

The August Months

by
Steffie Wallace

August (ô'gəst) *n.* [L. < *Augustus* (Caesar)] the eighth month of the year, having 31 days: abbrev. **Aug.**
august (ô gust') *adj.* [L. *augustus*] 1. inspiring awe; imposing 2. worthy of respect; venerable

The August Months

Steffie Wallace was born in Adelaide, South Australia, in 1946, and has lived in Melbourne since childhood. Her tertiary studies include art history, painting, sociology and media studies. During the 1970s, she was art critic for *The Melbourne Times* and has since submitted articles for various art publications. She is married, has a son and two grandchildren, and lives in Melbourne, working as a freelance desktop publisher and artist. This is her first novel.

*For Alex,
who has made,
and continues to make, motherhood
a source of joy and fulfilment*

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one

At the gallery opening, people stood about in small groups, clutching their glasses. The room was bright and well-lit. There were no chairs. People jostled around the trays of food which were handed infrequently around the room and were quick to hold out their glasses for refills as a smiling girl touted bottles through the crowd. They moved from painting to painting, frowning over their catalogues, looking up intently at each work in turn as if to discover some hidden meaning beneath the surface.

For indeed, there is nothing else to study, apart from each other, I think. I look at the cover of my own copy of the catalogue.

'The Moods of Port Douglas'

An exhibition of paintings by Marie Fitzpatrick

August 13th - 27th, 1988

Opening: Friday 12th August, 6pm to 8pm.

I have already achieved some kudos from this exhibition. The Shire is anxious to purchase at least one work and the curator of the Cairns Art Gallery is interested in another. One of the more prominent residents has even commissioned me to paint the spectacular view from his house. And in this, my moment of recognition, I suddenly see a figure, her back to me, across the room. Em, I think, my heart pounding, oh Em! I hardly hear the opening speech; I have lost sight of her amid the people who have bunched together to hear the complimentary words of the local councillor. And then it is my turn to respond. I thank them graciously and enthusiastically. For I have waited so long for this day. The years of hard work have borne fruit. Unlike my body which remained barren, my mind and my hands have been kind to me. The formalities over, I step down from the small dais and look round anxiously for Em. She is standing close to

Kevin and smiling up at him. And as I watch them for a moment, unobserved, I am reminded of the circumstances, six months earlier, which have led up to this meeting.

My first encounter had taken place at the door of the building which I had been instructed to look for. Driving up the winding road through the hospital grounds, I had not felt comfortable about this assignment. I tendered for the job, not expecting to be considered, and had been surprised when I was successful. The centre was situated on the periphery of the large hospital, a collection of single-story wooden buildings with little architectural merit. Large gum trees, various native shrubs and roughly cut grass softened the visual impact of its institutional appearance.

As I walk self-consciously towards the entrance, having parked my car in the visitors' car-park, I am aware of my own sensations of uncertainty, of disquiet. A few women sit or stand smoking around the doorway in the late afternoon sun which marks the end of another hot February day. They look up as I approach and glance quickly away. One appraises me more intensely than the others; she appears younger than I am and her pale intelligent face is surrounded by a cloud of dark curly hair, too dark to be her natural colour.

'Hi,' she says. 'Looking for someone in particular?'

She directs me to the office and waves me in with a smile. Later, on discovering the purpose of my visit as I am introduced, she asks me if I'd like a cup of tea.

The other women look at me suspiciously as I seat myself self-consciously among them. Someone produces a plate of scones.

'Oh great, Dev tea,' exclaims the girl nearest me. Young, blonde, she has prominent bandages on her wrists. To stifle my shock, I try not to look. At the sight of food, my

retreat in times of stress, I relax a little. The room is overheated, having a tranquillising effect. One by one the women drift away, all except the dark one who gave me the tea.

This is my first meeting with Em, at the rehabilitation centre where I am designing posters for drug and alcohol abuse. My career as a freelance graphic artist had taken off during the heady optimism of the late '70s when I found an enthusiastic market for my ideas regarding posters for political campaigns. Now, ten years on, I had a contract to produce work which would target addicts and alcoholics; I had come to the centre to study the effects of addiction and the treatment given so that I had some idea of my market. These women were to be my critics; judging my work from their own varied perspectives in terms of success or failure. Jobs like this paid my bills. In my later years, I was trying to make a new career as a painter and in the beginning, I felt a detachment from this type of work. My view was clinical, objective, and it did not involve people, only images. Not, that is, until I met Em. Her name, in fact, was not Emma, or Emily, but Marie, with the emphasis on the first syllable; she gave herself the phonetic spelling of her initial as her real name. I was intrigued with this, for my name was Marie too, and it had never occurred to me to be called anything else.

The fragility of her face is marred; by anger, despair, depression, I can't tell. Beneath a deceptively cheerful exterior, her face reflects hopelessness and desperation, evident in quick jerky movements, nail biting and chain-smoking. She does not seem to fit in with the other women, for as I discover later, they are all women here, sentenced by the courts, by relatives, or in rarer cases by themselves, to be liberated from the substances upon which they have become dependent. Most have come because they are in danger of losing their children. She is here, she tells me, because she has lost her child.

I have no children, an only child born of elderly parents. In my disastrous early marriage I welcomed the prospect of children, children who were to remain unborn. And in this, my undesired state of infertility, I gallop gratefully towards the menopause, welcoming the shift in my hormonal levels which will cease to remind me of my childless state, my inability to conceive, to achieve what others do so effortlessly.

Having introduced herself, with her predilection for one-syllable names, she proceeds to call me Mar. I do not like it, but it makes no difference. After a while I become used to it; it signifies intimacy, constituting an endearment peculiar to this emerging relationship.

She shows me her room, making a face as she indicates her roommate who has her back to us in the adjacent hallway as she speaks animatedly into the phone.

'We have to share. God, I hate it! The woman is a prize bitch and she never stops talking.'

The rooms are sparsely furnished; a bed with a candlewick spread - 'I miss my doona,' she moans - a small chest of drawers and a wardrobe. It is not a room which one would be comfortable in, yet, for many, these rooms are havens of safety, oases of security in an uncertain world.

I am relieved to leave, to escape after this initial visit. I need some space to put the experience into perspective.

Once home, I sink into the solace of a lavender bath with a chocolate bar and a cup of strong tea, musing on the things I have witnessed and how they can be translated into visual images. Am I making statements for these women or to them, I wonder, and laugh at my Doberman as she rushes in and watches intently as the water swirls down the plughole.

two

I discover the women are referred to as clients, a word I struggle with in the familiar capacity of my own job knowledge. My clients do not look like this, they do not have this empty, dejected look of surrender about them. Their ages vary from late teenage to my own age, their backgrounds even more.

At the time, I was working on a series of portraits of friends, large scale works which had been inspired by the work of the photo-realist painter, Philip Perlstein. My figures were clothed and cropped so that the forms of their torsos filled the picture space. By eliminating the faces which would normally form the main focus of these portraits, I had rendered my subjects anonymous, and the fixed aspects of their body language, particularly their hands, had to speak for them as artistic characterisations of differentiation.

These women, to my initial furtive glances, would have all demonstrated the same pose, had I drawn them in the same way. They slump in their chairs and couches, their eyes are downcast and their expressions lifeless; they seem possessed of a terrible weariness which is foreign to me, as indeed is this whole side of life. Their hands rest loosely in their laps or hang limply by their sides, cigarettes droop from their nicotine-stained fingers, indicative of hopelessness, despair. Their voices are monosyllabic, becoming animated only when they speak about their drug-taking. Clearly it is easier to relate to the past, despite the fear of the future.

'The thing we all have trouble with,' says Em, 'Is *now*. Now, as in the present.'

I do not understand this, how else is one to live? I value my existence. I cannot comprehend this attitude which is so orientated, so centred around the pursuit of oblivion through drugs and alcohol, as a way of life. These women seem so desperate; in

this environment many are defiant, some openly hostile to this unfamiliar form of authority with its concepts of self-help and positive thinking.

Their over-sensitivity causes them to over-react. There are fights precipitated by aggressive attitudes. To me they appear inordinately possessive; of their belongings, of their food in the communal kitchen, of their feelings. The staff seem to be detached, calm, objective as they deal with the progress and problems of excess.

I learn that the women are here for a period of six weeks and that during this time, they will learn the nature of their illness and ways to learn to live without the props of drugs and alcohol. Some don't see the time out, they may be dismissed for behavioural problems, may leave of their own accord, or be requested to leave if they show positive testing for drugs after being away from the centre on leave.

On my second visit, I am discussing prospective ideas for posters when a young girl, having been asked to leave, is making a dramatic departure. She screams abuse at the supervisor, a terrible stream of words emanating from her angry, distorted crimson mouth. It is a lifetime of hate that spews forth, it lasts until the moment she hurls herself into a waiting car, cropped peroxided hair glinting in the sun, a torn Guns 'n Roses T-shirt and faded black jeans emphasising her thin body. 'Ah, fuck the lot a'youse!' are her last words. Her compatriots are largely dispassionate, though some are visibly disturbed.

three

There are pregnant women here periodically, Em tells me. One joins her group during the course of treatment. To me, she seems careless about the future. 'It'll be all right, I'll get welfare.'

I have read that many babies are conceived in drugged or intoxicated states. 'Meant to be,' she says, laughing at my concerned expression. This will be her third child. The others are wards of the state.

I have heard stories of babies who must be given treatment; once born they exhibit symptoms of addiction and must go through the pain of withdrawal. The mothers' attitude makes me angry. When I mention this to Em, she says, 'We're learning about tolerance here. Tolerance, for God's sake!'

I am reminded of those long and terrible months spent taking my temperature, checking my vaginal mucus for viscosity, having my Fallopian tubes blown, discovering cryptic aspects of my body of which I had been previously and blissfully unaware. And the waiting, oh God, the endless waiting! My breasts would become tender and enlarged, my back would ache, my belly would swell and I would hope I was pregnant. But each month would see my menstrual blood flow with monotonous regularity, there would be tears and depression for a while and then this would be nullified by the prospect that it might occur next month.

Four weeks, governed by the moon, did not seem a long time to have to wait for anything. But in the end, it became too much. I became obsessed, I could think of nothing else. My marriage became a mirror for my emotions, cracking badly so that my view became distorted. By nature, I am pragmatic, the prospect of living this type of life for over a year became distasteful and unbearable. My marriage crumbled and lay in

ruins, eventually disappearing altogether. I had no desire to pursue another relationship, having decided that I was destined to live my life in celibacy. It was at this point that I began to paint.

Em's attitude towards recovery oscillates between profound optimism and savage pessimism.

'I'll give it six weeks,' she says, sighing heavily. 'That sounds positively Lenten, doesn't it? I simply can't envisage the rest of my life without alcohol, it's an impossibility.'

We are sitting near the vegetable garden, a struggling, straggling collection of growth dominated by silver beet gone to seed. An ineffectual scarecrow with a hideous expression is positioned in the centre. Someone has pinned a badge on him which says, *'I'm an alcoholic, give me a drink'*. As she runs her hands through her thick unruly dark hair in a gesture of resignation, I feel a rush of sympathy. By now, I have learned enough to know that no-one can help anyone else in these specific and often terminal circumstances; help can only come from within.

four

One day I get a group together who are interested in seeing their problems depicted as a visual message and I ask for their ideas. One girl says, 'How about a huge shot of a bare backside, with "Don't smack *your* bum" stamped across it?'

Em smiles appreciatively when I tell her about this, for she was on kitchen duty when this happened. The women take it in turns to cook the meals they eat.

'I'm really having a lot of trouble recognising that I've got a problem,' she says. 'My whole life up till now has been relatively disciplined. Before this, I was running four or five days a week, I wasn't smoking for a year or so, and,' with a pointed look at me, 'I watched my weight. Now I get told I've got a disease, a *disease*, for Christ's sake. And they use terminal words to describe it, like 'progressive' and 'incurable'. Great incentive to do something about a condition you can't fix.'

I, who rarely drink, who has never smoked nor felt the need to, have trouble relating to this.

'Hey,' she says then, laughing, poking me in my ample stomach. 'Maybe you should do some time in here for *your* problem.'

I frown. I am only too aware of my own addiction. Food. A fat child, a fat adult, I have never known thinness. Her elegance annoys me. At forty-one, she has the shape and grace of a dancer. Tall, dark, willowy. She must have been striking when she was younger. A real knockout, as they used to say when I was young.

Concerned that she has hurt me, Em attempts to soften her criticism.

'Look how food is promoted,' she says indignantly. 'It's sold like drugs. It's presented so that it will change your perception of the world. It has additives which you become addicted to. Once you start eating, you can't stop. No wonder people get fat!'

five

The work on the posters expands. I have decided not to use people in them, fearing this will sentimentalise the subject matter. Instead, I use photographs of objects; clothing, personal articles, to signify loss of the owner-user in powerful, dramatically-lit contrasts of black and white. The captions are brief; understated text in serious typefaces.

The women are largely non-committal in their responses, possibly reluctant to speak out. Em, however, is enthusiastic. 'God, if I saw that, I'd *really* want to stop drinking!'

I know she's joking, but it makes me feel good. I have no idea whether these will have any impact at all. 'It's a state of mind,' Em tells me.

She recounts an ad in the paper she saw years ago when she woke with a dreadful hangover. 'It said, *'Alcohol is the fog that spoils the view'* and I thought, well, who wants to see the bloody view anyway!' But she had stuck it up on her kitchen notice board all the same.

'It might have helped,' she says. 'Though I did get some strange responses from people who came to our house.'

At first she does not speak much of her home life. Her son had been an only child in a comfortable, middle-class home. Once when I am there, her husband comes to visit. He is a tall, thin man, prematurely grey with thinning hair and an intense clever face. Older than she is, he is different to how I had imagined him.

She is nervous as she introduces us.

'This is Mar, um Marie,' she stumbles over the word. 'Kevin.'

He smiles self-consciously, unsure of himself in this overwhelmingly intimate, female-dominated atmosphere. He is a computer programmer. 'He writes training programs for people who can't relate to computers,' says Em.

In the course of conversation, I learn that they live in a large Victorian house in Camberwell. 'Well, Queen Anne, really, but it sounds so pretentious.' She laughs, conspiratorially poking Kevin's thigh.

It constitutes a dramatic contrast to my flat in St Kilda, which I have previously described to her and now reiterate to Kevin.

'How is it you're allowed to keep a dog?' she asks, since I am confined to small rooms with no garden.

'We have a pro-dog body-corporate,' I say. 'And there are only four flats. My dog gets walked every day along the Esplanade.'

It is now obvious to me that Kevin and Em are well off.

'Why didn't you choose to stay in a private hospital?' I ask tentatively after Kevin has left, for I am vaguely aware that there are more attractive venues which specialise in the treatment of alcoholism and drug addiction.

'After Dylan died, I forgot to pay the Medicare subscription and we no longer had any private health cover. I suppose I didn't really care where I went anyway - at the time I was so demoralised to be told I needed treatment that it didn't matter. And I can certainly count this as being one of life's more interesting experiences, this place is definitely in the character-building category.'

We speak then of our upbringing, our convent schooling, our adolescence.

'What's your favourite childhood memory?' I ask her.

'Mmm. Sitting on the swing with a handful of sweet biscuits, reading Enid Blyton while my hair dried,' she says dreamily. 'My mother would wash my hair with a Sunsilk bubble. I can still smell it.'

Initially, she doesn't speak much about her parents. I discover later that her mother died of cancer when she was eleven. Her father is retired and has a small acreage north-east of the city, where he keeps a few goats.

'My father's out of Melbourne, about forty kilometres, so I don't see as much of him as I'd like to,' she says, brushing ash off her jeans. 'I guess he never really got over my mother dying so young. He finds it difficult to communicate with me. Maybe I put him off when we had to go through puberty together. I'd be looking at the Modess ads in the *Women's Weekly* - you remember, it was always a picture of a glamorous woman in a beautiful satin dress and underneath it would say, *'Modess, because...'* I would ask him, "Because why?" and he would be *so* embarrassed! Sanitary pads were definitely not spoken of in those days, a brown paper bag job when you went to the chemist. I decided in the end that the packet of Modess contained a beautiful dress. I just thought it was a funny way to package it up.'

She laughs at this and I do, too. Our fifties Catholic upbringing included very little information regarding bodily changes, let alone sex.

'Eventually,' says Em, stubbing out her cigarette on the hot concrete, 'Dad gave me a book, which made some things clear and not others. How, I wondered, could anything happen if two people lay down next to each other side by side? Side by side, that's what it said. Very Catholic. I think he was terribly relieved when I married young. He could put the sexual responsibility on to someone else.'

There is a brother too.

'Peter and I are really close,' she says. 'He's married to a fabulous Italian woman and they live just out of Ballarat in this huge mudbrick house where they run a part-time restaurant called 'Chee Chee's' - that's his wife's nickname - and do Bed and Breakfast. Because of the distance, I don't see him as often as I'd like to, either. Still, we have lots of phone calls. They've got five kids. Phoebe's the eldest, she's doing art and design at Prahran College. She's in her final year now and doing well.'

Here she hesitates. 'Phoebe was living in the same house as Dylan when he died, in Fitzroy. I think we became much closer after that because her family were out of Melbourne.'

'I guess we had what's termed a privileged upbringing,' she says defensive now in her self-consciousness, stretching expansively on the couch. 'You know, private schools, holidays up north, big house in the right suburb.' Then soberly. 'Problem is, you just take too much for granted, don't appreciate anything properly.'

Her background shows. The other women send her up, taunt her. It is not vindictive. 'Well, not all the time,' says Em.

six

'This morning, I want you to think about your drinking and drugging.'

There is an appreciative titter from the group. The counsellor leans forward on her chair looking at the faces of the women who sit in a half-circle around her.

'I want you to think about what it was like before you were drinking and drugging, what happened, and what it is like now. In other words, I want you to look at your lives, how they began, how they have turned out. Think about how you would like your life to be. Try and find reasons why things have not worked out. Not aspects beyond your control, but that which you might have been able to change. Don't whip yourselves over this. It's just a beginning, a starting point. Now,' she looks at her watch. 'Go and find a quiet spot to think about this. Some of you might find it easier to write things down. It doesn't have to be in great detail - you can use columns or headings - before, during, after - if you like. Now off you go, for an hour, and try and be as honest as you can about your analysis. Remember, you're doing this for yourselves.'

Em stands up, stretching her arms above her head. She does not want to do this, reach into this pain below the surface and take it out and examine it. For over six months, she has avoided this confrontation, not wanting to look at the events in context, content to live from day to day. But I have to do something, she thinks in despair. I'm here for six weeks and if it doesn't look any better after this, I don't know what I'm going to do.

She walks out into the garden. The day is warm and she finds a place to sit under the large gums which dominate the area and stares out at the expanse of the nearby golf course which stretches off into the distance. Above her, magpies warble loudly with a rustling of branches before they fly off beyond her vision. I can't stand that noise, she

thinks, and she is suddenly aware that it is only one of many associations which she now finds unbearable.

Before, during, after. I don't want to think about my drinking, thinks Em. I want to think about Dylan.

In the past, she had always considered that lives were changed most deeply and dramatically in the summer. Like that first summer with Kevin when, white-hot with love, the warm lazy days drifting into sensuous nights, she had found her dreams fulfilled far beyond her expectations. Winter had always been a time to endure, to wait. Life seemed to stop, stagnate, waiting for the salvation of spring. But it had happened in the winter, in the coldest, thickest part of the Melbourne winter, and it was then that everything changed.

The death was not reported. In the newspapers the next day, scanning through scandal and sport, politics and prejudice, she found nothing. Newspapers, she reflected, communicated such different things to different people. The black and white of print and photographs swirled and blended into grey before her blurring vision. If he had been famous, it would have been front-page news, she thought. The room would have become a shrine, the footpath would have been strewn with flowers and scrawled messages. It would have constituted a heroic death in the eyes of his peers, an identifiable death for the times in which he lived. A final statement. As it was, he simply became a statistic. She discovered later that these deaths were never reported.

Dylan they'd called him, Dy for short. Now it sounds like irony of the worst kind.

Shifting her position under the tree so that the sun is not in her eyes, Em lights a cigarette, watching one of the hospital gardeners cutting some stray branches from a

nearby shrub. If her mind was in better working order, she could remember its botanical name, but gardening is not high on her list of present priorities.

From her purse, she takes a piece of crumpled paper, much folded. She had written this account down in 1979, stuffed it in a drawer and all but forgotten it. After Dylan's death, she had searched for it frantically, wanting to see how much of it related to the actual events. Now she wonders if she should have taken more notice of it, this premonition, this forewarning of death. She reads it again, pushing her hair back from her face.

'Last night I had a dream. And it was so profound, so shocking, that I knew I'd never feel the same again. It was in the country. I knew, and my mother knew, that Dylan was going to kill himself'. She thought it strange that her mother was in the dream, because she had not lived to see Dylan. 'Because I believed this event would take place, when I was told that he had shot himself, I was not shocked, it was pre-destined. I did not know where Kevin was at the time, so I went to see Dylan's body for myself. He was lying on the ground, but he was still alive. I was surprised at this, since I felt that he would have died instantly. My mother took it very badly, but I did not cry since I felt the events were beyond my control and my emotions had been expressed long before. My mother knelt over him and wept, but I did not touch him and I did not weep. The inhabitants of the town stood in a semi-circle around his body. None had moved to help or prevent him committing the act, which had occurred in a vast expanse of flat, brown-grassed land. An ambulance was called and a doctor came. I learned the bullet was lodged in the spine and that Dylan probably wouldn't live for very long. This news did not shock me, since I knew without doubt he was going to die anyway. I woke up and felt an enormous sense of relief and a sense of something being resolved'.

This last sensation of everything being appropriate and correct, Em could not explain.

Her dreams often defied logical explanation, but rarely had she dreamed with such conviction. It seemed a purely emotional response to a momentous occurrence - an unrealistic reaction to a realistic incident. Dylan had only been twelve years old at the time; the concept of him committing such a self-destructive act was unthinkable. Waking the next morning, disturbed and distressed, she had recognised that if the event had really taken place, her reactions would hardly have been sanctioned with such serenity and acceptance.

Reflecting that the dream now seems as fresh in her mind as it did eight years ago, Em folds the paper up carefully, now damp from her perspiring fingers, and puts it back in her purse. Lying back on the grass, her arms folded beneath her head, she compares her reactions in the dream to those of last August.

The first real opportunity for an appraisal of her distraught and damaged psyche had been in Queensland. Her father had flown them up to Surfers Paradise, where he had been staying prior to Dylan's death, the day after the funeral.

Shortly after their arrival in Surfers, Em discovered the warmth of the sun and the sound of the sea in unfamiliar surroundings acted as balm to her tortured soul after the dark days of the past week. She could not believe Dylan had not yet been dead a week. If this was only the beginning, how was she to envisage time after this? She wore the windcheater she gave him for his birthday. It was dark blue and small, he liked his clothes tight to show off his body. She replaced eating with drinking and smoking, but didn't seem to notice. The pill she took each night killed her appetite for the morning and left her with a soft, blurring buzz when she woke up. She had started knitting a

jumper just before he died. Different colours for her, muted and soft. Now she sewed it together. Good occupational therapy. Something to show for the time. There was a wool shop in the village. She bought variegated wool in blues and greens, the colours of the Queensland sea. The sea was beautiful to look at, to listen to, to walk in. It was too cold to swim.

There was a full moon that week. At night, she stood on the balcony and stared at the moonlight on the water shattered by the constant motion of the waves. 'Save me from tomorrow...', wailed the song through her headphones, and she felt an irresistible pull towards the dark sea. Oh God, take me too, she prayed. I have no purpose now. He gave me so much joy, now he's dead at the same age as I was when I gave birth to him. He took my youth, now he's taken my middle age. She was aware of her propensity for self-destruction. Depression enfolded her like a fog, it closed in, threatening to engulf her.

Her father and Kevin swept her along with their activities. 'You must eat,' said Kevin, chopping fruit with yoghurt and honey for her.

'Yes, Emmie, an army can only march on a full stomach,' said her father, breaking eggs into a glass and carefully pouring them into the poaching pan.

Since her mother died, they had always gone to Noosa for holidays. This year her father had chosen Surfers Paradise. 'I need a change,' he said to her. 'Harry next door is happy to keep an eye on the house and feed the goats for me. And I have quite a few friends up north now who play bowls.'

They had been there once before, she remembered, driving down one weekend from Noosa for her eighteenth birthday. She remembered the Mutton Bird man with his suntan oil spray, the music of the Beatles blaring out over the public address system as

she lay on the beach. Then the beach was crowded with bronzed and oiled bodies; she suspected it would be different now with the increased knowledge of skin cancer.

She recalled a strange feeling of apprehension as she saw him off. What if I have to ring him to come back for some emergency, she had thought, dismissing the feeling as paranoiac before it could take root, blaming the unfamiliar venue for her trepidation. But it turned out to be exactly like that. It had been terrible making the phone call. He was bowling all day so she could not contact him until after six.

‘What’s the matter, dear?’ he had asked, attempting to cover his anxiety with a smile in his voice. And she had told him, told him to get himself a drink and sit down and then she would tell him, having warned him that she had bad news.

And his voice had cracked with his tears. ‘Oh no,’ he said brokenly. ‘Oh, no, oh Emmie.’ He had flown down the next day, arriving late in the afternoon.

They held each other wordlessly at the front door, she felt the pressure of his hands on her arms, felt him tremble in her embrace. She had thought that he would cancel his holiday, but he insisted on flying back with her and Kevin the day after the funeral. He would change his booking to a larger apartment, he said, and they could stay for a week to rest in the sun.

For as long as I live, Em thought afterwards, I will never forget this gesture. For the shared experience of that brief time stayed with her through all the dark days which followed.

Sitting up, Em stares unseeingly at the hospital buildings from across the grass. She looks at her watch, it is time to go back. It is hot out here now, her T-shirt is sticking to her back and she can feel the sun burning through her jeans.

Assembled back in the room, they are asked how they coped with the assessment of their addictions. She listens to the others mumbling in halting monotones. Some don't speak at all. When it is her turn to respond, Em has trouble relating the problem back to herself; it is easier to speak of Dylan, having spent most of the allotted time thinking back over his life, not hers.

'Well,' she says, shifting uncomfortably in her chair. 'It's as if every life has a front and a back. You live your life mainly at the front, that's the bit everyone sees. But behind it, there's this back bit, a sort of dark side which you can slip into and live there, too. I guess that's where my son lived most of the time. And I now see that I was in danger of doing it as well.'

At the communal meal, she joins in some aspects of the conversation, for it is in her nature to be social. They are encouraged to retire early and not to drink too much coffee or eat too much sugar so they will find it easier to fall asleep. Lying in the narrow bed, unable to reach for a pill or a glass of wine to help her sleep, Em is trapped in her thoughts. Reluctant to dwell on her own situation or think about Dylan, she concentrates her thinking on the woman she had met earlier in the week. Marie, she prefers to call her Mar. Big and blonde with a sensitive kindly face. She looked to be in her late forties, possibly fifty, hard to estimate with her overweight appearance. She was obviously nervous, thinks Em, she seemed very conservative, both in her dress and her manner. Em had been drawn to her through her sympathetic attitude, her willingness to listen. Mostly here, everyone wants to talk, she thinks, staring out into the darkness, hearing a door bang as someone goes to the bathroom. No-one listens, obsessed as they are with their own problems, their own situations.

Finally, Em sleeps. And she dreams. She dreams of being away, on holiday where she can be free of the confines of this depressing, impersonal room. The last holiday had been in Surfers Paradise. Paradise, she thinks as she drifts off. Dylan in one, and me in the other.

In Surfers, following the funeral, her father had driven them everywhere. Since she was a child, he had always loved going off in the car, alone or with company. While her mother was still alive, on summer nights she and Peter would greet their father in their pyjamas by the front gate when arrived home from work. After tea, he would pack the family into the Ford Anglia and they would drive off down the Beach Road in the darkness, staring through the ti-tree at the sea with the lights of Williamstown winking in the distance.

Now his restlessness manifested itself and he found solace in the car. 'Need any milk, bread?' he asked her. And he was into the car and off. Em went with him on several occasions. He loved exploring and showing her places he had discovered. He looked less strained up here, despite the mark Dylan's death had left upon him, away from the responsibilities of his home and the taxing physical work involved in much of its upkeep.

'Up here, Emmie, they give way to the left, not the right,' he chuckled, patting her knee reassuringly as she involuntarily clutched the sides of her seat, waiting for impact as he swung round a corner in the face of the oncoming traffic.

He insisted on buying her a dress. I couldn't have packed very well, she thought as he took her into Sportsgirl. Or maybe he was just sick of me wearing Dy's jeans all the time.

'Now, here we are, Emmie. Nothing black though or I won't pay.'

So she had chosen a skirt and top overprinted with large colourful flowers in abstract shapes.

He looked at her critically. 'Yes, I like that, but the belt's too wide.'

She kept it anyway. It was a stretch belt which made her waist look smaller, though she didn't seem to have a weight problem at the present time. Quite the opposite, she had no idea it was possible to lose so much weight in a week.

They went to Seagulls for dinner at Tweed Heads. Walking into the Flamingo Lounge in her new outfit, Em was suddenly confronted with more people than she had encountered in some time. The noise of the crowd and the mechanised staccato whine of the poker machines, the flashing lights, the restless motion of people all around her, overwhelmed her, sending her into a panic. This was his way of dealing with grief, but it's not mine, she thought, glaring at her father who was enthusiastically ordering steak and chips. Her animosity also extended to Kevin whose face reflected the pleasure of being in this cheerful, noisy environment, so different from the silent and subdued atmosphere of the apartment. Making a hurried excuse in the middle of ordering her meal, she fled to the bar, drinking a brandy and soda to calm herself in this unfriendly atmosphere. She drank it fast, feeling its effect calming her and giving her the courage to face the remainder of the evening. Five minutes later, composed she returned to the table.

'Sorry about that,' she said, lightly. 'Couldn't handle the noise.'

That night, there had been a rock band who had sung a song which set the hairs pricking on the back of her neck. She had talked to them later and the lead singer told

her it was their own composition. Her father had taken photographs of them together, raising their glasses to the success of the song.

I look quite mad, thought Em, studying the pictures a few days later. There's something wrong with my eyes.

Waking uncomfortably in the narrow hospital bed for a glass of water in the night, Em recalls that at the time, her father had seemed to be watching her as she moved through the routines of the day. As I now watch myself, she ponders, looking down at the liquid in the glass and trying not to imagine that it is vodka instead of water.

seven

Kevin, driving home after his visit with Em, feels exhausted. His life has been thrown into complete disarray. He is normally the organisational half of the relationship, but without Em there to organise, to placate, to calm, he founders, bringing the realisation of how much he has depended up till now upon revolving around her magnetic, chaotic core. And of how much he loves her. Over the years there had been problems, but it was not until Dylan's death that they had manifested themselves to such an extent. Slowing at the traffic lights changing from green to amber, Kevin reflects that his life has become a series of red lights since Dylan's death. He, too, thinks back to the brief hiatus in Surfers, last August.

They had been in Surfers just a few days. He felt as if someone had lifted him from hell and carried him into heaven, albeit temporarily. Em seemed sedated by the experience. He became aware that her father was watching her and that he watched her too. She was too still, too quiet, and there was something else below the surface which was disquieting; he sensed a volcanic tide of grief was waiting to erupt but she would not give herself over to it. She sat and drank her drinks and smoked her cigarettes, only becoming animated when they spoke of Dylan and the associations his name provoked.

