

***Dead Reckoning* (novel)**

accompanied by

**The criminal parvenu:
narratives of transgression
and upward mobility (dissertation)**

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Abstract

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Novel – *Dead Reckoning*:

A housewife who thought she was happy discovers from an old letter that her husband, when they married, was really in love with someone else. Unable to rest until she tracks down this woman from long ago, the wife grows more obsessed until she is entangled in the woman's life and can't get out again. The past is always with us, even when it's someone else's: this is a story about love, death, and unintended consequences.

The novel *Dead Reckoning* takes a new approach to a well-established literary motif – a crime committed by one who has risen from low origins to a more secure social position: what the dissertation calls the “criminal parvenu”. Rather than a lone figure like those of the works studied in the dissertation, this novel's protagonist is a married woman who has sought to make something of her life through her husband. This permits investigation of themes including dependence versus autonomy, vicarious ambition, desire and possessiveness, all brought to bear on the more traditional pattern of the novel of (more usually *male*, with some exceptions) ambition-and-downfall.

Dead Reckoning, in its focus on the married couple, brings a new angle to the criminal parvenu story. Furthermore, the setting in contemporary Western Australia allows for a new dimension in implicit and sometimes explicit background addressing of the colonial crimes entailed by the rise of a “parvenu state”. While *Dead Reckoning* does include a crime and is of the psychological suspense genre, it is not a novel of detection, but a work exploring the criminal protagonist's own viewpoint, and derives influence from both traditional realist literary novels and domestic noir.

Dissertation – *The criminal parvenu: narratives of transgression and upward mobility*:

This is a study of selected novels from the nineteenth century onwards, from Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* (1830), through Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925) to Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955), and

including other relevant works in less detail but connecting them to the narrative of the criminal parvenu descended from Stendhal's work. Examining the motifs of imitation, doubling, ambiguity of crime and instability of identity, the dissertation contends that the criminal parvenu figure resists a fixed political interpretation as either social revolutionary or mere selfish individualist, instead lending itself to narratives that are arguably both progressive and reactionary. The dissertation concludes with an examination of how the novel component, *Dead Reckoning*, is related to the tradition under study.

Candidate's Declaration

The thesis is my own composition, all sources have been acknowledged and my contribution is clearly identified in the thesis. The thesis has been substantially completed during the course of enrolment in this degree at UWA and has not previously been accepted for a degree at this or another institution. This thesis **does not contain** work that I have published, nor work under review for publication.

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DEAD RECKONING

(novel)

De jolies pensées interlopes...
— “Pénélope”, Georges Brassens

Pen stood in the kitchen with her back turned to her mother. She was intent on scraping the salt from slices of eggplant, pale hair tucked back behind her ears, breathing calmly. Only the brisk strokes across each slice betrayed her feelings.

"You'll destabilise the whole thing," her mother muttered. "You can't just knock out walls wherever you please."

Mrs Stone drained her teacup, and got up to help herself to a refill.

"Gone cold," she said, peering into the glass-and-chrome pot. "New-fangled. Might be very chic, Pen, but it doesn't keep the tea hot, does it?"

'Now even the tea is my fault,' Pen thought. But aloud she only said, "I'll put the kettle on again."

She squinted at the box-like living room, trying to picture how it would look when she and Derrick were finished with these renovations. They were going to make the room L-shaped, since there was no need, after all these years, for that fourth bedroom.

Then it would be a bigger, better space for having friends over, which they knew they should do more often. They must make an effort to open up. At least that was what they said to each other.

"I hope you're finally going to do something about those steps," Mrs Stone said, nodding at the gap between kitchen and living-room, an old bugbear of hers.

Pen smiled grimly. She liked her 'sunken' kitchen. "Mum, you won't *know* the place."

The change was still hard to imagine. There were so many books and papers around, old cartons of things that needed clearing out before they could really start work. That little room had become nothing but a storage dump, a dust-trap netted with spider-webs. And she wanted to get on to the cardboard boxes – so much was rubbish, if you really sifted through it.

"Well," Mrs Stone sighed, "you'll have your work cut out for you. Don't say I didn't warn you. And the bulk of it will fall on you, since *he's* at school all day."

Pen put the eggplant slices on a tray now and brushed them with oil, then slipped them into the oven beneath the chunks of potato and pumpkin, the onions which were catching and searing on their bursting tops. But Derrick liked them almost blackened, caramelised.

"You know that black edge on food is carcinogenic," Mrs Stone said; but Pen was off in her own space, thinking of knocking out walls. She was used to her mother's soundtrack and had learned to tune out.

"There's a man at the sliding door," her mother said, and Pen wheeled around, startled. Nobody came here during the day. He looked strange. And with Derrick still at work. In a flash she tried to picture what to use in self-defence.

But the man called, "Mrs Barber?" and she nodded, feeling silly. Through the glass she saw he had a clipboard and pencil. She opened the door.

"I've got a parcel here," he said. "I knocked and knocked out front," he added, "but you obviously didn't hear me. You look like you've seen a ghost!"

Pen took the package, and the man jogged back to his van. The package was from Amazon, addressed to Derrick Barber.

"What's he been buying then?" her mother said.

"Books, I would imagine," Pen said drily. She placed the package on the dining table and thought: odd that Derrick hadn't mentioned ordering any books. That was unlike him. They usually discussed everything they bought, and certainly everything they wanted to read.

She thought for a minute of opening it. But it might be a surprise of some kind, after all, and that would spoil it. And he would know, too, because you couldn't easily close that flat packaging again.

She could, of course, look it up later on their Amazon web account, since they both used the same one. They didn't like too many credit card details floating out there. She could log in and see what it was. If she wanted to.

'I must be going dotty,' she thought, and laughed at herself for making mountains out of molehills. First the fright from the man at the door, and now these silly doubts about a parcel...

It was all this time alone. Practically a recluse, and only thirty-two. Of course she saw people in the mornings at Boys' College, when she was on the reception desk, but it was all rather automatic, the same things day in and day out, a child with a nosebleed to send to the school nurse, a parent down for an appointment. Then it was over by midday, not even overlapping with her "job share" partner by more than a few minutes.

She did go out to the supermarket, and to the organic store, but that was just about it. Her mother dropped by occasionally, if she could get a lift on someone's way, but that hardly counted. They were not visits Pen wanted.

Looking at her mother now as the kettle boiled, and fresh tea was made, Pen was almost guiltily glad she couldn't have children. As it turned out. Then there would have been even more visits, both ways. *O Grandmother, what big teeth you have...*

"I can drop you down at Gatelands, if you like," she said tentatively. "When you've finished your tea."

Mrs Stone tilted her head sideways. "I could help you make a start on all that rubbish in the spare room."

"No," Pen said. "I mean, no, you don't have to do anything like that. I wouldn't ask anyone else to! There's years of old stuff in there. And then Derrick will help, when he gets home. Why don't you let me give you a lift to the shops?"

Mrs Stone opened her eyes wide and sighed again, as if to say she could take a hint.

"Well, at least you've got the use of the car. That's no small thing."

They'd had no car when Pen was young, after her father left. Whenever she thought of those times, she saw her mother weighed down with plastic shopping bags on each arm, like a loaded scale, wobbling back from the supermarket; doing the walk all over again if she forgot something.

She would say, "Mum, why don't you go for your licence?"

"We can't afford a car. What use would the licence be?"

Before her father left, Pen had never noticed the cost of anything. Afterwards, it was like a refrain: *can't afford, can't afford*. A negative mantra.

Afterwards meant grey suburban isolation, flat yards in cleared, sandy areas where the only verticals were asbestos fences. Pen and her mother had lived in rental homes and had to move every year or two, when the cost went up or the owner was selling.

