He accused Jeff, the Mining Registrar, Mark and the Mining Warden of assisting Russ. He was there day after day. In the end they banned him from attending the local office of Mineral Resources.

Why didn't he appeal the decision of the Local court.

Jim only had a right of appeal to the Supreme court on the point of law. That means that the Supreme Court judge had to decide whether the Mining Warden had a jurisdiction to decide on the case.

The lawyer advised us to appeal. We borrowed four thousand dollars to pay a barrister to represent Jim.

We found out later that the Supreme court judge almost never overturns the decision of the Local Court. He decided that the Mining Warden had the jurisdiction to decide on the case. That sealed the case. We were broke, I was in a wheelchair. Jim and his family stayed in their caravan for awhile before they left. With Jeff gone the Mineral Resources office claimed that they have no connection to the case.

You could apply to the Freedom of Information office to obtain the evidence on the bonds paid on those old open cuts. With the new evidence you could reopen the case.

We had lots of new evidence. The old miners forfeited the bonds on other open cuts nearby. The Mineral Resources office held this money for twenty years. It accumulated to over one hundred thousand dollars. Russ and Jeff from the Mineral Resources office probably split this money after Russ restored the old open cuts. No wonder Jeff supported Russ. Nobody supported Jim.

Where money talks justice is quickly forgotten.

You should have gone to the member of the parliament or ombudsman. I try.

We should hire a good lawyer to start with but we believed in the justice. Later we should have hired a good lawyer but we were broke. No lawyer likes to work against the government unless he is well paid.

You should have talked to your Member of Parliament.

Marilyn wrote letters to the local member of parliament for Jim. The MP conferred with his colleague who is the minister of Mineral Resources. They made inquiries through the local Mineral Resources office. Jeff reported to the Minister that Jim is a suspected ratter, a known troublemaker and a nuisance. They refused to intervene on Jim's behalf.

The Mineral resources office produced a diary of all Jim's movements for their Minister. Jim went to the Premier's office in Sydney. He wanted to make an appointment to see the Premier. He was waiting there until the Premier's secretary contacted the Minister for Mineral Resources. The Minister explained that he knows about the case and dismissed Jim's complaint.

Jim stood there and insisted to see the Premier. He was desperate by then, exhausted and almost suicidal. Two armed security officers escorted Jim out of the Premier's Department. He asked the Attorney General and Ombudsman to intervene but they all refereed the case back to the local Mineral Resources office, which dismissed Jim as a madman.

Jim made a complaint to the Opposition leader who also referred him to the Mineral Resources Minister who referred him to the local Mineral resources office.

In the end Jim made a long report to the ICAC-

Independent Commission Against Corruption. He waited for months until they wrote that his case could not be investigated. They did not have enough resources to investigate every case and they did not have to give reasons why they would not take his case.

Jim always believed that somewhere higher up he would find justice.

In the end Jim wrote to the Premier. It was during the election campaign so the Premier ordered the minister for Mineral Resources to organise an independent inquiry.

Jim was elated. Two men in black suits came from Sydney and inquired. These independent men were paid by the government, they inquired and reported to the Minister for Mineral Resources. The minister ordered that the independent body ICAC investigate but ICAC did not see it necessary to do so since it has many more important things to do. They have all done what they could.

What a white-wash. Who paid for the inquiry?

The government ordered the independent inquiry into the dealings of their Minister's responsibility and the government found that everything was fine. The government paid tax payers' money to the independent men who told Jim that the government was innocent. What more do you want?

Little crooks are on the ground but the big crooks are higher up holding the umbrella for little crooks, said Jim.

Why did they come to investigate in the first place?

To satisfy the electorate and show that THEY are innocent.

Jim became obsessed. For the whole year he begged people to help him write letters of complaints, he hitch hiked to Sydney and Canberra to talk to media, lawyers and politicians but they all dismissed him. In the end he forgot who he was complaining against, he attacked the whole system and the system kicked him back. To the politicians Jim was just a nuisance.

I will die fighting for justice. There is nothing else for me. I lost faith in the system and in humanity. Nobody can compensate me for that ever. I just want to bring it out in the open. You haven't heard the last of me, said Jim and left.

Jeff and most of the staff in the Mineral Resources Office left soon after and were replaced with new innocent people.

In the meantime Dunny sold the farm, bought a house in town and lived happily ever after.

Here is a letter Jim wrote to ICAC, says Anthony and I read about the things Anthony already told me.

The persecution against me began when I brought to the Department's attention that local Mineral Resources officers and the Chief Mining Warden favour some miners at the expense of others.

I have paid an enormous price for making a complaint. The obstruction, slander, and persecution on every level has been directed against me.

I became an example to other miners not to rock the boat.

Miners know that Mineral Resources officers can and will destroy your mining ventures with little or no recourse available, if you are not in good books with them.

My complaints are always refereed back to the Lightning Ridge Mineral Resources officers who appear to have succeeded to discredit the validity of my complaints.

I have been stalked wherever I go. I feel powerless and have nowhere to turn. They created for me a feeling of desperation and fear for my safety. They destroyed me.

You don't have to read the lot, he repeats himself a lot, says Anthony. Jim had a huge box of similar letters.

In the end Jim forgot who his real enemy was. Russ did favours for the Mineral Resources officers and they backed him up. I believe that Jeff and Russ split the bond money.

There are honest people around who could witness that Jim is an honest person, I say.

In a small mining town people don't like to witness against sharks like Mining inspector and the big boys like Mark and Russ. A miner never knows when he will need one of them.

I don't believe that Mark is a crook.

It's a small mining town. Mark mines, cuts and buys opal. He is on most of the committees doing good works for the town.

Jim comes in without knocking. I knew a happy red haired guitar strumming Jim who lived next to Anthony's camp with his Aboriginal girlfriend Fay.

Hello stranger, long time no see, I extend my hands to Jim as he comes through the door.

I saw you going to Mark's place, Jim ignores my hands. He is not the same man I knew. I feel that he wants to cause trouble between me and Anthony. I didn't tell Anthony about my visit to Mark.

I just told Tina about Russ and Mark, Anthony explains.

You can tell Mark that Jim is back, says Jim.

I don't carry messages for anyone, I say angrily.

I'll come when you are alone, says Jim.

You have to understand, says Anthony when we are alone.

I don't owe anything to Jim. If anyone should have a grudge, it is you. He owes you.

It's a long story, says Anthony. Jim is like a brother to me. I'll invite him and Fay for dinner if you don't mind. I'll explain to him.

Explain what?

Leave it to me.

If I am to cook dinner and spend time with them I have to know what is going on.

Jim thinks that you and Mark conspired against us.

Why would I do that?

Jim saw Mark here before he went to Japan. He also saw him here while I was in hospital after my accident.

Of course Mark was here, he was here when you were home and sometimes when you weren't. He always complained because we didn't have a phone so he could ring us.

Jim is suspicious. We have to reassure him that you are on our side. You are, aren't you?

I need someone to help me write to the newspapers, says Jim after dinner as we sit on Anthony's veranda.

Give it a rest, says Anthony.

Never. I want to expose Russ and Mark and Mineral Resources and chief Mining Warden and The Mining Association and the members of the parliament and judiciary.

They will cover up for each other. Most of the time they are the same people or friends of the same people. It's the same Mafia.

Nobody wants to admit that they made a mistake. If one of them admits it, the whole case can collapse. People have reputations to look after.

Miners try to please the powers and the only power that matters here is the local Mineral Resources office.

If some influential journalist gets interested in the case he may be able to help, I say. I want to prove to Anthony and Jim that I am not on the side of Russ even if Mark is my friend.

I feel sorry for Jim, says Anthony when we are alone again. I am also tired of him hitting the brick wall. He lost his sense of humour, he is quoting the Mining Act like Jehovah Witnesses quote the Bible. Jim knows all the law and lawyers and general attorneys and politicians. The trouble is, nobody wants to know the bloke who has nothing. I accept that, but Jim does not. There is nothing in it for anyone. Nobody will help Jim but he just can't walk away from the case.

The Mineral resources officers can make it awful hard for a miner to live on the fields. Everybody is somehow dependent on opal and they like to stay on the side of the Mineral Resources.

I am not a miner so Mineral Resources officers can't touch me. Nothing can happen to me if I help Jim.

Or so I thought.

You pay for all your sins one way or another. If you do what you know is right, you sleep well. That is the only heaven I believe in, says Anthony.

I can write letters for you, I have the computer, I promise Jim.

You live in Sydney.

I took a job at school here.

We are staying, says Toni. He became friends with Jim's daughter Emma. They build houses out of sticks and make mud pies and create roads.

Russ bought the property ten years ago for one hundred thousand dollars. Now Russ sold it for two millions to Aborigines, tells Jim.

Aborigines must have really wanted it badly.

Russ called Aboriginal experts and showed them sacred sites on the property, says Jim. The local Aboriginal legends are supposed to originate on the property. Aboriginal Land Council bought it with government money. The price means nothing to Aborigines.

I wonder who Aboriginal experts were and how much they were paid. Money talks all languages, I say. Some of mum's money wisdom was passed down to me.

We should get Aborigines on our side, says Jim.

Aborigines have their own Mafia. Those around the Land council tell other Aborigines what to do, they distribute the government money, they are the black culture brokers. The rest of Aborigines have no say, says Anthony.

Unless someone makes them powerful, I say although I have no idea how to make Aborigines powerful.

We should get the media.

The journalists are too scared to say anything against Aboriginal Mafia because they'd be called racists, warns Anthony.

Not if Aborigines make a complaint, I say.

You need evidence. Who is going to know how much Land Council bosses got from the sale. Russ paid them off and they are not going to tell, says Anthony.

Aborigines are against Russ, says Jim. Everybody listens to Aborigines. There are no artefacts, there are no sacred sites, there is just the old farmhouse full of mice and cockroaches. The machinery is rusty and useless.

You better not say anything to anybody. The artefacts and the sacred sites may easily be recreated, says Anthony.

I don't know what I am getting myself into, I confess to Anthony after Jim and Fay leave. I am only beginning to glimpse into the background of it all.

Fay worked for Russ on the property, says Anthony. She was pregnant before she met Jim.

Is Russ the boy's father?

I believe she got pregnant with someone else and Russ found out. He wanted to kill her. It seems that all our trouble started when this black girl knocked on Jim's door, says Anthony. Jim and I never heard of Russ before.

Tell me about Fay, I say.

There is little to tell. She collapsed into Jim's arms one evening. She was bleeding and he called me to help. She refused to go to the medical centre because she was scared. Jim put her into his bed and she never left. Russ swore to hunt Jim out of town. I was Jim's partner so I was hunted as well.

I want everybody to know what happened, says Jim as I begin to write his story.

I think everybody knows but nobody cares, says Anthony. You need evidence, otherwise it's a waste of time. Nobody will act on suspicions.

How does Fay feel about it? I ask.

Fay is scared of Russ., says Jim.

She can get legal aide.