'I'm going to buy some notepaper for thank-you cards. It's awful if people get them a long time after the funeral.' She spent an hour in the newsagent's choosing beige notepaper with blue envelopes and a pen with a fine nib.

'Look, the colours of the earth and the sea,' she exclaimed. 'It's really fitting for Dy.'

Kevin doubted whether Dylan would give a damn about colours at this stage, but the rituals of death were more for the living than those who have died, so he smiled and ruffled her hair.

She bought tapes, too. Bruce Hornsby's 'The Way It Is' and World Party's 'Private Revolution' would forever be associated with this time as she spent hours staring out to sea, listening to the music through the headphones plugged into the portable cassette player.

Kevin felt concerned. He knew grief took different forms, but she did not weep, she did not seem to want to work her way through it. He sensed she would like to stay frozen in this time frame, and he observed a growing obsession with the circumstances of Dylan's death which made him feel uneasy about their return to Melbourne.

He had not yet tried to deal with his own grief. He, too, suspected that it was waiting to be released, but the torrent he felt would not be one of overwhelming uncontrollable emotion. He loved Dylan deeply; to have a child manifested in one's own image, to be involved in the joy of raising a child, watching it grow from helpless dependence through trusting childhood and questioning pubescence, observing the development of the spirit as well as of the body, to anticipate seeing the rituals of human life perpetuated, marriage and birth, then to see all of this obliterated, terminating in untimely and unnecessary death, to him seemed unbearably tragic. He had wept for Dylan; one night he sobbed like a child in Em's arms, inconsolable in his loss.

Now he felt empty, bereft and exhausted. And despite the fact that he was aware that grief was a deeply personal affair, he felt concerned that he and Em could not mourn together in some way. He saw reasons for the deep internalisation of her feelings. Losing her mother at a young age had been followed by losing her child at a young age,

precipitating enormous insecurity insofar as life experiences were concerned. He imagined she felt threatened, at the mercy of the elements as it were. Her concept of life was now distorted, she could not view the events of her existence in any kind of rational context or framework. Coupled with her over-emotional reactions to all occurrences was her obsession with herself and her propensity for not being able to see beyond any immediate situation at hand, creating unnecessary crisis points in many instances. He felt helplessly inadequate in his attempts to unravel the complicated emotional web which she had woven about herself.

Now he looked at her sitting silently on the balcony, staring out to sea, a glass in one hand, a cigarette in the other, headphones covering her ears, and he felt his trepidation more strongly than his grief.

Kevin is rudely jolted from his reverie by a loud chorus of car horns honking behind him. The traffic lights have changed and an impatient driver, swerving past, abuses him verbally through his open window.

Arriving home, Kevin is greeted by the Siamese at the gate. It doesn't care for Kevin, being Em's cat and it sulks now, having waited optimistically once again for her arrival. Inside, he pours himself a drink, then thinking of Em, tips it back in the bottle. He had better try and weather this for a while without alcohol, he thinks. If he was concerned about her coming back from Queensland, he is a great deal more concerned about her coming home from the treatment centre. Staring down the dark hallway, he is reminded of how it was. Surely it cannot get worse than that?

After they returned from Queensland, chaos reigned for a period. Em did not open the mail; first the phone was disconnected, then the electricity. When the gas man appeared

with his tools after the 'Final Notice' had been ignored, she tried to placate him, but he ignored her. 'Just doing my job, madam,' he said, and there was no hot water. The garden, so carefully nurtured over the years, was neglected. The pots on the verandah, unwatered, began to die.

From the end of August until December, she went into a dark space where he could not follow, could not reach her. She would wake with the best intentions of disciplining her body and mind during the day, expressing as much to Kevin, only to find them disappearing within the wine cask in the fridge as soon as she arrived home from work. Her depression, her anger, alienated the friends who called, telephoned or were encountered at random.

'Drug overdoses are very anti-social deaths,' she told Kevin bitterly one evening, having met a neighbour in the supermarket she had not seen for some time. 'Tell someone about it and you can feel them draw back from you. Give themselves space. Car accidents invite sympathy and understanding. "It wasn't his fault - they didn't stop, the brakes failed, he was tired..."', there are a dozen reasons to reconcile oneself within the social structure in which we live. Drug use alienates. People are suspicious, judgmental.'

Through this experience, he observed a barrier forming between herself and others. They were nervous in her presence, their body language reflecting discomfort and anxiety. They spoke in halting tones with clumsy efforts at commiseration. They shuffled their feet, and folded their arms tightly over their chests, they looked away from her and were relieved to take their leave, cowering from the intensity of her grief.

And the barrier was extended to him too. He found her more and more difficult to relate to, more remote, more despondent.

Kevin switches off the lights, having found some clean underwear in an obscure drawer for the morning. Washing used to be something which disappeared into the laundry, then reappeared in drawers, somewhat haphazardly, but it happened nonetheless. Although he is an orderly person, he finds it difficult to dovetail the domestic chores into his working life and frequently fails to note when he has worn his last clean shirt, eaten the last slice of bread, poured the last of the milk on his breakfast. The silence to him seems deafening. He switches on the clock radio for company, recalling the pattern of the evenings for so many nights, prior to Em's admittance to the treatment centre.

It was a Monday evening in September. The signs were bad; he could tell when he opened the door. No welcoming light in the darkness, just the brooding sombre sounds of Pink Floyd resounding through the hallway. He hung his keys on the hook made for this purpose on the hallstand. 'We need to have places for things so we don't keep losing them,' she told him once. At least keys were replaceable, unlike people. Worse when they were still around, just drifting off till they disappeared, he thought. Taking off his jacket, he draped it over the hallstand.

The phone rang, he ignored it. There was enough going on, he could see. He was tired. Tom was away again today. 'Asthma,' he had said on the phone. But his voice sounded normal, no shallow breathing, no coughing, no shortness of breath. A compassionate man, he felt angry for his doubts. Tom was a conscientious employee. It just always seemed to be a Monday or a Friday when his asthma attacks occurred. He was worried too. His business had suffered since this had happened. He had shelved his grief, put it

on hold, till he could bear to take it out and look at it. She was grieving more than enough for both of them.

As he walked down the narrow hallway, the volume increased, vibrating through his eardrums. Opening the door, he observed her, head on her arms, crouched in front of the record player. Tapes would probably last longer, he reflected moodily. The records were turned over and over again. As her drinking increased, the lives of the records decreased. Already, this track jumped over several scratches from the carelessly dropped needle.

'Hi,' he said with an attempt at cheerfulness, feeling his smile stretching forcibly. 'I'm home.' It sounded banal to him. Before, she would have rushed to welcome him with shining eyes and a smile in her voice, telling him of some triviality from her day, making it sound exciting. Now, she lifted her head, startled. The blue eyes, once piercing and lively, were anxious, guilty. Her mouth hung open in surprise, though he was no earlier, no later than any other day. Thank God she wasn't crying. For he was not good with women's tears, they made him feel inadequate, angry. The glass at her elbow was heavily finger-marked, a testimony to frequent refills. The ashtray was full, scattered ash surrounding the clutter of cards and envelopes on the table.

'I've been writing thank-you cards,' she said. 'They're so hard to write.' He had felt this to be a mistake, this taking on of individual messages seemed to be an exercise in masochism. It would have been easier to have had some printed, she would have simply had to sign them and address the envelopes. He said nothing; they had been over this.

Worried now at his lack of opinion, she kissed him with sudden passion, surprising him as she took his face in her hands. He tasted stale wine and the sharp bitter bite of nicotine. The taste of defeat, he thought. Of oblivion, of escapism. The taste of reliving

what had been and was no more. In her mouth was the past now, not the future. He willed himself not to pull away, for he was not a smoker and the habit repelled him. There had been little enough passion lately, passion had been replaced by passivity, and he took what was offered. He felt a growing concern at her apathy, for it served to emphasise the steady demise of their relationship. He had read statistics on this: the prospect of a marriage break-up following the death of a child was high. He did not like their chances.

He followed her into the kitchen where, surprised again, he found she had made dinner. 'Curry. I think I put too much in, but we can eat lots of yoghurt with it. And I bought some icecream too.' More drinks with dinner, more drinks after. 'Wish You Were Here' had been replaced with the television. 'Bliss' was on. Not a good choice for tonight, he thought, watching Barry Otto's chillingly real, simulated heart attack at the beginning.

The phone rang again. More wine to take to the phone. He wished the wine cask had not been invented. Six bottles full. Shit, how many had she had tonight? She sounded bad on the phone, her voice was slurred and a growing agitation was becoming apparent as she lit more cigarettes. He had been careful to restrict his drinking, despite her efforts to constantly fill up his glass. He couldn't afford to dull his mind or become aggressive. Finally, she broke down. He had hoped to be in bed by now, safe from her onslaught of grief, leaving her to her maudlin memories and her music, knowing he was powerless to help her. The flood inside her burst; she was now hysterical, weeping uncontrollably. 'When is it going to feel any better?' she cried, 'When, when?' He had no answer. He went to bed, weary of his life.

So, thinks Kevin on this Wednesday in February, lying in bed, waiting for sleep. That's where we were. Where are we now?

eight

Em sits with her group, a week after her arrival at the rehabilitation centre. The counsellor is encouraging the women to talk about the circumstances which have brought them here. 'It is an important step in becoming honest with yourselves, that of acknowledging your own actions.' Some are hostile - 'My husband made me come', some are tearful - 'they're going to take away my daughter', and some sit in silence, their reasons known only to themselves and the hospital authorities. Em is amused by one story where a woman has recently had a three-day party to celebrate her intentions of becoming sober, and shocked by another. 'I came here to stay alive,' says the girl sitting next to her, who looks to be in her early twenties. 'I've been in institutions all my life and most of my friends are dead from overdoses.'

Waiting for her turn, Em rehearses the story in her mind, relieved to have the opportunity to put the events into perspective within this wider range of experience.

It had happened on a Friday night.

Home from work, Em sat in the garden enjoying the benevolence of daylight saving during late January. Bees still hummed among the alyssum which grew through the cracks in the paving, its pink and mauve flowers extending up the steps of the verandah, the bricks were warm under her bare feet, and she lifted her face to the healing blissful rays of the late afternoon sun. Sunlight caught the wine in her glass, turning it to shades of glowing garnet. She was listening to John Farnham's 'Age of Reason' and contemplating dinner. Pizza, she thought. Makes it easy and I don't have to cook, just knock up some salad.

She was feeling better lately. With the inquest no longer hanging over their heads, Dy

had been finally put to rest. It had been hot like this last week, too, she remembered, the day of the inquest

She had risen early, so she could spike her orange juice with vodka without Kevin seeing. She filled a thermos flask to take with her, for the prospect of getting through this sober was untenable. She dressed carefully, a black sleeveless dress, overprinted with designs in muted pinks and golds. A dress for death, she thought. Black tights. Her best shoes. They were the trappings she did not allow for herself at his funeral which did not seem then a day for dressing up. She had worn his jeans and jumper, fed by a need to get as close to him then as that last act of formality had permitted. On the morning of his inquest, she applied her makeup carefully, scrunched her hair, sprayed 'Opium' liberally. My favourite perfume, she had mused, bit of irony there.

She and Kevin had some argument over parking the car, she remembered, but couldn't remember why. The inquest had been late; increasing nervousness had made everyone tense. Those present included people she knew and others she didn't. The ambulance officer, the police constable materialised into people, rather than references. The autopsy report began, *'The body was that of a tall, muscular male...'* In her mind's eye, she saw his body lying prostrate on the cold slab of the autopsy room, ready for the knife which would take out the organs seeking the exact cause of death. He had been so beautiful, at times, almost breathtakingly so; there was beauty within as well, but it had become harder to see as time went on and reflected in his outer appearance as the drug took over and his belief in, and opinion of himself deteriorated.

At the conclusion of the inquest, she was dismayed not to have a verdict of suicide. It would have made sense, would have tidied it up, put it at a level she could understand. She did not want a verdict of 'accidental death'. She wanted a deliberate act of finality.

Afterwards, she recalled shaking hands with the policeman who had attended the scene. Her voice was formal, polite; inside she raged, 'Why didn't you let me see him?' loathing herself for her lack of courage to speak out. There had been a social worker, who had offered help and support. She had been polite to her, too. 'Your son didn't have enough heroin in him to kill him, but he died anyway. We don't know why this happens.'

Em was relieved to vacate this building with its stark bureaucratic atmosphere. Experiencing a range of mixed emotions, both numbed and heightened by alcohol, they went off to the pub, intending only to have lunch, but staying most of the afternoon. In a transfixed state, she and Kevin had paid for everyone who showed up. It hadn't seemed to matter at the time.

Thinking about that now, she should look at the Bankcard slip, but that would require an energy she did not lately possess. The sun had moved off the verandah and it had grown cooler. Should go and get the pizza, thought Em, draining her glass. It was not far, she had rung and ordered it anticipating Kevin's arrival shortly, and had another drink, watching the news. Walking towards her car, the sun threw the tall trees into silhouette against the sky as she looked back towards the park. There was a mother playing with small children in the playground. These were sights she could no longer bear; the pain was born of her own memories and she turned away quickly, unlocking the car.

The pizza restaurant was quiet, most people had ordered and left by that time. The man behind the counter looked like Clark Kent. He was a friend of theirs and she greeted him amicably. 'Paul's just had a baby, we're having a joint out the back,' he told her.

'Hi,' she said, to the group around the kitchen table. 'So this is Clark Kent's baby brother.' They laughed, and she shared the joint which was very strong. They started to roll another. 'No, I really have to go,' Em said. 'Kevin will be wondering where I am.'

Getting into the car, she realised the joint was stronger than she thought; combined with alcohol, the sensation was wonderful. Driving home, the last rays of the sun struck her windscreen as she hit the crest of the hill; there was a screech of brakes from somewhere and she was suddenly thrown against the door as her car sideswiped a parked car on the passenger side.

So that's how I got here, Em reflects, as the counsellor prompts her unwilling audience to reveal more of themselves, encouraging them by means of shared experience. By my own hand, or rather hands, she thinks, smiling wryly to herself at the memory of driving home and not arriving there as planned. The police had come, booked her for drink driving.

'How could I possibly be over .05 after just a couple of drinks?' she had demanded indignantly, when she was permitted to telephone Kevin, conveniently forgetting the Friday afternoon drinks with her workmates at the local pub.

She was ordered to do a course at St Vincent's and to see a counsellor. The counsellor, on hearing her story, had recommended hospitalisation.

A day at a time. God, time, she thinks, looking at the sentence the counsellor has written on the board. Does anyone know how long a day is? Structure, she is told. Routines. She had never thought she could be praised just for simply getting out of bed.

'Did it every morning for decades, hangovers and all. Now it's a major event,' she tells

Kevin when she able to speak to him on the phone.

They ask her how she is feeling. How the fuck do you think I feel, she rages inwardly, but since this would achieve nothing, she swallows hard, takes a deep breath.

'I'm tired, I'm so tired I can hardly drag myself around. I've got really bad headaches all the time. And I can't think properly. My mind's all over the place.'

They tell her this is to be expected, is quite normal and will pass.

nine

It had been after Christmas when she had really started to go to pieces, ponders Em, seated in the group arranged in a half-circle around the counsellor, who is talking about the cycle of addiction. Once into the new year, no amount of alcohol or nicotine seemed able to quell her rising panic. Her hangovers had begun to show, resulting in more despair and fear. She had kept thinking, it'll be better when we go away, for they had talked of a holiday in Tasmania for two weeks in March, knowing that if it wasn't, she might not have a marriage left either.

Well, I didn't get to see Tasmania, she thinks, watching the counsellor draw a diagram on the board which involves a lot of little 'no' words running along a zigzag with a great big 'yes' in front of a drink at the end. It had all become so unbearable, she had forgotten how dreadful she had felt until now. And as the counsellor lists danger signals for the addict and the alcoholic, Em recalls her own desperate search for the signposts of change in her life since the early summer, less than two months ago, but seemingly a lifetime at this point of her existence.

With the arrival of the tall ships in Australia at the beginning of January in celebration of the Bicentenary, Em waited for a sign to signify a shift in her universe, a change in her thinking. Oh, how she waited! In the meantime, the drinking increased, as did the smoking. She hit rock bottom when she was politely asked by the secretarial agency where she worked as a temporary employee, not to turn up for work the next day. Weighed down with maudlin self-pity, she expressed her desire for some relief from her existence. Kevin, anxious and despairing, tried to shake her out of her stupor through facing the reality of a failing relationship. This made her worse. Angry and mutinous,

flouncing from the bedroom to spend the night on the couch after a mild rebuke from Kevin, Em resolved to stop smoking and cut back on her drinking. And not before time. Her face, as it stared back from the mirror, looked terrible. No amount of makeup or hair tousling could relieve its excesses. She now feared her self-destruction where earlier, she had welcomed it.

She developed pins and needles in her hands and feet. Multiple sclerosis, she thought in her paranoid and depressed state. Smoking, said her friend Sue. After all, she was a nurse.

The sign, when it came, was obscure. They saw a film, topical at the time and tipped to win Academy Awards. Knowing it was fairly violent, but not much else about it, she was not anxious to go. However, it turned out to be a catalyst for her, since it was concerned with a relationship threatened by outside forces. She suddenly viewed her own relationship differently; her perspective shifted from negative to positive. Her libido reappeared and she felt surprisingly optimistic. It seemed to mark the beginning of a new phase in her existence, a sign pointing upwards instead of downwards.

Well, the movie signpost wasn't enough to change my life, Em thinks now, wishing she could have a cigarette. Look where my optimism has landed me. She watches the counsellor making a list of reading matter which they may find useful in identifying their problems. This morning, she has been horrified to learn that the addictions themselves are only the tip of the iceberg; it is the addictive behaviour which forms most of the problem. Her recovery it appears, is dependent upon changes in her thinking and her attitudes. Looking at her watch, she realises that Kevin is due here

shortly for his weekly visit. God, what will we talk about, she thinks in desperation. I don't seem to have a future to discuss, only the confronting aspects of the past.

Kevin, on his way over to visit Em, is also contemplating how bad the situation had become prior to Em being admitted to the rehabilitation centre. She had sounded better the last time he spoke to her, more optimistic, more confident. In the past, she had only been able to rise above her disasters after sinking to extreme levels of depression and desperation. This was precisely what had happened after he had confronted her over the demise of their relationship.

It had been towards the end of January that he began to notice a change in her. And not before time. She was frightened by the reality of a breakdown in the relationship after seeing 'Fatal Attraction', and he detected a new resolve growing within her. Their sex life had improved, surprisingly so. She seemed to draw reassurance from the intimacy of their love-making these days, as well as satisfaction. Often she was content with pure physical contact, reaching for his hand on awakening, a habit he found poignant and endearing.

Once she read in a women's magazine that it took forty-five minutes for the average woman to reach a climax. *Forty-five minutes*, she was amazed. If she couldn't make it in five, then it wasn't worth having. 'I mean,' she said to Kevin. 'How could you even *feel* anything after forty-five minutes?'

There were other changes too. One night, arriving home from work, he was greeted by the pungent smell of paint. Glass in one hand, paintbrush in the other, she came up the

hallway to meet him. 'Thought I'd change the colour scheme, it's so dreary and there's too many memories attached to this '70s shade of brown.'

She was referring to the trim. The window frames, skirtings and door frames were undergoing a transformation. Dark brown had been replaced by a pleasing shade of pale turquoise which looked good against the cream walls. Even the music had changed, the mournful chant of Pink Floyd having been replaced by the reflective songs of James Reyne, which appeared to have less of a depressing effect on her moods. He was relieved that she had at least found an activity to occupy her mind as well as her hands. Hopefully, it heralded her closing the door on the past and entering the present, so that they could begin to build a new life together.

Pulling up in the hospital car park, Kevin watches Em walk towards him. Her body language betrays her nervousness; she does not stride confidently towards him, but walks slowly, hesitantly, stopping halfway to light a cigarette. Clearly, she finds it difficult to look at him, the cigarette presenting a distracting focal point as her eyes follow its progress in her fingers from her mouth to her side. He is uneasy; conversations, once spontaneous and cheerful, have become reduced to a series of forced and halting utterances which sound almost rehearsed. It is only when she becomes angry that her speech becomes animated. He hopes they can avoid confrontation during this brief time they are about to share.

Later, Em, watching Kevin's car grow smaller in the distance as he drives away, thinks about what they have discussed this visit. She had become angry when he suggested he finish the painting which she had undertaken.

'I started it, I want to finish it.'

'Well, I thought you might be tired of it when you come home, and I could help you out by getting it all done.'

'I need something to do when I go home. God, how do you expect me to cope if I've got nothing to do!'

And so they had argued, parting amicably enough, but she senses he is the victor even though he has capitulated and agreed to let her finish what she began. The confrontation rekindles embarrassing memories for her.

It was a Saturday in early January. As they sipped vodka and orange juice in the kitchen while they put the shopping away, the doorbell rang.

'Sue and David,' Kevin told her. 'David wants to look at this new program they're running a demo of at Computer Palace, so we'll get round there before it closes.'

'OK. I'll get some more painting done before you come home.'

Em knew she didn't relish these occasions with her drinking friends the way she used to when she was left to her own devices; she seemed to always drink more than she intended to and there was often a nasty niggling sensation of not being able to recall conversations later. Still, she thought, if I'm painting, I won't be able to drink as much, so it should help.

Sue had a wine cask with her and potato chips. 'Pre-lunch snack,' she said. 'They should only be an hour.'

Later, she recalled Kevin and David's expressions as they walked into the dining room. 'Shit, what have you *done*? You're pissed, aren't you?'

Surprised, Em had stood up, realising at this point how many drinks she had consumed, and surveyed the results of the last two hours. The line which separated the skirting from the wall was now an uneven and wavering delineation meandering uncertainly along the top of the wood for most of the room. The floor, she noticed in horror, had not fared much better. Small pools and spatters of paint had begun to dry on the polished boards. Humiliated, speechless, she felt the blood rush to her face as they all began to laugh.

'Oh Christ,' said David, wiping his eyes. 'Drunken decorating. Maybe it'll take off.'

She had hesitated for a second, wanting to hurl abuse, but was acutely aware that this could result in permanent damage to the friendship.

'Maybe I should have worn my glasses,' she said sullenly.

This had the effect of promoting even more mirth, at which point she rushed off to the bedroom and burst into tears, having hurled the paintbrush back into the paint pot where it sank beneath the turquoise surface.

'Should have worn your glasses,' snapped Kevin angrily after Sue and David had left, still laughing. 'You have to do something about your drinking, Em. You're over the top.'

'I didn't mean to drink that much. It must have been having an empty stomach.'

She was scared when he made accusations about her drinking. She had no real excuse and didn't know what to say to him.

'I'll try and cut back a bit,' she said finally. 'And I'll fix the wall, too. There's some cream paint in the shed, so I'll do it tomorrow. And I won't drink anything except coffee.'

He made no reply, increasing her anxiety. She was left wondering how she could win him over. Oh God, what's going to happen to me, she thought in despair, her head buzzing from the wine, rendering her incapable of doing anything else for the remainder of the afternoon. I thought I was getting better. Eventually, she slept. There was nothing else to do.

The painting of the house would always remain a bone of contention, contemplates Em, as she walks slowly back to the kitchen to prepare dinner for the group.

ten

Shit, I wish these dreams would stop, thinks Em, waking sweating and breathless, ignoring a noisy expletive from her roommate, whom she has disturbed. She keeps dreaming about drinking. Often she is just about to pick up the glass and she will wake up, but sometimes, she actually *does* drink something and then wakes up immediately afterwards. 'This is part of it,' they say. Well, she wishes it would stop. She has not experienced really bad dreams since Dylan first died and those had been terrible.

Every night then, there had been dreams.

While she could blur her days with pills and alcohol, she had no control over the nights. First she dreamt of herself wandering through a nursery full of babies in cots. The babies were all dressed in dark blue velvet nightgowns. Blue had been his favourite colour. The colour of the sea, the colour of the sky, the colour of depression. She searched and searched amongst the babies, but she could not find hers.

The next dream took place in a bedroom. Dylan and Phoebe sat on the bed close together. The rest of the room was light, but they sat in darkness and no-one else could get close to them.

Then the dreams had become even worse. Because she had not been allowed to see him after he'd died ('He's got hepatitis,' the police senior constable had snapped at her) her subconscious found ways to resolve her loss. She dreamt of digging him up, and cutting off his head so she could keep him with her, all the time being fearful of being found out.

She wrestled with the idea of contacting the police and asking them for photographs of him, should there be any. This resulted in a dream where she saw herself at the police

station, having come to view the pictures, screaming, 'No, don't show me. I don't want to see.' But they laughed and showed her anyway. When she finally did look, it was just an ordinary photograph of Dylan when he was little.

Another time, she and Kevin were sitting in a room, with chairs along the wall and no other furniture. Suddenly a door opened and Dylan walked in. She screamed and then woke up, sweating and afraid. God, when would this end?

And Em was not the only one to dream. She strongly related to a dream which Phoebe had experienced. Phoebe had been at a party. when Dylan had suddenly appeared, covered in dirt, clearly having come back from the grave. 'You're not supposed to be here, you're dead,' Phoebe had said, shocked. 'Well, I just came back for a bit,' Dy had said, grinning. 'It took me ages to calm down,' said Phoebe, when she recounted the dream to Em. 'Bloody Dy. Contrary to the end.'

Refilling her glass of water in the shabby kitchen, Em derives comfort from performing this trivial act which disperses the fears her nightmares have induced. The dreams had stopped after they went to Surfers, she reflects, sipping the water. She could not believe the relief that she experienced when this had occurred. But while this had presented some alleviation from the bad nights, sometimes the realities of those Queensland days were difficult to cope with as well.

Her father took them to visit friends who were staying in Burleigh Heads. The friends had an adult son, roughly the same age as Dy had been. He sat with them, making animated conversation in a way that Dylan had never been capable of. Introverted, shy

with strangers, he had become more withdrawn in the last few years, barely acknowledging even relatives.

After they had exhausted the ritual of condolences which Em still found it difficult to respond to, they sat out on the balcony having drinks and savouries.

She stared at her father who seemed to have aged since they arrived; she remembered the last time he would have seen Dylan. He had come for tea on the way home from one of his rare visits to the city. On impulse, she had rung Dylan and invited him as well. She had felt his reluctance on the phone, his shame, his guilt. She cajoled, saying it would be good for him, her father really wanted to see him. Eventually Dylan capitulated. She had driven over with her father to pick him up. He was clean, scrubbed, his sleeves rolled up defiantly despite the cold. There were no track marks on his arms.

After dinner, they had watched 'The Court Jester' and his rich chuckle punctuated Danny Kaye's tongue twisting dialogue. Her father looked at him often as he laughed and the look had been filled with love, compassionate and forgiving.

Later, she discovered that several people had died in the same week as Dylan. High grade heroin had been available on the street for a short amount of time, as periodically happened in the world of drugs. The ambulance officers had estimated that he had died within seven minutes. A classic death as she saw it; he could not have envisaged anything better. He shot up, grabbed his guitar, reached to turn up the amplifier, and collapsed and died on the floor. She relived this every time she heard 'A Momentary Lapse of Reason'. He didn't have to die - the report stated there wasn't enough heroin in his system to kill him. She was sure he had a choice, equally sure he saw that much-heralded white light at the end of a tunnel and was drawn towards it like a magnet. It

seemed logical to her. He had turned his life into a living hell anyway, trampling despondently and desperately through relationships, jobs and living quarters. He would go to the country to get away from the city, then tear back to the city to get away from the country. There was nowhere left for him to go.

Now, on the balcony at Burleigh Heads, she stared down at the cars snaking along the highway, afternoon sunlight glinting on their rooftops, at the bowlers on the green determinedly concentrating on their game, at the wide sweep of beach screened by Norfolk pines with the highrise towers of Surfers visible in the distance.

'It's a much nicer view here,' she ventured. 'In Surfers, we only see the sea.'

Beyond the shops and suburban sprawl, she could see the layers of distant hills and as the setting sun illuminated their contours and the first neon lights appeared, she experienced an overwhelming sense of desolation, sipping her drink and listening to a young man speaking assuredly about his life and his future. It's almost as if he's taunting me, thought Em bitterly. She had estimated recently that the chances of losing a child from a heroin overdose were roughly one in quarter of a million. How can I have anything in common with these people? And this is just the beginning. These situations will have to be endured forever. And she smiled politely as her glass was refilled and she stared out over the darkening sea with its restless white-capped waves which rolled unceasingly on to the beach. And as the sand endures the waves, so must I endure my pain, thought Em, suddenly aware of a new and unique sense of social isolation of which she had been previously unaware.

And carrying a fresh glass of water back to bed, quietly closing the door to avoid another confrontation with her roommate, she deliberates, I am having trouble relating here too. Am I to spend all of my life feeling like a social outcast?

eleven

Peter comes to visit Em with Phoebe, his eldest daughter. Big and benevolent, her brother embraces her compassionately.

When she had first told him of her alcoholism, still barely able to utter the word, in halting stuttered phrases, unable to look him in the eye, he had thrown his big arms about her, rocking her against his chest, his chin resting on the top of her head. 'Poor Emmie, You've been through a rough time. I'm proud of you. Don't worry, I'm sure everything will work out for you now.'

That had been prior to her admittance to the hospital, shortly after the car accident. Although they have spoken on the phone, she has not seen Peter for several weeks.

Em is nervous regarding this first visit to the hospital by members of the family other than Kevin, particularly Phoebe, with whom she is more self-conscious. She feels Phoebe may be judging her in some way, fearing that she has been a failure as a role model.

Rather than subject her brother and her niece to the scrutiny of her companions, Em finds a seat some distance from the hospital buildings, where they can sit and look out over the golf course.

Peter produces a bottle of soda water and some paper cups. Pouring them each a drink, he says, 'Cia had to take Patrick to the doctor with earache. She'd been up all night with him. But she sends her love and says to give you a big hug, and she'll light a candle for you at mass. And I'll say a few words for you, too.'

Em looks affectionately at Peter, grateful for this caring message. She loves Peter dearly. They have always been close and he has been there for her over the years. He is

sensible, dependable, objective in his views, overriding her emotional, often irrational attitudes on countless occasions when she asks him for advice.

Putting down her drink, Phoebe is demonstratively endearing at this initial encounter, having been told by Peter in some detail where Em is and why she is there.

'Oh Em, we've been so worried about you and we didn't know what we could do for you. You're my favourite aunt and you have to look after yourself. It's wonderful that you've stopped drinking. I'm so happy you're doing this and I'll do anything I can to help you!'

Giving her a hug, Phoebe reaches into her handbag and hands Em a small paper bag. Inside is a fridge magnet which reads, *'I used to jog but the ice kept falling out of my glass'*.

Responding awkwardly, trying not to cry, Em touches Phoebe's cheek. She is moved by their charity, she had no idea she has given so much cause for concern.

Walking to the hospital cafeteria to buy cigarettes after Peter and Phoebe have left, she compares their reactions with her father's. She had written him a letter, explaining the circumstances of her voluntary institutionalisation. He too, had expressed relief when she said she had stopped drinking, but she had detected an embarrassment in his response, a certain reticence to discuss anything further.

twelve

Em stands under the shower, meditating on what she has heard that morning regarding learning to detach oneself from the places where most drinking and using has occurred.