Sometimes she wondered if it was just the way her mother preferred it – never to put down roots entirely again. Pen had not been the grasping, hungry sort of teenager who must have every latest gadget, every trendy outfit. Yet she couldn't help feeling the pinch.

Her mother felt it too, but seemed to wear it like a badge of honour.

For Pen, it felt like walls closing in.

"Your mother's been here," Derrick said when he came home that evening, slow with fatigue, his short curls and trim beard damp from a drizzle that had set in, just in the dash from bus-stop to verandah.

"How do you know?" Pen laughed.

"I always know. I can *smell* it on you," he said, kissing her. "The smell of the eastern suburbs." He said it grimly, but he was smiling. Nonetheless, he said it a bit too often. "I'm just going to change. Are you okay?"

"Yes. I didn't get as much done as I'd hoped," Pen said. She was impatient to serve dinner, because it was his favourite. She'd left the mail package on the table, right in their way, hoping that would trigger an explanation from him. But when he saw it, he just raised his gingery eyebrows and picked it up, put it unopened into his briefcase.

"What was that one?" Pen said casually, setting out glasses and a jug of water.

"Oh, something for school." Derrick was head of department in Languages at the same Boys' College where Pen worked. "They usually go to the PO Box; I don't know why it came here. Must have gone by courier."

Pen steeled herself not to be pushy. Deep breathing helped. Birthday was too far off, but it could be for their anniversary, so insisting would be ill-mannered, if he was trying to keep it a surprise. It made her agitated not to know everything Derrick did, but she didn't want to upset him. Maybe it really *was* something for school.

"Anything good on t.v. tonight?" Derrick said, when he had finished eating, and Pen nodded.

"There's a new *Anna Karenina*. And I bought us some chocolate," she said, knowing that he liked a treat when they curled up to watch television together. Derrick laughed.

She'd watched something like it, a much earlier mini-series version, with her mother when she was small, but all she remembered was the ghastly scene of the woman throwing herself under a train at the end.

That was hardly suitable for a child, Pen realised now. But then she had seen and read all sorts of things above her age when she was growing up, since there were only the two of them, herself and her mother, and no one to judge or object. It had been company, in a way, and her mother had liked the fact that Pen could understand things almost as an adult could. Or at least her mother had seemed to think so.

Now watching this latest version with Derrick, Pen thought, 'I can't have understood this at all, or I would have remembered it.'

When the programme was over and the chocolate was gone, they sat on the sofa a minute or two, with the lights still off.

"I don't know how I'll sleep after that," Derrick said.

"You mean the chocolate," Pen said. She'd realised with some dismay her error: she'd bought the coffee-filled one Derrick wasn't so keen on. Its wrapper looked like the plain dark sort. But he'd eaten it without complaint. Her own head was buzzing.

"No – well, yes – but I meant the movie. The series."

"You didn't like it?" Pen asked.

"Oh, it was very well done. But the whole adultery thing – it's so distressing. Especially because you *sympathise* with her, you know."

Pen nodded. "But she pays."

"I know. It's not that, even. I just can't stand the thought of deception. That kind of double life."

He leaned over and kissed Pen, the same kind of kiss he'd always given, as if his whole soul were in it. Like a transfusion, Pen thought.

"I'm lucky I have you," Derrick said. "I would die if you ever left *me*."

'Despite the *smell of the eastern suburbs*,' Pen thought. But he'd probably had a hard day at work, Pen reasoned, and it had made him emotional. Tired, and more inclined to say extreme things like that.

Yet she knew he meant what he said. That was something she relied on in Derrick. He might tell a temporary white lie to hide a surprise gift, but he was honest. Whenever anything had gone wrong, however minor, in the whole ten years they'd been married, he'd always told her straightaway, and they'd fixed it together. And it was never anything other than minor.

Pen suspected he was constitutionally incapable of deceiving her. That was why the mystery parcel was nothing to worry about. But she had decided, after all, not to think about that again.

In the event Derrick did go off to sleep quite easily, because they made love, the quick way that Pen preferred. That always relaxed him to the point where he couldn't stay alert for more than a few minutes afterwards.

Not that Pen minded: she liked to watch his dim outline lying in the dark, rising and falling steadily, and know that he had gone ahead of her calm and satisfied into the night, as if she were a mother watching over a child.

Mostly Derrick's rest was still and deep, though there had been a very few times over the ten years of their marriage she'd seen him twitch or even convulse in nightmare, interior trauma he usually couldn't remember the next day. Once, he had even lifted his arm and belted her from his side of the bed, woken only by her yell.

"Oh my God," he'd said, sitting up suddenly. "I dreamt you were choking me. You had your hands around my neck and you were trying to kill me. I can't believe I hit you. And I can't believe I would *dream* that. Darling, I'm so sorry."

"It's all right," she said. "Lucky you only got my shoulder."

Derrick was mortified, but Pen had to laugh.

"You can't be held accountable for what your unconscious cooks up," she said, and they had made love then, too, slowly and closely, moulded against each other, as if to repair the imaginary damage, to reinstate the true order of things and wipe the memory of the ridiculous nightmare.

Now he reached over to her from the depths of sleep so that they faced the same way, and wrapped one arm around her, tucking it over her belly as if that were simply where he belonged, and Pen let go, finally, of her wakefulness, and sank down to join him in her separate dreams.

In the morning they drove off to work together, as they always did. He would get the bus home later, because she finished earlier.

The school was about twenty minutes away down the hill, or more if there was a traffic problem, which increasingly there was, as "estates" grew up everywhere and brick-and-orange-tile replaced trees. The Hills were "booming", people said. The pocket of bush Pen and Derrick so treasured seemed to be diminishing daily.

In the beginning Pen had thought Hills people must care about trees, since those who lived in the cheaper wasteland where she'd grown up were indifferent.

But Derrick, born into the middle class and therefore the last word, had said, "No, it's a marker of affluence, it's not for environmental reasons. The right kind of backdrop for the right kind of people. They'll still traipse dieback through the bush in their expensive hiking boots. Trust me, people are green when it suits them."

They'd rented the house up there when they were first married, and then bought it as soon as they could, forward-planning, thinking they'd need a place that size when children came along. But children never did.

Their house was a typical Hills place from the old days, before big money had moved up there. Wood and iron, up on stilts, not quite what people now called a “pole home”, but a real bush retreat, freezing in winter if not for the wood-burning stove, and dark relief in the searing West Australian summers. Pen’s mother had disapproved.

“A tinderbox!” she always said. “In the middle of all those trees! It’s just foolhardy.”

Yet ten risky Februaries had come and gone without so much as a lick of flame approaching, even one year when the National Park, just down the road, had been threatened. You could call it luck. But Pen preferred not to dwell on the fear of fire. Everything came at some kind of cost.

And the whole thing with her mother mattered less because she had Derrick. Because they had each other, and supported each other. He was the ally she’d always wanted but never imagined was really out there.

“Mrs Barber,” a boy’s voice said, as soon as Pen had taken her seat at the front counter. She looked up – it was Cliff, one of the day-boys, fourteen or so. He was likeable, but very shy. This was enough to put Pen on his side. She was aware, too, that his parents were going through a divorce, the father had moved out, and she knew only too well how tough that could be.

Cliff was avoiding her eyes. “I’ve got a terrible headache,” he said.

Pen checked her watch. “Nurse isn’t in yet, Cliff. But you could come back in about half an hour.”

Cliff bit his lower lip. “I’ve got Phys Ed,” he said. “But I don’t think I can do it.”

Pen swallowed. “I understand,” she said; headache as euphemism. She knew the Phys Ed teacher wouldn’t like it, but why should kids be forced? “Well, I can let you into the sick room, and you can wait there till Mrs Davies arrives.”