Fay's uncle Brian told me that Aborigines cannot claim legal aid if they complain against other Aborigines or against aboriginal organisations, says Anthony.

Jim's family lives in a caravan under the tree next to Anthony's camp again. We are where we first started. It is forty degrees in summer and in the caravan it comes to fifty. Jim made an annexe and they sleep outside. They cook on the grid iron and eat on the little table under the tree. They have a drum of water nearby and they wet themselves to cool down.

Anthony is better off, he is on the invalid pension and he earns some extra from cutting opal. He runs a generator and has even a small air-conditioner.

There is a history in all men's lives, figuring the nature of the times deceased.

Henry IV

Aborigines

Fay occasionally offers me a cigarette and I take a few puffs. This brings a certain intimacy into our relationship. The cigarette has a strong bitter smell. I am not a real smoker, I can take it or leave it.

They are home grown, says Fay.

Fay is exotically beautiful, her movements remind me of ballet dancers, her eyes are quick but her words are barely audible.

In a small town like Lightning Ridge, you have to open yourself to friendships with people you have little in common with.

I am sure that Fay has the key to our mystery.

Fay's son Jack has dark skin but her daughter Emma has Jim's fair skin and green eyes. The two children are like chalk and cheese. Toni plays with them happily in the dirt and water. Children are just children.

Fay's grandmother Lucy sometimes visits Fay and tells us about the golden, olden days. It seems that any olden days were golden days. Toni loves to listen to Lucy.

Fay's uncle Brian brings some fish he caught.

Where did you get them? I ask.

My family always lived along the Narran river, we know every water hole, says Brian. Aborigines bought that part of the land now from that bastard Russ.

You know Russ Dunny?

I wish I never met the bastard. I knew his father and he was even worse.

Tell us about the olden days, begs Toni.

I caught some big fish in my life but my biggest fish was a cod I caught in Barwon, Brian turns to Anthony. My brother and I couldn't carry it to the camp so we had to pull it on the ground.

How big was it? Toni wants to know.

About as big as your mum, says Dudley.

Crop spraying polluted the river and the big cod has gone now but I still catch a few, over ten kilos some of them were, Brian turns to me.

How do you catch them, asks Toni.

You go at night as they come feeding towards the riverbank in a shallow and you throw a spinner and drag it across the water. Cod will bite on anything that acts like a spinner; even a red rag on a hook will get them. Some people use shrimp or worms.

Can I come fishing with you, Uncle Brian? Asks Toni. It is easy for children to adopt new family members.

Course you can. Cod gives you a good fight so you have to keep it strained all the time, if you let them loose, they play and snap off. You can catch a cod by hand close to the riverbank. If you ever had a pet pig, you'll know how it lays on the side if you tickle his belly. Well, cod is much the same, they just flip over.

Can we have a pet pig, asks Toni.

I can catch you a sucker in the bush if you like.

What would we do with a piglet, I laugh.

Same as you do with the dog. They are very affectionate. You throw some scraps and it grows fat and then you can roast it for Christmas.

Toni is fascinated with tales of fishing and hunting but I am waiting for information about Russ.

Tell us about your life, I beg.

It was during the forties when I was shearing around Walgett that I had a bit of bother with the police.

Russ Dunny's father was a policeman then, he was also a jailer and a grazier. He took his prisoners home to do his shearing and other work on the property at weekends for free. All of us shearers had to be union members at the time and rules of the union prohibited us shearing at the weekend. One day, as we were to move to a certain shearing sheds, a white sheerer said to me: Brian, one of the shearers there will be a chap that shore for that policeman at the weekend. As we commenced shearing the following Monday I said to this chap: You cannot shear with us because you shore for the policeman at the weekend.

Sometimes later, Russ Dunny's father pulled me up in town and said: It would suit you better to keep your tongue between your teeth.

I reported him to The Australian Workers Union. One early morning a jeep pulled in front of my home and the policeman accompanied with a detective called me out. He said: You reported me to the union. I said: That's correct. He said to the detective: Hand me that jack from the back of the ute and I will bash the black bastard's brains out. By that time my wife woke up and came out. Before he took off, he said: I'll get you, if it is the last thing I do, I'll get you.

I was a member of the Buffalo Lodge at the time. We had a meeting a few months after the policeman's visit. After I went home an argument broke out on the

footpath in front of the Buffalo lodge. I was told that one man was in hospital as a result of that argument and had later died from injuries sustained.

Russ Dunny's father stated that this old man died from a brain haemorrhage caused by my punch to his head. I was summonsed to court. I engaged the barrister and explained what happened.

In court the barrister summoned the local doctor, who attended the dead man, and asked him: Isn't it true that the deceased went home after the meeting, had a row with his wife and subsequently died of a heart attack. The doctor then admitted in court that there was no haemorrhage of the brain. The judge told the jury, that he wanted them to find me not guilty or he would have to overrule the verdict.

I went free and went out shearing again, but I was weary of the police from then on.

Russ used to hassle drovers on their routes and demanded that they give him poddy calves (the calves without a mother), from which he made his own herd. The rumour had it that some drovers stripped him, bashed him, and thrown him into the lagoon naked.

Two months later I was fishing on the Barwon when Dunny came and hit me on the neck with an iron bar. Another man was with him and they kicked me and urinated on me before they left me covered in blood. I promised then that I will get the bastard if it is the last thing I do.

What did you do?

Nothing. Dunny chased a pig and fell over the log and the gun went off. He shot himself in the groin. God works in mysterious ways. He was never right after that and he died a few years later.

Russ is the same bastard as his father. He is god as long as he provides dope. He got them all hooked on marijuana, says Brian. Grog, marijuana, tobacco and needle are Aboriginal killers.

Is Fay getting her home-grown tobacco from Russ, the thought frightens me.

I used to fight for Aboriginal rights along with Charlie Perkins' Freedom Riders. He told us to stand for ourselves and demand free access to alcohol, continues Brian. Liqueur became the greatest killer of Aboriginal people. I begin to wonder, who Freedom Riders really helped. They all ended with top positions in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, they serve the government because the government serves them while Aborigines are dying from grog.

Greed, there is so much greed in people, they are all in it for themselves.

Aboriginal leaders only see dollar signs and the positions of power. They quickly forget what they were elected to do. They are implementing government policies on big salaries so they sit comfortably in their positions. They say: Bugger you Jack, I am all right. Somewhere down the track they'll come face to face with the

grassroots because our leaders are only someone's aunty Mary and uncle Tom after all.

I stood for election as a Shire Counsellor, I promised to work for the improvement of inter-racial relations but our people still don't realise the value of their vote in the elections. Older Aborigines had no choice, no vote, and no opportunity to have a say and make decisions about their fate, so they could not teach their children how to use their rights.

White people forced Aborigines into the white man's lifestyle. We were chucked into the competitive world and our masters wrote the rules of the competition. We were a sharing culture. We had to be to survive. Now our people became greedy for the things that are precious to whites. If they can't break through they push harder and find short cuts and crooked ways that land them in jail. Or dead.

Aboriginal people were dispossessed, most were moved from their traditional ground and resettled on other people's traditional ground. Now the government tries to put things right. Aboriginal Land Councils and ATSIC (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission) get the funds from the government for special projects.

ATSIC bought 20 000 acres property from Russ Dunny for over two millions.

Russ invited the local Aboriginal Land Council to inspect the sacred sites on the property. He provided lots of grog and a barbecue. Everybody was impressed by alcohol and they forgot the sacred sites.

People say that Russ would have settled for half a million, I venture.

Aborigines never had a thousand dollars on their bank account so million dollars has no realistic sound for them. It's the government money.

Who applied for funds?

Barry, I think it was Barry, he is clever like that, says Brian.

How come Barry did not negotiate the price?

Someone was lucky, says Brian. Someone got rich on the account of poor Aborigines. So much of Aboriginal funds go this way.

My daughter has been on a waiting list for Aboriginal housing for six years. Those related to Barry, come first. His friends and his employees come second.

I want Aborigines to become owners of their homes and independent of their Mafia. The ownership brings direct and permanent benefits. If you do not own the house you live in, you have no incentive to look after it.

Politicians couldn't justify the well paid positions they created for themselves, if they had no one to look after. They need us more than we need them, concludes Brian. Everybody is in it for himself, two for me and one for you kind of thing. Nobody is really interested in doing some good for others.

I reckon that Government can give you all the rights and all the money but if people around you don't like you and respect you, you have nothing. In fact you have nothing if nobody likes you and respects you.

Aboriginal children are born inferior. We don't have to be put down any more, we are down, we feel worthless.

I almost forget that I only wanted Brian to tell me about Russ and Fay so I could help Jim and Anthony.

Mum is scared to live in Sydney on her own. I tell her that Lightning Ridge is a quiet, safe, friendly place. She promises to come as soon as she sells our home.

I bring my belongings to my new home and begin teaching in Lightning Ridge Central school. It is exciting busy time for all of us.

There are children of many nationalities and colours. It seems that every child comes from a different background.

Toni is in year one. He finds instant friends.

After a few months the principal calls me into his office.

The complaint was made that you behaved inappropriately towards an Aboriginal student, says my principal.

Which student, I ask.

The incident with Philip was reported to the Director of Education, Health inspector and Aboriginal Advisory council. They are all coming to talk to you on Friday, says the principal.

I have done nothing wrong.

You will have to explain it.

There is nothing to explain. I told him to put his lunch in his bag, that's all.

It's out of my hands now, says the principal.

I don't know how the principal feels about Aborigines but I know that everybody is specially careful not to put a foot wrong with them.

You know exactly what happened with Philip.

I read your report.

Do you believe me?

It doesn't matter what I believe.

It matters to me.

It is a delicate situation. It always is with Aborigines.

I have done nothing wrong.

Barry and his wife are coming and you can explain it to them.

They know what happened.

People seem to believe Phillip's version of events. Other Aboriginal parents are saying that you are picking on their children.

The principal is new in town, how could he understand all that is happening in the background. I realise that I am just as new, only I have been thrown into the deep end of the Lightning Ridge politics.

Barry is in charge of Lightning Ridge Aboriginal purse and people will do as he tells them. He is one of them and he can make things happen. Barry is defending his powerful position.

There is a rumour that Russ paid two hundred thousand dollars commission to Barry because Barry made it possible for Russ to sell his property to Aborigines.

Maybe Fay told Russ. She is scared of Russ. She heard us talking. People become dangerous when a lot of money is involved.

Maybe I should not trust Brian or Fay. Maybe Barry got all Aborigines to gang against me. I am too naive. I have seen it often enough at school. When there is a dispute Aborigines gang up against the rest. Barry, Fay and Brian are Aborigines. I mean nothing to them. They may tolerate me but I have nothing to offer them.

Aborigines know who is cutting their bread. They will not stand for me, they will testify in Barry's favour. It is only human nature, I try to console myself.

Aborigines are gullible, they will do as Barry tells them, I try to make my principal understand.

You have to take them as they are. You better take a leave until this blows over. Maybe you should ask for a transfer. Once Aborigines feel wronged they will never forgive you, says the principal.