For me, that includes the house, she thinks. How can I stay out of there?

‘Most women do their drinking at home,’ the counsellor had said. ‘So you have to change the environment, but that’s not difficult. Just make sure there is no alcohol and there are no drugs at home, in your car, in your handbag, anywhere. We often recommend having someone with you who has been sober or clean for a prolonged period, to help you get rid of any mind-altering substances you might have around the house. Always remember, you never know when you are going to be tempted and if the drink or the drug aren’t there to pick up in the first place, you’re ahead.’

There has always been alcohol at home, she thinks. And there had always been pressure to replace it, pressure activated through her own need, for it was she who was the purchaser. She had been quite happy to run out of milk or bread, but if the wine cask was empty, she found her reactions quite erratic. Once she had burst into tears when, loaded up with shopping on the way home from work, she had dropped the bottle of vodka she had been carrying as it slipped from its paper bag. Arriving home from work, her first act was always to pour herself a drink. She can take the alcohol out of the house, but how will she be able to change her thinking? How can she stop herself wanting a drink when she arrives home, particularly after a bad day? Missing the train, for example, she thinks, a common occurrence due to the erratic service of the public transport system. This new approach to life and its problems fills her with apprehension. Thinking back to a typical day last summer, she has no idea how anyone can change their life to this extent.

Running down the ramp at Flinders Street as the 'Stand Clear' announcement came over the public address system, Em arrived at the bottom as the train pulled out of the station. Damn, she thought, annoyed, twenty minutes to the next one. It was a still, hot afternoon, with the promise of a thunderstorm. The sky was leaden and heavy, the air oppressive. The platform was littered with the debris left by those in transit, soft drink cans, scraps of food, cigarette butts.

Frustrated and angry, Em retraced her steps up the ramp. The ticket collector snapped his chewing gum at her as she passed, barely glancing at her ticket. Em found a shop and bought a packet of cigarettes and a lighter. She had not intended to buy any more, but her defences were down. Slumped on a seat, she smoked a cigarette on the platform, a practice she did not often indulge in, but today was different. Today, Dylan had been dead for five months. Em did not want to go home tonight, she had a feeling of unpleasant certainty that there would be a letter waiting for her, the extract of the death certificate she had requested. The inquest was to be held in a week's time.

There had been a brief notification the week before. 'Look at this,' she had exploded to Kevin. 'These people have no fucking sensitivity at all.'

He had taken the proffered piece of paper and read, *'Notice to Warn Relatives of a Pending Inquest'*. 'Sounds positively Victorian,' he said, handing it back. 'I guess the people who write these things are never the ones who have to read them later. Look at the computer industry.'

Arriving home eventually, Em stopped at the gate and reached into the letterbox. And sure enough, it was there. *'Death Registration'*, she read after tearing it open and then, *'Cause of Death: Intravenous injection of heroin'*.

Seeing her own name at the bottom as the informant made her feel as if she has committed a crime. And perhaps I did, thought Em, despair making its familiar presence felt as she reached into the fridge for the wine cask. If I hadn't had him, I wouldn't be going through all this shit now. She knew she should get on with the house painting, she needed to occupy herself, but she was wary of this since her disastrous episode with the skirting board. Well, I'll just have to be more careful, she thought.

The phone rang, it was Phoebe. 'Hi, I just thought I'd drop round,' she told Em.

Despite the heat, Phoebe wore a long black dress and heavy boots. She gave Em a hug and walked down the hall. 'Oh, wow,' she exclaimed, 'This is looking really good. Looks like a different house. That brown was *so* depressing.'

Em didn't take her into the dining room to show her the skirting board; she had fixed it up now and it was difficult to see where she had made such a mess. 'Glass of wine?', she asked Phoebe, topping up her own glass.

'Just half,' said Phoebe, who didn't drink much.

'How's your course?' inquired Em, settling herself back in her chair, having switched on the fan.

'We haven't started back yet. I should be finished in the middle of the year, though. All I seem to do at the moment is work.'

Phoebe had deferred her studies after Dylan's death, going off to Queensland with Colin for several weeks, travelling up and down the coast in Colin's old station wagon. When she returned, she worked full time as a barmaid and waitress in the local pub to accumulate enough money to travel overseas when she graduated.

'It's easier working, though,' she explained to Em. 'You can just stick yourself on automatic pilot and not think about anything.'

Em could definitely identify with this. She herself had been fortunate in the first job she had been sent to after their return from Surfers.

'I have no idea what I did those first few weeks,' she told Phoebe. 'I was supposed to be transcribing legal contracts and I could barely put one thought in front of the other. My mind seemed to have packed up totally. I would go off to work in this daze, type all day, and at the end of it, I would have no idea what I'd produced. I could have typed my name over and over again for all I knew. Anyway, these people were great. The boss was an extremely sensitive and tolerant woman who kept me on, God knows why. They certainly could have put someone else in the job who was more efficient.'

'I had the same trouble when I went back to work in the pub. Once I messed up an entire order for a party of people who had come in to celebrate someone's birthday. All these people were swapping meals and drinks up and down the table for about fifteen minutes - it was like something out of 'Fawlty Towers'! Luckily the boss was out at the time.'

Em laughed. 'Well, it sounds as if we were both fortunate in keeping our jobs at the time. So, what are you doing at college?' she asked then, emptying the ashtray and lighting another cigarette.

'Well,' said Phoebe hesitantly. 'I'm thinking of doing an audio-visual display which involves Dy. I see it as a conceptual piece which involves social documentation as art. I wanted to ask you if you minded, as I realise it's a really sensitive area which is still pretty raw for you.' She hesitated for a moment and then went on, 'I always like to tell people what I intend to do, what my plans are. Because then it's a commitment. People talk to you later, "how's that project", they say. And you feel really dumb if you say, "oh that, yeah well, I didn't really get round to finishing it". Even if it doesn't work out,

at least you had a go.'

She suddenly saw the piece of paper with its envelope which Em had left on the table. 'Oh God, Dy's Death Certificate. I didn't bring this up on a good day, did I?' she groaned.

'It's OK. Really,' said Em, filling up her glass. 'And the art project sounds like a good idea,' thinking it would resolve a lot of Phoebe's grief and set things right for her.

After a pause she said evenly, 'I'll probably be ready to see it by that time, assuming it will be a few months down the track. I need to see it for the same reason, just accepting the finality of it all, I guess.'

Phoebe quickly got to her feet. Em felt there was something else she wanted to say, but had changed her mind.

'Well, I'd better go. There are people coming round for tea, as yet uncooked. I probably won't see you till the inquest. Sounds bloody awful doesn't it.' Sighing, she took Em's hand. 'I'll be thinking of you during the week. Take care.'

Waving her goodbye, Em closed the door behind her, blocking out the sound of the rain which had started to fall. At least now it's too late to do any painting, she thought, and went into the kitchen to see what she could do about dinner.

I've probably picked a really bad day to remember, thinks Em, drying herself vigorously with a threadbare towel, glad that the inquest is now in the past. The memory of Phoebe dropping in, someone to drink with, creates more anxiety. For years, she has enjoyed having deep and meaningful conversations with her friends over glass after glass of wine. Admittedly, she cannot afterwards always remember the discussions which have taken place, but that is incidental. Will her friends stop coming when she

only offers them soft drink and tea? There must be ways around this, ponders Em, seeking to alleviate her trepidation. She will bring it up at the next discussion group.

thirteen

The days follow one another, gradually forming a series of routines. Some of the women have left, mostly voluntarily. She hears a horrific story of one young girl whose parents have applied for adoption of her child, their grandchild, in order to give it proper care, she supposes. The girl, on leaving the centre, had got drunk and driven her car deliberately into a tree. She is not badly injured, but her face, once beautiful, is now undergoing extensive reconstruction. Em contemplates how primal the female can become when her young are threatened, and is made aware for the first time what desperate measures can be taken under the influence of drugs and alcohol.

Once they go to the local swimming pool. For a few hours she feels wonderful, soaking up the warmth of the sun and enjoying the tranquillising effect of the water. She hasn't been in a pool since last August, she thinks vaguely to herself, for Kevin is the swimming enthusiast in the family. She can remember how *that* water felt too, for every morning in Queensland, Kevin had insisted on her coming down to the pool with him while he swam.

She would immerse herself briefly and then watch him while she lay trance-like in the hot spa watching the steam rise, feeling her body being massaged and softly pummelled by the water. Things grow well up here, she thought vaguely, looking at the impatiens and gazanias massed together in the garden beds surrounding the pool.

Her father didn't come down with them. He sat in front of the TV, watching 'Good Morning Australia', smoking cigarettes and drinking tea, leaning forward in his chair and frowning over the news.

In the middle of the day, the beach was crowded. Far below, tiny figures were dotted on the sand, partly obscured by brightly coloured umbrellas. She watched as they lay motionless, ran into the sea, walked along the shore. Some distance out, a ragged line of surfers rocked gently on the waves. A biplane flew overhead, trailing messages.

'Have a Nice Day', she saw fluttering across the sky, as she glanced out of the window one morning. The cliché seemed more trite than usual; for Em, the nice days had vanished forever. She wanted to stay here, cocooned in this warmth without responsibility, without purpose. Flipping through the guidebook in the information folder, she said to her father, 'All they want you to do here is eat and go to Seaworld. What a pleasant, mindless existence.'

She had no wish to return to the real world, which threatened her with memories and decision-making, the relentless patterns of ongoing life with its problems and dramas. She conveyed as much to Kevin, 'I'm frightened,' she said hesitantly. 'I feel bad about going home. What am I going to do when I get back?' She was aware of how hopeless she sounded. 'Just go on,' he said, holding her. 'I'm here, I'll help you. We'll help each other.' At such times, she sensed he would like to add, 'This happened to me, too.'

Once she rose early to watch the sunrise with her father. He was already on the balcony, leaning on the rail, smoking a cigarette. They stood in silence, smoking, watching the pink and purple glow beyond the pale sea, waiting for the sun to lift its glow above the horizon. Far below, there were some people on the beach, mainly joggers and hardy swimmers. A few stood motionless, watching the sunrise as the sandsweeper moved slowly up the beach, its lights shining brightly in the semi-darkness. Her father had always had trouble showing his emotions, Em knew this from childhood. But as they watched the first tinges of red appearing on the rims of the clouds, the sun moving

slowly through the soft grey clouds in an orange haze, white-gold at the centre, to cast pink and then golden light on the steel blue water, she felt his closeness to her much more deeply than if he had spoken. It was something she would reflect on later when she looked at her jumble of photos taken during that week, favouring dusk and dawn for her studies. Birth and death, rising and dying, the pattern of nature and the pattern of our lives, she thought. Her father wrote down the times. 'Now Emmie, here we are. Dawn at 5.50, sunrise at 6.20. And high tide at 12.21am.' She discovered the scrap of paper later, among tickets to Dreamworld and the Twin Towns Services Club, matchbooks from Jupiters, boarding passes from Coolangatta, swizzle sticks and crumpled serviettes from Fortunes, sugar sachets from the Galleria.

Em found the number of elderly people who lived or were on holiday in this area disconcerting. The men with their thin, varicose-veined legs and the women with their lumpy overweight bodies were everywhere. The women seemed to dominate the men who had shrunk into insignificance. There was not even an assertive bulge in their immaculate shorts to give them a distinctive masculine edge. At Pacific Fair shopping centre one day, looking for a parking spot, they waited for nearly ten minutes while one old couple unloaded their shopping trolley into their car. It's as if they're in slow motion. Maybe they're stoned, thought Em, smiling to herself at the absurdity of this possibility. She did not want to get old. Especially not now.

The body was important up here, she could see. Magnificent tanned specimens of both sexes contrasted dramatically with their elderly counterparts. In a cafe on Cavill Avenue, they ate souvlakis. A fat girl stood at a table nearby, looking at the menu. Her boyfriend's hand snaked up under her shorts and caressed her buttocks. The girl looked away, smiling. See, she seemed to be saying. I am desirable, I am desired.

Desire was not a word in Em's vocabulary at the moment. It was difficult to feel much at all. She was simply transported through the days by the medium of time. Yet there had been so much desire in the early days of their relationship. They had met at a dance when she was seventeen and he was twenty-five. Kevin had been one of the organisers. Wilful and determined, already she drank too much, liking the way her inhibitions were released after a few beers. They had fought a war of passion over the price of her virginity and it had been won one spring morning after her father had left for work. She could not believe the pain, but the look in his eyes had made her heart stop. After that, she could not have enough of him nor he of her. Her lips were swollen, her nipples were raw, her pelvis ached, her clitoris was numb. She had to be excused from basketball practice. She developed cystitis, naively asking the girls at school what to do. They sniggered and giggled. 'Go to the chemist,' they said, and whispered about her behind their hands.

Em did not care what anyone thought. She was delirious with love. She had no idea such a state existed, where one's whole being could be so consumed. The film 'Exodus' had just been released. She read the book, captivated by the passion of the relationship between David and Jordana. On the first of September for years to come, she would write on the calendar, *'For winter is now past, the rain is over and gone...Arise my love, my beautiful one, and come'*. She read the *Canticle of Canticles* and identified with the phrases. *'My beloved put his hand through the key-hole and my bowels were moved at his touch.'*

'It sounds terrible, but it describes the sensation exactly,' she told Kevin. He rang her up from work, he told her he had an erection just talking to her. She was amazed that two people could feel like this about each other. And it lasted. Married when she turned

nineteen, passion had sustained them through various ups and downs over the years. I thought this only happened in the movies, thought Em, sometimes surprised that fortune had so smiled on her sexually.

Then Dylan had been accidentally conceived. She dropped out of her Arts Course and concentrated on motherhood. Reading her pre-natal booklet issued by the Department of Health, she was shocked to find that there should be no sex for the first three months and not much in the last three. After that, she read the book only for necessity. This did not apply to her, she was a '60s woman. Things had changed!

And Dy's birth had changed her. Birth seemed equivalent to a religious experience which changed her forever. And she literally treated Dylan as a miracle. He was good, he was beautiful. He was her saviour; through his birth she herself felt recreated, the baby totally fulfilled her experience of motherhood by his very presence.

She did not wish for other children, compensated as she was by the miracle of his existence alone. For several years, they led an idyllic existence, with annual overseas trips, weekends away, regular meals in good restaurants, before Dylan went to school. And even then, the good life had continued. She was happy being able to go to work and to have Dy in after-school care. Her nights were dedicated to helping him with his schoolwork, cooking his favourite meals and discussing his hopes and his problems without the distraction of other siblings. His smile, beguiling in its sweetness, made her heart miss a beat whenever he bestowed it upon her, which was often.

An only child, Jesus-like he seemed to her, as she watched him grow into good-looking adolescence, not without problems for he was rebellious, defiant, secure in the self-confidence which so often accompanied physical attractiveness.

And now, thought Em, gazing at Kevin's form, rapidly moving through the water as he lapped the apartment pool, this has evolved into my personal pieta. My child, crucified on the needle, resurrected elsewhere. She saw no end to her mourning, it now appeared as a permanent state in which she would be for the rest of her life. Who needed purgatory, she thought.

Swimming lazily up and down the pool, Em marvels at the fact that she can actually look back and see how much time has passed. At the time, it *had* seemed like a form of purgatory, where she was condemned to do penance for all time. After Dy's death, her Catholic sense of guilt, long buried, had resurrected itself with a vengeance.

At Coolangatta airport, preparing for departure, she had bought two mugs, purposely constructed to be misshapen and off-centre. On each of them was written, '*Does today really have to happen?*' It seemed a fitting question as she reluctantly left this haven of peace, dreading the return to the Melbourne winter.

They arrived back on a cold wet night. It had been a bad flight. There was a delay in takeoff due to a passenger who was extremely ill and had to be stabilised before they could leave. Then as the plane eventually began its ascent through the clouds, Em said, 'This plane's making a funny noise. 'Don't be silly,' replied Kevin, reading his inflight magazine, 'It's just the engines.' But sure enough, minutes later, there was an announcement from the pilot, apologising because they would have to turn back.

Arriving home, hours later, the darkness and the rain seemed more oppressive than ever after the bright warmth of the Gold Coast. Walking into the cold house, Em started to cry, caught between the pain of the recent past and an uncertain and

unwelcome future, graphically realised as she glimpsed the remnants of Dy's clothes and possessions still strewn over the couch. A lifetime in two plastic bags, she thought.

It was too cold and too late to light the pot belly stove. Kevin poured her a drink and put her to bed. Hugging her hot water bottle to her, waiting for the electric blanket to warm up, Em felt suspended in time; she could move neither backward or forward, trapped, wrapped in her anguish.

The next morning, passing the lounge room, she suddenly saw the remains of the floral arrangements sent by friends and relatives when notified of Dylan's death. Dead and dying, there were brown leaves and petals strewn over the polished boards. Crumpled cellophane surrounded several baskets, the bright colours and full blooms were now reduced to sombre tones and shrivelled stalks. This was the worst aftermath of all, thought Em, pouring out a glass of brandy and sinking into a chair, wondering what to do about them. On the table stood the bottle of port found in Dylan's room, his blue beanie and earrings, photographs taken by him, and photographs of him.

Alone in the house since Kevin had gone back to work, Em felt bleak and isolated. She stared at the table, set up for the wake they had held for Dy before the funeral, before they went away. She had wanted to pay tribute to him, for his life, to make a proud and significant statement about his life in the light of this undignified death.

On the morning of the wake, she and her father had gone to High Mass at St Patrick's. 'The best,' he had said. 'We'll give him the best,' and they lit candles for him at St Francis's afterwards.

Back at the house, people had already started to arrive. The day was cold and dismal, threatening to rain. People crowded inside, their faces sombre, many openly weeping. The air had been charged with emotion. Relatives, many of them elderly, greeted her in

hushed tones. Their friends stood in small groups, shocked and silent, for many of them had known Dylan since childhood. And Dy's friends had come. She felt their strong young bodies as she embraced them, saw the compassion in their eyes and perceived their pain.

They walked silently round her small altar of remembrance with its burning candles, reading the tributes which had come in. Until that time, Em had had no idea how much they were and had been loved, she, Kevin and Dylan. It filled her with awe, with humility, this giving of love and empathy conveyed through the written word. She did not consider herself religious, but there was a universality of spirit which reached out and touched all who were present on that occasion. 'The God within us,' her father had said simply. 'He works through people. This is the power that we all have to give to one another in times of need.' Em had been moved by his words, wishing she, too, could be party to such strong and simple faith.

Kevin and Peter had picked wattle in the park to decorate the tree fern they were to plant for Dylan. She tacked a card on the fence above the place, which read, *'May the spirit of Dylan be content in the country earth and may his soul find peace in the heart of the fern'*.

Mid-afternoon, they had all filed out into the garden, Em carrying a candle which miraculously had not blown out, despite the wind. The tree fern had been planted, glasses of port had been reverently raised in a toast, and the ceremony, evolved by her in tears in bed that morning, had passed with as much input as she could manage, to give Dy a fitting sendoff. She had made a brief speech. 'Dylan, you lived your life like a candle in the wind. And although the candle has gone out, your spirit will remain

because you touched so many people in your short life. You were a soul in torment and now you've been released and I know you're in a better place.'

As her father and uncle recited the Anzac prayer, she had buried him with her heart.

They shall not grow old

As we that are left grow old

Age shall not weary them

Nor the years condemn

At the going down of the sun

And in the morning

We will remember them.

Now, staring at the drooping floral tributes, many of which were beginning to smell unpleasantly, Em drank her brandy, enshrining the memory of the day in her mind. As children, her father had always taken them to see him march in the Anzac Day parade. After her mother died, he no longer marched. It was as if the memory of the war had been obliterated by her death. The Anzac prayer which she had loved as a child had now been extolled for her child. His war was with drugs, his battle for the peace of his own soul, she reflected. And in the end, he gave his life for it.

At the wake, Phoebe told her a friend of Dylan's had gone to a seance the night before, with no express purpose of contacting anyone. He had barely entered the room and sat down when a message was conveyed. 'Tell Mum I'm OK'. 'It was Dylan,' said Phoebe. 'He *knew* it was Dy.'

Her most vivid recollection had been of Phoebe's gesture of remembrance. Phoebe had found a poem in Dy's room, one the police had missed in their collection of personal effects. She had given it to Em. Em had wept. Even his poems reflected the feeling of

battle; the search for a place of peace. At the wake, Phoebe had re-written the words and then burnt them symbolically in front of the tree fern.

On the beach is where he lies

Flies in his mouth and ants in his eyes.

Unwelcome and untouched

Wiped out on a final rush.

For he has drawn his final breath

Relish he does the sweet peace of death.

Closing doors, walking on like a soldier

Shot at and punctured and growing older.

The body young, the mind going crazy

The world and its people getting distant and hazy.

As Em stared at the debris, smelling the stale mustiness of the room, she became aware that she would have to make decisions regarding these objects and that this would be only the first of many. The problems of day-to-day life suddenly seemed insurmountable, the simplest things appeared to be overwhelmingly complicated and difficult. She picked up one of the baskets. It was an attractive arrangement of dried flowers, some of which could be kept in reminiscence of the occasion. The decision-making process regarding which flowers to keep became too much. She put down the glass, closed the door and went back to bed.

It is time to get out of the pool. Em feels sedated by the effects of sun and water. She is glad at this particular time she is not home to see these rooms which hold so many memories, and as the minibus pulls into the hospital grounds, she feels almost enthusiastic as the now familiar buildings appear in the distance. She is apprehensive at

the prospect of going home, for she realises she can no longer block out her feelings, her pain, her frustration in the same way as before. The house, once familiar, a haven of comfort and security, now in her imagination appears alien, frightening and in some way, threatening.

Despite the sun's warmth, she shivers as she steps out of the minibus and walks towards the entrance to the building which has temporarily become her refuge.

fourteen

Phoebe comes to visit Em once by herself towards the end of February.

Watching her stride assuredly through the door where they have arranged to meet, Em envies Phoebe her youth, her confidence. Phoebe favours the Gothic look, long black dresses and coats, dead white skin framed by long black hair, Doc Martens and lots of silver jewellery, the only touch of colour, dark red lipstick and long red nails. Phoebe isn't really the Gothic type, Em thinks. She's cheerful, optimistic and ambitious. But the look suits her; tall and voluptuous, it enhances her strong sense of self-possession, gives her a presence.

'Hi,' she says, giving Em a hug and looking around the room with its armchairs, lounges, TV and video, and a few curious occupants. 'I've brought you some magazines. How are you feeling?'

She attempts to cheer Em up with stories of home. 'Mum was furious with Patrick last week. She was in Myer buying him some new pants. All he had to do was try on two pairs of pants, but it was too much for him.' Patrick is three, the youngest of the five children. 'So he rushed out of the fitting room, stood in the doorway and screamed at the top of his voice, "*I'm bored!*" Mum said the shop just stopped in its tracks and all the customers and the salespeople just stared. She said she wasn't game to come out of the fitting room until people had stopped looking.'

Em smiles, but her smile feels forced, even to her.

Noting her uneasiness, Phoebe rushes on. 'Apparently Dad killed a sheep last week and gave the scraps to the dogs. One of them appeared with a leg in its mouth so Patrick rushed round to see Emily the pet lamb. "It's all right", he went back and told Mum, "Emily's still got four legs". Then a bit later he said, "How are the sheep going to walk

around without any legs?" ' "

After a pause, looking around the room, Phoebe asks cautiously, 'How's it going in here?'

'Pretty much of a strain, actually,' says Em, sighing heavily. 'Still it's halfway now, three weeks to go, so I supposed I'm getting used to it. Still pretty scary, though. Every meal, I expect someone to put wine on the table and it doesn't happen. What terrible habits I've formed over the years!' She laughs at this, and Phoebe is relieved.

They chat for a while, Phoebe telling her about college. Then looking at her watch, Phoebe stands to go.

'I've got a doctor's appointment,' she says after some hesitation. 'A check-up, actually.' Seeing Em's expression, she pats her arm reassuringly. 'No, I'm fine, really, both here,' she touches her stomach, 'and here,' tapping her head. Smiling, she kisses Em goodbye and hurries down the road towards the bus stop.

Watching her walking quickly off into the distance, Em is reminded of that other day last month, the week in which so much occurred. She sinks down into a chair, ignoring a video someone has put on, and her mind goes back to that January day, which at the time had seemed like a further extension of the nightmare of her existence.

Playing the waiting game again, thought Em, for it was only two days since the inquest had taken place. Sitting in a coffee shop while my great-nephew or niece is being aborted. Phoebe's such a child, she reflected. She had looked so vulnerable and so nervous when Em had left her.

Phoebe had told her of her predicament at the inquest lunch. Sitting in the baking sun in the backyard of the Fitzroy pub, she had pleaded with Em to come with her. 'There's no-one else, Em. I can't tell Mum and Dad. Please help me.'

She was relieved now she had come with Phoebe, most people were alone in the waiting room. One looked as if she'd been crying for hours. They all looked apprehensive, enclosed within themselves, avoiding eye-contact, staring at nothing. Probably this place could tell a few stories as well, she thought, looking round the small cafe. She ordered coffee, black, so it would last a long time. She had anticipated having several cups of coffee in the next hour or so. Eating was not a consideration. She chain-smoked and noticed that her hands were shaking.

It was very hot. She waited as long as possible for her parking space to expire, around here it was all one hour parking which made it difficult. I suppose they don't expect you to drive yourself home, she thought, though some would. The staff seemed caring and sympathetic. At least I know she'll be looked after, thought Em, ordering more coffee. She felt weighed down, there had been too much death over the last months. She thought of Dylan, fully formed, and this foetus, barely formed, both sharing the same fate.

Well, she thought, looking at her watch, it should be over by now. She walked back to the clinic and watched as others were helped back to the recovery room, still heavily sedated. God, I feel so alone, thought Em. I wish there was someone else to talk to, someone to share this pain. Still no Phoebe.

She walked back to the coffee shop and ordered yet another coffee. A doctor hurried in. She wondered if he was Phoebe's doctor. Oh, God, let her be all right, prayed Em.

Her hands were sweating as she tried to still the panic in her mind. It was almost time to move the car. I'll sit here as long as I can, so I don't have to move it again, she thought.

The friend of one of the girls she saw in the waiting room came into the shop and recognised her. She half smiled and sat down at a table on the other side of the room. There was no call for intimacy in these circumstances, no-one spoke to each other in the waiting room, she noticed. Their worlds were separate areas of emotion. No-one wanted to be in that room, she thought. No-one.

Time to go and move the car. It was now 11.30. Em felt as if she'd been there for days.

Now she walked across the road and sat in the park. The ground was hard and brown beneath her feet. The dirt beneath the bench was littered with cigarette butts, a testimony to the many who had sat here and waited. She felt desolate and helpless. Groping in her handbag, she reached for the now familiar miniature bottle of brandy, a souvenir from her Queensland flights, retained to refill again and again. Looking round to see if anyone was watching, she took a quick swig. God, I feel like a bloody dero, she thought. All I need is a brown paper bag.

She wished this situation of Phoebe's could have been avoided. It wasn't as if it was a one-night stand, they had been living together for six months. She hoped nothing had gone wrong. Others had been and gone in the meantime. I couldn't bear it if this put paid to her chances of having children, thought Em, lighting yet another cigarette. She read her book. It was an old favourite, filled with fertile imagery.

Eventually, Phoebe appeared. She was pale and her face looked haggard, but she was not distraught, like some she had seen. Em experienced overwhelming relief upon seeing her. Thank God she was all right. She helped her into the car and they drove off back to Camberwell in the searing heat of the early afternoon.

Em stirs in her chair. The video has finished and it is time for lunch. Her days, once structured by drinks, are now punctuated by meals, regular and surprisingly good. This afternoon, they are going to a meeting. She has heard a little about what goes on and is curious concerning what will take place and whether it will have any effect on her.

fifteen

'Today, we're supposed to be finding a power greater than ourselves,' Em tells me, rolling her eyes. 'We seek him here, we seek him there...,' she pulls a cushion off the couch and stares at it fixedly.

I smile. As well as our names, we share an Irish-Catholic background. I have never had a problem with faith; the transition from the austere rigidity of my Catholic childhood to the liberating compassion of Vatican II has been smooth and inspiring.

Em has experienced no such comfort. 'How can you be brought up with a God who's going to send you to hell every five minutes for doing something wrong and trade that for something that offers unconditional love?' she asks me angrily.

I cannot answer this. 'I suppose it's something that comes with time,' I say tentatively, knowing this is the last thing she wants to hear. I cannot impose my God on her.

Sometimes she tells me about the meetings, meetings where innermost feelings are discussed. 'It's really weird when people ask you how you *feel*,' she says. 'Not like, how are you, but, how *are* you?'

The stories of her compatriots are like newspaper stories; tales of incest, rape, even murder, are told. Instead of being repelled, Em seems fascinated by this darker side of life. 'I was telling my story today,' she says. 'And at the end of it, this girl looked at me in genuine sympathy and said, "Jeez, what a cunt, eh!'"'

At this, she throws her head back as she laughs and looks for a moment young and untroubled.

Once, I go to a meeting with her. The self-effacing honesty of the speakers both unnerves and impresses me. Afterwards, over tea and biscuits, she tells me, 'I like to take home at least one thing I hear and remember it. It helps.'

I have a mental picture of her then, an artist's romanticised vision; Em as a pre-Raphaelite figure holding out her begging bowl to be filled with small portions of sobriety, which when absorbed metaphysically, will eventually reflect an inner peace that at this point, seems evasive.

During one of our conversations, I discover Em likes to write.

'Well, I try to,' she says, twisting her rings self-consciously. 'Part of my downfall, I guess, trying to write the great Australian novel accompanied by a wine cask for inspiration. Never gets done, though you do get to drink a lot of wine,' she laughs, hugging her knees to her chest. 'I won prizes for essays at school and I used to send off short stories to magazines when I was younger. I suppose now I don't feel as confident, probably more sensitive to criticism now I'm older. At least if you're a painter, people aren't going to scribble all over your work and leave comments about it on the picture frame.'

One day, they go to a pub as a group. I watch the women, eager and excited, as they await the hospital minibus. 'It's a test,' they tell me, 'To see how it affects us to be around alcohol.'

'We have lunch, then we play pool. That's the plan,' says Em. 'Except it's just not me. I hate pubs. Did all my drinking at home out of the friendly fridge.'

Despite the depression, the anger, the agitation, there are positive signs. Sprinkled among the unwilling, there are a few who have genuine intentions of starting a new life. Months later, shopping at a supermarket, I am surprised and touched to be greeted by a woman with a teenage girl in tow.

'I remember you, you did the posters,' and in a rush. 'Been sober three months now,' before she disappears down the next aisle, her trolley moving uncertainly before her on its wobbly wheels.

sixteen

'This morning, we're going to look at special occasions,' says the counsellor.

'You'll often hear it mentioned that there are no auspicious occasions, that every day is one to celebrate as one of sobriety. So this means,' she says, standing and writing on the board, 'that occasions such as anniversaries, birthdays, Christmas and New Year, will have to be regarded differently if you are to stay sober and clean. Christmas is an especially difficult period, and many people experience stress for a large variety of reasons around this time. This morning we're going to discuss past Christmases, how you felt, how you reacted and what you would like to do about that in the future.'