The boy followed her behind the counter into a corridor, at the end of which was a clean, white room with a single bed and cotton blanket. It was like a private hospital room. Boys’ College looked ancient, imposing, on the outside, but it was all fake gothic, colonial pretension. Inside was expensive and up-to-date.

“Just lie down here and don’t worry about a thing,” Pen said, and Cliff shot her a look of shaky gratitude. “Cliff,” she added softly, “nobody’s giving you trouble, are they?”

He sat very still. "What do you mean?"

"It's not bullying, or anything like that?"

He shook his head.

"Okay." Pen slanted the venetians to dim the room. "If Mrs Davies isn't here soon, I'll see if I can get you some Panadol."

"Thanks, Mrs Barber," Cliff said, closing his eyes, as if to squeeze back tears. "You're the best."

Pen laughed gently.

"No, I mean it," Cliff said. "You don't make fun and call me a delicate little daisy and stuff like that."

"Who said that?" Pen asked.

"Miss Walsh, in Science. Because they were dissecting frogs, and I didn't want to. I think it's cruel. Now the boys call me Daisy and sing that song, you know."

Pen paused, careful. "Well, I can't comment on your teachers, Cliff, because you know you have to respect them," and here she smiled, "but I must say I'm with you on that one. Only don't quote me, okay?"

Cliff nodded and lay back.

Pen shut the door and said to herself: he's a thinker, that boy, like Derrick, and sensitive. He'll be worth twenty of his classmates when he grows up, only now it's tough for him.

"It's always tougher for boys," Derrick had insisted, though Pen remembered how cruel girls could be too. Especially if you had no money.

Where'd you get that dress from, your grandma?

Someone run you over with a lawnmower?

Look, she's wearing ankle-freezers!

Pen's jeans, in her teen years, were always too short in the leg, because she grew faster than new ones could be bought.

The well-off girls, to whom Pen was a feeble specimen, had dished out verbal abuse. The rougher ones, who thought her a snob, threatened "catfights".

Up yourself, arntcha! Think you're better than us.

You had to steer between the two.

Even long after Pen had left home, she was still paranoid, turning and checking in front of mirrors to make sure her trouser cuffs fell to the correct length. Even with Derrick to shield her, she crossed the road to avoid rough-looking women.

Now she looked around for Derrick at tea-break, in the staffroom, but he wasn't there. He must have got held up. Instead she was cornered by Jean Sargent, school counsellor, about an outing that was looming.

"Christmas in July," she reminded Pen. "We need to have numbers to book for the meal. Are you coming?"

Pen concentrated on filling her tea-cup from the urn. *Urn*, it was called. Then she turned to face Jean.

"I'll have to check with Derrick," she said. "He might have plans."

Jean laughed. "And *he* said he'd have to check with *you*. You both have the same excuse, or alibi. So I'm going to have to get you two in the room together if I want a final answer. What do you reckon?"

"Oh, put us down," Pen sighed, figuring they could always pull out later, by phone if they had to. "I'll let you know if it doesn't work for us."

On rare occasions she and Derrick did the right thing by putting in an appearance at these events, and they got along with their colleagues well enough, but they weren't really party people, or quiz-goers, or even drinkers. They might sometimes have a glass of champagne at New Year or some other special occasion. But Derrick had been a bit too inclined to drink when Pen had first met him, and she wasn't sorry he went easy now.

Nonetheless, Pen was careful never to go on about it, because nobody liked prim and proper wowsers, and neither did she. And many of the teachers were regulars at Happy Hour in the local, every Friday. But it did hamper social interaction, if you wanted to be discreet and avoid the booze.

On her way out at midday, she passed Derrick in the corridor.

"I'm going to get stuck straight in this time," she said, meaning sorting the old boxes at home, and getting rid of stuff. "That's the only way to do it, no interruptions, no distractions."

"The *Putzteufel*," Derrick grinned. It was a German word – the cleaning devil. As if something possessed you and took over your will at such times. Derrick leaned over and kissed her, despite the other staff members squeezing past. "You make me feel guilty."

"Don't be. You're here teaching all day, it's only logical that I do the clean-out."

"I'll make it up to you," Derrick said, and gave her an affectionate squeeze.

Pen dropped by the post office box to collect their mail on the way home, and picked herself up a sandwich from the Eyrie, and a fresh vegetarian pizza

from the deli for dinner. Her mother always tutted over bought food – “You spend much more that way!”, but to Pen it was a functional thing, not a luxury. It meant she wouldn’t have to waste time cooking but could get started on the cleaning up.

“Putzteufel,” she laughed to herself, “I wish!”

She had taught herself a bit of German from books and tapes, and then some French, and then some Italian. It was a way of getting closer to Derrick, since that was his field, though she knew she would never have his university-level fluency. There were too many gaps, missing patches. Back at her high school, they didn’t do languages, and anyway, she hadn’t finished Year Twelve properly. But she just liked to feel she could connect with Derrick in that way.

They had that in common now, and books in general. Literary novels, biographies, poetry. Appalled at what she didn’t know, and that fact that she mostly read genre novels, he’d guided Pen over the years, till she was at least as well-read as he was.

At first his guidance had hurt her pride a little. Then she found it useful. These days she could hold her head up with any of his colleagues, even if she was only office staff.

Once home, she put the pizza into the fridge for later, and ate the sandwich as she sat cross-legged on the floor in the storage room, leafing through old documents.

It was a trap if you read through everything, because it took up time. On the other hand, if you didn’t, you might throw away something important. Most of this stuff hadn’t been touched for years. Newspaper clippings that seemed significant at the time. Stacks of floppy disks from long-gone computers. Even a small pile of old mobiles they really should have recycled by now.

So much of it was garbage, or things Derrick had brought home for her from school that she would never get around to using. Cassette tapes of German literature, for instance, that he was sent as free samples years ago, and that the school didn’t want because they were dated now. But Pen had only listened to one or two, and really couldn’t justify keeping so many.

Maybe the cassettes could be donated somewhere... They were stacked, forty or fifty of them, in shoe-boxes above a desk so cluttered that neither Pen nor Derrick ever sat at it. Pen reached up to pull the last box down, and a thick envelope fell and wadded against her foot.

Dusty and old, it was addressed in Derrick’s handwriting – to Kathleen Nancarrow in Sydney.

Pen turned the envelope over and over – yes, Derrick was the sender on the back. She felt immediately sick in a way she hadn't for a long time.

Kathleen Nancarrow. A name she had not heard often, and not for over a decade, but could hardly forget. The envelope was sealed, might never have been opened, to all appearances, though it was so tattered she couldn't be sure. Across the front was scrawled in red: *Return to Sender.*

So Derrick had written to Kathleen, rebuffed by the look of it, and had kept the letter. But when? Pen strained to read the date on the franking, but it was very faded.

This time she had no qualms about opening the item.

Twenty-one, she was, back then, and working part-time in a deli near Thomas Street. Close enough to go for walks in King's Park every so often – and to take the bus to typing classes at a small business college in West Perth, part of a long-term plan to better things for herself.

Short-haired, she'd worn that chopped-up wispy look that clubbers favoured back in the nineties, though Pen had never been into clubbing. (The style was the hairdresser's idea; she couldn't be bothered arguing.) And fresh-faced enough to disguise the fact that she'd already had and lost one lover.

That was a jovial, deep-voiced man seven years her senior, who turned out to be married, and shot through when Pen discovered it after a few weeks.

Only it wasn't Pen who discovered it. It was her mother.

"I knew there was something not quite honest about that fellow," she'd said, grim with satisfaction. She'd rung around to check on his background, and then confronted Pen.