Philip's father, Barry, wants me out of town. He was waiting for an opportunity. He created the scandal.

Maybe Russ warned Barry that we are onto him. He believes that I know more than I really do. He is scared. A small town can't keep secrets. Aborigines who don't get privileges from Barry's office, are grumbling, they are asking questions. Those in the office, their relations and friends, are getting scared.

I know who is behind this and I will not leave until I tell Barry's story. I have done nothing wrong.

I'd rather not have a scandal. It's bad publicity for everybody, says the principal.

He can't get away with it. I will have taxation office investigate him, I try desperately.

You should not mix your private life with the school.

I did what I hoped every teacher would do to my child. I was on lunchtime duty at school. Philip had a nicely packed lunch. He also had a packet of lollies. He threw his lunch in the bin and started distributing lollies to his friends.

Where is your lunch, I asked.

He chucked it in the bin, said a little girl.

The plastic bag with Philip's lunch sat on top of the paper in the bin.

Pick it up and eat it, I said to Philip.

I am not eating from the bin, said Philip.

Your lunch is perfectly all right. It is wrapped in the paper and it is packed in the plastic bag. It is on top of the paper in the bin.

I am not going to have it, said Philip. You can't make me.

Pick it up.

You eat it, miss.

I became angry. I know teachers must not become angry but I like children and when I think they need to do the right thing I become angry if they refuse. I picked the plastic bag and pushed it into Philip's hands.

When Philip started crying I calmed down. Maybe I should have ignored his lunch.

I want you to take your lunch home to your mother so she will know that you did not eat it. She went into a lot of trouble preparing your lunch.

I took a bag and unwrapped a neatly made ham and salad sandwich to demonstrate to the children how good Philip's mum was and that she was entitled to know that Philip did not eat his sandwich.

The children took no notice of my demonstration, they crooned over crying Philip and they whispered as their eyes shot glances in my direction. I wrapped the sandwich again and placed it into Philip's bag.

The bell rang, the children scattered to play and I tried to forget about the incident. At the end of my lunch time duty I still felt wrong. There was a nagging feeling that

the children ganged against me. Aboriginal children always stick together, I tried to explain it. Aboriginal children like me. But that changed. I am not their mob. The incident disturbed me. After school I sat down and wrote the report about the incident and showed it to the principal. He did not comment on it.

I remember Redfern. Aboriginal children always supported each other. White kids said that they saw an Aboriginal kid taking something that belonged to the white kid and Aboriginal kids testified that they all saw him not taking it.

How can you see someone not doing something? Aborigines got away with it because we were scared that someone will call us racist.

Sally, the Aboriginal Liaison officer, warns me that Aboriginal parents are mad at me for making Aboriginal children eat from the rubbish bin.

They used to scavenge for their food in the past when they were hungry and they are shamed by it now. They are really angry. Specially Barry's family. Aborigines are particular about food, they spend all their money on food, explains Sally.

And on grog and drugs, I say before I can stop myself. I don't want to have an argument with Sally.

I sound racist, I hate this misunderstanding. I can't take the words back. I know every Aboriginal family will hear them. They will crucify me.

Sally wasn't with me in Redfern where many Aboriginal kids had no lunch because their parents spent their social security money on grog and drugs and gambling. Sally comes from a good Aboriginal family and she is offended by my comment. Most Aboriginal families in Lightning Ridge are nice hard working families. I am prejudiced because I knew Aborigines that weren't so nice.

Aboriginal people are suffering from prejudice and discrimination, says Sally. She has been to many in-service courses where white libertarians told her that she has to watch out for signs of prejudice and discrimination at school. It is her duty to protect Aboriginal children against the racist teachers. Sally's opportunity came now. I wrongly assumed that Aborigines would stick with me simply because they liked me and I liked them. I forgot that I will never be one of them. The loyalty to their own people comes first. I should have known that.

Toni comes crying into the staff room.

Black kids don't like me. They hit me, he cries. Toni said that he doesn't want to play with blacks, Aboriginal kids tell the principal. My son is six and I know that he cannot deal with the situation.

I know it is time for me to move. I came here for Toni, so Toni would have his daddy. I always knew that there is nothing in Lightning Ridge for me. I wish I could cry. I never felt as helpless and powerless. I got mixed up into something that is bigger than me. Anthony and Jim have no power, Brian and Fay's people are afraid of Barry

and they don't like prejudice. Maybe Barry convinced them that I used them. Barry is powerful and he wants the truth covered up.

About twenty Aboriginal people come into the schoolyard during lunchtime.

There is a television camera and people writing notes. An Aboriginal mother knocks on the principal's door and tells him that I forced an Aboriginal child to eat from the garbage bin. Either I go or they will take their children out. I can hear them from the staff room, I feel the hatred. Barry is in the background like all this had nothing to do with him. He is just one of the group of innocent parents protesting against the racist teacher.

The principal promises an inquiry. He will have me stand aside while the inquiry is going on. Aboriginal parents call their children and they testify that I upset Philip, that I pick on Aboriginal children, that I send them out of the classroom when they misbehave. The children say that they are not going back to school if I am there. All Aboriginal children, even Fay's children are there accusing me. Aborigines stick together, their strength is in unity, the colour unites them against the enemy.

Only I have never been an enemy of Aborigines, they are my only friends in Lightning Ridge. Or so I hoped.

Barry won. I have to stand aside and wait for an inquiry.

I feel isolated and unprotected. I am stunned.

People welcome the excitement of the scandal, they whisper about it, some blame me, some blame Aborigines. Nobody blames Russ or Barry. Nobody in Lightning Ridge seems to know me or care about me.

Anthony and Jim are angry but they are powerless. Both have been chastised and have lost in the town's battle. They failed in their own struggle.

I am too proud to ask Mark for help.

I go to Fay. I need to talk to someone. I have to convince her that I am innocent. If one person believes me maybe I have a chance to convince others.

It is lunchtime. Fay is still in bed watching videos.

I had a late night, she tells. Jim gets up early and cooks breakfast for everybody so kids have something in their stomachs before they go to school. He makes their school lunches before he goes to work. Jim would never let the kids go hungry, she smiles. He is good with kids.

All this seems normal to Fay. I feel alone, out of place and jealous. Kids seem the most important thing to Fay. Having sex and tenderness and children is probably the most important thing to Jim. Maybe Fay loves Jim in the most practical ways one can love anybody. Maybe anything that makes you contented is love.

Anthony and I were happy like that at the beginning.

I am afraid to send Toni to school where kids hate him.

I want to ring mum but she would worry unnecessarily. What can she do? I don't think that she ever saw an Aborigine, let alone spoke to one.

I am thinking about a transfer. Maybe they will take me back at Redfern. There is a large Aboriginal population in Redfern, the word might get around to them, that I am a racist. Aboriginal grapevine is much like migrant grapevine. When the word gets around it has a habit of getting bigger and more damaging.

Toni would be upset without his dad. I have to wait.

There is a terrific storm. The dust covers the town before the storm moves towards Three mile. After it is all over I go to Anthony's place to see if he is alright.

Anthony is not home but Fay is there. Her arms are bruised, her cheek is angry red and her mouth is bleeding.

I instantly forget my problems.

What happened? Where is Jim?

Jim went to pick the kids from school and while he was gone Russ came. Look what the bastard did.

I do not ask which bastard, Jim or Russ. I try to comfort Fay.

There was this horrific storm around here. It lasted only a few minutes but it blew the roofs of the camps. It broke a tree and it hit the roof of the caravan and smashed the window. The wind lifted the opal dirt off the ground and covered the caravan with it. Jim and I were terrified.

Our dunny was blown away. Jim wanted to move the dunny on top of another shaft only yesterday. It was too close to the caravan and started to smell, explains Fay. The swelling on her face is getting dark red and blue in places but she is not concerned with it.

Dunny is a name for an outside toilet placed some distance from the house. In the olden days it used to be just a toilet seat placed over the sanitary can. It smelled. Jim's dunny was thirty metres deep shaft with the tin shed on top of it. Inside the shed was the toilet seat on a can.

Jim went to get the kids from school while I tried to clean the place, says Fay. Russ drove by and asked if he could help. I said no, thank you, but he came out of the car and tried to shift the branch off the caravan. I told Russ that Jim will be home soon and that he will be mad if he finds him here. Russ moved into the caravan after me. He said that he will take care of Jim. He pressed me to the wall. I struggled and yelled so he hit me and pressed his hand on my mouth.

Just then Jim returned without kids. He forgot an umbrella. He found Russ on top of me on the floor of the caravan. They struggled in front of the caravan and moved to where the toilet used to be. Russ tripped and fell into the shaft.

Did Russ rape you?

Yes, says Fay like an idea was just planted into her mind.

Where is Jim now?

The ambulance took Russ. Police took Jim.

Did you tell the police what happened?

I was too upset. They said that I will be called to make a statement and to testify in court.

I have to go and help Jim, says Fay suddenly alert and ready to go.

Did Russ ever come to see you while you were with Jim? I ask as I drive Fay into town.

Not since we came back. Fay looks down, she knows that I don't believe her.

He was drunk, says Fay trembling. Her eyes are red but there is a little smile on her face. Maybe she remembers something or maybe she just has an idea.

Fay and Russ must have had tender moments when they lived together. Something is just not right here. There is something in the way she tells things and looks up to see if I believe what she says.

Did Russ supply Fay with marijuana? The thought was there in the background for a long time but I denied the idea that Fay and I smoked marijuana. I didn't want to know.

Did I become a drug user? I only had a couple of homemade cigarettes and I didn't know what they were, I try to minimise my guilt. Can I really plead ignorance? I have to. I am a teacher. I lost my job because I told an Aboriginal kid to eat his lunch. What if they find that I am a drug user. I will never smoke again. Fay is not smoking now. Maybe she ran out. Maybe without Russ she can't get it. Maybe he brought her dope. Maybe Russ and Fay had an ongoing affair and it has nothing to do with dope.

It would be easy to condemn Fay but I remember how easy it is to kiss a man you used to kiss before. Mark and I kissed. We remembered that first kiss and it was natural to kiss again. We are both married and we don't plan to have a relationship. It was just a kiss for the old times' sake. It is no good saying that it was just a friendly greeting. It is so natural to touch something you once touched with pleasure. There is a sense of déjà vu, it is a nostalgia for something lost and the opportunity to have it again.

When I first loved Anthony, I believed that I will never want anybody else as long as Anthony will sleep next to me. I adored Anthony. I remember the time when Anthony and I totally trusted each other and our love.

Did Russ hit you before?

Yes. He used to lock me out at night when he was drunk.

Why did you stay with him?

He told me that he will kill me before he lets another man touch me. Just as well Jim wasn't home when Russ came. He would have killed him. I tried to escape from him but Russ ran after me and fell into the shaft, Fay changes the story before she goes out of the car and into the police station.

It seems natural to Fay that I accept the new version of her story.

I drive back to Three mile and find Anthony at home.