Em sits on the edge of her chair. Only last night she and Kevin had talked about Christmas and she had been angry when he had told her how difficult it had been for him. How it was the worst Christmas he could remember. How he had watched her drink and drift through the dark and silent days which her depression had made darker, despite the increasing warmth of early summer. How she had gone into a dark space where he could not follow, shutting him out.

It had begun with the Christmas cards. Kevin had thought it better not to send any in this year of bereavement, but with Em's fanatic attention to detail, she had insisted on buying expensive cards and putting herself through the punishing task of not being able to sign them as usual from Em, Kevin and Dylan. Not that Dylan had ever sent any.

'We don't seem like a family any more,' she wept over the medieval reproductions of the Holy Family, strewn over the table with envelopes and stamp booklets. 'Two people isn't a family, it's a couple.'

He was silent during this tirade, she was so stricken, so engulfed in her grief that it was pointless to argue or even initiate a discussion.

She did not buy a Christmas tree. They had always had a real tree, she loved the smell of the pine needles. This year she sprayed bare branches white and hung the tiny wooden ornaments on it her father had given her the previous year. It was stark and bleak compared to the richly decorated trees of previous years.

Usually they went to Midnight Mass, this year she would not go. The ritual was a perfunctory gesture, left over from their upbringing, their Catholic education. 'I can't bear to listen to all those carols about newborn babies and motherhood,' she said. 'Easter, though, I can *really* relate to.'

She did not cook Christmas lunch this year, although it was her turn. 'I couldn't face it,' she apologised to Cia on the phone. 'Usually I enjoy doing it, but this year it would be pure torment.'

'Don't worry about it, it's fine,' said Cia, sympathetically. 'Peter and I thought it might be better to go out this year, a pub or something. Somewhere which didn't have associations or memories.'

And so they went to the Pantan Hill Hotel, where Dylan had never gone. St. Andrews Hotel, further towards Kinglake and frequented by bikers, had been his preferred venue, and they had eaten there on occasion to be with him. Rather than not see him, it had been easier to compromise.

This year, the hotel had inadvertently set one place too many. Em looked at the empty chair and recalled previous years when a small child had torn the paper off his presents and eaten his way enthusiastically through turkey and ham. Her solution to her pain

was to drink more than usual and by late afternoon she was quite obnoxious, even to herself.

On the way back to her father's, they went to the cemetery. It was a fine hot day with clear skies. She had not visited the grave since the funeral and the memories swept back over her as she looked at the headstone.

She had brought seaside daisies to plant at the foot of the grave. They were tough and should survive the windswept dry conditions. 'I come up here quite often, Emmie,' said her father, his hand on her shoulder. 'I can give them a drink once or twice a week till they get established.'

The daisies had survived the months of neglect in the garden and she had dug up large clumps of them to plant, first putting plastic down in the hope that they would survive the weeds. The daisies made her think of Dylan. Last Mother's Day, returning from lunch with her father, they had been surprised to find him on the front verandah, having not expected to see him. He had been invited to lunch with them, but had not turned up.

He had sat on the step, a bunch of daisies in his hand. 'For you,' he had said, smiling, offering them to her. 'Happy Mother's Day.'

And they had seemed so precious at the time, for he was past being able to give much of himself, let alone gifts of any description for others.

Now she looked around at the graves, at the other visitors who placed flowers in jars and pots and sat or stood in silence, singly and in groups, honouring their loved ones on this difficult day of celebration. But this day, painful as it was, paled into insignificance in terms of difficult days when she recalled the funeral service held for Dylan and her

first glimpse of that stark, open space cut into the ground where his coffin would be placed.

They had driven from Camberwell to Arthurs Creek for the funeral, rising early so they could prepare the refreshments at her father's house when the funeral was over.

Em's father had stayed the night with them. Next morning, stoic, he had insisted on doing all the driving. Em and Kevin had stared out at the wintry countryside past Diamond Creek, saying little, Em and her father smoking constantly with Kevin suffering the smoke-filled atmosphere in silence.

Driving down the winding, hilly road in the early morning, looking up at the trees which met overhead, she was reminded of the motorbike accident when, dead drunk, Dylan had driven off the road with a pillion passenger, finishing up halfway down the hill, the passenger badly injured, he with barely a scratch. That had been the previous spring, she recalled, and from that time on, she realised that her prophetic dream experienced years earlier, signified that he was doomed.

The day of the funeral dawned bright and clear after a fog which made the surrounding mountains quite breathtaking in their beauty. She was glad it was not raining. It would have been that much more difficult to bear.

It was a perfect winter's day, that morning in August. Bare trees were etched softly against the blue sky and the view from the cemetery was magnificent. She felt alienated by this ceremony, having left her Catholicism behind with her virginity. The priest was not known to her, only to her father, and he had not known Dylan. His words were knowledge acquired from the things she had told him and they sound hollow and detached.

As the coffin was carried from the car, she experienced a frisson of shock, only because to her, he was already buried beneath the tree fern in her garden. Forbidden a last view of him, to her he had no body. He was free, free at last. It required effort to envisage him in the box and the reality only became sharper as it was lowered into the ground, a few flowers gracing the veneered surface. She threw a shovelful of earth on it and was appalled at the noise it made. Surely this was out of keeping with how things should be?

She spoke to relatives afterwards, but could not recall any of the conversations and had trouble remembering who they were. She could remember her brother sobbing as the coffin was lowered into the ground; Peter had always had such a soft spot for Dylan and his strong sense of family made this occasion a double tragedy for him.

And here we all are, four months later, thought Em, Why does it still feel so desolate?

After Christmas lunch, they went back to her father's. Kevin and Peter opened champagne and her father handed out the presents, stacked up under the Christmas tree. The lights on the tree flashed on and off, repeatedly casting coloured patterns on the brightly wrapped gifts around the base of the tree. In her inebriated state, they seemed to imitate the flashing lights of emergency vehicles. She sat silently in her chair, waiting impatiently for the gift giving to end.

'Lipstick,' said Phoebe's brother, Christopher, distastefully rubbing his mouth, having been enthusiastically kissed by Em after receiving his present of a plastic apron displaying a sweating cook in bondage attire waving cooking utensils, since he had recently demonstrated an interest in cooking. 'They say women swallow gallons of the stuff.'

'Ah, yes,' said Em, sarcastically. 'But what about the men?'

He looked at her non-plussed and went to help himself to soft drink from the table.

'You sounded really mean then, he didn't intend any real criticism,' said Kevin, giving her a cup of tea, in the hope that she would stop drinking for a while.

She could not tell him that the fifteen-year-old reminded her of Dylan at the same age, the same lean rangy body and a similar sense of humour. In her pain, exaggerated by the effects of alcohol, she was over-sensitive, unable to deal with her reactions.

'Well, he could at least understand this isn't a good day for *me*,' said Em. 'Why can't you sympathise with how *I* feel?' And she ignored the tea and stomped off for another bottle of champagne.

She was affronted when Peter gave her a new biography of Marilyn Monroe.

'It's just out,' he said, pleased with his choice. 'It looks like a really interesting read, too. I thought a few days in the sun would help you out and you can sit back with this and take your mind off things.'

'How *could* he give me a book about suicide?' she raged to Kevin later in the kitchen. 'Hasn't he got any fucking sensitivity?'

Having alienated herself from the family through instigating argumentative discussions with practically everyone present, Em wandered off, glass in hand, with a bag of leftover watermelon to feed the goats. They jumped up against the gate, enthusiastically taking the fruit from her hand, the fleece around their mouths rapidly staining pink as they greedily stretched out their heads for more.

Em stared out across the dry brown paddocks, inhaling the aroma of the eucalyptus, pungent with the heat of the day. For some reason, Wordsworth's *Prelude* came to

mind. Dy had loved it here, roaming up and down these hills ever since he was a small boy. She recalled odd snatches of the poem now.

Oh, many a time have I, a five years child...

Made one long bathing of a summer's day

...leaping through flowery groves of yellow ragwort...

A naked savage in the thunder shower.

Fair seed time had my soul, and I grew up

Fostered alike by beauty and by fear.

There had never been enough fear in him, she thought, drinking her wine, watching the goats as they wandered off up the hill. Perhaps that had been a large part of his problem. Too much beauty and not enough fear. She sighed and walked back to the house.

There was only Patrick left to talk to. As she stepped through the door, she could hear him giving instructions to Phoebe in his solemn gravelly voice as she prepared him for his bath. 'I want a singlet, then I want a skivvy, then I want my pyjama top, then I want my pyjama pants.'

'But it's too hot for all that,' said Phoebe, laughing. 'You only need PJ's.'

'I want everything!' shrieked Patrick, starting to thump his fists on the bath. 'I'll tell Mama.'

Em grinned, in spite of herself. Patrick was spoilt. As the youngest, he had four siblings to manipulate at whim.

As the sun sank behind the distant hills, the hypnotic sounds of 'A Momentary Lapse of Reason' floated across her father's property. Kevin had given her the album for Christmas and she had set up her father's old record player on the verandah. It was

driving him crazy, she could see, but he didn't say much beyond, 'Can't you turn it down a little, dear?'

She looked at the rest of the family now as they sat on the verandah eating pieces of crumbling Christmas cake with their coffee, the pine trees surrounding the house casting giant shadows in the setting sun. Cia laughed with Peter, her hand on his arm, recounting a humorous incident at the restaurant, Patrick finally asleep inside. Her father had moved the television set out on the verandah with the standard lamp, forming an incongruous image with Kevin as they watched the Queen's Christmas message, straining to hear above the sounds of Pink Floyd. Christopher fingered his new skateboard, clearly wishing there was a piece of flat ground on which to try it out. The eight-year-old twins, Miranda and Beatrice, were reading comics from the old chest which had accumulated many cast-off comics over the years. Phoebe was draped over a chair, listening to a tape through her new headphones, eyes closed, a blissful expression on her face. Em looked at them all, isolated in her bitterness. She had now resorted to a bottle of red, abandoned at lunch through lack of interest and brought home from the pub. She hated their happiness, their complacency. She felt alien, isolated, totally miserable. And she waited for the day to be over.

Now, remembering how it felt, Em listens to the others in the group speaking about Christmas. It seems that many would be willing not to celebrate it at all. When it is her turn, she recounts the episode in her thoughts, but at this stage has no solution to rectify the situation.

'You must learn to plan ahead,' says the counsellor when they have finished, though as usual some have not contributed at all. How will they go, wonders Em, these women who do not speak. She has spent weeks with them now, yet knows nothing about them.

'Plan ahead, so that you will not be caught out. You must learn to be watchful and alert, to understand that no matter what happens, you do not pick up a drink or drug. No matter what.'

seventeen

Phoebe, sitting in the doctor's waiting room for the routine check-up, recalls the day which brought her here as she flips through a copy of *Rolling Stone* which someone has left behind. Not normal waiting room reading material, thinks Phoebe, watching another girl disappear into the surgery.

On that January afternoon following the inquest, she had lain in Em's spare room on a bed beneath the window. The blinds were drawn against the harsh heat of the late afternoon sun. Must face north, thought Phoebe idly. She didn't feel too bad. No real pain, just a dull ache round her pelvic region. There was a faint smell of medication which she found irritating.

When they had arrived home, Em had fussed around her, talking all the time, making her edgy. This must be dreadful for *her*, thought Phoebe. Still, I wish she wouldn't drink so much, it makes her worse. She could smell the brandy on Em when she climbed into the car after leaving the clinic. Amplified by the heat, it had mixed with the smell of hot vinyl and the faint whiff of petrol fumes she was always conscious of in the VW.

Today would be truly appalling for Em, because of losing Dylan, reflected Phoebe, grimacing as she turned over, not as comfortable as she had earlier thought. Her vagina - she had never felt comfortable referring to it in more crudely explicit terms; the word seemed vulgar and abusive, even in these liberated times - felt tight and slightly numb. Yes, this must be so difficult for poor Em, especially so close to the inquest, but then it was hard for everyone, thought Phoebe.

Her mind drifted back to last week, back to where she remembered hearing her statement read out at the inquest, almost as if it was written by someone else. Well, it had been. The cop wrote it down at the police station.

Casting her mind back, watching the light at the edge of the blind and the patterns of sunlight on the ceiling, Phoebe recalled the winter's night which had led up to the drama of last Monday and, she thought with some irony, had had more than an impact on this summer's day.

Dy was supposed to meet her after work for a drink. Instead of which Colin had showed up at the pub where she worked, demanding to talk to her over the manager's protestations, over the noise of the crowd standing three-deep at the bar, waving five and ten dollar notes, waiting to be served.

Seeing Colin elbowing his way to the front of the bar, amid the cries of 'Piss off, mate' and 'Wait your bloody turn,' she hissed indignantly, 'What do you want? I'll lose my job. Can't this wait?'

Harassed, flustered, as Colin tried to talk, she gave a customer the wrong change. 'I gave you \$20.00,' said the girl, her eyes narrowing.

'Sorry, did too. Here you are,' and Phoebe slapped a ten dollar note into her outstretched hand.

'I have to talk to you,' said Colin, sounding desperate. 'It's about Dylan. Something's happened.'

At this, she stopped serving, ignoring the orders resounding in her ears. Going to the end of the bar where she could make her exit, Colin said, 'You have to come, there's been an accident.'

Shit, oh shit, thought Phoebe, scared, too scared to ask for details at this point. They couldn't talk in here anyway, the band was starting another set and the noise was deafening. She made a hurried excuse to the manager, saying she would be back in a few minutes and that it was nearly time for her break anyway.

Outside the pub, Colin told her about Dy. And as she listened, the tears poured down Phoebe's face and she pounded his chest, screaming 'No, no,' over and over again. Colin packed her into the car, disappeared inside the pub for a few minutes to tell the manager she would not be back that night, and drove off to the house they shared and where Colin held the lease. Parked outside were a police car and the mobile intensive care ambulance. At the sight of these grim testimonials of death, Phoebe became aware that she was trembling uncontrollably. Colin gave her a cigarette, but she could barely put it to her lips. She started to go inside, but Colin held her back. From the silhouettes on the hallway wall opposite Dy's bedroom, she could see activity in the room. 'I don't think you should see him, he doesn't look good. Better for you to remember him how he was.'

Later, she was told he had been dead for several hours before Colin found him. There had been a phone call for him and knocking on the door, he had pushed it opened and found Dylan lying face down on the floor. She and Colin now sat in the lounge room with a bottle of Scotch. The police wanted to talk to them shortly, they were told. Phoebe was suddenly conscious of Colin holding her head forcibly against his shoulder, they must be taking Dy away. Turning her head, she caught a glimpse through the uncurtained window, of the plastic covered form strapped to the stretcher, illuminated by the flashing red and blue lights, as it was loaded into the ambulance. The doors

closed and the ambulance drove off slowly into the night. There was no necessity for sirens and speed; a grim finish to life's journey.

As the ambulance disappeared, Phoebe sank down on the floor and sobbed. 'Oh God, I can't believe this shit! Why did it have to happen? He was only twenty, same age as me, for fuck's sake.' Then she thought, 'And what about Em and Kev? Who's going to tell them? Not the bloody cops, that would be too much.'

As the old Ford station wagon wound its way slowly to Camberwell along the darkness of the river, Phoebe wondered how Em would react when she heard the news. If only Dy hadn't been an only child. 'I'm shit scared about this,' she told Colin, 'But I have to do it. I'm family.' At that, she began to sob again, for the family had grown smaller that night.

Shifting in the bed again, Phoebe reached for the hot water bottle, despite the heat of the day, and put it gratefully on her stomach.

Em had been surprisingly calm, she remembered. Almost too calm. Perhaps if she'd let go of some emotion then, she'd be coping better now. Phoebe had been staggered when Em had hugged her, saying, 'Oh Phoebe, I'm so sorry. I know how much you loved him.' Almost as if it had been my loss and not hers, thought Phoebe.

Hey, this is pretty grim, she thought then. How do I feel about what just happened to *me*, or rather, what I made happen to me? Actually, she did not feel guilty or remorseful, she had been honest with the counsellors who had prodded and poked at her psyche.

'It doesn't feel right to have a child. And I don't consider this to be a baby. It certainly couldn't survive on its own at this stage.'

'How do you think you'll feel in the future?' they had asked.

'I'd still consider that at this time in my life I wouldn't look after it properly, I'd resent it. And I want to finish my course. More importantly, I think children need a father and this one certainly wouldn't have one. We're not getting on - about to split up, actually - and he doesn't want to know about it. Otherwise he'd have been here, wouldn't he?'

This was the only real bitterness Phoebe felt. It was a testimony to the increasing frailty of the relationship.

After Dylan's death, she and Colin had formed an unlikely alliance; in his early thirties, he found her ideals difficult to relate to and she certainly couldn't relate to a lot of his. Great sex, though, she reflected, wincing at the physical consequences of that now. Well, this should finish things off nicely, definitely no future after this. She would have to find a new house to move into.

Maybe that had been part of the problem, staying in the house where Dylan had died. She had really loved him, Phoebe thought now, biting her lip. He had moved into the house just over a year ago when there was a spare room going for rent, having nonchalantly told her he'd been kicked out of home. She could not believe this, it seemed inconsistent with Em's and Kevin's parental behaviour. She and Dy had been close for a long time, the sister he never had. Bit of an idiot at times, but they had got on really well, though she hadn't liked his smack habit. She hadn't known for a long time, thought he was only shooting speed, then, taking a phone call meant for him one day, she had realised what was really going on.

Shit, why can't I go to sleep, Phoebe thought, turning over in Em's spare bed. All this morbid thinking wasn't helping. She concentrated her mind on college. It was her final year, so there was a lot to do. She was into conceptual art, producing intricate boxes filled with layers of visual images, often accompanied by detailed written notebooks or writing incorporated into the art itself. Photographs, maps, drawings and paintings were pulled together in acetate and perspex overlays, so that the viewer was persuaded to look further into the depths of her three-dimensional images enhanced by two-dimensional references. Next time, I'll involve sound, she thought, so the viewer is totally involved. Sound and smell, and maybe taste as well. Art for the senses.

Her future resolved, at least in her mind, Phoebe slept.

Now, as she hurries out of the medical clinic to catch the tram back to the city, Phoebe feels relieved that the check-up following the termination is over and that her body rhythms are back to normal. In her handbag is a prescription for the pill. *That* should alleviate the prospect of any further visits back here, resolves Phoebe firmly, and smiles happily to herself as she sees a tram appearing in the distance.

eighteen

'How do you feel?' I ask Em one day when she seems more depressed than usual.

'I feel damaged,' she says slowly. 'Damaged in a way that can't be mended, so I have to learn to live in a damaged state. I remember when Dy was very young, I saw this documentary on TV about Isadora Duncan. It showed a re-enactment of her children's death, a bridge collapsed or something, and the car went into the river. The children drowned. And I sat there shocked. I remember I cried. I could not conceive of anything, anything at all being worse than my child dying. And yet, it's happened. Sometimes I can't believe I'm still alive, having survived this horror. How could there be a hell after this?' she asks, but the question is not directed at me, she is looking at the sky.

'Tell me about Dylan,' I say impulsively, sensing that she needs to talk. 'Tell me what happened.'

And she does.

It had been an uneventful evening. She arrived home from work, they went to the local pub for tea, had a few drinks, then home.

They were awakened by a loud banging on the door. Switching on the light, Em saw it was around 1.00am. She knew instantly that something terrible had happened. Kevin got up first, then she unplaited her hair and went into the dining room to join him. A man she had never seen before and Phoebe stood there. Phoebe was weeping and she was dressed in her work clothes. Seeing that Phoebe was in no state to perform introductions, the man presented himself as Colin. 'I have the lease on the house, where Phoebe lives.'

Then he said, 'Dylan died tonight.'

Em knew she must have exclaimed, because he repeated it. 'Dylan died tonight.'

The room seemed to shift and spin; for a second she felt violently ill and thought she was going to throw up. In that same instant, her mind believed and accepted the chilling statement and she knew her life would never be the same again.

At the same moment, as the thoughts flashed through her mind, her voice asked, 'How?' suspecting a motorbike accident.

'Heroin overdose,' was the reply, and she heard herself gasp and say, 'I thought he was off it.'

From then on, she seemed to be watching what went on from some distance, a participant, but her reality had changed. She asked Phoebe for a cigarette, she asked where Dylan was and was told he was at the mortuary. They did not stay long; she was aware of going to Phoebe and hugging her and saying, 'I know how much you loved him.' Colin told her the police would come and inform them shortly, and then they left.

Afterwards, they took the bottle of brandy back to bed and she acquired a taste for brandy which would last for many months. They did not bother with glasses, there was almost a necessity to drink straight from the bottle. They held each other in a state of numbness, too shocked to cry or talk. Words weren't there to be said.

But something happened. Em stared up into the darkness, unseeing, her whole being shocked to its core in emotional turmoil, her thoughts of any moments beyond this in a state of pure chaos. And as she stared, she suddenly became aware of Dy's presence above her, calm and distant, saying, 'It's all right, Mum. I'm OK; I'm safe, I'm happy, I'm at peace.'

She could not comprehend this visitation, if that was what it was, but she knew she had not imagined it.

The police came and were nervous, fearing over-emotional reactions which she refused to indulge in. They were kind, but obviously relieved to go, having informed them that the CID would contact them tomorrow; she couldn't remember why.

Back in bed, she resolved that she must see his remains; she must say goodbye to him, and she would arrange to have a wake for him on the Sunday. She did not sleep, her soul mourned his loss as she thought over and over again of how she would never see him, never touch him, never talk with him again. It was too early to feel guilty, too early even to feel angry; her vision of him being already in another place had confused her emotions and set them on one side.

Lying there, her ears pounding, her heart beating fast, her stomach churning, Colin's words repeated like a mantra, 'Dylan died tonight, Dylan died tonight'.

Oh, Jesus, Dy, you put me through so much pain! She was reminded of many things on that night, his life seemed to flash before her. On his birthday, his last ever birthday now, she thought numbly, she had asked him round for a family dinner. She had cooked a special meal, roast beef which he loved, and a chocolate pudding for dessert. He did not come. An hour after the arranged time, he rang. 'Well, I'd like to come,' he slurred. 'But I'm too ripped.'

'Well, fuck off then,' she had snarled, slamming down the phone, but not before she heard him start to laugh.

The scene recreated itself in graphic detail. 'Come on,' she had said to Kevin, tearing off her apron, throwing the magnetised potholder against the fridge. 'We're going out.'

Even then as she had angrily surveyed the carefully laid table, the flickering candles, the gift-wrapped presents, the meal spoiling in the oven; this wasted celebration, she

had known she would ring him the next day. Since he had told her of his drug addiction, she had been fully aware that each time she saw him could be the last.

He had never been an easy child, she reflected in the darkness of the bedroom, turning over on to her side. There had always been problems at school; he hated the confines of authority. The private school had sent home an incredible letter regarding the fact that his socks were not pulled up. In the wake of extreme shock, her mind locked into minute details. She remembered phrases of it now. Through all of his childhood into adolescence, he had seduced her with his quicksilver quirky humour and an enchanting smile which was almost disturbing in its charisma.

Always, he sought out danger and excitement. He had loved motorbikes. She bit her lip, remembering the first time their friend, David, had given him a ride on his bike, which he had since sold. The crash helmet had been too big for his head, making him look younger and more vulnerable. He had gone off on the back of the bike, hair flying, eyes wild with excitement and anticipation, to a new experience, leaving her fearful and in some way, bereft.

At fifteen, his larger than life presence had taken over the house, disrupting it and the routines and purposes of its occupants. Once he had come across her in the kitchen, taking refuge in the wine cask, drinking down the red wine in gulps to recover from his latest onslaught of painting his room black. 'Well, go on,' he had said mockingly, noting her humiliation. 'Drink up.'

Gradually, morning came. Light filtered into the room from behind the heavy hessian curtains. She heard the magpies warbling in the park across the road, the rumble of trams in the next street, the sharp whistle of the train, and the gear changes of the cars accelerating past the house. Her eyes drifted around the familiar room in the half dark,

she stared through the bars of the brass bed to the slatted doors of the built-in robe, past the dressing table and came to rest on the chest of drawers. There was a photo of Dylan up there, she couldn't see it in the dark, but it was there. It would always be there, but she would not see him. A helpless wave of despair engulfed her, she wondered if she had enough strength to get out of bed to get a cigarette. The thought of leaving the bed brought the challenges of the day. She would have to ring people. God, how was she going to tell her father? He adored this grandchild, his first grandson, which would make it all so much worse.

She picked up the brandy bottle and took another mouthful, feeling it burn her throat and calm her brain. And then she got up to call her brother.

The next day had passed in a blur of phone calls and faces. Em rang her agency to tell them she would not be in for work that day and why. Kevin rang Dylan's employer to tell him he would not be in for work, ever again. Later, she found notes which read *'Call J. O'something at CID. ? Snr Det??'*, *'City Morgue, Monday 10th'*, *'Police - Snr Constable Blakeley'*. Her questions for him. *'How much? Bad cut or too much?'*, *'Funeral 11am'*. There was a list of people to ring; there were the scribbled messages they composed together for the death notices to go in Saturday's papers. And the funeral. *'A graveside service will be held at the Arthurs Creek cemetery at 11am...'*

And there was another scrap of paper, set in a mandala, the lines of which had been gone over and over again with a pen. *'Love is all you need'*, she had written in the centre. She did not know where this thought had come from, it must have been inspired by the Sgt. Pepper's album Dy had borrowed a few weeks' ago. The Beatles again. She'd been just seventeen when *that* song came out - 'I Saw Her Standing There' - and she remembered hearing this one, its title printed too carefully now on a serviette, on

the radio when Dy was born. And now, she would be haunted by the memories created by 'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band'.

The really shocking thing was, she'd seen him only two nights ago and he'd seemed really together.

Her brother was down from the country and had been invited for dinner. Now, she couldn't even remember what she'd cooked. Shortly before they were due to eat, Peter had arrived and as she watched him come down the passage, she saw another figure behind him in silhouette against the setting sun, a tall figure loping along in easy strides. Her heart beat suddenly faster, anxiety took over. What did he want this time? Money? Was he in trouble? What new disaster would he recount, this child of hers, almost a man, who had allowed no ways of the world to disturb his quest for self-gratification?

She was relieved to see him smiling, a genuine smile of pleasure. 'Just got back from a job in Sydney,' he told her, gripping her shoulders in his familiar way, rough skin against her cheek.

'How was it?' she asked, warily.

'Really good,' he answered, grabbing a handful of potato chips. 'Probably going back there in a couple of weeks for another job. A biggie.'

'Good. Want to stay for tea?'

'Yeah, that'd be great, Mum.'

She was tentative, nervous around him, this child of hers who seemed part of her, yet not part of her at all. As a small baby, he had pushed her away when she held him too close. 'Winter babies are so cuddly', Sue had said when he was born. But it hadn't been the case with Dy.

She poured him a beer. 'Just half,' he said, grinning. 'Big night last night.'

She drank her wine quickly in the kitchen, then poured another to take to the table. He had brought back an album he borrowed, the Beatles' 'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band'. Em was delighted; her present for Dylan, purchased three week's earlier when he was expected for his birthday dinner, was a new book, *It Was Twenty Years Ago Today*, documenting the album's release. Inside, she had written, 'To dear Dy, With all the love of 20 years ago today'. There was a windcheater, too, navy blue. On his last visit, the one he had been wearing was torn and dirty.

After dinner, she sneaked a Camel from his packet as he smoked outside, lounging against the fish ferns which poked through the railway sleepers of the terraced back yard. He seemed optimistic; perhaps this was the change in attitude she had waited for. Graceful, lithe, he threw mock karate punches and kicks into the air and made a fuss of the cat.

'Really like to get a dog,' he said, looking down at the Siamese as it rubbed around his ankles.

'I'll buy you a dog,' she said, ever eager to please.

'Nah, I'd have to buy it. Like to get a house, too.'

It was then that Em broached the subject of heroin. 'Haven't had any for a while. I'm trying to get off it.'

She gulped more wine, grabbed another Camel and said in a rush of emotion, 'Oh, I just want to see you happy and settled in some way. I've been so worried about you.'

Her words were too loud, too fast. He shrugged this off and dipped and bowed in Tai Chi emulation. 'If you want to smoke,' he said. 'You shouldn't be hiding it out here. You should do it up front.'

She muttered something about Kevin not liking it, and then became aware of her empty glass and the cold August night air.

'Well,' he said, restless as ever. 'Must be off.'

She offered to buy him some new jeans for his birthday. He tore off a piece of the cigarette packet, now empty, and wrote the size on it. 'Lee,' he said. 'Not Levi's.'

Suspicious on his arrival at the lack of alcohol consumption, knowing it didn't mix with heroin, she initially thought he was off to score, but now, reassured and seduced by his 'trying to get off it' responses, she experienced only relief.

She walked with him to the front door, filled with love and tenderness, putting aside her doubts, her fear, her anger. He's going to be all right, she thought, surprised at this change of heart. He was clean, on this day, in more ways than one.

At the front step, she hugged him and kissed him goodbye in the darkness of the garden. Once more, his fingers dug gently into her shoulders, something he had done for years. She felt his restlessness, his need to be gone. To her, he had always seemed an enigma, he would never allow himself to be possessed, aside from his own demons. Disturbingly attractive, he drew people to him through the inherent danger of his self-destructive disposition.

As he turned to go, she said, 'I love you, Dy,' and he responded, 'I love you too, Mum.'

And that was the last time she saw him.

I listen in silence as she sits next to me, weeping softly, taking her hand and stroking it. Never having had a child, I cannot comprehend her loss with the same intensity; however, the enormous tragedy of the situation has been abundantly brought home to

me. Moments later she gets up to look out of the window, attracted by noise. Someone has ridden in on a motorcycle, a courier, perhaps.

'Dylan loved motorbikes,' reflects Em, staring at the figure as he dismounts. 'He had a trail bike when he was thirteen. Once he took me for a ride, I've never been so bloody terrified in all my life. We'd go and stay at my father's place for weekends and he loved riding round the property. He knew so much about the place too. Always picking up lizards, things like that, even when he was quite young.' Her voice quivers. 'I remember how it felt.'

She is silent for a moment. 'I remember the sensation of my arms around this slender body - wondering what it would be like to die. Holding on to him, this child's body, borne from mine. He felt so close to me and yet so far away, it's difficult to explain. He took me on a tour. "See that hole", he said. "Well, we'll get back here on that other track. And now I'll take you down to the plum trees and while you feast, I can look at the bike. Look at that front wheel, isn't it beautiful?". He was a total romantic,' she sighs, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, refusing my proffered tissue. 'No wonder he found life difficult. I guess drugs provided the ultimate romance for him.'

nineteen

Phoebe is arguing with her lecturers, a part of her course she enjoys. Watching others being intimidated and humiliated at 'crits', the monthly critical assessments where the lecturers publicly acclaim or denounce submitted work from their students, is an interesting study of social behaviour, she has decided. Confident and self-possessed, she finds these sessions amusing in that everyone takes themselves so seriously. Now, as she describes her latest project, an audio-visual concept which will involve Dy's death as its theme, she is in her element, passionately putting her own ideas forward and unwilling to listen to any objections.

She has sketches, photographs, roughs of paintings and a sample of her presentation in miniature. There are cassette tapes too. She has already decided on the music. The album is called 'Substance 1987'. Should be called 'Substance Abuse', thinks Phoebe, though it's fitting enough as is, as she plays a portion of it for the lecturers to listen to.