Her mother's snooping bothered her more than the man's deception. Pen was disappointed but not destroyed. She chalked it up to experience, grateful anyone would have wanted her, and somehow glad it was over.

The lying had shocked her, but not the leaving. She didn't need anything messy: she was trying to get established. She was not even on the look-out for love.

So when the new, pale curly-haired man first appeared in the shop, the last thing Pen expected was for anything to spark up between them.

What stood out was that this young man didn't speak to her at all. He came in quickly for cigarettes always at the same time, every few days, avoiding eye contact. Generally, the other customers were breezy, cheery – workers at the nearby hospital mostly, nurses and care assistants, in their standard whites and pastels, their sensible flat shoes.

But this man was different – about her own age, her own height, though thick-set, and dressed in jeans and tee-shirt, his face often unshaven, handsome in that ethereal Celtic kind of way. If he hadn't looked so dejected.

One day he came in and bought chewing gum instead.

"You've given up," Pen said, trying to be friendly.

He was startled. "What do you mean, given up?"

"Smoking," she said. "I meant, cigarettes. Because you're buying gum instead."

He nodded, and smiled, and she saw it was a lovely smile, a slightly incredulous one, as if he were surprised he had anything to smile at.

"Good on you," she said.

And after that most ordinary of beginnings, they'd talked every time he came into the deli, until one day he said, "Look, I won't be around here much longer but I'd like to keep in touch," and asked if she would go out for coffee with him, and that was how she and Derrick had started.

She had thought he must be moving house, but he was going home. He'd been a patient in the hospital, D-Ward: the psychiatric ward, not the worst one, Pen knew that, it was for mild cases, people who weren't dangerous. That was why they were allowed out to the shops and so on. Most mornings you could see them being taken out for a walk, off the hospital premises and around the block.

But Derrick was not a long-termer: he was only there for a few weeks. And he was up-front and honest about it, so that she was going into things with her eyes open. At least he wasn't married...

Later, so many times, he would say, "If I hadn't had that breakdown, I would never have met you," and that was true, because his family lived way on the other side of Perth. So it seemed good fortune out of bad, *felix culpa*, Derrick said.

As for his emotional collapse, Pen didn't ever press him for details, even when she burned to know. But he did tell her the name of a woman: an older woman, his lecturer at uni over east, who had dropped him after a long affair right throughout his student years. Fearing exposure, perhaps – the threat to her career.

"It wrecked me," he'd said. "You know, I was only seventeen when that started."

"She exploited you," Pen said firmly, and that was that.

Other than on this first occasion, neither of them had ever discussed Kathleen Nancarrow again.

Two urges were at war in Pen over it, right from the start, but the pragmatic urge won out. She'd always been practical, always had to be, fending for herself. And this natural attitude was bolstered, over the years of their

marriage, by old platitudes of her mother's like *Least said, soonest mended*, and *Out of sight, out of mind*. Her mother was a firm believer in self-control.

Whatever she might feel inside, Pen was quite capable of harnessing it to her greater purpose. So she had coaxed Derrick through his add-on year of a teaching diploma, and seen him into his first appointment. She had worked and scraped to build him the kind of buffer against the world that he needed if he was to thrive. Pen had never met anybody so intelligent, but his brilliance alone wouldn't do it.

Derrick was from what people called a Good Family, but most of their money was tied up in properties, and they weren't about to give him a foot-up. In any case, his illness had embarrassed them, almost as if it were a reflection on their genes, or their parenting. They'd effectively distanced themselves after that, so he and Pen saw very little of them.

"Got yourself the discount version," Pen's mother had sniped. "The markdown. Social climber meets social backslider."

"I love him," was all Pen could say, hoping that would shame her mother into silence. Underneath, she suspected her mother was jealous.

But there was no doubt Derrick required pushing. Gentle pushing by someone who could see what he was capable of.

Pen had watched, then, and monitored, and kept her eye on vacancies till the time came for him to move out of the public education system into an altogether better situation. One that appreciated and rewarded his exceptional talents.

So much easier to do this for Derrick because he was a man. None of the inch-by-inch scraping of her own attempts to rise. Men were expected to. *Their* ambitions were not vanity, not arrogance. For them, *lack* of ambition was a fault...

Pen had seen instantly, that day they first went for coffee together, that they were each other's best chance, and she had made sure they took it. There was no going back.

Now Pen unsealed the fat envelope carefully. The first page was dated just over a decade ago, written from Perth. She was aware of her heart pounding, the pulse at her ear and temple. There was a feeling of tinnitus but it seemed outside her.

She eased backwards into a bean-bag and held the letter upright, as if it could somehow become transparent, a window.

Kathleen, my only Kathleen, you know who you are, and you know who I am even if you will not acknowledge me – you are wrecking me with this silence. How can I believe it all means nothing to you? What can I do to prove that you must not cast me off, that you can't do it?

I will recognise no obstacle, you should know that. You are both the brightness and the bane of my life: you have consumed me and spat out the wretched pieces – can't you feel how wretched I am? You said you had never felt this way about anyone else. You are afraid to face those feelings, and you are making excuses – as if I would ever expose you, ever put you at risk.

It went on and on like that, for pages, out of control, as if it were some kind of brainstorming exercise, or an elaborate note he'd written to himself. Pen had never seen anything like it – certainly Derrick had never spoken or written to her that way. It didn't even sound particularly like him – it sounded like play-acting, poetic posturing.

Brightness and bane... If it were not in his own handwriting, nothing would have convinced her that Derrick had composed it. Let alone actually sent it. It embarrassed her.

Then she saw her own name, spread out in full on the fourth page: Penelope.

I told you I had met a girl my own age, Penelope, now you know her name. You must either answer me or I will go ahead and marry her – yes, despite you, because you show no compassion, no guilt – and then you will pay, you will come to regret what you have given up, what we could have had – it will be too late, do you understand?

If I don't hear from you by the end of the month, I will go ahead. Yes, this is an ultimatum.

Pen dropped the letter to the floor as if it were on fire, or toxic, contaminated. She stood up and stared down at it. All those years sitting there on some shelf – and he had kept it! – waiting to pounce at her with that long name only her mother used, to ridicule everything she had counted upon.

Her mother: *Eavesdroppers never hear good of themselves*. Her mother as a set of accusatory phrases, a voice in her ear. Derrick as a letter, a poison pen, cancelling in one stroke the entire story Pen had written, in her head, of their life together.

Had Pen been nothing to him then but a way of forcing the issue? *I will go ahead and marry her... and then you will pay.*

She walked across to the study window, sliding back the rickety glass pane so as to get some cold air on her face, her fingers dampened by powdery black mould that had settled in the groove where the frame met the sill. Pen shuddered. The brilliant pink of the bougainvillea outside hurt her eyes; it was almost blocking the view now, and must be cut back.

Pen laughed suddenly at the absurdity – as if everything could go on in its mundane way. Garden jobs and renovations, dinner, washing-up – all part of a practised routine that held her together, in the same way that necessity had held both Pen and her mother together, after her father had left.

If she confronted Derrick – and he would be home soon, and she must decide either way – where would it lead? What could he possibly have to say?

“I’m sorry, our entire life together has been based on a lie... ”?

A show-down. An *ultimatum* – that was what he had written. Pen could hardly impose one herself, a whole decade later. But the enormity of it. The vital piece of information she hadn’t even known was missing. The staff at school had a phrase – ‘La-La Land’, they said, for anyone who wasn’t *with-it*. Pen had been living in La-La Land.