Russ is dead, says Anthony. They charged Jim with manslaughter.

It was unfortunate that the storm blew the toilet shed away, I say to Anthony.

I told you about God's justice, Anthony tries to be solemnly serious.

I don't know if God would appreciate you attributing this to him.

He created the storm that blew away the toilet and left the shaft unprotected. What goes around comes around.

Dunny in a dunny, I smile.

He had a soft landing.

In Jim's shit, I say.

It was one hell of a storm. Most camps are damaged but mine is intact, says Anthony.

I don't fancy the idea of you living next to Dunny's drowning. Why don't you move into town with us.

Are you sure?

Toni will be happy.

I'll put the place for sale, promises Anthony.

Jim might want to buy it.

Who knows what Jim will do. If he ever comes out of prison.

Did he tell you what happened?

I heard that he pushed Russ into the shaft. Who knows.

The next day Jim comes out of jail. He is in the clear, he wasn't even there when Russ fell into the hole.

Fay stated at the police station that Russ tried to rape her. He hit her and she ran out of the caravan. Russ ran after her. He tripped and fell into the shaft.

Jim was in town with the kids when it happened. He has nothing to do with it. Russ was already in the shaft when Jim returned. Jim called the ambulance and police. He didn't do anything wrong. It was an accident.

Jim is a hero.

Aborigines come to comfort Jim and Fay.

Aborigines are happy that Russ is dead. They hated the bastard. Barry is especially pleased. With Russ gone Barry's position is safe. Barry offers Fay a house in town. It is the Aboriginal Land Council's decision, he says. She accepts. Jim doesn't want to live next to the dunny where Russ drowned.

Barry and his wife come to school on Friday to withdraw the complaint against me. The principal calls me in. It was a misunderstanding about Philip's lunch and everybody is satisfied now. Barry's wife says that I did the right thing telling her son Philip that he should take his lunch home and tell his mum that he did not eat it.

Maybe you should ring Barry or I and let us all know if anything like that happens again, says Barry's wife.

Perhaps next time I will know better. I will call the child's parent whenever there is a problem.

Why do they send kids to school if they don't trust their teachers to solve little problems for their children? They have to, of course, school is compulsory and trust is not. I am not a monster. I haven't yet met a teacher that did not like the kids. Most teachers do more for the kids than their parents. They wouldn't be in this job if they didn't like kids. And they are less biased and more qualified and all together better people.

I try to put the incident out of my mind. I have to rise above the prejudices of a small town. It has nothing to do with the town being small, of course. In a bigger place there are different problems, that's all. It has nothing to do with the prejudices either. It has to do with money. Love and money and power.

Why should I care if the kid eats his lunch. I am not here to change the world. I am here to do my job. Maybe it was my job to tell Philip to eat his lunch. Maybe it wasn't. Why didn't I look the other way? People live differently. Why should I care?

I caused Toni to lose his friends. Just as well children forgive quickly. They are playing happily now. I see Toni sharing his sultanas with Aboriginal kids. He knows what it takes to make friends.

Anthony and Jim are drinking under the annexe. The dry warm breeze is cooling their brown bodies. They never wear shirts in summer. They refuse to wear moisturiser or sunscreen yet their skins glow with health.

You can never trust a bitch on heat, says Jim to Anthony. He does not know that I can hear him in the kitchen.

Calm down, says Anthony. You are free. You got even.

I'll kill the lazy, fucking bitch.

No, you won't. You will go to jail and your kids will have no parents. Forget and forgive.

Never.

Never is a long time. She saved you.

I can never trust her again. Russ screwed my life.

You killed him. Go home, and make love to the mother of your kids.

I knew before, of course, that Jim found Fay with Russ. He gave her a black eye and pushed Russ down the shaft.

I don't want to know. As far as I know it was an accidental death. I am not protecting the killer. It's up to them and the police and the court. Why should it bother me. I hope Fay will forget what she told me before she had a better idea. I don't want to know if Russ brought her marijuana in exchange for sex.

I must ignore things that have nothing to do with me.

With Russ out of the way there is no reason for me to leave town. We all move to town, we all need a new start. We have to do a lot of forgetting and forgiving.

Life wasn't meant to be perfect. Nobody is perfect.

Death has a thousand doors to let out life.
Massinger.

New life

Anthony reluctantly moves out of the camp that was our first home to be with us in a new Department of Education three-bedroom brick house in the centre of the town. Only a stone's throw from Mark's. Anthony lost some of his independence and I lost some of my freedom. We become a fragile family and treat each other with careful gentleness like one treats a sick child.

Anthony keeps busy. He tries to forget about the loss of his self-sufficient existence. I try not to fuss over him as he cuts opals.

For our seventh wedding anniversary Anthony prepares a dinner celebration. He arranged for Toni to spend the night at Jim's place. He opens a bottle of champagne, he takes my hand and I put my head on his shoulder. We sit like that in silence and admire the sunset over the horizon.

To us and to the next seven years, says Anthony.

I love you, I say.

I always loved you, says Anthony.

Come to my bed, I whisper.

It is the most beautiful night of my life. The tenderness of our total surrender brings tears to my eyes. Our hands explore and caress each other long after our sexual union finish. Our whole bodies make love. I savour every moment because I cannot expect the tenderness like that to last forever.

It took a long time for us to regain the magic we knew when I first came to the Ridge. Maybe we would never appreciate the life we have if we never knew what we know. It is a grateful expression of love.

This is the first time we made love since I returned. Our lovemaking is a flower in the first bloom and we know how flowers are. They wither away and spread seeds and grow again and surprise us with the newness of the moment we live for.

Mum comes and she brings her crystal and fine china. I hope she will stay. She would want to be with Toni, of course. She spoils him. One can never get too much love, she defends herself.

Mum invites Mojca for coffee. Mojca knows how to appreciate mum's Royal china. She holds her little finger outside the handle delicately as she raises her eyebrows and her cup. The saucer rests in her left hand like a mark of royalty. The real Royal china means a lot to both old pretentious ladies. Both are happy to have someone who can appreciate the Royal china and hold it appropriately.

You can't get a decent cup of coffee in the Ridge, says Mojca. Girls these days can't cook. Even Kim, and I am not saying that Kim is bad, but even Kim, throws away half of what she cooks, says Mojca.

Mum and Mojca believe that they are a notch higher on the civilisation ladder than the rest and that the world would be a better place if the rest would take notice of what they say. Specially the young ones.

If you are a war baby you never throw anything away, says mum. You appreciate things so much more.

Our generation valued propriety and respect but young people these days just want excitement, says Mojca patting her strawberry blond curls. Nobody knows if her curls are natural or permanently set.

Men used to be responsible for the family, says mum. Men need to be in charge. It's in their nature.

Mum made men feel in charge but mum decided what clothes dad wore and what food he ate. She decided for her boss what presents to buy and what meetings to attend.

And you never know if people appreciate the things you do for them, says mum. She likes to begin sentences with And. I keep telling my students not to start the sentences with And but maybe sentences, like thoughts, sometimes need to be connected like that.

Maybe mum doesn't realise that we were all made to appreciate everything she did. We were happy when she told us to be happy. We ate what she said was good for us, we behaved according to her rules.

Women these days want a sensitive guy who appreciates them, I try to out-smart mum and Mojca.

Women may want a sensitive guy but the arrogant, rich men win the prettiest maidens, concludes Mojca.

I wonder how poor Vince is doing, says mum. She only calls her old boss Vince since she stopped working for him. She says the word Vince with proud reverence. He took her out a few times and I taught that there was something going on but apparently there wasn't.

I am surprised that you didn't marry Vince, smiles Mojca.

We were just friends, mum dismisses the suggestion.

It would not be proper for mum to have impure thoughts.

Mark is much like me, says Mojca. He is into everything. Poor man has no time for the family. He is the president of almost everything in Lightning Ridge. He is organising the Mining Symposium at the moment.

Some people are born leaders, says mum, casting an eye into my direction indicating that I am no leadership material and I didn't marry one either.

I return from school one day to find mum in the bathroom. She does not hear me. I watch her apply the blusher. She brushes bits of reddish colour onto her cheeks, smiles into the mirror and then rubs the blusher off again. She brushes it on again and rubs it off a little less. She pats the tiny wrinkles around her eyes. I know how embarrassed she would be if she knew that I am watching. She holds her hair up, brushes it back off the face and holds it up again. Mum always had neat permed curls pinned back. It seems like she just discovered her face. I never noticed her face before either. It glows.

I am so relaxed in Lightning Ridge. It must be the pool, the hot water suits me, says mum.

Bill hated coming to town before mum arrived. He hates modern appliances and the air-conditioner and the carpet; he still grumbles about civilisation but now he finds excuses for coming.

Mum became radiant. She is wrapped in an aura of serenity when Bill is around.

Mum and Bill changed beyond recognition, I say to Anthony.

For the better, says Anthony.

Mum holds the bottle of perfume to her nose and breathes in deeply. She sprays once onto her chest under her blouse. I wonder if she hopes that the scent will be saved there for Bill to discover and enjoy.

Bill and mum are like two naughty children who know how naughty they are. Only very young hide their love like that because they are surprised by it and think that they should not be so happy and that life should not be so good. Maybe Bill and mum feel that they are too old to feel so young.

Bill wears socks these days. He shaves almost every day around his mouth and I had a whiff of the old spice after shave on him. His grey beard is reaching to his chest but it shines. Like his eyes. He tries to make his clothes look worn but I know that he never wore them before.

You turned into a proper city gentleman, I try to embarrass Bill.

A gentleman has a plastic card to remind him who he is, laughs Bill. I pay cash.

It is scary, mum agrees. I don't know what the world is coming to.

I realise that only one's own generation can be amazed and shocked by the same things. Bill and mum share their astonishment and anxiety about the world.

Would you think that I am mad if I said that I am in love? Says Mum blushing to her ears.

Being in love does not necessarily mean being mad, I say seriously.

Would you approve of it, says mum and the tears sparkle in her eyes.

I would have to see if the boy is suitable and if he has honest intentions, I say and then we laugh and hug.

It might not be healthy for me but I feel so light-hearted. You must know who he is, she says.

No idea, I pretend.

Have a guess. He makes me feel young and beautiful and special. Nobody ever made me feel like that.

It must be somebody in Sydney, I tease. Is it Vince?

No, it's somebody here.

Be careful mum, miners are hopeless adventurers. He could be after your money.

He doesn't even know if I have any.

I suppose you are old enough to know what you are doing, I concede.

He asked me to marry him. He warns me that I may regret it. If I don't do it, I know I will regret it. He makes me feel precious.

Why are you asking me then?

I want you to be happy for me. I have never been as happy in my whole life. Of course, I was happy when I had my children, she corrects herself, but this is different.

I wish you every happiness with Bill, mum.

How did you know who it is.

All the birds are chirping about you two. It's written on your faces, silly.

Sometimes life turns dreams into reality, says mum. What is meant to happen, happens.

Mum has never been free to adore the man. She had to look after her family and after her boss.