'I want to provide an almost voyeuristic atmosphere which will have a social message as well as being a conceptual piece,' she says as they query certain aspects of her notes.

Finally, they agree to her project, having stated that there are certain things she shouldn't involve, since it would appear too chillingly authentic. For she had wanted to have a simulated body, dressed in Dylan's clothes. 'To add realism,' she says.

'It's real enough,' they say, uncomfortable with this statement of the grim realities of existence, and move on to the next student.

As the next work is surveyed, Phoebe thinks about the project, looking at her notes. One of the photographs is of Dylan's former bedroom, when he lived at home with Em and Kevin, now called the spare room. It looks very different from the last time she was in there, how long ago was it now, must be two months. And as the student struggles to

explain her latest painting, Phoebe remembers the bed on that hot January afternoon and Em's kindness for which she will feel forever indebted.

twenty

On the last morning the counsellor suggests a discussion on social justice. Em can almost see the women bristle at this, she has heard enough stories of social injustice to last a lifetime in the time she has been here. When it is her turn, she begins, 'My experience was with the police...' and suddenly, to her surprise, she is weeping uncontrollably. Everyone waits for her to recover and then she tells the story.

The interview room was plain and small with a desk and two chairs being the only furniture. Windows looked from it into the larger room with its multiple desks and telephones. No-one else was about. Despite the light airy interior of the building, the atmosphere was dark, claustrophobic. Em had never been in such a room before, and she did not want to be in such a room again.

The police officer cleared his throat. He was young, newly promoted to senior detective, and enthusiastic. Not yet hardened to what life in the CID had to offer, his voice, when he spoke, conveyed a certain reluctance.

'Do you think that the fact that he was asked to leave home was a contributing factor to his death?' he asked carefully.

Jesus, thought Em. A sense of outrage filled her and mixed with her pain. She took a deep breath and said slowly, 'I believe that we are all responsible for ourselves. His behaviour had become unacceptable at home. We had said no drugs, and he ignored the warnings. He chose his own way.'

The detective stared again at his notes.

'How long had he been using heroin?'

'He rang and told me in May. Four years, he said.' And for Christ's sake, don't say something smart like 'You must have suspected something', because I fucking well didn't, thought Em, watching him writing.

She remembered the phone call clearly.

'Mum, I think I'm in trouble,' but his voice had not been serious.

'Oh,' she had said, half joking, half anxious, 'Sex, drugs or rock and roll?' What had prompted *that*, she had thought later.

'The middle one.'

And he had told her. Shock and disbelief had filled her and she had got into her car and driven herself to the local pub where she had tried to absorb this news with its terminal connotations, overwhelmed with a dreadful sense of foreboding. The pub had been playing Nat King Cole selections. She would never be able to listen to Nat King Cole again without being reminded of that night. I guess I knew then, she thought miserably, wondering if she was allowed to smoke in the interview room.

Dope, that's all I thought it was. Dope and a few pills. And the confrontations had been terrible. Dy had become more defensive, more brazen about his using, more verbally abusive. It seemed almost as if he was backing himself deliberately into a corner so he would be asked to leave.

It had been just before Christmas when he had taken his departure the previous year. She remembered now standing on the side of the road, watching the bike get smaller, until it reached the corner and turned, consumed with shame, anger and guilt, faced with the bleak and agonising prospect of life without him until further notice. It was easy now to look back and remember the flaking skin around his mouth, the nervous scratching, the time he had rushed in from work and thrown up, the mysterious attacks

of what seemed like the flu which he refused to see a doctor for, the constant irritability. Yes, thought Em, watching the detective write. It was easy to look back now and say, I saw it all. The only problem was, I didn't know what I was looking at.

'He said he was an occasional user,' she said in way of some sort of explanation.

'There's no such thing as an occasional user,' replied the detective.

He stood then, signalling that the discussion was at an end. Em signed the statement and the detective left the room briefly and returned with a plastic bag and an envelope. The plastic bag was stapled. On it was written,

DECEASED

GREER, DYLAN

DRUG OVERDOSE

Through the plastic, she could see Dy's handwriting. Water had blurred the ink slightly, but it was readable.

I went to where I used to be but someone has been there after me. Knowing this I went to see some friends, old friends. As I approached I began to feel drained. Many were dead and some missing. Tools of death still littered the battleground. The further I went the worse it got, all the time an extremely pathetic, helpless recuperation effort was being performed by the undermined. Then above the screams, I was invited to a very special friend's domain. As I entered I realised the holocaust had not reached this far yet. I was treated with caution, however, I don't believe they feared me, just a lack of trust that used to be so strong, there was no love. I went on a little further and was spellbound to find everything as before. I stayed for some time, but I could not proceed. In a sensation, I was told that only those who died there could ever be allowed to live there, even if only for a few seconds.

She stared at it for a long moment, heart racing, realising that there was a connection between what she had experienced of Dylan the night he died, his peace, she concluded. And was suddenly made aware of how desperate he had become. I can't cry, yet, she thought. I have to put this off for a bit. And I'm certainly not going to start weeping in front of *you*, she resolved, looking up and seeing the detective watching her for a reaction.

'There's also this,' he told her, handing her an envelope. 'The money was in his pocket and these are his earrings.'

Oh God! One ten cent piece, she thought in horror. That's all he had left, all the rest of his pay went on the deal. Was it deliberate suicide or a search for the place he looked for when he was high? She would have to wait six months to find out. There would be an inquest which was a standard procedure with drug overdose cases. She and Kevin said a formal farewell and walked towards the doorway.

Looking up, Em saw that the upper shelves of the cabinets were filled with bongs of various shapes and sizes. It seemed a macabre testimony to what she had just witnessed, the trappings of the addict on display.

She went through his possessions when they arrived back home.

The plastic bag also contained his passport, an address book and a bankbook with a balance of ten dollars and six cents.

There was a letter from Phoebe,

Hi Dy,

This is your long lost cousin Phoebe, wondering where you are and if maybe you might care to pop in one of these days to visit, seeing it's your house!!

(Only joking). Hope you had a good weekend and hope to see you sometime before I die (of old age).

Love,

Phoebe.

There were empty pay envelopes, neatly folded credit card slips, a letter regarding a traffic infringement, a letter from Em's father with a cheque for his birthday, a driver's licence renewal form. There was his wallet containing a copy of his last exam results, a video card, credit cards, a Medicare card. She found her own card, too, an agency name crossed out on the front. She had written phone numbers on the back, all to do with drug and alcohol assistance. There was her birthday card.

Dear Dy,

Wishing you a very happy 20th birthday and a happy and successful bridge to 21.

Fondest love, Mum and Dad.

She had no idea then that the bridge would be the departure from life, that he would never reach twenty-one.

The women listen to her story in silence. Some have clearly been visibly affected, wiping their eyes and blowing their noses. Em feels emotionally drained, having finally put into words the story which until now, has never been released from her mind. She is beginning to see that in communicating her feelings, both oral and written, she is helping to solve her problems. The night before, she had impulsively scrawled a paragraph to try and express her innermost thoughts; an exercise they had been given as part of their study. After the group has left the room, she pulls her notebook out and reads the words aloud to herself.

For months afterwards, it's hard to look at kids with long hair in flannel shirts and jeans. Occasionally she sees someone who looks like Dy and her heart stops for a second and her throat constricts with pain. Sometimes, she could feel him behind her, the raspy roughness of his face in late adolescence, the knotted ropy veins threading his arms, the chapped and peeling blunt square hands, and the soft texture of worn denim. She could feel the pressure of his hands on her shoulders and the muffled tones of his voice saying, 'Mum.' At such moments, she would bite the insides of her cheeks hard to stop the emotion which rose within, this great torrential flood of love and loss which filled her chest and which she knew she would carry with her to the end of her days.

twenty-one

In the middle of March, the weather is still hot when Em returns home from the rehabilitation centre. She drives down to Camberwell Junction to shop, the pantry and fridge being sadly in need of restocking. This has been hard on Kevin, he looks thin and tired. She must try to make it up to him.

The VW is old, the exhaust emits terminal sounds. The elderly driver in front of her pulls over to let her pass, his face creased with anxiety. Mar has a new car, a Ford, she thinks. She can't remember the model, they all have silly names now, intimating at altered states when you get into them.

Altered states, she thinks.

That morning, she stood in front of the bathroom mirror and looked into her eyes, reciting self-consciously, 'My name's Em and I'm an alcoholic, and I make a commitment not to drink today.'

She still struggles with the word 'alcoholic'. It sticks in her mouth, tangling round her tongue, clumsily emerging in stuttered syllables. 'Part of acceptance,' the counsellor had said.

Her face stared back at her, her expression she noted was nervous, indecisive. Uncomfortable now, her eyes slid from her reflection around the bathroom over familiar objects, the spa bath with its bottles of shampoo and conditioner cluttered on the side, the towel rack with towels slung on it in varying degrees of dampness, a medicine cabinet Dylan made while he was at Swinburne. The stained glass front was dirty, dust gathering in the uneven surface of the glass and the contours of the lead. She recalled his frustration at putting it together. 'Crappy bits don't match up.'

Em turned back to her reflection. Ah well, she said to herself, relieved at being able to shift her train of thought with the recently acquired knowledge that she could glance at the past but not stare at it, that's why I'm looking in the mirror. As she stared at her reflection, she recollected what the term 'altered state' had connoted after Dylan died, in that dreadful period between August and December.

The sensations of an altered state became preferable to the realities of everyday life. Walking round, stoned or drunk, headphones filling her ears with the music she and Dy both loved, of soaring, shrieking electric guitars, she felt close to him. It was a liaison she was reluctant to break and it obsessed her. At home, she wore his clothes; raggy work shirts with torn seams, jumpers smelly with sweat and gaping holes, jeans stained with grease and slashed across the knees. She cut her waist-length hair; it was cropped short at the back, with long, ragged strands falling into her eyes, hiding her face, swearing never to grow it again. She moved into a dangerous half-world where others could not reach her. She romanticised his death, she became fascinated with heroin and its effects, but only as an observer. The realities of sticking needles into her arm, to be reduced to a state of semi-consciousness ruled by visions, did not appeal. It was too graphic, too masochistic. Besides, she liked to have some idea of where her altered state would take her and at what cost. Drinking was easy; what was more, it was legal. Vodka presented the ideal alternative, it was effective and affordable. Plus, it could be hidden, poured into orange juice, or even water. She proceeded to top herself up through the long days.

Well, at least I have no inclination to return to *that* altered state. Em sighed her relief and closed the bathroom door on her musings.

On the way home from the Junction, the car breaks down. Fuel blockage, the RACV man informs her. Well, she hasn't done much driving over the last six weeks, has she? She is annoyed, she has missed a dental appointment. Her tooth hurts.

Anger obliterates the sunny day, her purpose in it. 'You must learn to deal with your feelings,' they said. 'More importantly, you must learn to own your feelings.'

She does not want to own her feelings, particularly at this moment. 'It's all right for you,' she wants to cry, the alcoholic's cry of self-pity, of reluctance to take responsibility.

'Look at the feeling or emotion. Deal with it immediately, then put it behind you. In half an hour, half a day, it won't be relevant in the same context as you originally saw it.'

Sounds simple, she thinks, till you feel that wave of anger exploding from somewhere under your ribs, damaging your body and your mind with its intensity.

The RACV man slams down the bonnet, rubbing his hands on a rag. 'I'd get a fuel filter fitted if I were you - these old Beetles always have trouble with rusty tanks - and you sound like you need a new muffler.'

She goes to have coffee then, sitting in the sun, diverting herself with a *Vogue* magazine after she has phoned the dentist and explained what has happened. He has a cancellation for the next day. She is amazed. This stuff actually works, she thinks.

twenty-two

Shortly after leaving the rehabilitation centre, Em comes to visit me one day in my flat in St Kilda towards the end of March.

‘It’s so tidy,’ she says, impressed, looking around at my well, but sparsely furnished rooms.

‘And this is Doodle,’ I say, as my dog sniffs Em cautiously.

‘Doodle the Doberman!’ shrieks Em. ‘Oh, Mar, I wouldn’t have thought you’d have chosen such a frivolous name for such a dignified dog.’

‘Well, she wasn’t very dignified when she was a puppy,’ I tell her. ‘Most bitches are really easy to train, but she was terrible. She kept leaving these dribbles everywhere, hence the name. And I suppose it has artistic connotations, too.’

‘Where do you paint?’ asks Em, noting the landscapes on my walls, but no artistic paraphernalia, for my flat constitutes a small two-bedroom unit and contains only the bare essentials. My studio is set up in the spare bedroom and she admires the examples of work in my folio accumulated over the years, including designs for corporate logos and dust jackets for books.

‘I rent a garage around the corner,’ I tell her as we sit down facing the window with its view of the sea. ‘There are skylights built into the roof so it has good light for painting, and I enjoy being in a different environment from this one.’

As we talk, I make brewed coffee and serve a rich continental cake, purchased that morning from Acland Street.

‘What a wonderful view,’ says Em, gazing out at the flat calm of Port Phillip Bay, silvery grey in the afternoon light, under the cloudy sky.

'I've always loved the sea,' I say, pouring coffee and slicing the cake. 'We lived in Sandringham, where my parents still live, when I was young and I spent a lot of time at the beach. So Em, how are you feeling now you're home?'

'A bit rough around the edges. I feel really nervous a lot of the time. Nervous and scared. I had a terrible experience last week when my car broke down on the corner of Swan Street and Church Street. Peak hour traffic and it was raining. There's a pub on the corner and I went in to make a phone call to the RACV. I really wanted a drink, but something strange happened in the pub. As I looked towards the bar, I saw a guy, a real drinker, and I looked at his face and I thought, that could happen to me. So I made my call, bought a glass of lemonade and then went back to wait for the RACV.'

'Great,' I say, impressed, eating my cake. 'Do things seem different to you now, I mean, would you say you've changed?'

'Well, I don't want to go back to the person I was.'

She hesitates, drinking her coffee and refusing a second slice of cake. 'I guess there were some really good times where it wasn't a problem, but they seemed to become less frequent. And there were some really embarrassing moments, too. For instance, we would walk past a pub and I'd say, "I'd really like to go there one night", and Kevin would say, "Don't you remember, we went there last week?". I'd feel like a proper fool then and be frantically trying to save face by saying things like, "Of course we did. I was getting it mixed up with that other pub".'

I laugh at this, her self-deprecation is not self-pitying; rather it is an observation, honest and appreciative.

'I suppose what I'm discovering is that it's wonderful to live without drama,' she says slowly. 'I use to create drama all the time. If there wasn't enough happening, I'd bloody

well make it happen. I'd set up situations which would cause disruption and then enjoy the pain of being responsible. What a way to live! I'm learning to get enormous pleasure out of small occurrences. I'm also learning that things don't have to be happening all the time. If I'm running too fast, I have to stop for a bit and allow my soul to catch up. I could never figure out why normal people,' she makes imaginary quotation signs with her fingers and grins, 'could get pleasure out of quite simple things, like going to see a film. The first time we went to see a movie in sobriety, it was absolutely fabulous. Everything looked totally different and I felt like a kid again at the Saturday afternoon matinee. And it was so nice to actually stay awake for the duration; I would often miss entire movies because of the amount of wine I had consumed at dinner!'

At the door, she kisses me goodbye. 'It's good to see you, Mar. You were one of the major factors in keeping me going in the rehab. You'll never know how much you helped. Thanks for being there for me.'

And she smiles and starts off down the stairs.

twenty-three

At the end of March, my father died suddenly. A great river of love and loss flows through me and seems trapped within. Death, like birth, changes perception and one encounters another dimension which cannot be communicated to those who have not experienced it. I gain some insight into what Em has gone through.

I had been very close to my father. In his mid-forties when I was born, he lavished love on me, not an indulgent love, but an abundant and selfless nurturing, furnished with patience and understanding. He would read to me every night, he would allow me to help him in his workshop, he even taught me to cook sponge cakes. 'Your father always made better sponges than I could,' my mother told me, amused at this particular talent of her husband's. He taught me to be independent, yet cautious; to be honest with myself and forthright in my opinions, yet not at the expense of others' discomfort. He taught me how to give and equally, how to receive. He gave me so much of himself, yet he encouraged me to see myself as unique. And now he was gone. I felt an overwhelming sense of loss for this kind and compassionate man who had been my mentor and my friend as well as my father.

The funeral was on the Tuesday of Holy Week. Rosary had been recited the night before, and this in some form softened the way for the funeral which was to take place the next morning in the same church. Since it was Holy Week, the statues in this particular church had been veiled in purple, which added to the sombre mood of those present. There were no flowers. As the 'Hail Marys' were chanted, I looked up at the contours of the crucifix hidden beneath its mantle of violet. I felt as if God had turned his face away, as if I, too, were hidden in my grief, shrouded in my sorrow.

The morning of the funeral dawned cold and wet. My mother lit a candle in front of a photograph of my father she had placed in front of the statue of the Virgin on the mantelpiece and we recited the *Salve Regina* together. Then we left for the church to attend the requiem mass.

My parents had never relinquished their Latin heritage, for them the traditional Catholicism with which they had been raised was the only way. I was more comfortable these days with the intimacy and informality of the modern mass, but watching the solemn, formal ceremony, I see that this is a fitting tribute to my father in the dignified and stately grandeur of time-honoured ritual.

Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine: et lux perpetua luceat eis. 'Eternal rest grant to them, Lord and let eternal light shine upon them.'

Light seemed to emanate from my father during life; I am sure it shines on him now in death. I watch the priest at the bier, sprinkling it with holy water and incensing it. *Domine, exaudi orationem meam*, he says. 'O Lord, hear my prayer'. *Et clamor meus ad te veniat*, I reply with the others in unison, surprised at this upsurge of memory from the depths of my grief-stricken mind. 'And let my cry come unto you,' I murmur, feeling my tears on my cheeks. Grant me consolation in my suffering, acceptance in my deprivation.

And we stand, I helping my mother to her feet since she seems on the verge of collapse. Together, we watch my father's mortal remains being carried out of church into the drizzling rain.

My mother goes to pieces in front of my eyes after the funeral. I have always been slightly in awe of my mother; to me she has always been a strong capable soul, taking

life calmly in her stride, involved with a dozen committees and a host of voluntary jobs from Meals on Wheels to arranging the flowers in the church. Now, I watch her weep as I have never seen her weep before. She is inconsolable. Even her friends from the church, who have always been able to assist her with problems in the past, cannot stem this river of tears. Despite her grief, she insists on observing the rituals of Easter. We attend Tenabrae on Maundy Thursday. I watch the altar being stripped. *Deus, Deus meus, respice in me; quare me dereliquisti?* 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

I pray for my mother, stripped as she is now of the security of marriage, abandoned without warning into widowhood.

On Good Friday, we celebrate the Lord's Passion. At the Veneration of the Cross, I listen to the words, *Venite adoramus*, 'Come, let us adore'. So different from Christmas, I reflect. Then we sang in joy, now we murmur in sorrow.

My mother's tears seem tempered by ritual, she derives comfort from this greater, shared grief. The mortality of earth linked to the immortality of heaven.

Despite her increasing exhaustion, she insists on attending the long and intense ceremony of the Easter Vigil, preceding Midnight Mass. Watching the Paschal candle cut with its symbols, the cross, the Alpha and Omega and the date of the year, I feel my own pain cut across my soul like a knife. May this new year, born of the sorrow of this Easter, bring balm to my soul, I pray. My mother squeezes my hand in the darkness as she lights her candle from mine. *Lumen Christi gloriose resurgentis. Dissipet tenebras cordis et mentis.* 'May the light of Christ in glory rise again. Dispel the darkness of heart and mind.'

I breathe in the heavy fragrance of the incense which I have always loved. The smell evokes my childhood and the shared family experience of attending mass. I remember the opening words, *Introibo ad altare Dei. Ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam.* 'I will go to the altar of God. Who gives joy to my youth.'

My father had made my youth joyful with his time and his love. As I sit through the long Vigil into the Easter mass, I try to feel some gratitude for what I have received over the years through the heritage of my fulsome childhood.

The singing of the Kyrie, the unveiling of the statues and the ringing of the bells seem to symbolically represent the end of my father's burial in terms of formality. My grief has not been alleviated, but I experience a sense of finality in terms of his mortal remains being laid to rest.

Three of my mother's friends, all widowed, arrive with casseroles for our lunch. Normally, there would be a veritable feast at Easter with roast duck, cranberry sauce and a large assortment of accompanying vegetables, followed by pavlova for dessert: a true celebration of feasting after the frugal meals of Lent. This year, Lent lives on my mother's heart. She has little interest in eating, let alone cooking.

In contrast, I am ravenous, I eat and eat. I find I cannot stop eating. I have not weighed myself for years, only grudgingly doing so when ordered by doctors. I do not need to weigh myself to appreciate my increasing girth. I cannot fit into my suit, reserved for business meetings, for an appointment with a client. I am appalled, but I lack the energy and commitment to worry about it, cushioned as I am in my grief. And I continue to eat. Food is my comforter, my solace, my consolation, my lover, my friend. And I consume to satisfy my craving, to fill the empty space in my life.

Shortly after my father's death, I go to Port Douglas with my mother. This is her idea, I am an unwilling traveller. My personality seems to have become submerged in this humid unfamiliar climate. I feel languid, I cannot think systematically, I have no energy. Melbourne, with its sharp delineation of seasons, has always been an ideal climate for me, its colder aspect keeping my creative edges honed, a non-judgmental and comfortable location for my overweight condition. For I am conscious of my weight, the heaviness of my form, as never before in this unmerciful heat. My armpits and my inner thighs are constantly and continuously damp, and so is the chaffed skin beneath my breasts and belly. My obese appearance, which I have lived with for so long, becomes a source of irritation to me. Fat surrounds my body, sludge surrounds my mind. I tell myself I'm tired, I am run down and I need to rest.

In the local cake shop, I watch two girls deciding which cakes to buy. They spend a long time choosing an array of danishes and eclairs, custard tarts and vanilla slices, sticky buns and chocolate hedgehog. I am gratified to see they are larger than I am, but dismayed that I share their emotions.

As we travel around Port Douglas with my mother's friends, seeing the tourist attractions, my problems with the climate are overtaken by my fascination with the landscape. Never having travelled north of Brisbane, I find the landscape of the far north quite awe-inspiring. Enthusiastically, I look for artists' renditions of the surrounding countryside and I am dismayed to see it condensed so often in reproduction into areas of bright flat colour, many of which look like exercises in graphic design and would look happier on a teatowel than hanging on a wall. The grandeur, the scale and mystery of the scenery would translate wonderfully into majestic land and seascapes; there is a wild vastness here which I have not encountered

in my native Victoria, and it excites and inspires me. I take photographs, make sketches and make plans for a series of paintings. Through the landscape I feel myself spiritually uplifted and I am grateful for the experience. I have indeed lifted my eyes to the mountains and found a strength which fills me, gives me hope, brings comfort in my sorrow.

Though my spirituality has undergone a transformation, my physical self has not. My mother has rallied a little up here, she involves herself in small acts of domesticity, she enjoys the outings for meals and observing the local attractions. My eating is still out of control. Charitably, she says nothing.

On the last morning of our visit, I drive up to the lookout and stare down over Five Mile Beach and the surrounding landscape, still shrouded in mist. The Latin slips into my mind, unbidden, *Domine, dilexi decorum domus tuae, et locum habitationis gloriae tuae*. 'Lord, I have loved the beauty of your house, and the place where your glory dwells'. My Lourdes, I think at the end of the fortnight. I feel healed, regenerated.

twenty-four

Em is aware that since she left the hospital she is watching herself, observing her actions and behaviour. It irritates her, but she cannot seem to do anything about it.

‘It’s as if I’m watching someone else,’ she complains to Kevin as they prepare to go for a bike ride one Saturday. ‘As if I’m studying someone I never really knew.’

Since she arrived back home, Em is doing one meeting a week. ‘I guess it’s a bit like going to mass,’ she tells Kevin. ‘Being me, I’m trying to get by on the minimum.’

She has realised certain tell-tale aspects of her body language which reflect her discomfort; an inability to look people in the eye, her hands always up around her mouth when she’s having conversations, her jaw clenched tightly most of the time, and a permanently anxious expression on her face when she catches sight of herself in a mirror.

‘I can’t concentrate and I have trouble remembering what people have said to me straight after they’ve said it. Maybe I’ve got brain damage,’ she says gloomily as she pulls the salad drawer open in the fridge to make the rolls for their lunch.

‘I’m sure this all takes a lot of getting used to,’ says Kevin soothingly as he butters the rolls, while she slices up tomatoes and cucumber.

‘People keep asking me how my mood swings are going. I didn’t even know I had any,’ sighs Em wearily, in way of reply.

Kevin reflects on this later as they ride along the Yarra on the bike track to the city.

Em certainly seems different, but he feels uneasy with this person; the predictability of the drinker has been replaced by the unpredictability of the non-drinker. She seems tense and anxious most of the time and is more critical of him than usual. He has no

idea where this will lead, but feels apprehensive about the future. She will talk to him about the difficulties created for others through the alcoholic's core problem of self-centredness, and then demonstrate quite graphically her own capacity for selfishness in ways that seem much more extreme than before. She has always drunk to excess, he thinks as they dismount to find a place on the grass under the trees to eat their lunch, but he has become used to the arguments which follow after she has had too much to drink.

Now he finds himself in a world of uncertainty. She will oscillate between depression and self-pity and then a calm and positive attitude will take over for a while. And there's something else, something he can't put his finger on. The first time she comes home from a meeting, she seems lit by an inner glow, he has not seen this before. It is transitory, but encouraging.

And there have been changes in the house, he thinks, pouring out mineral water while she spreads a rug out under the trees to sit on. Since she came home, he has not encountered the maudlin depression produced by the music she would play to think of Dylan. In fact, she hasn't really played much of any music lately. She has a ritual now of eating her dinner with him and going to bed to read almost immediately after. 'I feel safe in bed, even though there's no wine cask in the fridge. Night was always the worst time for drinking and this is the only way I can cope.'

Now, she breaks into his thinking. 'Oh, that was just wonderful,' she says, her eyes shining. 'I feel as if I'm a kid again. I can't believe I feel so different!'

And looking at her, busily placing food on plates with serviettes, Kevin thinks, yes this is worth it, these are the good times.

twenty-five

Once home, I throw myself back into work and in my spare time, I begin to paint the country which has had so much impact on me. I spread out my photographs and drawings, looking at the green expanse of the cane fields, the mountains shrouded in mist, the ocean tipped with sunlight during a storm, the wide expanse of beach fringed by palm trees, the variety of seacraft in the marina, and I feel excited as I begin to plan my paintings. I have decided to start with small landscapes, which perhaps can be used as a basis for cards at a later date.

My mother is not coping well at this stage and there are tearful phone calls from her on most days. She insists on staying on in the large house in Sandringham and I visit her two or three times a week, returning exhausted from the conversations where my father's life is described in minute detail.

My sorrow finds its release in creativity. Through the medium of painting, I can recall the tranquillity and healing experienced in Port Douglas and it translates itself into landscapes which, until now, I had not thought myself capable of executing. Inspired by the finished works which emerge, I am mindful of a new confidence emerging which I had not been aware I was even lacking.

Doodle watches anxiously as I unpack; sitting up straight she stares fixedly as I bend over the suitcase. When I zip it up, empty, she rushes over, licking my hand. 'Oh, my poor baby, did you think I was going away again?'

Her stumpy tail wags happily. She is thinner after her stay in the kennels. I am aware that I overfeed her as I overfeed myself.

twenty-six

Em is having a 'life's-a-bitch-then-you-die' day. It started well enough, they sit in companionable silence eating a leisurely Saturday breakfast in front of the television. A children's show comes on. 'Why do they have girls with big tits to host children's shows?' she asks Kevin.

Then the phone rings, shattering their day. A friend had made vague plans to be picked up from the airport a month or so ago; now she rings from a Sydney transit lounge saying she is due in two hours at Tullamarine. Em thinks, she'll be blitzed and she'll want to do lunch. Once she would have been right up there with her, stealing cutlery and crockery off the plane as souvenirs and dying to kick on the minute she disembarked.

Now, a knot of fear, verging on paranoia, permeates her intestines, making her heart beat faster and creasing her face with anxiety. It's worse than that, she can feel tears forming in her eyes. 'I can't go,' she implores Kevin. 'I can't.'

Unsympathetic, impatient, he snaps at her. 'We made a commitment. We *said* we'd pick her up.'

She starts slamming dishes into the dishwasher, mounting panic growing inside her. Already, she feels Georgina's demanding, manipulative presence, 'Come *on*, we'll just have a couple of drinks in the bar, then go. Oh, I had such a great time. It was so-o-o good!'

Yeah, thinks Em. Bangkok. Don't want to know what went up your nose to make it such a good time.

Kevin tries to be understanding. 'This is all in your mind, Em. You're projecting.'

She hates it when he makes use of her own recently acquired knowledge of her problem. It makes her feel helpless and inadequate. Eventually he leaves without her, muttering a brief farewell, leaving her with a mixture of guilt and relief.

Depression casts a cloud over her mind and the brightness of the day is dimmed. Oh God, she thinks, is this the rest of my life, this terrible panic at every confrontation, every new circumstance that arises? Now if I was someone else, she thinks, I wouldn't worry. I would say, sorry, I've made plans for today, you should have let us know earlier. Get a cab. Why can't I think like that, why, she rages at herself.

twenty-seven

Breathless, Em arrives at the station to find the 8.27 has been cancelled.

The next train is late. On the platform, the increasing number of passengers shuffle and sigh with impatience. Across the line, men repair the old station to the accompaniment of an amplified radio. The 8.30 news contains a fascinating snippet concerning the changing shape of a Royal nose which she can only catch fragments of because of the drilling of the workmen.

It is Em's first day back at work after leaving the rehabilitation centre. She feels strange, as if she has come out without her clothes on. She had no idea how much of a prop alcohol was and more dramatically, she had no idea how much she depended on it.

The train comes and she thankfully takes a seat. At least she won't be late for her assignment. She had told her agency that Kevin had been offered an unexpected overseas trip and she had decided to go with him. Overseas, she thinks, looking down into the brown water as the train crosses the Yarra. Might as well have been on another planet. I suppose I had visualised a situation where my drinking problems would be solved without me having to do anything about it, ponders Em. Now I realise I have to deal with the problems of my personality which precipitated my drinking in the first place.

'It's like having to do a 360° on yourself,' she had told Kevin. 'You have to start looking at everything differently, how your mind works, what you think, how you think. I realise I don't have to be bloody perfect all the time, and I shouldn't expect others to be either.'

I do feel better, she muses, looking at an innovative piece of graffiti at Burnley which reads *'Real punks can't spell capacino'*. I feel very vulnerable a lot of the time, but I like myself better.

The train arrives at Parliament and she jostles with the other passengers to get through the ticket barriers. There's a band playing '76 Trombones' at the station entrance. The noise is deafening. Too much at ten to nine in the morning, thinks Em.

At least one thing I've realised is that drinking doesn't solve anything, she reflects, walking down Collins Street, grabbing at her skirt as the autumn wind catches the pleats.

'I thought it would soften the edges of pain,' she had told Phoebe when she came to visit her. 'All it does is sharpen them up. I thought I'd dealt with all my grief and anger over Dy. Now I see I've just put it on hold and I'm going to have to work my way through all this shit just to get to the other side.'