She put on a thick jacket, went outside to the shed, and found the secateurs. That wasn’t hard – Derrick always put things back where they belonged. Good, reliable Derrick. Surely not the weak-minded author of that pleading letter? He kept the shed almost orderly enough to live in, though it was unsealed, a kind of smaller shadow of the main house.

Pen placed the secateurs in the wheelbarrow, and headed for the bougainvillea. For the rest of the afternoon she waded through clumps of grass and plumbago to hack at the papery pink-and-green monster, cutting it back till the window was clear and the immodest plant finally reduced to reasonable proportions. It was always easier to process things if your hands were busy.

But there really weren’t that many options to process. Whatever Derrick might say to cover it up, if she showed him the letter, if she screamed at him, if she hammered him with her fists, if she *lost it*, as the boys at school would say, the truth would still be the truth.

He had loved someone else and not her at all.

She tried to push the thought away. Ten years: that must count for something? He couldn’t have been faking, *tolerating* her all that time. Why on earth *would* he?

But her mother's voice seemed to harp in her inner ear. You'll have your work cut out... The bulk of it will fall on you. You run around after that man so much he takes you for granted. Pen had put such comments down to jealousy. But what if her mother was merely pointing out what everyone else could see?

Pen rubbed her eyes till they stung.

Whatever she and Derrick had now was not, had never been, what it seemed to be.

She could force that out in the open, and it might destroy things once and for all. But that was a joke, surely. She could never leave Derrick: she had grown into him, and he into her, two inextricable elements. Which she had thought indestructible.

No, she would wait, observe, turn it over like a curious stone and examine what squirming creatures clung to the underside, until she decided where to put it.

She was still hard at the pruning, covered in little flakes of pale blue from the sticky plumbago, when Derrick walked up the driveway.

"Hello, love," he called. "I thought you were going to work inside today. Clear out the room."

Pen let the scateurs dangle, their weight suddenly alien. A momentary vision of lunging at him, screaming. It was ridiculous – these thoughts could come out of nowhere, for anyone. They didn't mean anything. She shut the scateurs and placed them back on the wheelbarrow, amid a thicket of spiky, lopped vine.

"Yes. I was. But the light was poor in there. Now we've got a window again."

Derrick smiled and shook his head. Pen thought: he is being tolerant, thinks I am scatty. She knew how he made allowances for her, especially when it was her time of month, for instance. Usually she was grateful for it. Now she saw it in another possible light. She turned her face abruptly.

Pen peered into the study, her face ghosted on the grimy exterior of the glass. She had the curious sensation that there must be two of her from this moment on, just like that, one inside and living her life, the other outside, looking in.

She must watch Derrick, see him with a measure of detachment, understand what it was she had missed, how deep the damage lay. Whether everything

was discredited, utterly, or something could be retained. She would take nothing for granted any more.

“It’s getting chilly,” Pen said. “Let’s go in and I’ll heat up the pizza.”

She might have expected the evening to be an ordeal, but it was surprisingly easy, once you allowed for that split between the inside and outside. Pen marvelled at how the mouth, the eyes, the body, could continue with their standard operations. Once or twice, faced with a stance or gesture of excruciating familiarity on Derrick’s part, the question was nearly detonated: Pen almost blurted it out.

It was as if he was skating around on her nerves.

The knowledge she had unearthed today would have to go somewhere, and she must decide where, rather than letting it dictate... Every word seemed suddenly to drag with it a thousand alternative words; every movement in space alerted her to all the other movements she might take. But it was a revelation, not a trial – as if the teacher had suddenly said you could pick up the chalk and scribble anything you liked on the big blackboard. For all that her discovery had devastated her, it had also given her this strange power.

Pen pulled the pizza tray from the oven and rummaged for the little cutting wheel. Right and left, up and down she sawed, noting the viscous stretching, the release of aromatic herbs and tomato.

‘I’m alive, anyway,’ she thought, ‘and after all this time, that woman is as good as dead to him. There’s no way he could still be in love with her.’ Her appetite, she realised, was enormous.

They sat on the sofa together, Pen with her feet up curled against Derrick, trying to be normal – *be normal!* – and watched the evening news while they ate. You had to freeze the details out, to a certain degree, or you would go mental. Sometimes, if Derrick had a lot of stress at school, he wouldn’t watch the news at all, wouldn’t even let Pen buy the papers. It was a little frustrating, though she knew why he wanted it that way.

But things were going well for him just now, and he seemed to take it all in his stride. Iraq, deaths, bombs, terrorists, the same old permutations and combinations.

Then at the end of the news there was always a short, supposedly heart-warming human interest story, before the weather.

The newsreader was a girl Pen had gone to school with, only now her dark hair was bleached, her nose straightened, and she had a new surname by

marriage. Scarcely recognisable. She'd been on the t.v. a while now, but her transformation still tickled Pen. Plus the fact that Pen could pick her. The success story of the eastern suburbs – anyone could rise if they worked hard, that was what their teachers had always insisted. But the woman had not been among Pen's group of school-friends.

Best of all was to watch her adjust her expressions according to the nature of the news item. Consummately false. Sometimes there was a glitch, a slight time-lag in these changes, reminding you she was just a kind of actor after all.

"You're very quiet tonight," Derrick said at last, switching the t.v. off.

"Am I?" Pen smiled. "Probably just tired from the pruning."

She waited, as if he must somehow see through her excuse, but he didn't.

He just nodded. "Maybe we should get an early night," and he slipped his hand gently inside her shirt.

The strange thing was, she suddenly wanted him now more than usual, as if the knowledge of Derrick's fakery, deception, treachery – whatever you wanted to call it, and however long ago it was – had only added to his allure. He had become partly someone else.

Pen had never, in the whole time they'd been married, found herself seriously attracted to another man. Neither did she ever expect another man to be attracted to *her*. As far as she knew, no one had.

She had simply thought of sex as "what I do with Derrick", rather than as a reality in its own right. But now that he *was* someone else, the same and yet different, the outer form painted with his features like an effigy, a driving hunger kicked in.

As they got into bed and he went to turn the lamp off, Pen said, "No, leave it on," against her usual inclination. She wanted, now, to see everything. She wanted slash and burn and scorched earth.

When they woke in the morning, it was like being dredged up from a deep mire. They did not know where they had been, only that they had both been there together, and could not speak of it. They had forgotten, because of the break in their routine, to set the alarm, and it was late now.

"Just take the car," Pen said, rolling over. "I'm going to ring in sick." She groped about for the mobile on the bedside table.

Derrick leaned down to kiss her, as if sniffing for clues. "That's not like you," he said, too close to her ear, so that she pulled away, hugely sensitised.

"I know," she said. "But I need a day off."

Derrick shrugged. "Are you sure? If you step in the shower right after me – I'll leave it running – we can still make it."

"No, really," Pen said. "I think I might actually have the beginnings of a cold."

"Oh, great," Derrick said, pulling back quickly. Whatever the throes of the night before, whatever strange zone they might encounter, his pragmatism would always hold sway afterwards – his terror of sickness, of missing a day's work – and she laughed.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Don't worry," she said, and pulled her head under the covers. "You'd better get moving, anyway."

Pen did feel a bit feverish, so it wasn't untrue, only the cause was not physical. When she heard the front door click behind him, and the Volvo reverse at last down the sloping drive, then surge up the next slope to the highway, she pushed the blankets back.

She lay rigid for a minute, as if to master all the kinks and bumps, to stretch away the night, and then slackened. She thought about sex and Derrick, Derrick at seventeen doing that with a grown woman who must have felt extraordinarily flattered, or vain. Or insecure, unable to control men her own age. What would it take? Duty of care and all that.

But the boundaries were so much more blurred at uni – it wasn't like the college, where the boys were clearly boys, and you couldn't feel anything but motherly toward them. Though there were even people who... but she found that idea so disgusting that she pushed it from her mind.