Happiness comes to those who wait, says Anthony.

Mojca comes before Easter to invite us all to dinner.

I might get a lobster for Good Friday. It's only once a year, that the whole family is fasting, says Mojca.

Kids went fishing and got some fish and yabbies. Toni thinks yabbies are the only festive food, says mum like I wasn't even there.

Jesus has been squeezed out of Easter, says Mojca.

It's just a holiday and chocolate eggs, agrees mum. I wish she didn't agree with everything Mojca says.

Mum was never specially religious, maybe she feels duty bound to be so now. I think old people want to sound pious when talking in the presence of young people.

Jesus is what people would like others to be but it is too hard for them to be. If you know what I mean, explains Mojca. Children need an example and they can't get it, if they don't get it at home or in the church.

I hope they all come to church for Easter, says mum.

Mark and Kim would like us all to celebrate Easter together, says Mojca.

What do you think, I ask Anthony later.

Do I really have a choice with all the women against me.

Toni would enjoy sharing the day with Mark's children, says mum.

Life is simple after all. One should not dwell on the obstacles. The real life means simplicity. We have to keep busy and not search for more. Maybe great things happen only in our minds. Our inside life has little to do with what we do on the outside.

I watch Toni follow his daddy everywhere. He calls daddy with utmost reverence. I am so in love with my two boys that sometimes I feel that I will break into small pieces and weep. I thank God for having them.

Girls laugh at you if you don't know what the word is, Toni declares solemnly to his daddy.

Anthony is seven and already he feels threatened by girls. He wants to be their hero, but girls in his class are better readers.

I love you, mum, he snuggles into my lap. Perhaps he still does not make a connection between girls and mothers.

We all love you, I kiss the top of his curly head.

I like computers. Girls ask me to help them with computers, says Toni.

We all put on our festive clothes for Easter Mass. Children love the magic of Alleluias and the preparation for Easter bunny and Easter eggs and big Easter dinner.

Anthony and I simply have to do it for Toni. I suppose mum does it for our sake. Even Bill puts his white shirt on and stands at the back of the church. Every man in Lightning Ridge has a white shirt and dark pants just in case there is a funeral to go to.

Easter means that Jesus gave us a new life so we can forget about the old life and start again, says the priest.

I think we will always celebrate Easter as our new life, I whisper to Anthony.

I am happy that Anthony agrees to go to Mark's place for Easter dinner after mass. Maybe we can repair the friendship that has been torn apart.

Mark helps Anthony over the front step. Toni is already playing with Mark's children. Mojca and Kim are preparing the festive table.

We smile politely and admire each other's children and their Easter bunnies.

We know that it is not natural to celebrate together, but then again we are the only real friends. Maybe not best friends but the only friends connected by the family ties and the place our parents came from. We have roots. We are the only history to each other.

I am so glad you could make it, says Kim.

You wouldn't take no for an answer, says Anthony.

Anthony is about the only friend I have in Lightning Ridge, says Kim. It gets lonely here for women. Men have all the excitement.

So it was Kim who persuaded Anthony. They share their childhood memories and maybe their dreams. They love each other.

You have known Anthony before, asks mum.

Anthony was the best looking boy in my class. Every girl and every boy wanted to be Anthony's friend, but he was my big brother who saved me from the torments of the other boys at school. He was always a good guy and always on my side.

I am only six months older than Kim. It was a great honour to be her knight in shiny armour, explains Anthony. Now she is mine.

Isn't it a miracle how out of millions of people, you meet again the ones you like, says Kim.

There are so many coincidences in life that it isn't worth planning. What is meant to happen will happen. I just feel so lucky.

You all have relations, only Kim and I have nobody, explains Anthony. Kim's an only child and her parents died in a car accident when she was still at high school.

Kim and Anthony seem so innocently happy, maybe they are innocent. Maybe each love serves its purpose.

I am grateful that I finally have a family all in one place. I should count my blessings.

I am glad Anthony and Mark and Jim say good day to each other. Maybe in time they will like each other again.

Mum and Bill are getting married. I don't know why they should but they are convinced that they would be a bad example for us if they just moved in together like young people do.

Toni is looking forward to his role as a page boy at their wedding. Mark's daughter will be a flower girl and Mojca will be mum's Matron of Honour. Anthony will give mum away. I will be the best man, jokes Anthony because mum chose me as a witness. Everybody has a reason to buy new clothes and prepare the speeches. Mark and Kim are preparing a wedding feast in their beautiful garden.

To believe in God is to yearn for his existence and furthermore, it is to act as if He did exist.

Unamuno.

Nothing lasts forever.

I try to convince myself that there is no reason for my restlessness. Lately I feel easily irritated and cannot focus on my future. I have headaches and can't stand the noise. I don't sleep well and feel constantly fatigued.

I visit Marilyn at the weekend.

Settled into your new life, asks Marilyn.

I liked my old life and I am happy with the new one, I say. I always wanted a bit more. I still do.

I think it's this heat and the drought and the fear of war, Marilyn dismisses my discontent

There are as many ways of being poor as there are ways of being unhappy. Many people cause their own misery because they can't manage their lives.

Marilyn chatters on about unhappiness of others in an abstract way. She does not hear the annoying restless voice saying that something is wrong in my life.

I know how lucky I am, I say. There is just something that makes me feel stressed and I can't point it out.

You are lucky to have a good job, Marilyn dismisses my complaint again. It must be depressing for those who have nothing to do. The government makes it too easy for people to get social security so people give up trying. Giving up on a job means giving up on life.

I wake up in the middle of the night and can't go back to sleep. I feel restless, I tell Marilyn.

The honeymoon is over, darling, and you will have to settle down into the mundane life we all live, Marilyn makes my problem unimportant.

I try to count my blessings but I get impatient, I try to make Marilyn register my complaint. She probably can't imagine me unhappy.

Oh, Lord it is hard to be humble, laughs Marilyn. You really have the world at your feet.

I am humble, I protest.

As long as you have children you will never dare be bold and proud and free of fear, warns Marilyn.

I know how lucky I am.

There are lots of lucky people looking for happiness. Some drink, others take drugs, many pray. Happiness for me is every morning as the light makes the sky blue and life begins again, says Marilyn.

Marilyn attends Bible studies with Jehovah Witnesses. Every Wednesday is her free day and she goes from house to house to teach the Word.

I carefully skirt around Marilyn's religion, I have no intention of joining. Mum warned me about Jehovah. Any version of the almighty is much the same to me though. I have no wish to squeeze god within the walls of any particular church.

I am bored, I tell Marilyn. I am scared.

You are restless, Marilyn finally takes notice.

I have to remind myself why I am here. I know I would not swap for any other place on earth and yet I don't feel right.

Life is what the day brings. The continuation of events distracts us from thinking. You have to accept it.

I like my life and I like being me. Mum said that war babies are happy because things are improving all the time. Things are not improving for me. I am less happy every day. I feel tired.

Hormones are telling you that you are ready for the baby again, it is all biological, tries Marilyn.

I can't have another baby, I had hysterectomy after ectopic pregnancy.

Your ovaries are still ruling the way you feel. It'll pass. Procreation is a heady staff. It is not something one could reason about.

I don't know what I want or what I want to escape from.

Bill said that the only duty of a slave is to escape. If one had no shackles one would not have a reason to escape, I laugh.

I could just pack my bags and go. But I love Toni and Anthony and mum and you, so I stay.

God programmed every living creature for a purpose. Your purpose will be revealed to you in time and when you realise why you are here you will be happy.

I wonder if Marilyn learned that from the Bible.

Anthony came to live with me because he wanted to be with Toni. We put a brave face on it but we are scared that one day it will all explode into our faces.

He loves you.

Never believe in the power of love to create something in a person that wasn't there before, said my grandad. Things hidden inside explode to the surface sooner or later.

If you let them, says Marilyn.

We are both trying to make our marriage work. Anthony lost his independence. I lost my freedom. I can feel the irritation in his voice. I resent him for stopping me from going away. I feel guilty because I am not as happy as I should be.

A little guilt is healthy, says Marilyn. All good people feel a little guilty, but don't let the guilt rule your life

I became snappy with people. I keep apologising. I think I am going to go on Prozac, I say to Marilyn. Millions take Prozac to escape into oblivion. I just want to forget about what is happening around me.

Drug manufacturers promote depression, says Marilyn.

I make an appointment to see the doctor. I tell him that I feel anxious and restless. He prescribes Prozac.

Prozac is a wonderful drug, nothing worries me anymore. I feel in control.

I tell the hairdresser to lighten my hair because I want to lighten my mood. She tells me about the new makeup that stays as smooth as your own skin.

I need something to make me look smooth and balanced, calm, and in charge.

I wake up with a headache every morning and mum says that I am grumpy.

The restlessness in me is growing again. I feel tension building in my head. I blame headaches on the stress of my situation. I cannot explain what exactly is wrong with my life.

I take aspros first thing in the morning before the headache has the chance to irritate me. Aspros are supposed to be good for you anyway. I feel nauseous if I don't take a pain-killer. I am going through an emotional trauma. Anthony and Toni are oblivious of my problems. I don't want to involve them, they have nothing to do with the way I feel. I begin taking two Prozacs a day. Mum knows that something is wrong, she complains that I am not listening, that I am absent minded, she doesn't know about Prozac.

You changed, you are becoming neurotic, accuses mum so I guard the tranquillity. Prozac keeps me pleasantly sleepy.

Your husband and your son feel bad because you behave strangely, warns mum. Talk to them, tell them what is bugging you.

I have a splitting headache, I snap.

My headaches are progressively worse, my vision is blurry sometimes and I am losing balance. I don't want to bother Anthony so I lay down often and ask not to be disturbed. It is just a migraine and nothing can cure it.

Something really weird happened when I opened the fridge. I moved my hand but it didn't feel like my hand. I smiled. My arm probably went to sleep as I sat at the table writing. My headaches become worse.

I lose my balance and fall on the street. I don't tell my family how clumsy I became.

I tell the doctor and he sends me for a routine CAT Scan.

The doctor is serious when I return. He explains that there is some abnormality. I am glad they found the cause of my condition. So it wasn't all in my head, I wasn't going mad.

It could be an infection, says the doctor.

An infection does not last long.

I need more tests. Could you bring your husband along, asks the doctor.

No, I can't. I don't want to worry him. I want to deal with it.

My husband is away, I lie.

I have to have more tests. I go to Sydney and the specialists do all the tests I need. The results will come home to my doctor.

There is a lesion on the brain, explains the doctor. I have no way of knowing if it is malignant without examining the actual tissue.

I listen with my mouth open as the doctor explains how a specialist surgeon would shave a small part of my hair and make a window in the skull to remove as much lesion as possible.

Talk about it with your husband before you decide.

Somehow shaving a part of my head stuck in my memory. I didn't want to know about cancer or surgery. My life with my two boys just began.

The doctor shows me black sheets of film.

Near the back of your head is a large lesion. It might be more than one but one is huge, says the doctor. For the first time the doctor calls my lesion a glioma.