'Yes, but you've already come this far. It's happening now -you're just too close to see it. It's like having your nose pressed up against a mirror and you can't get back far enough to see your face. It happens to me all the time when I'm trying to come up with new ideas for art projects,' says Phoebe, encouraging as always. She had given Em a key-ring as a welcome home present, which said, *'I tried to drown my troubles but the little suckers learned to swim'*.

Em reaches the building where she has been assigned to work for a week.

'Shit,' she had said to Kevin, when told of the location. 'It's on the twenty-fifth floor. You know what I'm like with lifts and it seems to be worse now I don't carry any ammunition with me,' referring to the brandy bottles which formerly inhabited her handbag, along with the odd valium.

Stop projecting, she tells herself. Breathe deeply. Say the 'Serenity Prayer' even if you're having trouble believing it. Get into the lift. Look at the wall. See, it's OK, it's moving. And now you're on the twenty-fifth floor and you're going to have a good day because you're sober. Now get on with it, she tells herself.

And introducing herself at reception, she starts her first day in this new world.

twenty-eight

It seems to Em that she feels tired all the time. She has started running again through the tree-lined hilly streets of Camberwell, usually taking between twenty minutes and half an hour. The weather is very hot still and often she finds it hard to breathe. Her favourite times are just after a shower of rain when the air is cool on her body and feels good to inhale. She enjoys listening to her mind when she is running; her thoughts seem sharper, more focused.

She has always hated the start of the exercise. The very act of putting on her running clothes seems like a deterrent. The first efforts seem so great, she listens to herself as she starts to pant, her legs ache, her head feels heavy. Then suddenly, she's over the discomfort and feels as if she could run for ever as her body settles into a rhythm and her mind slides into freewheeling mode. She considers there are few pleasures greater than this one and there is always the satisfaction at the end where she feels wonderfully relaxed and clear-headed. With daylight saving, she could run after work, but now that it's finished, she is confined to her lunch hour. In the city, she runs in the Fitzroy Gardens, the Flagstaff Gardens and round the Tan. When these venues aren't available, she runs around the streets, city and suburban, taking in her environment, allowing herself to be absorbed in it. It's good for her stress, particularly this new stress which is taking such a lot of adjusting to.

'I didn't realise we had so many dinner parties,' she says to Kevin one morning, looking at the calendar still hanging up from the previous year. She keeps it there because there are notes about Dylan; a Mother's Day lunch, his phone call about his habit, his birthday, his last visit. And there are the pencilled ticks on all the days after the 6th of August. Just to show that time was actually passing, she thinks.

There had been endless dinner parties when she had been drinking. Not just dinner, come to that, breakfast and lunch as well. There had been epic dinners; half the time she would forget to serve dessert until prompted by Kevin. Sometimes it didn't get served at all and she would find it in the fridge the next morning, often having lavished a great deal of time on its preparation. There always seemed to be a large number of wine bottles accumulating next to the rubbish bin and during the course of the evening, she would make arrangements for more dinner parties and not remember them until a phone call or, in some embarrassing cases, arrivals, prompted her memory. She is aware that now she must return some hospitality and is not looking forward to it.

'It's not that I mind not drinking, but I wish other people didn't have to drink,' she moans to Kevin. 'Why can't we all just have cups of tea?'

David and Sue are invited for dinner. Em has made careful preparations to keep the meal as simple as possible. She has already decided if the evening becomes too difficult for her, she will go to bed.

She is incredibly nervous, lighting cigarettes and putting them out. David has told her he has stopped drinking, too; now he only drinks socially. Shit, thinks Em in the kitchen, pouring mineral water into the biggest glass she can find and drinking half of it in one gulp. He calls *that* not drinking?

They have brought with them a bottle of excellent red which they keep telling her about and asking her to taste. For Christ's sake, shut up, she fumes inwardly.

'No, I really don't want any,' she says, getting up from the table quickly, thinking, we haven't even started the main course yet.

'You seem awfully sober,' says David, when she returns. 'Are you enjoying it?' and he laughs at her expression.

She hasn't told them about her sobriety, she doesn't feel ready yet. Even Sue, whom she has known for years and shared so much with, seems alien to this new and unfamiliar pattern of living.

'They just wouldn't comprehend it from your point of view,' says Kevin as they get undressed for bed. 'I find it difficult and yet you explain it to me.'

'I don't know how to tell them,' sighs Em, climbing into bed. 'All those times Sue and I would agree to give up drinking. It was only our hangovers that inspired that thought when we looked at the empty bottles of port the next day!'

And yet, a conversation had arisen at the table which makes her glad to be sober, grateful for the meetings she attends.

Sue recounts a story from the hospital where she works as a midwife.

'This doctor left the baby too long, and by the time it was finally born, it would have had definite brain damage,' says Sue, pouring more wine into the others' glasses. 'He wouldn't come in, kept putting it off, and when he arrived, he was pissed. Everyone knew and no-one can say anything about it. And now this poor bloody woman's got a child that's fucked forever because of this cretin of a doctor.'

Em had taken note of this, as she now looks for signposts in her life to guide her. She has always thought of herself as intuitive, but her mind has not been focused like this. 'We begin to redevelop our sixth sense,' she hears at a meeting. 'Children and animals pick up things, but we lose the ability as adults.'

'It's amazing,' she says to Kevin. 'There really are all these signs, like the story Sue told tonight, all waiting to be taken notice of.'

And she reads a few pages of her novel and drinks her Milo and ponders the mystery of sobriety.

twenty-nine

Resentments, thinks Em gritting her teeth, resentments are supposed to be the worst thing the alcoholic can get hooked into.

She is irritable after a bad night. 'You won't die from lack of sleep', they told her cheerfully at the last meeting. In the past, she has put on the television and had a couple of glasses of wine to put her back to sleep. Now she's stuck with cups of tea and her feelings.

It has been a bad day at work, too. She has been given a one-day assignment in Fitzroy to fill in for someone who is sick and the boss clearly expects her to know the exact point this person has reached in updating the database. She does not like this man who sits too close to her as he points out the relevant information on her computer. He seems demanding, obsessive.

At lunchtime, she goes for a run and inadvertently runs past the house where Dy used to live. She stops running and stares mesmerised, panting, walking in small circles, her hands clenched at her sides, unable to take her eyes from the house. It doesn't look very different, though there are bars now on the downstairs windows and graffiti scrawled along the low brick fence. The door is slightly ajar, she can just glimpse the hallway and she feels an unpleasant heaving begin in her stomach. It gives her a strange voyeuristic sensation to view this interior, identical to the one in which so much drama occurred. Turning, sick at heart, Em resumes her run, slowly at first, then building speed, dodging dog shit and overhanging branches along the narrow footpath. And as she runs back to work, she remembers the night they had driven over the previous August, the day after Dylan had died.

They had waited until quite late to go to the house. Driving along the Yarra, the setting sun cast long shadows into the chill winter's day and the dying rays reflected the funereal mood, the end of a life, an untimely death. The sun dappled her face through the windshield. The radio was playing music by Crowded House as they pulled up outside. She didn't know the name of the song, but it was popular at the time. There was a wonderful sky, glimpsed from Gore Street as she looked back towards the city, getting out of the car, an expanse of grey and pink cirrus clouds. Iceblock clouds, she had called them when she was small, for the surface of the iceblock had the same sweeping marks which were present in this evening sky.

The previous time she'd visited the house he'd been really sick after a bad trip. She shuddered inwardly, remembering her attitude of toughness, having recommended he book himself into a treatment centre. She had been recently inspired by a magazine article about Boy George's recovery from heroin addiction through some sort of 'black box' method. She felt encouraged by this. Recovery was feasible, she thought. Perhaps there was hope for Dylan too. She had resolved to mention this, but his appearance had changed her mind.

He'd been in the kitchen, having recently vomited into the sink. She'd demanded to see his arms, oblivious of the presence of others, and he'd obliged. She'd hidden her distaste and horror at the track marks and told him she couldn't do anything for him and handed him telephone numbers for Lifeline and some other place she couldn't remember. Then she drove him to the bulk-billing doctor around the corner, ignoring his curt remarks that he would rather walk. He came out afterwards and told her he had the flu, which further infuriated and saddened her.

All this had passed through Em's mind as they walked along the hallway to the second door on the left; the entrance to the room where her only child had so recently and dramatically died.

The bedroom was small. In the Victorian style, it had a fireplace on the wall opposite the door, which was littered with cigarette butts and empty bottles. A naked light bulb harshly illuminated the starkness. The only furniture was a desk, on which stood a half empty bottle of port. A desk lamp, the base covered in grimy fingerprints, was next to it. Facing the fireplace was a mattress on the floor, the sheets crumpled and the doona thrown back. A pile of clothes inhabited one corner and an electric guitar was propped against the wall. The window was curtained by a sheet. She swallowed as she recalled the fanatic tidiness of his room at home, the daily discipline of his workout with weights meticulously noted on a chart. The room lacked drama; it was a place of aftermath, marked by the empty cardiac packs used by the ambulance officers, still carelessly littering the floor.

They packed his clothes into garbage bags. From the first moment, she hadn't dared to cry, for fear of losing control and giving full voice to the grief which threatened to totally engulf her, perhaps eliminate her. There was, surprisingly, washing in a separate bag; she had assumed he had gone beyond this point of personal care. It was at this stage, realising that there was no point in doing the washing for someone who no longer existed, that she finally broke down.

'What am I going to do with his washing?' she sobbed over the rubbish bin, throwing socks and underpants into it, these earthly remains seeming to accentuate the vulnerability of humanity.

It seemed much worse when she came across items she'd purchased for him herself; he'd bought very little, every spare cent had gone on drugs.

Running past the greengrocer's in Brunswick Street, the sight of the flowers sitting in a row of buckets at the front of the shop evokes a longing for spring. She dreads the winter, yet to come.

Back at work, the afternoon does not improve. The computer crashes and the boss is convinced it is her fault. Since it is nearly 4.30, Em feels it is not worth making a fuss; she breathes deeply, makes coffee, immerses herself in studying the names she is supposed to be entering into the database.

But the resentment holds, it festers. She does not go to her meeting that night. They are due at Sue's and David's for dinner. She does not want to go.

'Why can't I just ring up and say I'm not well?' she asks Kevin peevishly as she pulls a dress out of the wardrobe and promptly puts it back again frowning, dragging out another and throwing it on the bed.

'Because it's a copout if you don't go', says Kevin patiently. 'Life isn't going to stop just because you've changed.'

She has recently given him some of her recovery program literature to read and has been surprised at his interest. The downside, she thinks sourly, is that now he'll know all about me and my nasty manipulative, controlling habits.

This statement, maddeningly correct, serves to make her more irritable than ever. 'Well, it's all right for you,' she snaps, yanking the dress over her head. 'You haven't got any problems, have you?'

'Self-pity won't help you either,' says Kevin walking out of the room. 'Now, just calm down and get ready. I'll make you a cup of tea.'

Now I feel like a real shit, thinks Em. I can't stand it when I treat him like this and he's nice to me.

She is filled with foreboding as she leaves the house. I don't feel good, she thinks. What was it the poet, Robert Lowell, said? 'My mind's not right'.

She has chosen tonight to tell David and Sue that she is seeking help for her drinking problem, but there doesn't seem to be an opportunity. She is aware tonight for the first time that she would really like to drink and tries to forestall the temptation by smoking more than usual, which she will certainly notice tomorrow if she runs, she thinks.

The evening is not a success. She has wanted to impress them with her brand new sobriety, but has not considered at what cost. She cannot believe her anxiety, her discomfort. Fear is her biggest enemy and it has been a hidden enemy for all of her life. A feeling that something was wrong, but unable to hang a label on it. Fear sat behind every act, every thought, every waking moment of her day, and yet she had not recognised it.

At the conclusion of the meal, a bottle of Cointreau is produced.

'Just have a sip,' says Sue, and before Em realises, she's had a whole glass, and then another. It burns her throat, but not unpleasantly, it is what it does to her mind that she cannot bear. For the first time in her life, she has a heightened awareness of alcohol affecting her mind and her mood. She feels herself letting go, sliding off somewhere else, watching the real world becoming distant. It is this sensation of being where she does not want to be that stops what could signal the return to the world she had left behind when she entered the rehabilitation centre.

In a sharp reversal of vision, she pulls herself up. There had been a film shown, talking about busting, for that is indeed what she has done. 'Stop using immediately', had been the advice given, and focusing her mind firmly on this edict, she puts down her glass abruptly. 'Shouldn't have done that,' she says, trying to sound casual. 'I really don't want to drink any more.'

'I don't know what you're so worried about,' says Sue, topping up everyone else's glasses. 'You don't drink any more than the rest of us.'

'Well,' says Em, leaning back in her chair, trying to calm herself out of a panic attack, 'We just don't get on, the drink and me. It's a failed relationship.'

She goes to the kitchen, puts on the kettle for coffee, drinks a couple of glasses of water, although she can already feel her head reeling after such a long period of abstinence. Two months, just over, I only made it to two months, she thinks in despair. What's going to happen to me now? I can't go back there, I just can't. Another six weeks would destroy me, there must be some other way.

Kevin comes out to see how she is. 'Are you OK?' he asks, concern in this voice.

'Oh, I just feel like shit,' she says muffled in his shoulder. 'I'm really sorry about this. I didn't mean for it to happen. I should have planned for it better.'

Once home, Em panics. 'What am I going to do?' she cries.

'Go to bed, start reading, take your mind off it,' says Kevin calmly.

He has seen enough to know that diversion tactics have some success. When she was drinking, she would find something to get upset about, a hypothetical spot on the carpet. She would eventually stop worrying about it after a few drinks. These days, she just keeps staring at the spot. When she first came home, he realised the power of

diversion and he has made it work to advantage on several occasions. Tonight is a big test. She is clearly waiting for, 'I told you so' criticisms to emanate from him, and he is determined to avoid this.

He puts her to bed, brings her some Milo and a Panadol.

'More drugs,' she moans.

'Don't be dramatic,' he says mildly. 'You take them when you get headaches.'

She tries to immerse herself in the novel by her bedside. It is a Jackie Collins, and she reads until she begins to feel her mind slip into sleep, resolving to ring someone tomorrow and start again.

Em rises early the next day, mortified by the events of the night before. How had this happened? She has listened to others sharing at meetings about busting, she thought she would see the signs. And I didn't see anything, she thinks miserably. I just became complacent and thought it would all work out, no matter what. Now I'm fucking well back where I started, maybe it's not even worth keeping on with. Maybe I'm just no good anyway. Dy couldn't get off it, maybe I can't either. It just seems too bloody hard. She listens to herself then, knowing that she is at a crossroad with her sobriety and her life.

She remembers the early days at the rehabilitation centre, when confused and exhausted, she first heard of the recovery program which had turned so many people's lives around. She remembers the welcome she received at her first meetings, the encouragement and support she was given, the sense of belonging.

If I keep drinking, she thinks, what's ahead of me? Everyone's told me it just gets worse. And drinking made me so depressed about Dy, I haven't even started looking at

any of that stuff yet. I feel stuck, I can't go forward and I can't go back, she thinks in despair. And I'm so fucking scared. It's probably fear that makes people keep drinking anyway. Life's really scary when you can't block your mind off. Oh Christ, what am I going to do? I've got all these phone numbers people gave me and I haven't made use of them at all. There was a girl, what was her name? Didn't live that far away, either.

I have to talk to someone, she thinks desperately, pacing the kitchen, her arms folded over her chest, cigarette clenched in her fingers. Thank God I didn't tell them about the program last night. Would have looked really good. Yes, I'm a social drinker in a recovery program. Look how well I'm doing. Oh, shit, I *have* to find this woman's phone number. And she empties her handbag in a frenzy, never well-organised, bits of paper fall out of her address book and scatter over the slate floor.

'Oh fuck!' she yells. 'I can't stand this. I can't stand myself!'

And she sits down on the floor among the scraps of paper and weeps. She weeps for herself, she weeps for her child, she weeps away her anger and frustration, until exhausted and stiff, she pulls herself on to a chair and tries to think rationally. Well, clearly I can't go on like this, she thinks. Now this phone number, I'm sure I wrote it down. Her name, her name was Caroline, no Karen, that's right, And sure enough, under 'K' there it is. She feels nervous as she rings, this woman had seemed very confident and perhaps she won't want to take on someone like me, thinks Em.

'Hello, is that Karen? This is Em from the Thursday meeting. Look,' she hesitates, then it all comes out in a rush. 'Look, I had a bust last night. I need a sponsor and I was wondering, if you, well, if you would be my sponsor.'

Kevin is surprised when he comes home from work that night. He had expected tears, depression, blame: 'You should have stopped me', anger, and none of it is forthcoming.

Instead, Em seems calm and almost relaxed. She gives him a glass of mineral water and then sits down with him.

'I got a sponsor today,' she says. 'I realised I just wasn't doing this thing right and I had to get more involved with it and really want to get better. We're going to meet once a week at her place and I'm doing extra meetings. She told me it's one thing to know you're an alcoholic, but quite another to accept it. I guess I thought I was doing OK, but I was really angry with myself, I saw myself as a failure and it seemed humiliating to have to succumb to some form of treatment. Karen said it's like a journey that never ends and I'm only at the beginning. All I have to do is not drink for one day at a time and I have to learn how to do that as well as I can.'

'And,' she says, looking resolutely into his eyes, 'I rang up Sue and told her I was an alcoholic and that I'd really stuffed up badly last night. They want to come round here after tea to talk about it.'

Kevin's not sure this is a good idea, but maybe it's better to get it out in the open as quickly as possible.

Sue and David arrive looking, she thinks, expectant. They also have a bottle of wine in tow. I can handle that, thinks Em resolutely.

'Hi, guys,' she says breezily. 'Come in.'

They are all seated on the couch. 'So tell us,' says Sue, lighting a cigarette. 'What prompted this?'

Em takes a deep breath. 'I had a car accident which made me realise my life was totally out of control. Before that, I really couldn't see what was happening to me.'

While she had been at the hospital, Kevin had told them that she had gone to stay with her father while he was recovering from pneumonia.

'I guess I've always had a problem,' she says slowly. 'I started drinking when I was sixteen and I really loved the way it made me feel. Being forty-one isn't quite the same, now I don't like how it makes me feel.'

'You don't drink any more than we do,' says David.

'But David, it really messes me around. I get nasty, I say and do things I don't mean, and sometimes I can't remember what's happened.'

'But that's part of drinking,' laughs David. 'Nothing unusual about that. Why last week, Sue had me under the shower to sober me up after the footy. Happens all the time.'

Shit, thinks Em. I'm not getting anywhere here. She tries a different tack.

'I don't like myself when I drink,' she says, standing up and pouring herself some more mineral water. 'When I stopped drinking, I realised I had a problem with reality. I've always tried to avoid it. When I was a kid, I used to look at the reflection of myself in the toaster and wish I could climb into the reflection. It seemed like a better world than the one I was in.'

They all look a bit perplexed about this, so she hurries on. 'I used it as a prop. I didn't really deal with my problems. When Dylan died, I just poured drinks down on top of my grief and didn't deal with it.'

'Yes,' says Sue, 'But Dy's death was really serious stuff. The death of a child is among the most traumatic experiences in life, it would make a lot of people drink too much.'

'Sure, but it was really starting to drive me crazy. I was going mad.'

'Everyone drinks to relax, though,' says Sue. 'We're all so stressed out with our lives and our jobs and our mid-life crises. Drinking helps you cope.'

But not me, thinks Em, I wasn't coping at all. 'Anyway,' she says, 'I just wanted to tell you, so you know what's happening and so you can appreciate that last night was a major event in terms of my alcoholism. It shows that I can't rely on myself to stop drinking. It shows I have no control over my drinking.'

She sees that Sue and David are now distinctly uncomfortable. They finish their wine and quickly take their leave, saying Sue has an early shift in the morning.

Em is both disappointed and relieved that they have gone. Disappointed at their lack of comprehension, relieved that they now know. A big day, just twenty-four hours of it, she thinks, turning off the front light. It can only get better.

thirty

At the end of April, I received a letter from Em. She had never written to me before, always phoned, and I felt apprehensive as I opened it. The handwriting was small and surprisingly neat.

Dear Mar

Well, I thought I'd better let you know that I've had a bust. It wasn't a major event and I didn't do anything dreadful, but it really shook me up and made me look at myself and what I was doing. I guess I wanted to show off how well I was doing and I found it doesn't work like that. So I started doing a new meeting, learning about the program in some depth and it seems to be helping. But something else has happened, too. You remember I told you I had that vision of Dy telling me he was OK the night he died, and then Phoebe told me about that friend of Dy's who went to the seance and received a similar message. Well, this happened a couple of days ago and it was too hard to talk about on the phone. I wrote it all down straight after it happened so I wouldn't forget and here's what I wrote:

'Today, I had the most extraordinary experience. I felt in the morning that something was going to happen - as I lay in bed, I was aware of the sounds of birds in the park I hadn't heard before. As Kevin drove off, two kookaburras made their characteristic call and it seemed very loud and clear. I was sweeping up the leaves in the front when I became aware of a presence. I knew it was Dylan. Although I could not see or hear him, he seemed like a gentle but powerful force within and around me. I felt an enormous wave of emotion sweep over me, mainly sensations of calm and relief. He did not speak to me, but conveyed through my mind that he was in another state, not of this world, and that he was happy and that this was the way it was intended. Also, that I should not grieve for him because of these reasons he had given me. I could miss and be sad for the person I had known, but

this person now existed in another state and I must be aware of this. In essence, he seemed above the human state; there was something awesome about his presence. He inferred that he could not stay with me in this way with the intensity I was now experiencing, but that I must remember this encounter and be changed and helped by it. This feeling probably lasted about an hour. Towards the end, he intimated that he would give me back the things he had taken from me when he died. I felt this had to do with my place in the world - he would give me more of myself to project into other people. He seemed to be possessed of a strength of dignity and compassion which had escaped him in his earthly life. The peace he radiated seemed born of humility, perhaps atonement, but it was extraordinary, he was in perfect and complete harmony with himself, a oneness with the self that he had never known on earth.'

I can't begin to tell you what this meant to me. I know people will go to any lengths to have mediums set up contact between this world and the next and I've experienced this on a unique one-to-one basis. I do not expect this to happen again - it is very clear to me it was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, which was too profound to ever be repeated. I feel privileged, Mar. I don't think this happens very often to us and it was totally unique. I somehow know, too, that it would not have taken place had I still been drinking, so my commitment to staying sober has been renewed.

I think I said to you once that having Dy was like a religious experience, and it was as if he never really somehow belonged to me, despite the fact that I had given birth to him. In the light of this experience this now seems true, though you couldn't say his life had been a role model for a successful and happy existence. Maybe some role models are meant to work in the opposite way. Something to think about, isn't it?

Well, I'd better close. Hope your work is coming together, and that I'll see you soon.

Love, Em.

thirty-one

Em is thinking about doing some writing. Since becoming sober, she has realised it is something she would really like to do. She doesn't know quite where to start, but she feels something will happen eventually. She wonders which name she will use if she ever does write a book. Her married name is the one that sits most comfortably, the name she has learned through and grown with, a name associated with the purest happiness she has ever known and the greatest tragedy.

It's a bit like doing a jigsaw, she thinks. You have to put all the pieces together, but first you have to make them. It's a jigsaw of the mind. She finds it difficult to write. In the beginning, when all the thoughts crowd into her head, demanding to be written down, she agonises over the very act of putting pen to paper. She writes even smaller than usual, the cramped sentences almost indecipherable, even to her. The notebook, too, is tiny. Initially, she is appalled at her self-consciousness, her reluctance to read back what she has written, but as time passes and her confidence grows, she finds it easier to put pen to paper without the feeling that someone is looking over her shoulder and reading it back.

Following the drinking bout at Sue and David's, their social engagements are now kept to a minimum. Sue and David, though welcome, do not drop in as casually as they once did, and they find on odd occasions that they are excluded from certain social events, once people are acquainted with the fact that Em no longer drinks.

At one party, turning down the offer of a glass of vintage champagne from their host, she says, 'I'm not drinking at the moment,' knowing it is not good for her mind to say 'forever'.

'That must be boring for you,' is the derisive reply.

Stung, she hides her anger. 'Actually,' she says calmly, 'it's not.'

Later, he apologises, but they are not invited back for the next party, planned in a month's time and mentioned in her presence.

Despite the increasing lack of engagements scribbled on the calendar, there are other compensations.

'Oh, aren't climaxes wonderful,' sighs Em, happily rolling on to her side, her eyes still closed in blissful aftermath. 'And you never get sick of them, either.' She turns her face towards Kevin, looking at the contours of his body under the doona. She holds out her arms to him and he wriggles forward into her embrace.

'You've been making great and glorious love to me for over twenty years now. Aren't I lucky?' she says snuggling into him, as the first heavy rain of autumn begins to fall.

thirty-two

Em rushes over to greet Mar who is already seated at the restaurant.

'I'm sorry I'm late. The dentist took ages. Look.' She opens her mouth wide and shows the glint of new gold, previously inspected in her hand mirror. 'You're looking at my Bankcard. I'd only just got it paid off, too. Now I'll have to pay off my mouth,' she moans.

Mar looks at her cigarette. Em suddenly remembers that she told Mar she was giving up smoking.

'The dentist made me do it. Guess I wasn't as disciplined as I thought,' Em smiles. 'Still, I'm working on it. I need to stop. It's another thing to be free of.'

Mar has put on weight, thinks Em, looking at the new loose top she wears over her pants. It must be the stress of her father's death. Still she doesn't look bad, her face looks well, almost serene.

'I was so sorry to hear of your father's death,' says Em compassionately, placing her hand over Mar's, for this is the first time she has seen her in two months.

'Thank you, and thank you for the flowers. It was so thoughtful of you to send a dried arrangement which I could keep, I had no idea how terrible it would feel throwing out the others as they began to die.'

'Yes, I know all about that,' says Em, in heartfelt tones. 'It's strange isn't it, the way those things can have such an effect. I've gardened all my life, never had a problem with getting rid of anything that wasn't doing well, and yet, those arrangements have so much meaning attached to them - you feel as if it's an affront to throw them out. How are you coping now? It's only been a few weeks, hasn't it?'

'I'm still pretty numb,' says Mar, buttering her roll. 'I feel as if I'm wrapped in a thick blanket of fog and I can't function properly. I've turned down a few jobs of late, because I know I won't perform very well. And,' she takes a bite of her roll, 'my mother is coping very badly and I'm having to spend quite a bit of time with her.'

And she tells Em about the funeral and the ensuing Easter ceremonies which had seemed to form part of the funeral formalities.

'I've brought a card with me,' says Em later, as the waiter brings their coffee, with cake for Mar, getting an envelope out of her bag. 'I always hate florist's cards because you don't write them yourself. It seems so impersonal.'

Ma opens the card. Inside is a photograph of a breathtaking sunset, illuminating heavy cumulous clouds.

'We took it from a plane one year, flying to England,' says Em. Underneath the photo she has written, *'Each day a new beginning'*.

'It does say 'new',' says Em, 'Except I was on the tram when I wrote it and we went over a bump, so it looks like 'raw'.'

Mar laughs at this. 'Each day a raw beginning. Well, that's how it felt a month or so ago.'

'And how does it feel now?' asks Em.

'Port Douglas turned out to be my Lourdes,' says Mar slowly, reflectively, as she stirs sugar into her coffee. 'I went unwillingly because my mother wanted to go, she has close friends living up there and they invited her to stay after the funeral. She didn't want to travel by herself, so I agreed to go with her.'

'I hate the heat,' she eats a mouthful of her cake with its thick mound of cream and lone decorative strawberry, 'and I saw this fortnight as an endurance test. I felt I could

deal with my grief more effectively in the familiarity of my own surroundings, my own routines. But something happened up there, which I wasn't prepared for.'

She wipes her mouth with her serviette and leans forward.

'You remember you wrote to me about your experience of Dylan in the garden and how it had set your mind at peace?' Em nods in silence, listening attentively.

'Well, I didn't experience my father in the same way, but I could definitely count it as a spiritual experience, a shift in my perception which could not have been brought about by anything in normal human experience.' She takes another mouthful of her cake. 'I hadn't expected to be so emotionally affected by the scenery. There was a majesty about the environment, it didn't seem just geographically higher, it seemed closer to the sky. The spatial elements were awesome, the rain was heavier, the vegetation higher, the mountains more rugged, the sea more varied in its colours, the flowers more vivid. Everything seemed to be intensified. I felt uplifted, entranced by it, almost bewitched. It seemed outside this world, like a glimpse of heaven in its grandeur. I, good Catholic that I am, for the first time in my life felt as if my religious experience had been constricted, compared to what I was experiencing here. No church, no matter how magnificent, had ever inspired in me what I was feeling in this place.'

She drinks some coffee, looks anxiously at Em. 'Is this making sense?'

'Oh, yes,' says Em passionately, recalling her experience in the garden.

'One day we went for a trip to Cairns and we drove up to Kuranda after our lunch. There's a place on the way where you can stop and look down over Cairns and the sea. We all stepped out of the car and took some photos and then the others got back into the car because of the cold wind. I stood by myself for a few minutes. The sun was breaking through the clouds and illuminating parts of the landscape below me. And I

suddenly experienced a feeling of perfect peace and I knew my father was happy. For that split second, I felt completely at one with the universe and saw quite clearly that everything was how it was meant to be - that in our human state we are sometimes permitted occasional glimpses of what life can be like beyond this one, and that the concept of death is clearly beyond our human perception.'

Mar finishes her coffee. 'And that's what I meant by my Lourdes. I had gone up there, not expecting anything, and I came away feeling that the grace of healing had been bestowed upon me. It made me feel blessed, humble, and more importantly, able to accept my father's death and put it into the perspective of life.'

Em nods appreciatively, taking her hand.

'I too, share this feeling of having a place in the world. Now I know I am where I am meant to be and Dy is where he is meant to be. And it is so comforting when you are given that assurance, that they are at peace. I know,' she says slowly, 'that if Dylan hadn't died, that I would not be sober, that I would not have this gift of sobriety, as I see it now, and I view his death as being absolutely central to my salvation. Through his death, I myself have been resurrected.' Em looks surprised at this. 'Did I say that? Where did that come from? Do you know,' she says, signalling the waiter for the bill, 'my perception seems heightened now. I really take pleasure in watching my mind work. I've been able to take all my skeletons and demons out of the dark and scary cupboard of my mind and hang them up and look at them. On a good day, I say 'boo' to them and they shrivel and cringe and skuttle away.'

The waiter brings the bill. Em rummages through her bag for her purse, pulling out a lipstick as well which has leaked into its capsule.

'God, isn't this disgusting,' says Em, attempting to make a straight outline round her mouth. 'I must buy a new one. Maybe I should be like you and not wear any makeup.'

She only ever buys cheap cosmetics, her skin is still unblemished, not requiring a mask of foundation. Mar comments on how good her skin is. 'I'm a Pond's girl,' she tells her, tossing the lipstick into her handbag. 'It's all I ever use.'