Kathleen Nancarrow was like that, she reasoned, making use of someone more vulnerable. Probably born into privilege, and seeing everything as her entitlement... Just because the students were older, and it was legal, didn't mean it was morally right or harmless. Maybe Kathleen had gone on doing it for years, ruined lots of students for her own satisfaction. All at once, the anger Pen hadn't felt toward Derrick, despite what he had concealed, surged up in her toward this woman.

Pen leapt out of bed and stared at herself in the dressing-table mirror. Red marks, legacy of the night, were visible on her neck: just as well she hadn't gone off to school today. She peered closer, as if her appearance could explain something, then slowly reached for Derrick's robe, and wrapped it around her, girding her loins. She would track this woman down. She walked into the study

and pushed the button to bring up the Mac. Then she went to put the kettle on, waiting till she could go online.

She was little, so small as to be still square and compact in body, eight years old maybe, and the smell of her new synthetic tracksuit, flocked on the inside, was overpowering, the kind of thing that usually made her nauseous. But it was mixed with excitement – being out at night in the shiny gym, among a group of children she'd never seen before, and all boys except herself – and it charged her up. Adrenalin, an older boy in the group said it was called.

“Fight or flight,” he told her. “You can feel it in your legs because your body is getting them ready to run if your defence doesn't work.”

Then the teacher gazed sternly at them, and they fell silent. Pen writhed under scrutiny: she was the only child in the class without a proper white belted outfit, because it was too expensive. But the teacher moved on without a comment.

“Eeurgh, you going to judo?” the other girls at school had said, wrinkling their noses, no matter how many times Pen told them, “It's not judo, it's ju-jitsu kan.”

“Same diff,” they said, and she couldn't disprove it, because she wasn't really sure about the distinction herself. Her mother and father had decided it would be good for her, and the hall was only a few hundred metres down the road from their house, and it wasn't costly if you paid by the session. More than that, Pen did not know.

Now the teacher was telling them things they didn't believe, the marvels they could work if they stayed with the course, that he would teach them to bring down opponents much bigger than themselves. Some of the boys had whooped and cheered, until the teacher added, “But it may only ever be used in self-defence.”

Pen wondered briefly how you could control that, since it relied on a code, a promise, like the honour box when you lit candles at church – no one could tell if you hadn't really paid for them. Some of the boys whispered that a curse would come upon you if you used your ju-jitsu to attack someone.

They lay on the ground to learn how to trip up a standing opponent.

“Tim-ber!” some of the sillier boys yelled, and the teacher was not pleased.

Then they had to learn how to “throw” someone who lunged at them. For this they formed pairs again, but it was closer contact this time, and none of the boys wanted to join with Pen, since she was a girl.

“You come here to me,” the teacher said, and Pen flushed. The boys began to snigger. The teacher put his hands to Pen’s throat the way he had demonstrated, and she did as he instructed, stepping forward, her hip thrust behind his, her whole body becoming a lever. Her arms as good as thick cable, her feet firm but electric.

In one swoop, little Pen flipped the teacher to the floor.

Now it was there again, undeniable, that adrenalin, only this time there was no question of running.

Pen placed her mug of Earl Grey carefully on a shelf to one side of the computer desk, at the safe, no-spill distance she and Derrick had formally agreed upon, one of their many little rules.

Googling people always made her feel like a girl again, lying on her belly next to Sally Fearn from next door’s, leafing through the big dog-eared phone book together to see where their teachers lived, or the Grade Sevens they had crushes on. Not that they would ever follow these people home, or even ring them up. It was just the feeling of power you got from secret knowledge, seeing without being seen. The reassurance that even gods had an ordinary location you could pin them down to. It added a new dimension to the boredom of school.

But now Pen was an adult, and this wasn’t boredom. This was something else. If Kathleen Nancarrow was still out there, with such a distinctive name, and an academic career, Google would be sure to turn her up. Pen was teetering, she knew, on the threshold of a wholly different existence. She thought of Bluebeard’s chamber, and the blood-stained key. Then she chuckled at her own melodrama. Derrick was no Bluebeard, and he need never know. She could just sneak a peek, and then clear the cache. No harm done.

“Bingo.”

She clicked on the first link. *Talking to yourself is the first sign of madness*, Sally Fearn used to say. *Hair growing on the palm of your hand...* and then she would scribble with biro in Pen’s sweaty palm.

It was a university web-page, Pen saw from the URL, and to her amazement, it was here in Perth. The adrenalin grew louder.

Kathleen Nancarrow was actually *here*, had perhaps been here for years. Did Derrick know she had left Sydney? Had she followed him over, despite returning his letter?

Kathleen Nancarrow was an Associate Professor, whatever that meant exactly, and her office was in the Arts building. Then a whole cluster of links to her research interests, the classes she taught. No photo.

If there had been a photo, perhaps it would have all stopped there.

Like doubting Thomas in the Bible, Pen needed to see in order to believe. She backtracked to run a Google image search, but nothing showed up. Then she swung forward again into the university site. Clicking around, she saw that some of Kathleen's colleagues had supplied their photos, and some had not. Modesty, maybe, or vanity. Or just not getting organised. She riffled through the links on Kathleen's page, reading them over and over, but it was all unsatisfying. That was the internet – like biting into fairy-floss. Ethereal stuff, all ungrounded.

Pen closed the page and emptied out all evidence of her meanderings, thinking: if only it was so easy to wipe out the actual past. Or at least a part of it. In any case, she knew, the university wasn't that far away. There was nothing to stop her having a look around in person.

Lying was easy, because she had not done it before, so she had no preconceptions. All it meant was a new consciousness, a kind of heightened sensation, like Derrick said people got from smoking pot – it didn't really change anything.

There were millions of ordinary times Pen had gone ahead and done something other than what she had told Derrick. People said one thing and then did another all the time, without giving it a second thought. That was called spontaneity. You said you were going to Coles for veggies but you dropped by the growers' market instead. *Same diff.*

The only thing that made it lying was the intention. So it must be the intention, Pen thought, that made an act right or wrong. Because the form of the act might be exactly the same.

She might say, "I'm going to nip into Perth this afternoon to pick up a new jacket", and if she also happened to drive on further to visit the campus, just another curve around the bay, and have a wander around the Arts building, who could judge, from the outside, whether it was willed or whimsical?

So easy, in fact, it was, that she could hardly believe this possibility had been sitting there all the time, like extra paid leave you didn't know you had accrued, like a talent that had never been called on.

It struck her now as amazing that she had got up each day of her life and tried to stick to the day's outline, as if there were some great supervisor in the sky watching for variation, for deviation, for a poor fit between player and part. It seemed now that she must have been the only person making that mistake.

Certainly Derrick hadn't. He had known the possibility of lying and made generous use of it. A lie told even a long time ago remained a lie. So she certainly wasn't injuring him. She even felt a little grateful to him for the knowledge of it.

The Arts building was quiet except for an occasional unearthly screech from peacocks in the courtyard, the campus curiosity. Maybe a symbol of something; Pen didn't know why they were kept there. She walked around a few times, glancing from side to side, but even where the odd door was open nobody popped their head out to look or to question her. It was like a maze, a mausoleum, or the still corridors of a mental hospital. You felt the floors above were bearing down on you, and because each level looked the same, it was like those places that trap you in dreams.

It was a picture by Escher, and she was in it.

She could stroll once or twice past the Faculty Desk, check out the ID pictures on the staff noticeboard.

There was no photo of Kathleen Nancarrow on the noticeboard.

She might even inspect the door of Room 413, A/Prof K. Nancarrow.