Take your time and think about it, doctor offers me a way out.

What am I to think about. If it has to come out it has to, I say bravely.

Gliomas stay in the brain, some grow fast others are slow but they don't spread to other organs. That's one good thing about gliomas, the doctor is offering a good news to comfort me.

I have my family and they love me. I refuse to spoil things. I don't want to scare them. Maybe it is only an infection and it will go away while I am thinking about it. If I don't let the doctor make a window in my skull I can keep it shut away.

I will think about it, I promise.

The pain is getting worse, the infection refuses to go away and I see my doctor again.

I think you will have to take it out, I blurt to the doctor.

Glioma is a type of tumour that grows tentacles into the surrounding brain tissue. Some tumours grow rapidly and

double in size every week, says the doctor. He is talking about other people's tumours.

What happens after you cut the window in the skull, I ask.

Radiation. Chemotherapy.

How long would it take to fix it.

In my mind I am planning to go to Sydney during school holidays and have this little window done. I don't allow glioma to interfere in my planning.

Whatever you do, you have to move fast, says the doctor.

How long will it take for me to recover.

Nobody knows.

I will be all right after radiation.

There's a very small chance.

And if you don't open...

You might go like that for months but it could also worsen.

You are not sure that you could fix it permanently.

No.

From the distance of my awareness I hear my doctor talking about this sickness called gliomas which comes in many different forms. This unpredictable, mischievous growth arises in the brain tissue itself. My symptoms are consistent with the condition. I don't need an operation or even medication and can expect a reasonable life. He could operate to confirm the diagnosis, he can also take out the growth to relieve the pain but it will grow again. Radiation treatment may help if the pain persist.

The doctor sounds like an advertisement for the wonderful things doctors do. I am to think about what he said and see him again in a couple of days after I talk to my loved ones.

How long, I say and doctor understands what I don't know the words for.

Nobody can predict, he says.

Can anybody help?

I promise to keep you as comfortable as I can but only He can make you well.

The doctor's finger is pointing up to an invisible presence.

I sit down in the doctor's waiting room and cannot get up to go home. My legs don't hold me. The doctor had long forgotten about me and my little gliomas, he has another patient, he might be called to an emergency. He is no longer my doctor.

I need to lean on someone but there is no-one. How am I going to tell Anthony, Toni, and my mum. I cannot lean on them, they lean on me. I never knew how important these people are to me. I don't want to be a burden to them. I am the strong one, I must forget about the pain. I am so full of life and love, that pain has no room in me. I have to do all those things with Toni that children want to do with their mothers. I have to tell him all the stories he wants to hear so he will be able to survive on the memory of me. I have to let them all know how much I love them and how precious they are to me. Toni will eventually grow up without his mother. Thank god he has a father. Bill and mum will take care of them.

I want to run away and cry and pray for a miracle. Maybe it is only an infection. I eat lots of vitamins.

Glioma cannot be confirmed as long as I refuse to have a window in my skull.

It's all in your head, said mum when I told her about my restlessness. Now I have an explanation for my moods. It's normal to feel as I do. The explanation offers some relief. It's not my fault. The symptoms are consistent with my gliomas.

I was always lucky. I am lucky to get a reminder that I am alive and that every moment counts. Other people just live their lives until they die unprepared.

I haven't been to church since Easter. I am not a church goer. I never pray. I only need the silence of the church. I sink into the pew, close my eyes and allow the

images from the black negative of my x-ray to emerge before my eyes. Huge, I remember doctor saying. A small chance.

I remember my first visit to Lightning Ridge. I told my grandmother that I was in love. She hugged me and her eyes were shining with tears. I couldn't tell anybody else how overwhelmed I was with the enormity of feeling. I was walking on air. Nothing else mattered, nothing else was real.

Life offers moments of absolute joy when one least expects it. The enormity of joy is so personal that the rest of the universe stops existing.

I tell God that I am not a believer. I apologise for not believing and coming to church. I apologise for not praying. I beg him to give me courage to be patient, accepting and strong. Help me show my three people how much I love them, I beg. In the silence of the church I hear god. Maybe all scared people hear God.

I remember the stories of people who found God and religion. I used to laugh at silly converts. I am not a convert, I tell God. I will not join any gospel preaching group, I just need strength not to become a nuisance to the ones I love.

I don't believe in bothering God with little insignificant bits of my little gliomas. There is nothing I can do about it. If He wants to He will take them away. I intend to live happily for all the days that I still have. We all have to go sometimes, only my days may be numbered. Everybody's days are numbered.

My doctor tells me about Thalidomide tablets. After the disaster they caused to the unborn babies they returned as a cure for everything. Tumours and leprosy and lesions have been cured by thalidomide.

Thalidomide capsules caused much misery. Mum told me that she took thalidomide against morning sickness when she carried me. She shudders at the thought that I could have been born without legs or arms or both. But I was born perfect. The doctor tells me that a thalidomide may prove useful in my case. It is good that I cannot become pregnant because thalidomide is not to be taken by women who can become pregnant. Maybe I am again fortunate.

Maybe a new drug will be found in time, he promises.

There is nothing I can do but wait. I wanted something more in my life. Now I have more. I have gliomas. I have to hide this intruder. I ignore IT and pray that it dies of neglect. I call it IT to minimise its importance. After all it's all in my head, it isn't real. IT made a nest within my brain, it coiled itself like a snake around my thoughts. This uninvited, secret companion wants to delete everything that I am. I don't have to have surgery. Even with surgery there is no cure.

I have to condense all my living into the days left to me. I have no time to cry.

There is an infection, I tell my family when the doctor puts me on sick leave.

No child is born a criminal: no child is born an angel: he is just born.

Smith.

A Family

I find Anthony sitting in the cutting room with a pile of brownish papers. The tears are running down his face. I stop uncertain. He shudders when he sees me and then he smiles. It's all right. His tears have nothing to do with me or with us.

I kiss Anthony. There is tenderness between us, there always was a fragile gentle intimacy; we were never rude or rough or common with each other. I am enormously glad to be here for him. I can hear his heartbeat, I can hear the sobs in his chest. Whatever those papers contain, have touched him intensely. I am happy that he still loves me, that I can take some of the pain away.

We sit like that in silence.

Someone sent me a story, smiles Anthony.

Who?

It came in a mail.

Can I read it.

If you like.

Who wrote the story?

Jack Brown.

Who is Jack Brown?

I think Jack Brown is a pen name.

It is a man, I say.

Read it and you tell me.

Do you know who wrote it?

I have an idea.

I sit under the gum tree and read the story. I forget the time. I even forget gliomas for awhile.

Under the skin and in the blood.

I am making sand castles in the sand pit. I need mud into mud-cakes. I am having a banquet.

An old woman and her husband sit on the park bench and look at me playing in the mud.

Poverty, dirt and sin get under your skin. You can never wash that away, says the woman.

I don't like the old woman. Her eyebrows are raised and her forehead is so furrowed that ants could easily pass unnoticed from one side of her head to the other.

The woman's husband is chuckling at something. He doesn't hate me.

I jump in the puddle and splash them both with the mud. They gasp and the woman makes a run for me. She never actually moves, she just lunges on the spot and make up like she is going after me. The man seems amused. They know that I am faster than them. The woman tries to clean her flowery dress and her husband's grey trousers. I can't quite hear what they are saying.

Other kids in the sand-pit laugh. I don't know who at, or why. I stick my pointing fingers into my mouth and spread my lips wide. I stick my tongue out and kids laugh. I don't know who they laugh at or with.

I look at them and shake my body and my head from side to side.

What can you expect from the likes of her, says the woman so other kids can hear her.

Kids look at themselves and stop laughing. They are different. I am different.

She is not mine, you can keep the brat, yells a man. I sit on my bed on the top bunk. I cannot get down. The man pushed me away so mum stuck me up and removed the ladder. I stay out of the way. Mum is crying.

Once a slut always a slut, says the man and slams the door.

The man goes away. Mum falls to the floor and cries. I call her and she picks me up and almost crushes me. Her tears are salty. She takes a tablet and then another one and then a handful and then she goes to sleep. I sleep next to her.

I am awake but she still sleeps. I open the fridge and get some milk. Mum sleeps.

A woman comes and looks at mum and phones someone. They come and take mum to wake her up.

The woman takes me to her home. She is mum's friend. Next day mum comes home and she is sorry for sleeping so long. Mum takes me to her friend to look after me while she is at work.

Did you hear from him, asks mum's friend. She is a pretty woman and she smells nice. I like her. I love mum.

He is gone.

Good riddance. Does she know her father? Asks mum's pretty friend. Both of them cast their eyes on me.

She is too little to know, says mum.

I play with the doll who has beautiful blond curls and blue eyes.

She is a doll, says mum. I think she thinks that I am a doll.

Who is he, says mum's friend.

You should know, says mum. Everybody knows. His wife knows. I lost my job because of her. Everybody turned against me.

What does he say.

He pretends that it never happened. How could it with his kids in the Catholic school and him being what he is.

Takes two to tango, says mum's friend.

He tangoed himself. I should have charged him with rape only nobody would believe me. And there is her, mum lowers her eyes onto me.

You should tell, says mum's friend.

His wife is a rich bitch. She can make him do anything she wants him to do, says mum.

Is she Italian? She doesn't look Italian, our neighbour looks at me as she talks to mum's friend. She couldn't be Italian with those blond curls, the neighbour folds her fat arms as she leans back on the fence and casts her eyes on me again.

It's a long story, says mum's pretty friend.

Mum's pretty friend has to go to work and can no longer look after me. Mum asks our neighbour.

I thought she is trained, says the woman to mum in the afternoon. I can't look after her if she is not trained. She pooped her pants and they stink. I am not having it. At her age she should be trained.

Mum cries and drinks her drink slowly. After awhile she is not sad any more, she likes me again and cuddles me and cries and laughs. She put me to bed and tells me that she will be home soon. She says that an angel will look after me. I tell her not to let the angel into my bed because it may break it and she laughs. She sings to me and she smells nice and her hair is beautiful and she has another drink and the smell of it stings my nostrils. She kisses me good night and I think of the angel looking after me.

What a waste of time, really, whispers my teacher to her friend as they wait for me to do my homework.

She'll end up like her mother, says her friend as they sigh because they both know the same sad truth.

It's a shame really, says my teacher. One tries even when one knows. Her martyr voice makes me sad and I try to work harder even though I know that it is all a waste of time.

I crawl into my skin and smile to please the teacher who does so much for me out of the goodness of her heart and in her own time.

What a waste of time.

I wonder sometime, says the teacher's friend. If one took these kids out and away, maybe they would have a chance.

Maybe it's in their blood.

It's not a poor mite's fault.

One has to try.

Some kids are cursed. They can't break the curse.

Who knows.

I wonder how one could break the curse.

I try to concentrate on the numbers of my addition. I write two and carry one, I say to myself.

How long are you going to be?

She is almost finished.