'Just before we go, I was going to tell you - something else happened up there. I was so inspired to paint, to try and capture some of this feeling in landscapes. I thought I'd start with a series of cards and call them 'Glimpses of Port Douglas', to tie in with my glimpse of something beyond our human vision. So when I arrived back last month, I started working on some very small paintings, done from photographs and sketches from the local area. I then photographed the paintings and put them on the front of folded cards with envelopes, the whole thing being enclosed in a plastic so they wouldn't mark. I sent samples to one of the bookshops up there and they placed an order. When I rang the manager the other day, he told me they're selling really well.'

'Oh, Mar, isn't that great! I'm so pleased for you, what a lovely heritage from your stay up there,' says Em enthusiastically giving her a hug. As they stand to go, a girl backs into her with a pusher. 'I wouldn't like to be near her when she's doing a three-point turn,' Em says, rubbing her ankle ruefully.

'You've been very tactful, Em, not commenting on the amount of weight I've put on,' says Mar, getting awkwardly to her feet. 'I have never been more conscious of myself than I am now and I can't keep buying larger sizes. It's too expensive and too demoralising.'

'I'm sure it's just the stress of your father's death,' says Em reassuringly, patting her arm. 'Next time you go out, wear glasses when you eat. The food looks bigger,' and they laugh together as they walk out of the restaurant into the chill of late autumn.

thirty-three

It seemed to me that whenever I spoke to Em lately, she was working in tall buildings in the city.

'Gives me a wonderful feeling of power,' she tells me. 'Though some places have their drawbacks. I dropped my security card down the loo last week when I was leaning forward to flush the toilet. I couldn't get back into my department, felt like a right fool,' she giggles on the other end of the phone. 'You should see this place, Mar, there's a cappuccino machine and baskets of fresh fruit and every kind of teabag imaginable. The work's really boring, but the views and the kitchen are terrific!'

She appears to be more settled now that she is back at work. Temporary work suits her restless nature, her lack of commitment to be tied down to one place. 'I've got friends who've been in the same job for fifteen years,' she says in awe. 'I don't know how they stand it.'

In an attempt to make myself feel better about my increasing weight, I go and have my hair done. Normally, it is shoulder length, but my face is fatter and I feel it might look better a bit shorter. I have it trimmed to just below my ears and like the effect. The hairdresser uses an organic wax treatment to finish with, it smells of strawberries. Doodle, waiting patiently in the car, is excited by the smell. She sniffs enthusiastically then starts to lick the back of my hair. I laugh at her in the rear vision mirror. 'No, Doodle, I didn't spend thirty dollars to be undone by you!'

On the way home, I do the supermarket shopping at Safeway. I notice it takes a lot more energy as I struggle up the stairs with my plastic bags.

'I should have trained you better, then you could carry the shopping basket in your mouth,' I pant to Doodle, as I unpack the shopping.

When I come back from putting the tissues in the bathroom, she has dragged a packet of teabags on to the floor near her mat. Doodle has a fetish for teabags, constantly retrieving used ones from the rubbish bin, when she can slide the lid open with her nose.

'Look at that,' I say sternly. 'No, it's no good looking the other way. I know it was you.' She turns her head and pulls her lips back in a huge smile, looking me in the eye. She has me twisted well and truly round her paw, and she knows it.

I have tried to restrict my consumption of cakes and biscuits by not buying packets to stock the pantry, but I find I compensate in other ways. Instead, I buy diet food: icecream, margarine, cheese, biscuits, jams. Everything labelled 'no added sugar' and 'low cholesterol'. But my plans do not work. I buy more food, eat more of it.

I am forced to buy new clothes. I buy cheap pants with elastic waists, large flowing tops and voluminous tent dresses, telling myself this is a temporary situation. I am also forced to buy new shoes, for my ankles have swollen and I cannot fit comfortably into my normal shoes.

One afternoon, I cook a chocolate cake. I have walked to the corner shop and bought the packet cake mix with the deliberate intention of cooking it for the purpose of eating a slice with my afternoon tea. What I had not intended is that I should consume the whole cake in one sitting. I sit on the kitchen floor, my legs stuck out in front of me, despite the discomfort this brings, and I weep. Doodle puts her head on my shoulder, her eyes filled with concern.

'What am I going to do!' I sob helplessly, despair and misery overwhelming me.

I feel ill, so ill I fear I will vomit. And I dare not vomit. For if this happens, I sense there is a worse nightmare in store for me. The practice of bulimia, once abhorred, has

recently wormed its way into my thoughts as a solution to what I now know to be a definitive problem. And with that knowledge has come fear.

thirty-four

A fortnight later, I visit Em one afternoon, after seeing a client in Hawthorn. She comes to greet me at the gate, looking apprehensively at Doodle sitting up very straight in the back seat, and glancing down at the Siamese at her feet.

‘It’s all right,’ I say reassuringly. ‘She’s used to being in the car for short periods. I’ll let her out and give her a drink and a sniff around the nature strip before we go home. She’ll be perfectly happy with that.’

Em’s home is a marvellous fairy tale house, with tiny attic windows set in dormers in the roof, and steep gables with a gargoyle above the entrance porch. I walk around the verandah, admiring the stained glass windows, looking out through the wonderful carved, curving fretwork which surrounds the wooden verandah posts.

‘What a beautiful house,’ I say, as we walk through the ornate front door, the sun casting fragments of jewelled light through the stained glass, colouring the polished wooden boards of the hallway.

‘It belonged to Kevin’s grandparents, and then his parents. Unfortunately, now there’s no-one left to inherit it.’ Her face darkens for a moment, then she smiles at me.

‘I’m so glad you came,’ she says grabbing my hand impulsively. As time has progressed, I have noticed that Em’s bitterness surrounding her son’s death has become muted at times, which is encouraging.

We walk down a long hallway, the walls extensively decorated with old prints. At the end is a stained glass door which leads into a large living room wonderfully furnished with antique furniture, the desk and table topped with old glass lamps, and Persian rugs, paintings and embroidered cushions providing a rich feast of colour. A magnificent piano stands in one corner and there are floor to ceiling glass-fronted

bookcases on one entire wall. After the relative austerity of my flat, I am content to walk around the room, enjoying the luxury and visual pleasure of my surroundings.

Having admired the room, we sit on a comfortable leather couch looking out at a brick courtyard, attractively adorned with potplants of various sizes, through French doors. Beyond the courtyard, I can see steps leading up to a terraced area, bounded by railway sleepers with fishferns pushing their way through the cracks.

Hunting in a messy desk drawer for serviettes, she produces a *Melbourne Trading Post* 'Fill in and Mail' form. 'Dylan wrote this when he was about fourteen,' she says. In neat handwriting under the article descriptions, are '*Mother. Good condition. Can type. \$20.00*', then '*Father. Hard working. Enjoys laying bricks. \$20.00*'.

'Kevin hated laying bricks,' says Em, laughing, indicating the courtyard. 'He spent three months doing this. And then a few years ago, the toilet blocked up and we had to have most of it pulled up to unblock the drain. He couldn't cope with it at all, decided it was easier to pay someone else to do it.'

Em tells me rather tentatively that she is doing some writing.

'Though I keep scribbling things on pieces of paper, then they get lost,' she says. She has a problem with paper.

'I don't know how other people ever get organised,' she wails as she looks for her notebook. 'My father was a lawyer. He had a problem with paper, too. We had filing cabinets all over the house, filled with things like gas bills that went back to 1936.'

Looking around, I see mail piled up on a bench in the kitchen. Much of it appears to be unopened. It is interspersed with magazines, old TV guides, credit card slips, pieces of gift wrap, supermarket docketts and torn off scraps of paper bearing cryptic messages. '*Please tape "The Philadelphia Story".*' '*Dinner in fridge*'. '*Garbage must go*

out, missed last week!!' I see this as she goes carefully through the layers, looking for the notepad on which she has started writing.

'When I was at the rehab, they said to write down how you felt. I've done that for years. Now I'm trying to find all the bits of paper which are everywhere,' she sighs. 'The trouble with having such a large house is that you can collect endless bits of everything.'

And certainly, the house is a clutter of collections. Matchbooks in various bowls, postcards on rattan trays, numerous ornaments from miner's lamps to teaspoons, an enormous number of books, all gathering dust on the dark Victorian furniture. Every available surface seems to contain various piles of commodities. There are videos, pens, computer disks, the odd screwdriver, newspaper cuttings, writing pads, boxes of matches, plastic bags, sunglasses, packets of cigarettes and film canisters. Even the fridge does not escape. It is covered with fridge magnets struggling to hold up various photographs, calendars, invitations, photocopies, postcards and other miscellaneous papers.

Finally, Em discovers the notebook under a pile of newspapers on a chair.

'I thought I'd begin by writing some short stories. Nothing too ambitious; I'm supposed to be setting achievable goals for myself,' she says mockingly, rolling her eyes. 'I like the theme of motherhood in the '60s, so the stories would centre around that. I've always wanted to do it and there doesn't seem to be much point in waiting till I'm an old lady. I thought I'd be able to drink till I was an old lady, too.'

At this, I laugh, and Em relaxes and puts on the kettle. 'The main thing I have to remember is that it's not a big deal. I don't have to be the greatest writer in the country,

I just have to *do* it. If I tell myself it won't be good enough, it will never be published, stuff like that, I'll never write anything.'

She pours the tea, gets out a plate of biscuits, 'No, I didn't bake them. Phoebe's the biscuit maker, inherited from her mother. Mr Safeway made these, they just look as if they're homemade.'

She flips through the notebook, taking a biscuit as she does so.

'I felt inspired to start writing after we had lunch together. It was your experience in Port Douglas. I thought, these spiritual upliftings, if you like, are very rare, difficult to put into words at the best of times, and so transitory, you can easily forget the exact sensations at the time. I started thinking about what it had been like having Dylan and I wanted to write it down. At first I thought I wouldn't be able to recall things, but it's amazing what you can pull out of your mind. So this is a beginning.'

Em hands me the notebook, by this time embellished with a large chocolate thumbprint. 'Oh, damn, sorry. Here's a serviette. I really am a dreadful slob.'

I begin to read, cautiously at first under her gaze, then I ease into the closely written pages. Em has written a short story concerning an incident which occurred shortly after Dylan had started school at a well-known Catholic establishment and was criticised because his socks were not properly pulled up, which had resulted in a letter being sent home. The account is lively and amusing, striking a good balance between the attitude of the five-year-old and the attitude of authority, deeply steeped in tradition. Told from the mother's point of view, it expressed a concise individual style, easy to read and entertaining, with a surprise twist at the end.

'It's good,' I say, astonished, as I hand her back the notebook. 'It's very good, in fact. Definitely worth approaching magazines about or entering into competitions.'

'Oh!' says Em, looking thrilled, hugging the notebook to her. 'Do you really think so? I didn't want you to feel obliged to say nice things just so you wouldn't hurt my feelings.'

The doorbell rings. 'Oh, that must be Phoebe, I asked her to drop in on her way up to Dad's place. She said she needed some country time,' says Em rushing up the hall to the front door.

A few minutes later, Em comes into the room with Phoebe. I look at Phoebe with her open welcoming smile, arrayed in her layers of black, assorted earrings twinkling around the curve of her ear, and I like her immediately.

'Hello,' she says, 'You must be Mar, or would you rather I called you Marie?'

'Mar is fine,' I say, feeling myself warm to her. 'I hear you're doing your final assessment next month, how is it going?'

'Good,' says Phoebe, sinking down into a chair, crossing her legs, her heavy boots trailing thick laces across the rug. 'It's much easier too, since I moved into this house just across the road from the college. I can stay back and work when I have to, which means I can actually get parts of the project all finished in one go.'

'Phoebe's into conceptual work, you know, multi-media projects,' Em says, going out into the kitchen to make more tea.

'So, who are your influences, would you say?' I ask, interested. 'I don't know much about this type of art.'

'Well, Larry Rivers and some of the abstract expressionists, like Rauschenberg. I like the way he combines paint with photographs and drawing. And I love the brushwork of Willem de Kooning.' I nod, appreciatively.

'But I'm also interested in the work of Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler, the stained canvas works particularly. And as far as assemblage art is concerned, I like Rosalie Gascoigne.'

She warms to her subject, leaning forward in her chair.

'I'm really interested in women's art, the way women see things. Judy Chicago and the 'Dinner Party' project, I thought that was amazing when I first read about it, and then I saw her exhibition at the beginning of the year. I suppose it's a bit dated now, but I still like the concept.'

'I don't know her,' I say. 'What's the 'Dinner Party' about?'

'Well, basically, it's a visual historical documentation of the achievements and contributions of women. She conceived this idea of a triangular banquet table set for thirty-nine great women, beginning with an ancient goddess and finishing up with Georgia O'Keefe. The table was covered with an embroidered runner relating to the period of time and then each place setting was individually set with porcelain dishes pertaining to each woman. Some of the designs were fabulous, with lots of curved sensuous shapes with a central core.'

'What an interesting concept. I'd like to see some pictures of it.'

'Oh, I've got the book,' says Phoebe, eagerly. 'I'll lend it to you if you like.'

'Yes, I'd really like to see it. My knowledge of conceptual artists is pretty limited. I read *From the Center*, years ago,' I say. 'Lucy Lippard. She had some really challenging things to say about women's art. Particularly in terms of female imagery. I seem to remember aspects of what constituted women's art, things like patterns, layering, grids, repetition, fragmentation. Would you say these things are present in your conceptual art?'

'Why yes,' says Phoebe, in some surprise. 'That's exactly what most of it is concerned with.'

'So,' she says then, reaching for her cup, as Em comes back into the room with more tea and biscuits. 'What sort of work are you doing at the moment? Em says you really want to be a painter.'

'At the moment I'm involved with some brochures for the 'Quit' campaign. And I just finished a job for the Salvation Army. They saw my posters at one of the public hospitals and wanted some comparable designs which would be suitable for billboards. So that's kept me pretty busy. In terms of what I really want to do, though...thanks,' as Em pours more tea into my cup, '...I really love painting landscapes. I thought North Queensland was wonderful and it's made me appreciate my own local views more.' I take a biscuit. 'I suppose the Australian Impressionists would have to be my greatest influence, though my drawing is totally different from my painting. I guess it would relate more to Super-realism than Impressionism.'

'Oh, I really like Chuck Close,' says Phoebe eagerly. 'Those huge faces are amazing.'

'I really love Charles Condor,' I say. 'Yarding Sheep' is beautiful, even though a lot of people don't think it's a great painting. It's so subtle.'

'When I went to Sydney, it was interesting seeing the later paintings of the Impressionists,' said Phoebe. 'A lot of them just seemed to miss out, it was as if they couldn't recapture the sort of magic they'd created with the Heidelberg School.'

'Yes, I know what you mean,' I say, reaching for another biscuit. 'It was such a brief period, such a special time.'

'So, is there anyone else whose painting you like?'

I eat my biscuit, thinking about this. 'The later works of Turner, especially those paintings of snowstorms. And oh, yes, I love the later paintings of Lloyd Rees. All those views of Sydney Harbour and those wonderful colours, like painting with light, which was the original Impressionist concept. They're just magic.'

'Oh, I knew you two would have lots to talk about,' says Em looking pleased. She walks to the window, pulling the blind against the strong sunlight. 'What a fabulous day. It makes winter seem a lot further off than next month. How's your car going, Phoebe?'

'I've only had it a couple of weeks, but I really don't know how I did without it. It was a great twenty-first present, though there's not much left over from my pub earnings after the rent and the petrol. Looks like that overseas trip is going to have to wait. Still, that'll keep. I'd rather go away with someone else, and unfortunately, none of my friends have any money at the moment.'

She laughs and looks at her watch. 'Well, I'd better make tracks or Poppy will wonder where I am.'

We chat some more and then I, too, take my leave. As we walk to the front door, Em hugs me.

'Thanks for looking at my scribbling, you've made me feel encouraged to keep on with it.'

Seeing us approaching, Doodle gets up happily and stretches from her place on the back seat of the car, tail wagging, anxious to greet me and be let out. The Siamese wags its tail angrily by the gate, growling menacingly.

'Ramses is no dog lover,' says Em, scooping him up and walking back towards the front door. 'Thanks for coming, Mar, it was great to see you. I'll give you a ring in a couple of weeks.'

I watch Doodle sniffing enthusiastically round the base of the timber fence where alyssum grows abundantly. 'Come on Doggie Doo,' I say, and we head back down Riversdale Road with the late autumn sun pouring through the windscreen, warming me as I reflect happily on the exchanges of the afternoon.

'Mar has put on so much weight!' says Em to Kevin as they eat their pasta and salad that night. 'She must be two stone heavier than when I first met her, maybe more. I suppose I didn't help by serving Florentines; she must have eaten at least half of them.'

'What did you talk about?' asks Kevin, his eyes on 'The 7.30 Report'.

Since he doesn't appear to be listening, she says, 'Oh, I showed her a bit of my writing and we talked about that, and then Phoebe came and we talked about art.'

'Good,' he says vaguely. She is relieved he doesn't pursue the subject of her writing.

Later, however, as they are getting ready for bed, Kevin *does* ask, much to her chagrin.

'Why don't you show me what you've written?' he queries encouragingly. 'You've shown Mar.'

'Well,' Em says hesitantly. 'I suppose I feel more self-conscious with you, how you'd react.'

'Yes, but you take your clothes off in front of me, and you certainly don't have a problem with that,' he says, propped up against the pillows, smiling up from reading his paper.

She cannot tell him that to show him her writing at this stage seems equivalent to showing him her soul in all its vulnerability.

'Well, I don't think it's good enough yet. I'd like to show it to you when I'm a bit further down the track with it.'

Mollified, he nods his acquiescence.

thirty-five

The cappuccino is good; thick foam sprinkled generously with chocolate and hot and milky beneath. Not too strong, just the way I like it. I am fortifying myself, the best way I cope in times of trepidation, finding solace in food. A slice of black forest cake sits on a saucer beside the coffee. It is early in the day for black forest cake, but it is what I need. The saucer has a small chip out of it, indistinguishable at first because of the pattern, but visible when I stare at it. In this particular instance, I was looking intently, concentrating fiercely on my surroundings, seeking to distract myself from where I was about to go next. For I have an appointment at Weight Watchers.

thirty-six

The question of whether or not to have another child had been raised intermittently, but persistently by Em from the time of Dylan's death. For himself, Kevin was content to leave well enough alone, sensing in the early days that her mothering would tend to be both neurotic and inconsistent. He would not have liked a child conceived under these circumstances, making love to her when she is drunk or stoned. Once she had sobbed over him, 'You're so beautiful', tears dripping on to his chest, and he had a distinctly uncomfortable feeling that she didn't even know who he was.

Following her hospitalisation, her attitude seemed more practical. 'I know there are problems with being older parents, but I'm prepared to risk that and I feel I would be able to cope quite adequately with the increased tiredness and stress if I limit myself to a fairly structured routine.'

It was with some reluctance that he had agreed, having nominated a six month period for conception. 'After that, it's not on, Emmie. I don't want our marriage exclusively focused on conceiving a child.'

But they had not had to wait, she had become pregnant after the first month, which was viewed by them both as a profound event. He recalled the sense of awe and wonder as they sat up in bed, watching the little window in the pregnancy test change colour. 'We couldn't have done that in 1966,' he had said to Em, squeezing her hand.

The pregnancy however, had not been without its problems. From the beginning she bleeds spasmodically, sometimes heavily, sometimes lightly.

She goes to the doctor. 'Well, if it's a threatened miscarriage, there's not a great deal we can do,' he says to Em, his kindly face reflecting concern.

'You could go to bed, but that doesn't always solve the problem. Besides, a lot of women bleed like this and manage to deliver perfectly healthy full-term babies. We'll do a scan next week and see what the problem is.'

thirty-seven

The room, when first encountered, is an ordinary medical examination room. Once the lights are dimmed and the screen turned on, however, it is transformed into a miraculous place where the atmosphere is charged with expectation.

The flickering screen shows a tiny being, indistinguishable at first, but gradually recognizable as head, trunk and limbs. The amount of movement is astounding. Em has envisaged the foetus as passive, a receptor of nourishment, suspended in time waiting to be born. But the movements are vigorous and assertive, constant, too. The doctor points out the fingers and thumb, but it is too early to discern facial features. He points out the area of concern; although apparently firmly attached to the uterine wall, the placenta is torn and bleeding at one end.

‘What dates do you have?’ he asks.

‘The seventeenth of January.’

The doctor deliberates over the measurement. ‘No,’ he says. ‘It’s definitely the eighteenth.’

Tears start in her eyes and her heart pounds within her. Dylan’s inquest had been held on the eighteenth. The chances of this child being due on the exact date of her dead son being laid to rest were remote and yet it has happened. There is suddenly an unearthly feel in the room, a mystical presence and she feels herself to be part of a unique moment in time, no matter what the outcome may be. The physical magic dissolves with the darkness of the screen and light once again flooding the room. But the psychological presence, the power of the experience, will remain with her for ever.

thirty-eight

I look at the kitchen table. On it are my Weight Watchers' pamphlets and a set of small scales. I go to the fridge which is now occupied by the type of food I have never felt inclined to purchase. It is packed full of fruit, vegetables and low-fat prepared food. I close the door, feeling intimidated by this alien and unfamiliar sight.

Preparing my meal, I talk to Doodle, non-critical and supportive of my every move.

'Well, they said it would take time to adjust to and I had to change my mind about how I regarded food. And they also said the worst thing I can do is to view this as a diet, it has to be an ongoing way of life.'

Doodle pushes her nose against my leg. For the first time, I can relate to how Em felt at the rehabilitation centre, I can empathise with the fact that this too, must be a day-at-a-time procedure.

And it is not just for discomfort. A few weeks ago, I had visited the doctor, complaining of chest pains. He had found no heart problems. 'Well, not yet,' he frowned, looking over my shoulder as I stood on the scales, but my blood pressure was up. It was he who had recommended some sort of program for restricting my eating. 'And exercise, too,' he said. 'Do you walk?'

'Well, I walk my dog regularly.'

'Mmm, how far?'

'A couple of blocks.'

'Couple of miles, that's what you need, every day. Now, here's a prescription for some tablets. Make an appointment to see me in two months time.'

For the first time in my life, precipitated by extreme discomfort, I look at my eating habits. I have never eaten to the point of vomiting, but I have certainly eaten to the

point of being in agonising pain while my digestive system struggled to absorb and process the large amounts of food which I devoured at frequent intervals. I read in horror that the size of the stomach is actually quite small and it only requires a very minimal amount of food to satisfy hunger.

In the early weeks, I do not weigh myself, apart from the obligatory weigh-ins at the meetings. I do not want to disillusion myself, for at this stage, seeing little progress, it would be too easy to give up. I try and look at the process in stages. First, I have to cut back on the huge amounts I have been consuming. I find I must have small meals regularly to stop myself from feeling ill. Second, I must acquire a taste for different food. I must learn to eat more slowly, to concentrate on my food, to eat sitting down. For years, I have enjoyed my trays in front of the television, with no-one to share my food, apart from Doodle with her eyes. Now, I make a point of setting a place for myself at my small dining-room table, away from the kitchen. I buy entree-sized plates so that they will hold less, I drink a glass of water before I eat. If I have cravings for certain foods, I learn to succumb to them, knowing that I can allow myself tastes of certain foods, as opposed to ingesting vast quantities. I discover the mouth has its own identity, the taste buds becoming bored with any food after only a few mouthfuls, all that is necessary to satisfy a craving.

And after a month, I find I feel different. I have more energy, though I have not yet lost a great deal of weight. But it is in my mind where most gratification occurs. For I now have self-control where previously none existed. I have never been particularly interested in cooking, now I make a ritual of every meal, trying different combinations of food and enjoying the results.

And as my body aspires to greater things, so does my work. One day, I receive a phone call from the manager of the bookshop in Port Douglas.

'Hi, Marie. We need some more cards, but that's not the reason I'm ringing. An American company is making a film up here at present and one of the stars - don't ask me who, I'm not a movie-goer - came into the shop and saw your cards. He wants to buy a painting to take back with him, and when he heard you were in Melbourne, he suggested having an exhibition so he could choose from a selection. There's a space in the local hall where they sometimes run art exhibitions, so that's a possibility. I know it's a long way to come to put on a show, but I've had periodic enquiries from some of the locals in terms of buying your work, so it could be quite successful for you. And it might be easier to sell paintings in a tourist area, particularly if they're all of local scenes. Anyway, I'll give you the phone number to check out the hall and you can think about it.'

I am excited by this offer, to me it would certainly create a much-needed goal to put a body of work together. After a few phone calls, I discover the hall will be available in mid-August, which gives me six weeks to finish off the work I began, following my return in April.

I ring Em and tell her my news. She too, is excited. 'Gosh, Mar, you might become famous, wouldn't that be something!'

I do not tell her about Weight Watchers. Fear of failure, coupled with the fact that at this stage I do not look very different, prompts me keep this news to myself.

thirty-nine

Phoebe is aware of Em's depression increasing as the time draws close to Dylan's birthday. He would have been twenty-one. Phoebe had turned twenty-one at the beginning of May and Em hadn't stayed at the party till the end; the occasion had been too difficult for her to cope with.

Kevin and Em go to see 'Babette's Feast' with Phoebe, who is planning an exhibition after she graduates which will involve a conceptual piece to include food paintings and recipes with cooking utensils. 'Eating is such a social ritual,' she tells Em. 'Look at Homer's *Iliad*. Achilles cut himself off from everyone and wouldn't eat. And feasting was the act which brought him back into the social structure. I want to make a real feature of the ritual of eating.'

Inspired by the film, Em decides to have a family dinner party where everyone will bring something. Em seems much better, thinks Phoebe. Calmer and not so manic. Dy's birthday falls on Bastille Day. 'Well, he always did like drama,' says Em, smiling wryly.

There had been a mass said for Dylan at the local church her father attended. They had all gone, and lit candles for him afterwards.

The dinner is impressive. Em has set a little table aside. On it stands a photograph of Dylan when he was at school, looking happy with himself and his life; a candle she had bought in Surfers, a bonnet Cia had knitted when he was a baby, a gold locket of her grandmother's which contained a lock of his baby hair, and the beanie he wore to work with his earrings placed on it.

'Look, Em,' says Phoebe, hugging her, tears in her eyes. 'You've made your own exhibition.' Phoebe brings a cake. On it is written '*For Dylan*', with a twenty-first

birthday key underneath. 'It's called a 'Lumberjack Cake',' says Phoebe. 'I thought Dy would have liked that.'

Peter and Cia bring lasagne. 'This is truly authentic Italian lasagne from Cia's province,' smiles Peter, kissing her. 'We didn't bring the children, apart from Patrick, as it was a school night,' apologises Cia, 'but they've sent a card, which they all signed.'

Her father brings pumpkin soup. 'My speciality from the vegetable garden,' he says.

Em bakes a cheesecake which Dy had loved for dessert at many family dinners when he was younger. Patrick, watching her in the kitchen as she drizzles chocolate on the top says, 'Look Auntie Emmie, you've made an Aboriginal cake.'

At the end of the meal, Peter makes a speech which brings tears to everyone's eyes. Listening, Phoebe recalls Em's words in the birthday remembrances in the morning newspapers. *'Dear Dy, Today would have been your 21st birthday. May the key turn for you in another door in another world'*.

Kevin plays a tape of an African Mass - 'A Latin Mass sung in Congolese' - he tells them, and they drink his health in port, except Em who is drinking tea. There is an unexpected bonus. In the middle of dinner, a friend from the agency rings and tells her that his wife had a baby girl that morning.

'Do you know,' says Phoebe. 'In Bali, they believe that when someone dies, their soul passes on to someone else. That's why children are considered to be so important.'

Em looks around at the people she loves most and feels Dy's presence and experiences peace and a deep sense of gratitude.

forty

Em goes to see Phoebe's display which is part of her end-of-semester assessment. She is not looking forward to the experience, but feels fatalistically drawn to see this graphic interpretation of Dylan's death.

Phoebe has warned her, 'You don't have to go, Em. I don't want to upset you. I did this for me. It's a tribute to Dy and it has a message, too. I guess you could call it social welfare art.'

Phoebe sits and goes through her cassette tapes while she waits for Em. She is remembering the time Dy took her to Bob Dylan. 'Well, you were named for him,' she had said. 'We just pronounce it differently. We should go. He's a legend. They're playing at Kooyong.'

He was supposed to pick her up half an hour before the concert started. She had been excited, Em had told her about seeing Bob Dylan in the mid-sixties. 'He was this little guy sitting at the piano, and he'd say obscure things like, 'This is a song about the Sphinx, no, it's a song about Mrs Sphinx', and then start playing something like 'Ballad of a Thin Man'. And the band. They looked as if he'd gone into Tattersalls' pub, beloved by RMIT students at that time, and picked up a few of the drinkers.'

Now Phoebe waited to see him some twenty years later. And waited for Dy. The concert would have begun by now. She started to cry from pure frustration. This was to have been a big event for her. Dy finally showed up twenty minutes after the support act would have started.

She punched his arm. 'Where *were* you?' He was stoned and she could smell beer on his breath.

'Settle down,' he said, smiling lopsidedly. 'Won't have come on yet anyway.'

During the concert, she was disturbed at the sight of an older man fondling a young boy, younger than me, thought Phoebe, shocked, he only looked about fourteen. She nudged Dy who was rolling a joint. 'Look at that,' hissed Phoebe. 'Do you think he likes it?'

'What?' said Dy, absently, glancing up briefly. **'Mmm, probably.'**

Phoebe got annoyed with Dy when he wouldn't express opinions. To her, he seemed to exist on a series of physical sensations which were all linked together.

The music lifted her up with its plaintive harmonica and heartfelt poetry, and the rousing duets with Tom Petty had everyone screaming for more. Dylan sang a final song and the crowd streamed out into the darkness of Glenferrie Road.

I can even hear the trams clattering over the railway crossing if I concentrate, thinks Phoebe now, looking at her watch as she waits for Em to arrive.

Phoebe has set up the exhibition in her space at the college. She looks nervously at Em as she walks in. There is a black sheet as a makeshift wall closing off the area.

'It's all behind here,' she tells Em.

A sign on the front proclaims *'the second bedroom on the left'*. Phoebe starts the tape and hands her a sheet of paper. On it is written,

'the second bedroom on the left'

Social Drama as an Art Form

Music: 'Touched by the Hand of God' from 'Substance 1987', by New Order.

Poetry: Excerpts from 'Stray Birds', by Rabindranath Tagore.

Phoebe holds back the sheet and Em enters the space. She is confronted by a large mixed media work depicting a small boy, recognisable as Dylan as a child. He is seated

beside a painting, his hands clasped in his lap, his head turned to view the work. She sees it is a collaged image of him as an adult, a huge closeup of his face, but it has been dissected multiple times to form a grid. The child is whole, the adult is fragmented, thinks Em.

Turning, she observes a small television set, silently operating beside her. Em catches her breath; it is a video of Dylan at fifteen, hitting a tennis ball around the backyard after a family barbecue. The figures of her father and Phoebe's younger brother, Christopher, periodically fill the screen; they had been playing together. She has not seen the video since Dylan died. Phoebe must have asked Kevin for a loan of it. Phoebe has copied the tape so that Dylan's animated movements with the ball and the racquet are endlessly repeated. The video, though in colour, has in this instance been reduced to black and white, in keeping with the monochromatic collage.