That door held nothing but a pouch for student essays and a timetable that showed Student Contact Times Mon & Wed 10 till Noon.

It was now late in the day. There was a small glass panel against the roof, too high for anyone to see in or out of, but enough to indicate that the light was switched off and no one was inside.

Pen tried the handle: it was locked. She could come back some other time...

In just such a room, long ago, when Derrick was a student, on the other side of the country, there were trysts, no doubt, declarations and remonstrations, maybe even tears. An anonymous box of an office, like a confessional. Sordid but solid, impenetrable.

Suddenly it was as if there were simply too much weight on this side of the continent, even with the room apparently empty. As if a set of scales were tipping, and must be put to rights.

Pen checked both ways down the corridor, reached into the door-pouch, and retrieved an armful of papers. Marked essays, ready for collection.

There was nothing to stop her walking down the stairs with them, out past the Faculty Desk which in any case was closed now, its convent-like grille pulled across and bolted, past the drink fountain with her eyes straight ahead, as if she were any tutor or mature-age student carrying her work home, past the cold stone wall with its giant chiselled motto KNOW THYSELF, and safely into the Volvo parked right below.

She would have preferred to burn the papers where she could really see them go, in the old open fireplace with its jutting mantel of Toodyay stone, but they never used that now that they had the Bushman stove, and Derrick would have noticed for sure. Instead, she fed the essays through the smoky glass stove-door page by balled page, fearing that otherwise they might fly up and out and catch other things alight, even in winter, or lie around outside in half-legible fragments. So she screwed them up painstakingly and poked them in.

It was satisfying at first, like counting off money, but when it was done, it left a vague boredom: so what? Kathleen Nancarrow was sure to have kept a record of those marks anyway, maybe even her comments. It wouldn't affect her teaching. She wouldn't even know *why* they were gone.

Swiping and then destroying them was hardly an achievement – no heroic gesture. It was more like the woman Pen knew from work, who had once spotted an ex-boyfriend's car parked nearby and sneaked out to let the tyres down. Just petty spite, leading nowhere beyond the moment. Something that had made Pen keep a slight distance from that woman ever since.

It would not do. It was small, mean, and what was more, impetuous, not thought-through.

'I will have to be smarter than that,' Pen realised, 'if I am to survive this.'

She turned on the Mac again, went online, and started to browse the university website in earnest this time, leaving no electronic stone unturned. There must be something she could do. That much Pen had learned from the things life threw at her: you could always *do* something.

"I'm thinking," she said over dinner to Derrick that night, the ashes of Kathleen's papers mixed now, undetected, with the kindling and logs he had added to get the evening's fire going, "of taking an Extension course. At the university, I mean. Winter school."

Derrick nodded. "That's great! At last." He watched her eating for a few moments, not wanting to prod too hard, and then finally said, "Why don't you go the whole hog and pick up a degree? You know they've got mid-year entry in some courses."

Pen winced. It was an old, occasional topic between them – she could sit the mature-age test, it wouldn't matter that she hadn't finished secondary school, and so on – but it was always the wrong time. For a long while – before the miscarriage that had been her last chance, anyway – she'd put it aside because of wanting children. Then there had perpetually been some other reason.

She worried about money, for instance. Derrick was confident he earned plenty, but Pen herself, being the usual shopper and bill-handler, had a fair idea how much they'd miss that second fortnightly pay, part-time and piddling or not. She wasn't sure she could give that up for full-time study.

But Extension was different: they were intellectual hobby courses, a few hours a week – you didn't have to pass tests or write essays. You just paid a fee, and you went to lectures and discussions. *Improving your mind*, Pen's mother would call it. Like a wine, or a cheese, or an investment.

"I don't think I'm ready for real uni," Pen said, "and I'm a bit old, don't you think, to sit alongside all those teenagers? But I could try something short, something not for assessment."

Derrick rubbed his beard: a sign of imminent disagreement, Pen knew.

"You always sell yourself short, Pen," he began. "I don't know why, after all these years, we can't get over this hurdle. I'm telling you, you could do anything you wanted..."

"I *have* done what I wanted," Pen said softly. "All these years. And this is what I want to do now."

"But you could actually get some return for it, get some credit, some acknowledgement."

Pen thought of the evil letter: *You know who I am even if you will not acknowledge me...* All words now took their shape in relation to that letter, as if it were etched verbatim into her brain.

Now she thought for the first time, 'Perhaps he is ashamed of my lack of education. Perhaps he despises me. Perhaps all this time when I thought he was

just being encouraging... The way he was ashamed of my ignorance, when we met. There is another Derrick I didn't know was there all along, one for whom I was once only the means of getting at another woman. Whatever I am now. Everything he says is open to reinterpretation.'

"I just want to see what it's like first," she said at last.

Derrick shrugged. "Okay."

What he thought finally, she could not tell. But he went straight to the computer after dinner, wanting to download the courses on offer. Even more eager than she was. Or seemed to be.

Pen said, leaning over his shoulder, "I've already got all that stuff, love" – and pressed the CANCEL button. "Besides, we're over our limit for this month."

It wouldn't do for Derrick to see the lecturer's name, in among all the subjects.

But at least one thing was established. Derrick had shown no sign of anxiety; he was all for it. Clearly he didn't know that Kathleen Nancarrow was in Perth now, and at the university. It was unlikely they'd had any contact. Pen allowed herself to breathe a little; marvelled at how easily she could make things happen. That Derrick would jump up and try to do it *for* her.

When she was a child, Pen had willed God to do things for her – base, financial things, because she never had any money, like letting her win ten dollars in a contest from the cartoon pages of the local paper, that sort of thing. The deal always was, she had to be good for a whole week – not even a bad thought – and it always paid off.

She smiled, slightly embarrassed, at the memory, and Derrick smiled back now, oblivious.

"I'm so glad you're finally doing something for yourself," he said, and Pen couldn't help thinking: 'the model husband, the genuine SNAG'. No *Educating Rita* here. "And in any case, it'll give us new things to talk about. Part of that whole opening-up thing, you know. We mustn't stagnate."

"I know," Pen nodded. "I'm sure it'll do us both good."

Warm to look at, but cold to the touch. That was how Pen had always thought of the university, with its imitation Tuscan prettiness that caught sunlight even in winter, but this pervasive interior chill of stone and low ceilings.

She parked up near the highway, and walked slowly, a little too early for the afternoon class, having come straight from work without stopping to eat. She paused near a still, oblong pool, unruffled, almost unapproachable, and read the inscription: VERILY IT IS BY BEAUTY THAT WE COME AT WISDOM. Pen didn't know where it came from, but it had the sound of a quote. That "verily"...

Outside the lecture theatre, a group was already beginning to form. They chatted over the squawking peacocks that glided and occasionally fanned their tails in the external corridors.

Pen stood at a distance and observed. The human group was mostly middle-aged, and mostly female, all thick hair, fine teeth and quality fabrics. She felt again that attraction and repulsion these sorts of women always provoked in her, with their shawls and "interesting" beads, their well-fed figures, their complete carelessness of their own leisure and good fortune.

She knew, too, that this was a prejudice, and that she couldn't have it both ways. There was this, or there was where she had come from, and that hadn't worked for her either.

'I belong nowhere,' she thought glumly, not for the first time, and watched as the sole albino pea-hen thrust its way through the crowd, tiny head lurching, indifferent to the flapping and fuss of the colourful ladies it was disturbing. Then the doors were unlocked, and the whole group moved in.

Pen could hardly think for the pounding in her temples. It was the element of the unforeseen: she had taken certain steps, but who could know where they would lead?

And there at last was Kathleen Nancarrow at the front of the hall, introducing herself so there could be no mistake, and Pen sat intently, eyes wide as if no amount of looking could saturate her vision. *Verily it is by beauty that we come at wisdom*, she remembered ironically.