I mumble my numbers to make myself finish faster so the teacher and her friend would not have to waste more of their own time out of the goodness of their hearts.

Some kids are lucky but some will never make it, says the teacher's friend.

That's life, says my teacher.

Nasty rich kids bring prejudice to school from their rich parents, says the teacher in a conspiring whisper.

They think that their shit doesn't smell, says her friend. The word shit hisses out although it is spoken in an even smaller whisper.

I only teach them, their parents bring them up, says my teacher.

I love my teacher.

It's not right, says her friend.

I like her too.

On the playground we all play in the sand-pit. Two girls move away and whisper. I know that they are being nasty to me.

I'll smash you, I tell them.

They run to tell the teacher.

I cry.

What happened?

They are saying things about me.

What things?

Nasty.

The teacher waits for more information.

They say that they will smash me, I lie. I couldn't hear what they said.

We don't talk like that, miss, says the girl. She talks like that, miss.

Like what?

You know, they look meaningfully at the teacher. I think that the teacher understands.

Say sorry and keep away from each other, says my teacher.

I return into the sand-pit. Kids laugh. I am sure they laugh at me. I throw a handful of sand at the boy who laughs most.

You are going on detention, the teacher points at me and her finger almost touches my face. Right in the middle.

You know the rule about sand, says the teacher.

Of course I know the rules, I broke most of them and I spent most lunch times on detention.

Our class goes for an overnight excursion. Some mums come with us but my mum can't. I sleep near my best friend.

Your eyes stick out like toad's eyes, laughs my best friend. We all have best friends in year two. At the age of eight friendships are most important. Some even have boyfriends and girlfriends.

I look in the mirror and the enormous blue eyes look back at me. They stick out like two boiled eggs cut in half. I haven't seen toad's eyes so I don't know how they stick out. I try to pull my eyes in under my skin.

Your feet stink, yells a girl on the other side. Everybody laughs. When I go to the loo I try to wash the smell off my feet. I could never wash the smell away. I know that it follows me wherever I go. It's under my skin.

Nits stick to blond hair, says the mother of my best friend to my teacher. She is holding a hand of her daughter who has brown hair. They look at me and something makes me scratch my head.

You see what I mean, says the woman.

I scratch some more.

I look in the mirror. Piercing blue eyes stick out from under yellow curls. My nose is snotty. I see no nits in my hair. Maybe they got under my skin like dirt and sin and poverty.

We play basket ball. I like basket ball. I am good at basket ball.

Watch where you put your bag, warns my team mate's mum. Her eyes crawl towards me without moving her head. I see her eyes travelling sideways like crabs. They slither towards me like snakes. Her daughter understands the unspoken message and moves her bag away from me and into the circle of her friends. I want to join the circle but it is closed.

I have a friend. She came from the country and nobody knows her. She likes me. I go to her place. Her mum works but her dad is studying or something. I stay with my friend for the weekend. We are both twelve. She already wears a bra but I don't. My chest is growing very slowly. She knows everything, she has periods and she has a boyfriend. I have none of these things and I want them all. I want to be like her. I love her.

She saw her father and mother in bed doing it. I don't know who my father is. Mum goes out and comes home without a man.

I made it a rule never to bring a man home, says mum to her pretty friend.

The new girl is my first real best friend. Her father is a good man, he bounces me on his knee and cuts a big cake for us. He says that it is no trouble having me to play with his daughter. He tickles both of us and we roar laughing as we roll all over him on the floor. He never mentions dirt or sin or nits. He lets us jump on top of him and he pinches our bottoms to make us laugh. He is under us and our bottoms bounce over him and our skirts cover his face. He tries to bite my bottom but I sit on his face and he tickles me all over to get rid of me.

He takes us out and buys us ice-cream. He is the best man I know. I don't know any other man really. He runs his fingers through my hair and kisses them. No man ever kissed me before. Mum is happy that I have a friend and a good home and family to go to. Mum works a lot. In the evening she has to go out a lot. My friend's mum works a lot too. In the evening she goes to college. We only have her dad to care for us. He is always finished with what he is doing by the time we get home from school and he helps us with homework and he cuddles us. He kisses me like I was his own daughter. Maybe he is my father. I want him to be my father. He must be my father.

The hell started when this little bitch came, says my friend's neighbour to another neighbour. Both women look at me coming to my friend's place.

I wonder who her father is, says the woman.

When you fall into the hornet's nest you never know which one bit you, says the other neighbour.

Police is in my friend's house.

I am scared to go in. I have something to do with the hell that broke in that house.

My friend moves back to the country with her mother. Her father goes away somewhere.

Mum gets me videos to watch when she goes out. I am big enough to look after myself

Mum signs the permission note for me to go to
the disco.

There will be a teacher in charge. It's a school thing, mum tells her pretty friend.

She has to learn to look after herself, says mum's pretty friend.

All the kids are going. There is no drink or drugs, just jumping around. There is no harm in it, says mum.

They are just kids.

Kids will be kids.

Behave yourself, orders mum and they go out. They don't say when they will be back.

I am fourteen and I am at my first school disco. I have a new girlfriend and she is popular with boys. Other girls hate her because she can get any boy she wants. She likes me best.

We are exhausted from dancing. The boy asks my friend if she wants a smoke. My girlfriend goes out and I follow. We hide under the bushes with some other kids. I am so happy that they all let me hang out with them.

A boy brings a bottle of coke. It is flat and very sweet and we pass the bottle around, the two boys and two girls lying on the grass. I have never been so happy. They are my real friends and I love them. They all love me and nobody is saying nasty things to me. Another bottle is passed around and we giggle lying in the grass. It is a warm starry night and everybody loves me.

We move into the dark end of the park with lots of big bushes. We all lay down on the grass under the tree. The boy rolls a cigarette and passes it around. I inhale and cough but I try again. I can't let them see that I don't know how to do it. It's all right because we are all friends. My girlfriend and her boyfriend start kissing. I see them getting up and they hold onto each other like they were still dancing only the girl's dress is up and the boy pulls her pants down. The girl leans on the tree and holds onto the boy. He sticks his hand between her legs and she unzips his pants. They both lean on the tree a few steps away in the dark. We watch them. They are both moaning. Everything seems miles away and very close at the same time.

I have never seen anything like that.

It is a hot night and I feel hot and wet between my legs.

A boy starts kissing me and rubbing my chest.

I like it and I kiss him back and hold onto him.

Want to do it, says the boy.

I don't know.

There is nothing to it, says the girl. She pulls her pants up and straightens her dress. The boy zips his pants.

I don't know.

Watch me do it again, says my girlfriend.

A boy starts kissing her again as the rest of us puff on the cigarettes. I keep inhaling deeply as the boy and the girl moan and move as one. I get more wet between my legs. Everything seems a pleasant dream and I cannot get up or move away.

The boy next to me sticks his hand under my skirt and reaches into my pants. He feels my wetness.

It's nice, says the girl. Feel him, she guides my hand into the boy's pants where there is an excited hard thing pushing into my hand. Something makes me squeeze the hardness of him and he pushes his finger into my wetness.

We all lie down now.

My girlfriend lays down next to me and a boy lays down as well. He puts his head on her tummy and she pulls his bottom up. His head is under her skirt. She moans loudly for a few seconds.

We are all lying on our backs tired. The music from the hall is vibrating among the branches, we are all together but we seem to be alone and far away. The stars are very close. Someone spots a shooting star. The moon is up, the whole big circle of light is almost on top of us. I hear the drums and the stamping of the feet far away.

The boy kisses me and massages me between my legs and it is lovely. He comes on top of me and pushes his penis into me. Someone claps as he pushes in and out. There is pain, sweet pain, there is tremendous excitement in every part of my body. I close my eyes. Someone plays with one of my breasts. Somebody is kissing me. We are all one and I want it to continue. It seems that they are all stroking me and kissing me and poking into me and suddenly I think that I will die. I hear the echo of my scream from far away. My bottom is going up and down and up and down, I have no control of my body but I like it.

I want to sleep. We are all spent in the grass.

When I wake up others have gone back to the disco. I go to the toilet to wash the blood from my legs. I stroke the soreness between my legs and feel a little surge of pleasure that reminds me of the big, enormous thing we did.

I walk home and go to bed before mum returns.

The next day it all seems like a dream and I am not sure what really happened.

Did you enjoy yourself last night? Asks my girlfriend.

I don't know.

I am a little scared of what happened.

We are going down to the river in the afternoon to have a joint. Want to come?

I don't know.

There is nothing else to do. I go. I sit next to my girlfriend and we pick little daisies and string them on the stem of the grass to make necklaces.

The boys throw sticks into the water. They pretend that we are not even there. It is just two boys and two of us girls.

The boy passes the joint to my girlfriend. The girl passes it to me. Soon we giggle. I roll on the grass and stop next to the boy who kisses me and rolls me over to his friend who lifts my dress and kisses me between my legs before he rolls me over to the girl again. We play follow the leader and I am the leader and they all roll after me and kiss different parts of each other. It is enormously funny and we laugh all the time.

The boy rolls me into the bush and climbs on top of me and we laugh as he pushes my skirt up. I can hear my friends laughing and sighing and screaming. Everything seems far away.

It is pitch dark as we walk home.

I know I am pregnant. I just know for sure. I tell my girlfriend and she takes me to the clinic where they take it out and put me on the pill.

I am safe now.

I am fifteen and boys like me.

I don't like girls and they don't like me.

Men tell me that I am beautiful but I am too smart to believe them. I need more men to convince me that I am really, really beautiful and lovely.

It's a waste of time, I hear from the past. Some kids are cursed.

Men look into my eyes and lie that my eyes are beautiful. I know that my eyes are toad's eyes and that men only want to have sex. They love having sex with me and I don't mind. They buy me gifts.

Men tell me that they love me but I don't believe them. I leave them before they can leave me.

I know that dirt and sin and poverty lurks under my skin.

I know about my curse.

I know that my feet stink.

Maybe nits are there as well.

Under the skin.

In the blood.

I need more men to tell me how beautiful I am.

I know that they laugh behind my back.

I like to hear men saying that they love me. I need men to seriously kiss all my ugliness and the weird things that were once laughed at. Men do try to kiss it away but the more they kiss it the less I believe them.

Mum's boyfriend was drunk when he smashed into the semi-trailer. Both died.

I have a job in the office now. The boss's son, Danny, says that he loves me.

I am eighteen and we are getting married.

We are decorating the church for our wedding.

She will bring you down, mark my word, says Danny's mum at the back of the church. I am putting the final touches to the altar. Her words echo to me. Churches carry sounds more than other buildings.

Lay off her, mum, whispers Danny.

Don't say that I didn't tell you, says Danny's mum.

Keep your voice down, mum, says Danny.

I am not going to have her in my house.

I am buying us a house.

May God help you, says Danny's mum.

Leave him alone, says his father. You have to let go. He is a grown up man.

Danny is twenty one.

I like Danny's father. He hugged me like I was his own daughter. He congratulated Danny for choosing a pretty girl like me. I almost believed him when he said that I am pretty.