The music begins then, a throbbing rhythmic percussion. Phoebe has designed the exhibition in three sections, partitioned off from each other. All of them are entitled, *'the second bedroom on the left'*, and 'A', 'B', and 'C' form additional labels, pertaining to specific stages of Dylan's life, namely birth, adolescence and death. The display has been organised so that the work cannot be viewed from a distance. A large piece of board, painted black, effectively blocks Em's vision, intensifying the oppressive atmosphere Phoebe has created in this confined space. Three narrow openings, positioned at eye level, have been cut into the board. These are situated in front of each partition, so that the suspended multiple layers which form the focus of the display, can be viewed.

The first stage, 'A', refers to Dylan's birth. A black picture frame hangs next to the title. In the top left-hand corner is a small photograph of a private room in a maternity ward. A hospital bed with a bassinet can be seen in the foreground. Both are unoccupied.

Underneath the photograph is a map. The map has a cross marking the hospital location.

Em looks through the first opening, which is adjacent to the frame marked 'A'. Phoebe had borrowed garments and photos of Dy's, faithfully returning all in good order. Now Em sees that she has made photocopies of the garments and mounted them on acetate; tiny bonnets, shoes and the matinee jacket knitted by Cia and herself have been juxtaposed, together with his birth notice and the hospital ID which had hung from his bassinet. Photocopies of his toys, with magazines and gifts for Em in celebration of the birth, have been cut out and suspended in amongst these, as well as a copy of his birth certificate. There is no colour present, everything has been reduced to the stark severity of black and white.

The next picture frame, 'B', shows a picture of the bedroom of an adolescent, positioned on a map of the Camberwell area with a cross approximating Em and Kevin's house. Once again, the bed is empty. Posters of rock stars decorate the walls, there is a cricket set in the corner, and books stand on a desk. Em recognises the room as Dylan's, remembering that she had taken a picture of it when he was doing a project on still life. He had deliberately aimed to make the room as tidy as possible, though he had never been messy at that age anyway. Through the window, Phoebe has displayed more photocopies; of jeans, a T-shirt, a can of coke, McDonald's wrappers, tickets to a rock concert, as well as a copy of Dy's end-of-year marks, when he was doing well at school.

But it is the third window which Em dreads, and this is the one Phoebe has put most effort into. The picture frame for 'C' also displays a bedroom, once again with a vacant bed, but this one is a fairly faithful recreation of how Dylan's room had been when he was found. There are clothes piled up in a corner, an unmade and messy bed, the

mattress on the floor, a desk - yes, Phoebe had even put a bottle of port on it, an electric guitar propped against the wall. The window now reveals copies of a flannel shirt and torn jeans, with the knitted beanie he always wore. They are arranged on the floor to form a life-sized image. Beside this is a photocopy of a hypodermic needle, a dessert spoon and a scrunched up piece of silver foil. The most chilling aspects are the cardiac packs used by the ambulance officers which surround the image. Phoebe must have picked them up and kept them, thinks Em, heart pounding at this graphic recreation of the room in which her son had died. Above the effigy hang the remnants Dylan left behind, his wallet, bank statements, letters, tapes, the book she gave him for his birthday. Even though all the objects have been reduced to photocopies, the scene is graphic enough to be disturbingly real.

It is then that Em becomes aware that the music has faded away and been replaced with other sounds. They had made a tape of the inquest, using a miniature recorder, the account of which was faint but discernible, and it is this which finally brings tears to Em's eyes. She hears snatches of the statements, hers included, beginning with the pathology report, read out in muffled monotones, *'...found dead on bedroom floor...the body was that of a tall muscular male...loving child with a beautiful personality...hard to control...started to go downhill...told me he was using heroin...using it for four years...destructive element led to his death...'*, *'...Did you actually see the deceased inject any heroin himself?...'*, *'...knew he was going off to score...telling him not to do it...told me he had overdosed and was dead...'*, *'...ripped him off...given him extra to make up for it...tried to wake him up...checked for a pulse but couldn't find one...'*, *'...cut open his shirt...connected to cardiac monitor...no resuscitation...dead for some time...'*, *'...didn't want him using...told me he'd stopped...really sick, throwing up...ended up going to hospital...drinking heavily...lost a lot of weight...personality changed...'*, *'...depressed about*

work...wasn't getting much money...handed over \$120...given a foil of heroin...took it home...', '...observed male body on the floor...face was purplish...saw syringe with a needle attached...CID were contacted...collected various personal papers...', '...And I further find that the deceased himself contributed to the cause of death'.

Oh fuck, thinks Em wildly, now emotionally ravaged, giving herself totally over to her grief, tears running down her face. What a fucking terrible waste! And all that stuff about how terrible he looked and how he was in so much trouble and I didn't do a fucking thing. Jesus, what kind of mother was I, I didn't do anything!

She says as much as she weeps on Phoebe's shoulder.

'Em, Em, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have brought you here.'

'No, I had to see this, I had to go through this sober and really feel it. Otherwise it's just going to keep haunting me forever and driving me crazy. I have to get free of it, deal with it and move on.'

Phoebe looks into Em's eyes, holding her gently by her shoulders.

'Remember when we all talked about it and you said you couldn't help Dy? It was just after you stopped drinking. Dad said - and I remember quite clearly - he said you couldn't help Dy, but we couldn't help you either. We were watching you slide off into this dark space with a glass instead of a needle. It was you who said people could only help themselves with their addictions. They couldn't do it for anyone else, no matter how close they were, no matter how much pain or trouble they saw that person in.'

Sniffing, wiping her nose and dabbing at her eyes, Em suddenly sees Phoebe's wisdom as cathartic.

'There's an end too', says Phoebe, hugging her. 'See?'

And lifting the black curtain, she reveals a large painting, which a carefully constructed photographic grid of Dylan's face fills, overpainted in soft pale washes of

gold and blue, the only colour present in the exhibit. The composition conveys an impression of tranquillity and harmony, signifying that Dylan has become one with that other world he now inhabits, thinks Em, transfixed at this depiction of her son at peace. As Phoebe lights a candle at the base of the work, her voice, clear and strong, comes over the tape.

*I think of other ages that floated upon the stream of life
and love and death and are forgotten,
and I feel the freedom of passing away.
Around the sunny island of life swell day and night
death's limitless song of the sea.*

And as the candlelight glows softly, the sound of the sea is heard, the crash of the waves on the shore interspersed with the cries of seagulls. The sound rises and dies away. Phoebe extinguishes the candle, and the room is once again as it was.

Phoebe touches Em on the shoulder as she stands in silence, looking at the images.

'You know he's happy now, Em, you told me about him contacting you the night he died and I told you about the seance Dy's friend went to.'

'I hadn't thought of it as being contacted,' says Em slowly, as Phoebe switches off the television and the tape recorder.

'Well, how else could he communicate with you except through your mind?' states Phoebe assertively, patting her arm, seeing that Em has not yet come to terms with this form of communication.

Em absorbs this revelation in silence.

'What kind of response have you had as far as assessment goes?' she asks cautiously after a pause. 'Did they give you a good mark?'

'They said it was very innovative,' says Phoebe. 'I haven't had my results yet, but I don't really consider that to be the most important part. Doing it, actually putting all the bits together and working my way through it, both emotionally and conceptually, that was what mattered. I think a lot of people thought it was a bit macabre. But in *this* place, well! There's one girl who does tampon paintings using tea bags and this other guy paints dicks all the time. They don't like you to produce what people would normally hang on their walls, it's considered boring and traditional. Unfortunately, I'm not sure how you can actually make any money producing this kind of art.' And she laughs.

'How did you feel...well, how did you feel, handling the baby clothes?' asks Em hesitantly, as they walk downstairs. They have not spoken intimately of the termination since it happened.

'Fine, Em, really. It wasn't right for me and I have absolutely no regrets. Though I'm sorry I put you through it all at that time, it must have been terrible for you.'

At the lunch after the inquest, Em had got very drunk and told Phoebe that if she had the baby, she would adopt it. Even then, Phoebe had been quite adamant. **'No, Em,'** she had said. **'It would be a bad thing for us both. It's one thing to terminate it now, but if I had it, I'd want it.'**

Now, Em is relieved to hear Phoebe's conclusive words regarding her decision. It is another aspect of the trauma of the previous summer she can put to rest.

forty-one

They arrive at the airport with plenty of time to spare. Kevin leaves Em in the coffee shop while he goes to the check-in counter.

'Where are the tickets?' he asks her.

'Here,' she says, rummaging through the travel bag.

But when she pulls them out, she sees they are last year's tickets, bought to go to Surfers Paradise. 'I know they're here, I packed them,' she says calmly, more calmly than she feels. And sure enough, they are there, tucked behind her novel.

As Kevin walks away, Em stares at the tickets marked for Surfers, recalling that day the previous August which now seems so long ago.

It was raining then, when they had arrived at Tullamarine. The cold, grey day seemed fitting after the bright clear weather which they'd experienced at the funeral the previous day. Getting out of the car, the diesel fumes, familiar for many years with the anticipated excitement of overseas destinations ahead, now had a different connotation.

Em and her father sat in the bar together while Kevin checked them in. Sitting on the plane, she fumbled for a cigarette to light when the 'no-smoking' sign went off. The safety procedure was read out and demonstrated. No-one took any notice. She had always loved flying, takeoffs especially, but now it filled her with overwhelming grief. She stared out through the rain-swept window at the dull grey and green landscape as the plane built up speed, wondering if the sensation was how that last rush felt for Dy. She had never been more conscious of the experience than she was now; the pause at the top of the runway, the enormous surge of acceleration, the brief seconds of phenomenal speed and the sudden shift in equilibrium as the plane lifted into the air, would always

stand for her as his moment of death. As the plane left the earth, it seemed to her, so did his soul leave his body. And not without joy, she was sure. She did not know where the comparison had originated from. In the past, she had always loved this sensation of racing down the runway, it filled her with exhilaration. 'This must have been how it felt,' she said shakily to Kevin, seated between herself and her father. And they grieved in silence together, the parents and the grandfather, bound by the loss of the child who would not carry their name into another generation. Her mind felt shredded, her thoughts seemed like loose strands which had no interconnection, no linking. Rational thought as she had known it no longer existed, she was incapable of making decisions. She was only conscious of her physical sensations as she stared out of the window at the thick cloud through which the plane rose and dipped on its northbound route. 'Could I please have a brandy and soda?' was her first request.

So Em reflects just over a year later on her way to Port Douglas as she waits for the rattle of the breakfast trolley. Behind her sit three men on their way to a computer conference. They joke and swap shop talk. 'Who wants a hash brown?' 'These rolls must have come out of the freezer.' 'I sat there for twenty minutes swapping disks. It might be portable, but it keeps running out of memory.'

They must be talking about the Macintosh computer, she decides. Pretty new on the market, only in the last five years or so, she had used one in her last job. So different to the IBM computer, with its 'what-you-see-is-what-you-get' concept, she keeps losing files off her, what did they call it, a desktop. 'It tries to simulate a working desktop, so you put your files into folders, things like that,' she tells Kevin, but this doesn't connect in his mind. 'When the document is up on the screen, it actually looks like a sheet of

paper and it uses icons - little pictures - to give you instructions. The graphics are the best,' she informs him, showing him samples of her doodling and layouts. He had been excited by it. 'This concept needs to be applied to IBM, it could make for much more interesting training manuals - it's a really different approach.'

She is pleased at his response. Since emerging from her pill and alcohol hiatus, she has become aware that he has been suffering in silence, and for a long time. Her world has for a prolonged period excluded him and she is now trying to draw him back into it, this new world filled with reality.

He interrupts her thoughts, frowning at the boarding passes. 'If we change in Sydney, do we still have the same seats?'

As the plane flies over Sydney, sparkling in the morning sun, Em marvels as always at the vast expanse of water and the meandering coastline, sprinkled with houses amongst the trees.

'Imagine having a waterfront home', she says. Kevin takes her hand, pleased to see her happy and relaxed.

The plane is delayed. It circles the airport, waiting for the landing clearance. The men behind her still joke, despite being late for their nine o'clock meeting.

The plane lands, there is a unanimous clicking of seatbelts and passengers rise and stand in the aisle, impatient to be on their way. Em and Kevin are among the last, dawdling with the other holiday makers who carry straw hats and children's toys. 'Where's my colouring book?' screams a small child behind her.

In Sydney, they drink cappuccinos in the airport lounge. 'The plane coffee is terrible,' says Kevin.

Em goes to the toilet to avoid the claustrophobic crush on the plane. A woman stands outside a cubicle. 'Crystal, have you *been!*' she shrieks to the unseen occupant.

En route to Cairns, Em takes off her cotton top to reveal a T-shirt.

'Getting set for the sun,' says Kevin, smiling at her.

'That's what it says, S-U-N F-U-N,' she points to the letters.

He rolls his eyes. Kevin hates T-shirts with logos. David once gave him a T-shirt with *'I'm the boss and I don't take shit from anyone'*, written on the back of it. He wears it to work one day and absentmindedly takes off his shirt, only to replace it five minutes later when he goes out to serve an astonished customer to whom Kevin has always appeared a serious and dignified person.

Now, he pokes doubtfully at his dessert.

'What do you think this is?' he asks her.

'I think it's trying to be cheesecake,' she replies.

'Well, it'll have to try a lot harder,' he says tasting it and making a face.

Em is surprised at herself on this flight. Flying and drinking have always gone together, 'the ultimate state' as she once described it to Sue. Though nervous, she eats handfuls of Smarties to contend with her anxiety, previously combated with vodka and valium. 'The two Vs are an absolute must for the perfect flight', she was fond of saying. Though I did overdo it a few times, getting off at the other end totally bombed, she reflects now, remembering the time she lost a piece of hand luggage containing all her photos of New York. 'No more V&Vs,' she had said to Kevin at the airport, walking past the duty-free shop. 'Well you better get some M&Ms,' he had replied.

Cautiously, she examines her mind, checking for fear and is relieved to find she can keep her anxiety at bay via distractions. She sniffs the headphones, ripping open the

plastic, exclaiming 'Oh, smell this! Fifties plastic - don't you remember your school books smelling like this?'

Kevin doesn't, but she is contented, playing with the dial and adjusting the volume. The songs have changed too, from the ones they played this time last year. They fly into Cairns to the strains of Steve Winward's 'Roll With It'.

The sky is overcast, but it is warm. As they disembark, she remembers stepping off the plane at Coolangatta the previous August, the wind whipping her hair, the sky blue and clear, as she walked across the tarmac into the terminal. The trip to Surfers had passed in a blur of Norfolk pines, high rise apartments and shopping centres interspersed with patches of bush and suntanned people. Tugun, they had gone through Tugun, she remembers the name.

There is a bus ride then to Port Douglas, a picturesque drive along the ocean, grey-green and rough. It is mid-afternoon by the time they arrive at the motel. She unpacks while Kevin reads the paper, telling her facts. He is mad on facts.

'Did you know the world didn't get clean till 1880?' he yells from the next room. 'Prior to that no-one washed, everyone was dirty.'

'Oh,' says Em, distracted. 'Do you think the world has become better since we got cleaned up?' He doesn't answer. Looking for the next fact, thinks Em as she puts socks into a drawer which won't shut properly.

Who put my clothes away last August, she wonders. I don't even know how I packed. So she thinks back, as she packs away their swimwear, hoping the elastic has not perished on her bathers.

forty-two

Early one morning, walking along the beach while Kevin has his swim, looking at the remains of the previous day's sandcastles, she finds a silver ring in amongst the debris of broken shells and ribbons of seaweed which has been washed up by the tide during the night. Kevin tries it on, it fits. He has never worn a wedding ring; now he looks admiringly at this find on his left hand.

'It's a pirate's ring,' says Em, her eyes shining. 'Washed up from the deep.'

And it seems symbolic. He feels himself caught up in the romance of this place, so different from the Queensland of the previous year, feels a new strength present in the relationship.

It had begun to improve after the drinking episode at Sue and David's. A few days later, he arrived home to find her almost in a trance. For a moment, he feared she had been drinking, but then she said, 'I felt Dy with me today. I didn't see him, but he was with me and there were things that came through my mind from him, things I couldn't have thought up by myself. I wrote it down.'

And she had showed him. He found it strange, but he believed her, there was something in her eyes which was different.

'I feel as if I've been spiritually awakened, as if I've been asleep and some force beyond my understanding has summoned me from the state of mind I've been living in, and now everything seems changed.'

And she has been different. The meetings with Karen have borne fruit and her confidence is improving. Em has become more articulate about her problem and the available solution. Once he comes home and sees a note stuck up on the fridge, '*F-E-A-R*

- *False Evidence Appearing Real*'. This sounds a bit abstract to him, but she seems thrilled by the interpretation and what it conveys to her.

'It's projection,' she says. 'I'm always worrying about what's going to happen. And half the time it never happens anyway.'

This does make sense to him. She has always had enormous trouble coping with the day-to-day, making her dissatisfied with her achievements, impatient with her goals.

forty-three

It rains in the night. A blustery wind blows fiercely around the motel, reminding her of the night Dylan was born. And suddenly, there she is back in the labour ward, with the nurses looking disparagingly at her nipples and telling her she won't be able to breastfeed.

The night before, she had arrived at the hospital with Kevin, filled with uncertainty, a towel between her legs. Kevin was sent home. 'We'll ring you when she starts to do something.' She was left in the room alone. The light was dim, the clock on the wall the only reminder that time had not actually stopped. The wind howled and whistled round the building which was old. It started to hurt, why didn't anyone tell her how much it actually hurt? She began to moan and cry (in the morning they told her they thought she was Italian). Finally, at 3.30am, he was born. She could scarcely believe the wonder of it all. She had entered another world, one which seemed a great deal more meaningful than the previous one.

Unable to sleep, plagued by her memories, Em slips out of bed and goes for a walk. A group of kids are coming home from a party, laughing and leaning on each other as they walk unsteadily past her in Macrossan Street. One trips and almost falls. 'You right, mate?' asks his friend.

In Anzac Park, the trees drip incessantly. A sprinkler unnecessarily waters the grass around St Mary's. The town is deserted, the streets wet, the sky leaden and unfriendly. Through the window in the pub she can see an old man cleaning up. There is a strong smell of stale beer. Further up, another man delivers bread and the sweet warm

fragrance makes her want to be back with Kevin, eating breakfast. She walks quickly back along the road to the motel.

One night they go to a restaurant for dinner. Em listens to the sound of the waves pounding on the sand and the rustle of the wind in the palm trees.

'Can I have the Creme Caramel, please, but without the Grand Marnier sauce,' she says firmly.

She likes Port Douglas. Since she has never been here before, there is nothing to remind her of the pain of the previous August. She is glad it is so hot here, she finds the humidity pleasantly oppressive. Since her pregnancy was diagnosed, she has been advised not to exercise until the bleeding has stopped. She feels languid and relaxed.

Every morning, she reads her 'thought for the day' and meditates on it as she trudges slowly along Five Mile Beach while Kevin takes his morning swim. Sometimes she walks a short distance up the hill to the lookout point, looking up at the fruit bats as they hang motionless in the early morning sun. If she's early enough, they are still chattering and settling after the night's exploits, their shrill cries cutting through the air. She likes to watch them spread their wings and fly to a selected spot, positioning themselves carefully before they suspend themselves from the branches.

There is an untamed quality about this place which she had certainly not encountered in Surfers. It is almost like a different country. The vegetation seems disproportionately large, dwarfing the houses. As her dessert arrives, looking out of the restaurant window, she notices that one leaf virtually covers the entire pane of glass.

She is more tired with this pregnancy. Kevin is careful to limit their activities, since he is well aware of Em's propensity to do too much of everything. They find renewed

pleasure in each other's company, spending most evenings watching television, while she knits a jumper for the baby.

'Do you think we should find out what it is?' she asks him. This is a new thing. They had to wait in 1967. To find out the sex of the child, one waited until it was born.

'No, I'd like a surprise. How about you?'

She considers. 'Yes, I'd like a surprise, too.'

They hire a car and visit the Shipwreck Museum, stopping for coffee opposite St Mary's-by-the-Sea. The local pub offers excellent fish and chips and as she eats, staring out to sea, she has no urge to drink. A great peace has descended upon her; she feels as if she has laid Dylan to rest and she can now move on with her life.

forty-four

Late next morning they sit by the pool. Kevin lies on a recliner, reading.

'I want to take a picture of you to stick up on the fridge at home,' she calls. 'Put your legs together, I can see up your shorts.'

He takes off his glasses, puts down *Oscar and Lucinda* and grins cheesily up at her.

'No, not like that,' says Em laughing. 'Look normal.'

'Oh, you mean like *this*.' And he grimaces back at her, crossing his eyes, which sets her off into a fit of giggling.

It seems to him that it has been years since they shared these enjoyable trivial interchanges, and he is grateful for this renewed experience. Her depression and self-imposed isolation after Dylan's death, followed by the strain of early sobriety as she painfully began to reconcile herself with her alcoholism, have not left a lot of room for pleasure over the past months.

She is more settled in her mind now, he thinks, watching her as she sits on the side of the pool, lazily swirling her feet through the water. She is clearly thrilled at the prospect of another child and this has had a significant bearing on her more positive attitude, added to the fact that she is much more committed to staying sober, having realised she can only maintain it within the powerful confines of the recovery program.

He is cautious regarding this baby, mainly because they do not yet know whether she will carry it to full term. As for Em, she seems surprisingly philosophical.

'If it's meant to be, it will be,' she tells him, when he tentatively suggests she should be sitting down more. 'The doctor said to be moderate - imagine *me* moderate - in my physical activities, but he said a lot of these cases are OK. He also said it won't really

help a lot if I take to my bed for a couple of months. So it's better if we just take it as it comes.'

forty-five

Em lies on her back, arms folded behind her head, listening to the sound of the sea and the increasing noise of the traffic which rushes past the motel on its way to the highway, as the daylight creeps around the edges of the curtains. Beside her, Kevin sleeps soundly, his back towards her. There is a clock ticking in the room, a wall clock. She does not like this sound. She remembers the sound of the clock ticking in the bedroom the night Dylan had died, penetrating through her panic-stricken mind after the police had come. She had bought the clock in K-Mart. 'Oh, look, a Mickey Mouse clock,' she had exclaimed in delight, even more taken with it since it was a reproduction of an old-fashioned clock with the alarm bells on the top. There had been no need to set the alarm that morning.

The previous week had been the first anniversary of Dylan's death.

That morning, in the darkness of the bedroom, she had lit a candle in front of the photograph of Dylan and put on a tape. The haunting plaintive strains of 'The Way It Is' filled the room with its lilting melancholy. And they listened together, bereft, holding each other, weeping silent tears as they mourned their child, no longer of this world.

In the late afternoon, she and Kevin visited the graveside. The daisies had thrived and their delicate pink and white blooms softened the base of the headstone. It was Saturday and there were several people attending the graves of their loved ones. She felt a bond with these people, unspoken, unobserved, united as they were in bereavement.

Em was relieved not to be drinking on this day. It would have reduced her to a maudlin mess of self-pity with no room for the grief of others. 'Why is this night

different from all other nights of the year?' she said softly to herself, hearkening back to *Exodus*, as they watched the sun beginning to set over the distant hills.

They went to her father's for tea. He greeted her with affection. 'Emmie, you look so well. And what about this baby?' he smiled.

She took his hand, 'It's growing,' she said softly, gently placing his hand on her stomach. There had been no such intimacy with her first pregnancy. He looked shy, but pleased at her gesture to involve him with the beginnings of this new life.

'Well,' he said, rubbing his hands together briskly, as if he found this physical act of touching her too emotional, 'Come through. I've cooked a roast and, of course, pumpkin soup.'

Em found now that she could give herself over to her emotions in ways that were no longer neurotic or self-seeking. She hugged her father affectionately in the kitchen. 'Dear Dad, thanks for this. It's wonderful.'

And she looked contentedly around the carefully laid table with its candles, serviettes, glasses and cutlery set with military precision.

The memory of the meal and the reminiscences of happier days which frequented the conversation float through her mind now as she watches the room lighten and she drifts contentedly back to sleep.

forty-six

Em stands apprehensively at the door of the hall where Mar's exhibition opening is being held. She does not enjoy these occasions; what used to constitute pleasant social events now become tests of endurance. Get yourself a drink immediately, she remembers. Keep it filled and be vigilant. Vigilant. She feels like a soldier fighting an eternal battle which will never end.

Grabbing a glass of mineral water from the proffered tray, she takes a deep long draught and experiences an unexpected calm. She doesn't know anyone and she sees Mar surrounded by a group of people. I'll wait until she's alone, thinks Em. Kevin will meet her here later; he's had to go to Cairns to see some business contacts. She hopes he won't be late, she needs his steadying influence at such times.

Taking a deep breath, she begins to look at the paintings. There are large landscapes, depicting the country in and around Port Douglas. The mountains shrouded in mist, the moonlit sea and the luxuriant vegetation stretching as far as the eye can see, so foreign to her Melbourne eyes, have a mystical look. She refills her glass from the clear, still bubbling bottle, eats cheese and olives from the rapidly emptying dish. 'Don't get too hungry, too thirsty or too tired', is her adage these days, although she has trouble with the latter. Her manic disposition manifests itself in an inability to relax, a constant restlessness, an insatiable curiosity for new things, new experiences.

There are portraits, too. Mar-type portraits, the figures silhouetted against the landscapes. At one, her heart stops. It's Dy, from a photograph she had shown Mar months ago, taken on the beach at Phillip Island as the sun was setting. Her stomach contracts, her breathing quickens. Stay calm, she thinks. Look at this for what it is. It's a beautiful painting, a wonderfully inspired vision to keep and hold in my heart, she

tells herself. For he had been clean at the time. And happy, too, she remembers. Mar has captured his stance uncannily, hair blowing in the breeze and the dark red-brown of his form contrasting with the wonderful golden variegated light behind him. It seems to her that the hand of fate was already upon him, the light appears ready to absorb him in its majestic vastness.

Turning away, head dipped to hide her anguish, she is confronted by another painting, that of herself. She is depicted leaning out of a window, behind which the countryside is seen in the early morning light. Her stance is dejected, her form slumped, resting on the window sill. The room in the foreground looks the same as her room at the hospital, except that the centre never had a view like that. One hand, resting on her mass of curls, has a cigarette crushed within tightly clenched fingers, the smoke spiralling upwards. Why, Em thinks in surprise. I don't feel like that any more. I'm still having trouble, but not that desperate don't-want-to-be-here response to life. She remembers now. Mar asked if she could take a picture of her. 'No-one will know who you are, you'll have your back to the camera and when I take it, you'll just be a dark shape in front of the window.' It had been an idea for a further series of posters involving figures, but they were never used.

Looking at this frozen slice of time, her negative thinking reflected in her pessimistic pose, she realises how much her approach to life has changed and is suddenly indebted to Mar for these interpretations which have allowed her to look on her life and view the events in some sort of perspective. Taking a deep breath, she heads back for another drink.

The speeches begin. She is relieved as it restores a sense of time and place, it imparts order over the sudden chaos in her mind. As the words resound around the hall, she

looks at her glass. It is a wine-glass, thin, on an impractically long stem. She favours chunky sensible glasses, the type which look comfortable filled with bizarrely-coloured soft drink at children's parties. She does not like drinking out of wine-glasses now. Once she spent a fortune on glasses, seeking out those which would hold the most liquid. Still, this is temporary, she tells herself. In an hour it will be over and she can pursue the comfort of English Breakfast tea. These days she drinks tea as if there were no tomorrow.

Kevin taps her on the shoulder. His smile is kind and full of welcome. She is grateful, relieved to see him. Lately, almost as an afterthought, she has realised how much she loves him. She is also surprised that he is still with her, and affectionately too. More than I deserve, she thinks. No, mustn't think like that. I *do* deserve love, she tells herself firmly.

It is Mar's turn to speak. From the back of the room, Em appraises her eagerly, standing awkwardly behind the microphone as she thanks everyone for coming in that soft, deliberate voice of hers. Mar looks different, thinks Em. She looks thinner. Well, not thin, definitely not thin, but *thinner*.

She wonders how Mar will take her news. Probably think I'm mad, she thinks, hugging herself, but that's all right.

forty-seven

Watching Em and Kevin from across the room, I approach them shyly, not wishing to intrude on their intimacy, but Em sees me and breaking away, embraces me enthusiastically. I feel her pressure on my arms, feel her trembling slightly.

'I'm so pleased you came. When I didn't hear from you, I assumed you wouldn't be able to make it. Then I got such a shock when I was up on the dais and saw you in the crowd. You look wonderful,' I say, pulling back from her embrace, and looking into her radiant face.

She takes my hands in hers, squeezing them tightly. Same old Em, always wonderful physical responses that make me feel as if I am as close to her as anyone could be.

'How *are* you, Mar?' she says excitedly. 'Oh, I really love the work, it's so *good!* And the paintings of Dy and me are just wonderful!'

'Well,' I say, smiling. 'The backgrounds could be Port Douglas, so I thought I'd include them anyway. I'm fine, Em. I'm really thrilled to see you, it's such a long way to come for an opening.'

'Well, Kev had this business trip he'd been putting off for ages, so it coincided nicely. Mar, you look so well, are you on...well, are you on a *diet?*' She looks embarrassed at the question, so awkwardly presumed.

'I'm going to Weight Watchers,' I tell her, feeling a rush of pride. She has actually noticed that I have lost some weight without me telling her first.

'And you?' I have noted the mineral water. 'Have you stopped smoking?'

She looks at Kevin. 'Well, it was sort of imposed.'

I am astonished, Kevin does not strike me as the type who would enforce the breaking of one's personal habits. Rummaging in her handbag, she pulls out a picture. It does not

mean anything to me, this indistinct black and white image. However, I see her name in the corner and 'Mercy Hospital for Women' underneath. At first I think something's wrong, but it doesn't add up, she looks happy.

'We're having a baby. Next January.'

I feel my surprise reflect in my face. She laughs and then looks serious.

'It's not a replacement, I wouldn't want that. But I *would* like some grandchildren, even if I'm so old and doddering as to be quite useless. And there are problems. The placenta is torn away at one end. Here,' she says, pointing to the picture. 'The doctor thinks it will be OK, but there's still a risk I'll lose it. Also, I haven't had the tests for Down's yet. I'm forty-one, almost forty-two, so that's a big factor too.'

'Anyway,' she says, brightening. 'We'd like you to be a godmother, if everything goes well. We *have* to have a Catholic godmother,' she laughs.

As Kevin moves away to look at the painting of Dylan, she whispers conspiratorially, 'It's not all that easy having a baby at this age. My bladder seems to have aged badly. I keep having to change my knickers all the time.'

Laughing, I am pleased for Em, her happiness is infectious. Kevin looks delighted, although he has said little, and I sense this has brought them together. I feel apprehensive though. I know she has been sober barely four months and she has told me that major changes should be avoided in this initial period. Also, how will she cope if she miscarries, or must face the decision of termination, I wonder? Now who's projecting, I tell myself wryly.

'What are you smiling at?' Em asks as we walk off together, our arms linked.

'Oh, I was just thinking how much has changed since we first met and so much for the better.'

It has never failed to amaze me in the course of human existence, that we can form such intimate and lasting friendships in the most unusual of circumstances. And as we stand outside the hall on this warm August evening, looking down Macrossan Street towards Anzac Park with its tall palm trees in the gathering darkness, I am grateful for the impact we have had upon each other and for the changes in our lives which have been wrought from that contact. The trees rustle in the wind, someone calls to me from the hall doorway. We smile at each other and go inside.