All the girls are after Danny. I don't care. I know that he doesn't really love me. How could he? All the girls are after him and he is nice to all the girls. See if I care. I want to punish Danny and those girls. They think that he is spotlessly handsome and clever and gorgeous. I look at girls flirt with Danny. I have fun with his friends. I know that he does not love me, so it doesn't matter who he loves.

Danny is adorable and he loves you, says a female making eyes at Danny.

I believe that he is adorable but he does not love me and it does not matter. He must never think that I care because I don't. He wants to dazzle them all.

Danny and I dance at the party and he whispers in my ear that he wants to go home and make love. He is excited but I don't want to go home. I like to stay and watch the women want my husband.

I don't want to go yet.

Antonio is Danny's friend. His family is friends with Danny's family. Or distant relation.

Antonio is not dazzling anyone, he is skinny, ugly and not so bright. He has huge disgusting pimples all over his face. I am eighteen and he is seventeen so that makes me an older woman and I feel in charge. Antonio likes me. He knows that he is ugly.

I know that Antonio would love me. He would want to have me. Antonio follows Danny like a little dog follows his master. I am happy because I know that he would really like to have me. They would all envy Antonio if he took Danny's girl. I want a little dog to follow me. I am stronger than Antonio. He is uglier than me and I don't love him. As long as I don't love him, he can't hurt me.

Danny is charming to all the girls on the dance floor. They look in my direction sometimes and Danny seems happy that Antonio keeps me company. He is just a star struck kid.

Danny's friends want to take me to bed to prove it to Danny that they are as adorable as Danny is. Nobody could be as adorable as Danny. He is adorable with old ladies and snotty children and cranky old men. He has the power of adorability over everybody but me. I don't care.

Nobody notices Antonio leaning into my neck because they are all dazzled by Danny's perfection. I look at Danny as Antonio leans on me with his liquid foggy eyes.

Danny told me to stop working so I can decorate our new home. I feel alone in our huge beautiful home. Danny has gone to work. His career in his father's firm is flourishing.

All my dreams came true. I have a perfect home. I know I should be grateful to Danny. Grateful to God maybe for my luck.

I feel very alone. I know I should love Danny better but I am scared of being hurt. I polish everything that I can find to polish. I follow recipes and cook exotic deserts. I set the dinner table in a festive welcoming for Danny. I pull every weed out of our new garden and trim every dry branch on the shrubs. I cry as I sweep the leaves off the garage. I want to go back to work, I want to have something to do and somewhere important to go. I want to have interesting things to say so Danny will find me interesting.

I want to have a baby. Danny wants a baby. My baby would love me. I need a baby. I need someone to really, really love me. People only say that they love me because they want to be close to Danny and love him.

My own baby would love me.

I don't love anybody.

I cry a lot.

Whatever is wrong with her, I hear Danny's mum say. She certainly has her cake and eats it.

You never liked her, says Danny.

She is a curse, says Danny's mum.

I am pregnant. I knew the moment I became pregnant. Probably the baby knocks on every female's door and announces itself. I just know.

I am excited. I sit in front of our home waiting for Danny. I want to make him happy.

I put my hands out to Danny as he comes in the driveway but he walks past me.

What's wrong, I ask.

Mum was right. You couldn't find anyone else so you sleep with Antonio.

Someone told Danny that Antonio spends time with me. It is true that I am seeing Antonio but I don't love him or sleep with him. He keeps me company because I have nobody else. We have never done anything wrong. He follows me like a little dog. He follows Danny like that. I need someone to love me. I never slept with anyone since I first set my eyes on Danny.

Danny pushes me away. I tell him that I never slept with Antonio.

Danny doesn't hit me and he doesn't go away. He drinks. He gets more and more drunk and then he makes love to me and tells me that he loves me and is not going to let me go. I tell him that I love him and that I never loved anybody else.

Everybody fucked you, cries Danny after a couple more drinks.

The words scare me.

Danny crumbles into my arms and I see the tears in his eyes. Maybe he really loves me. He is kissing me and cursing me. We make love.

I am a curse, somewhere deep down I always knew that I am a curse.

I want to tell Danny that I am pregnant but he is too drunk. He goes to get another bottle from the hotel down the road.

He never makes it.

It takes them hours to pull his body from the wreck. I lock myself in the house. I don't want to see his family. I don't want to see anybody. I hold Danny's baby growing in my stomach. I am a curse.

I am going to have Danny's baby. This baby will have a perfect home and a perfect mother. I will protect this baby against the world. This will be my own adorable Danny. I talk to my baby every day. The baby loves me and I love Danny's child.

The dirt and poverty and sin are not going to be in the baby's blood or under its skin. This is Danny's baby with Danny's adorable blood and skin.

I will break the curse.

I go to church to thank God for all my blessings. This is going to be a new beginning for me. My child will have a good mother. The curse is dead.

Antonio still follows me like a little dog. He follows me more since he has no Danny to follow. I know that Antonio loves me. Other girls laugh at Antonio but I like the little dog to follow me. I know that he adores me the way he adored Danny. He is the only person that likes me.

Antonio tells me that he wants to marry me. His family is cool towards me but Antonio tells me that I am not marrying his family. Antonio is only eighteen. They don't want him to marry because he is too young. They don't want him to marry a pregnant girl. They don't want him to marry a slut.

Antonio tells them that the baby is his. We know it isn't, we just want to make his family happy. Antonio says that the baby needs a father.

Antonio and I get married and he moves in with me. We are a happy family waiting for our baby. My baby will have a father and a mother and a happy home.

No sin and no dirt and no poverty for this baby. The curse is gone. I want to name my baby Danny but Antonio insists that the baby be named after him.

I am happy that Anthony does not look like me. He is adorable and cheerful like his father. I am so glad he is not like my husband Antonio. Antonio's sister told me that she knows that Anthony is not her brother's child. They hate me.

Antonio has a girlfriend and people tell me about it to make me jealous but I am not jealous. I don't love Antonio. I never loved him. He needs someone to love him, I suppose. It's not easy to love Antonio.

My son Anthony is my life, he is my sunshine, he loves me. He is my adorable Danny which I did not dare love.

I sit under the gums with the story in my lap. I never listened to anyone for long enough to get to know them. I cry for Anthony and his mum and for our family. I am so enormously happy and grateful for my husband and my son.

I am glad that old Antonio is not my father, says Anthony as he wheels himself closer.

We hug.

You should be called Danny.

What about Toni?

We perpetuated the wrong name. I wish your mother was here, I say.

I hated the old bastard Antonio. Now I don't hate him any more. He vanished. He means nothing.

It probably didn't matter to your mum what he said or did. She did not love him.

She tried to do the right thing for my sake. The bastard didn't know how lucky he was.

Maybe he wasn't. He was probably more unhappy than your mother. He probably loved her.

I am glad that I don't hate him anymore.

My parents protected me against the nasty, ugly world, I tell Anthony. My mother was always the light that shined in front of me. She knew her way and she never looked sideways.

I like your mum, says Anthony.

I like your mum too.

I am glad your mum found Bill.

I sleep better since you moved in, I tell Anthony.

Maybe it is better late than never.

I am so lucky to have you and Toni and mum. I love you.

I don't need to rush any more. I don't have to impress my superiors in order to get a promotion. I can stop and talk and listen and tell Toni all the stories I never had time to tell. I can look at all the butterflies with him and help him catch all the yabbies he wants.

I pour all my love into every moment we have. I see Anthony re-read his mother's story. He seems happier.

We wonder who sent him the story. Maybe it was mum's pretty friend, maybe mum gave it to her friend before she died. Who knows? Someone somewhere was thinking of Anthony and his mum.

I am aware that my days are counted.

I want Toni to read about us one day when he will understand. I begin writing a diary for Toni to read so the picture of our family will never fade. I write about the precious moments we shared, about the tears of joy and the tears of sadness.

Dearest Toni,

You are the most precious person and I thank god every minute for having you. You are the best thing that happened to daddy and mummy. Nanna adores you. We are proud of you. Your friends like you.

I love watching you on daddy's knees and singing with him. You both have beautiful voices. Uncle Jim is teaching you to play a quitter. He is a good man.

Pete and Emma are waiting for you outside our house every morning so you can walk together to school. They waited for you when we all lived in a camp at three miles. You never liked toys much but you made houses and roads and rivers out of dirt and water and sticks.

Remember yabbies you and your daddy caught for Christmas? That was the best Christmas daddy and I ever had because we had you and you were happy.

When I will go to heaven daddy will stay with you. He will need you so you can remember me together. Nanna will also stay here and tell you stories and things I used to do when I was young. Uncle Mark's family loves you. You can always trust uncle Bill because he is old and he knows a lot.

All these people are your family and they all love you.

Your mouth and your eyes are like daddy's, you have the same long fingers, you are as kind as he is. Your hair and the shape of your face you got from me and I got that from my grandmother.

My nanna told me to go to Lightning Ridge. I am grateful to her because here I met your daddy who is the most wonderful man on earth and we have a son we both adore.

I would not want to change anything in my life because I would not want to miss a moment that I had.

Writing little notes for Toni makes me forget that my brain tumour is spreading rapidly. The tumour wasn't a surprise really. Deep down I knew that something was terribly wrong when my headaches refused to go away.

I am afraid that I will go mad before I die.

I wish to die a dignified death. I would hate to frighten Toni with my pain. I take more tranquillisers and pain killers than I should but I am not doing any harm to anybody. It is easier to smile.

I won't be there to meet Toni's girlfriends and his children, I won't even be there to kiss him better when he falls from his bike or when someone's words hurt him. I want to stay around as long as possible but I don't want to be a burden to my family. I believe that when God wants us back he takes us.

I am afraid of pain, I tell my doctor. I don't want my family to see my pain. Give me whatever it takes to control my pain. Don't worry about the safe dose since my life can not be saved. I want to save the happy memories.

Dearest Toni,

I planted a jacaranda tree for you today. It will grow with you and every time you see its blue flowers hanging from the branches you will know that I am with you. Jacarandas live a long time.

I will plant some grape vines near the fence, maybe daddy and you and uncle Mark will one day make wine out of the grapes to drink a toast to me. Have fun. One day we will meet again and be together forever.

I planted a rose in the back of the house. You might want to sprinkle my ashes around it. Roses do well with a bit of ash.

I will tell my family about the tumour when I will no longer be able to hide my pain. But not yet. We have never been so happy. My husband and my son need memories that will help them when I am gone. I am so lucky because I can prepare everything for the end. Most people are taken by surprise.

I am happy to have known this beautiful world, I am happy that I am a part of the creation. I am happy that mum and Anthony and Bill are going to be there for Toni.

Maybe a miracle will happen and I will be with them as well for awhile. Maybe gliomas are only the reminders that I am alive and happy.

Maybe there are miracles.

Maybe there is somebody somewhere who knows what he is doing. Maybe Jesus will take away my gliomas.

I am on my knees, perhaps I am a little closer to God .