Of course the woman was beautiful. It couldn't have been otherwise. Even from a distance you could see it – the kind of face and body that don't age.

As Pen, from the half-shadows of the cold lecture hall, watched her mount the rostrum and arrange her papers, Kathleen shook her glossy blonde hair, and appeared to gaze straight back at her. It was an illusion, given the crowd, but Pen knew for a moment how Derrick must once have felt, back when he was a young student in Sydney at this woman's mercy: unnerved, stripped of his nerves.

Time had passed, and yet stood still. Kathleen's face was rounded like a child's, though porcelain-pale; her eyes were bright blue globes, lamp-like. And

then her mouth – small and discreet, mouth of a Twenties film star – yet the room fell utterly silent when it opened to speak.

Whether it spoke sense or nonsense, Pen could not yet determine. Around her, others took notes, but Pen only sat, observed and listened. Pen had not come to study *The World of the French Symbolists*, Extension Course FR100. She had come to study this woman. She had come because she could not help herself.

Now Kathleen began to read, her French solemn, precise and impeccable, and to translate what she pronounced:

*Soon we shall plunge into the coldest shadows
Farewell, bright light of our short-lived summers!*

and the poem as it went on, and the lecture built around it, almost stirred tears in Pen. She was torn between her irritation with the speaker, decided in advance, and this new feeling, caught off balance. Gripped, in spite of herself.

‘It’s because of Derrick,’ she told herself. ‘I am over-identifying with him, as if I were in his shoes. I must be more guarded. Women like her have a certain kind of charisma, of course they do. That’s how they hook people in.’

Yet when she glanced about for evidence of the same effect on her fellow audience, she saw only the same placid self-containment they had shown outside in the icy corridor. They might as well have been at a macramé class, or a cooking demonstration. They simply nodded now and then, or murmured politely, as if to signal they were keeping up. None appeared as stricken as Pen felt.

‘It’s because I haven’t eaten, and I’ve been rushing around,’ Pen thought. ‘It makes you light-headed.’

After the lecture she loitered near the door, self-absorbed.

“We’re going for coffee, would you like to join us?”

It was one of the cluster of shawled women, beckoning to Pen.

Pen looked at the floor. Why would they want her along?

“Come on, it’ll be good to get to know each other.”

The woman’s smile seemed genuine, and for a moment Pen felt guilty about her earlier thoughts. But she didn’t want this distraction; she couldn’t afford it.

“Maybe another time,” Pen said. “But thanks anyway.”

Kathleen Nancarrow was still in the room, gathering papers, as Pen lingered. Walking out, she nodded and smiled at Pen, and then was gone.

An empty hall, peacocks calling plaintive at the windows.

Pen thought, 'So now I have *seen* her, and so what? Nothing has come of it. Nothing is fixed, nothing put right. What did I *think* would happen?'

Even now, in those few moments when Pen had had the chance to speak to her alone, what could she have said? She was disgusted with her own indolence, her failure to act. She had not even ruffled the surface, not skimmed a single stone on the still pool of that woman's composure.

Smugness, some might call it. That Kathleen Nancarrow could sail blithely on after ravaging a life like Derrick's all those years ago... no consequences, not even a hiccup, apparently, in her professional life. That she could go on disrupting Pen's happiness, without even knowing it, by her mere existence. It was not Derrick's fault, after all.

The woman could do with a good shaking-up.

Jean Sargent was wearing those little red-and-green felt Christmas earrings, with gold trim, that usually started to appear on shop counters around November. But it was only July. She must have saved them from last year. They bobbed absurdly as she waved. Pen's heart sank as she saw name cards already placed on the restaurant table – they had separated her and Derrick.

“Otherwise people tend to stay in their comfort zone,” Jean smiled, “and never make an effort to talk to each other.”

“I thought Christmas was about comfort,” Pen said, but Derrick squeezed her hand, and she shrugged. He pulled the chair out for her, kissed her, and went on to his allocated seat. The table was long, running from one end of the restaurant to the other, where there was a drinks area with eggnog and gently steaming mulled wine you could help yourself to.

Pen was wedged between Jean and a sports master, Kerry Pollard, whose breath was heavy with wine. The small talk on that side, she knew, would run out quickly.

Mr Pollard is a sadist... Mr Pollard watches us under the showers... Pen had heard it from the boys, like Cliff, who didn't like doing Phys Ed. She'd been shocked that there were no doors or even proper cubicles in the gym showers.

“Sadist in what way, Cliff?”

Cliff had lowered his eyes. “He just pushes us harder than he should, you know. Till it hurts. He enjoys making us suffer.”

“If it's nothing more specific than that,” Derrick had said later to a worried Pen, “there's nowhere you can go with it. Really speaking.”

“You don't think I should follow it up?”

“No,” he'd barked. “I don't.”

Pen was surprised, but left it there. After all, she reasoned, Derrick had strong feelings from his own schooldays.

Derrick was better placed than Pen now, at the dinner table, between two English teachers he already knew. Both were women, which might have annoyed some wives, and did slightly bother Pen. But Pen was practised at quelling those sorts of worries, and more preoccupied these days with the ones that weren't right under her nose. The past, she thought – the past was the problem. In the here-and-now you had more control...

Anyway, she'd checked out those particular two long ago, and knew that neither held any vivid interest for Derrick, though all the women teachers were certainly fond of him. Derrick was good at polite conversation even when bored. It was performance; it came naturally to teachers, who were on a kind of stage all day long.

This evening itself was a kind of stage or theatre, a rejigging of the season, an excuse to eat a heavy, traditional meal you couldn't get away with in sweltering December, though some families still tried. Except for those who were migrants from Britain or mainland Europe, it wasn't even nostalgia, since Christmas had never been like this. Log fires and hot stodge.

Pen's mother, before her father left, had done the turkey and ham thing, but always served cold, with salads, and followed by ice-cream. A tense meal, both parents putting on an act for their daughter's sake; then her father flaking out in an armchair from drink and heat, virtually unconscious for the rest of the day. Later, no longer there. Scaled-down Christmases, in keeping with a single-parent's budget.

"So how's this renovation coming along?" Jean said by the time they had come to pudding and custard. After an initial surprise, Pen made a little mental readjustment: there must be many occasions when Derrick told these people personal things in her absence, things about their private life, at meetings and afternoon teas. That was quite reasonable.

"Slowly," Pen said. "There's been a lot of clearing-up to do first, and I've been doing some study as well. Just recreational."

"Lovely," Jean said. She didn't ask what the study was. "I envy you all that spare time – I know I could do with some. But then I've got kids..."

Pen winced inwardly.

"What sort of renovations are they?" Kerry, to the right of Pen, put in.

She told him, and another man opposite chuckled. That was Leon Masters, cynical head of the science department. Pen liked him better than the others because he talked less, and more to the point. Weathered and bearded, he was near retirement, and the women generally found him sarcastic when he did speak.

"Stick with the study," he said. "Renovations are for the birds. People moving rooms around because they're bored."

There was a jab in this for Jean, who was fond of rearranging her office.

"Oh, come on, Leon," Jean said, "everyone's doing it these days."

“Or watching it vicariously on the telly.” Leon peered over the top of his half-moon glasses at Pen. “Truth be had, I reckon it’s the last gasp before divorce. All that hammering and sanding, keeping your hands busy when you feel like throttling each other.”

Jean tried to laugh, but no one was sure what to say. Everyone knew Leon was divorced, and any repartee would point this out, which was unseemly. Then he himself said, half-aside, “And no, I didn’t throttle my wife. Ex-wife. She’s doing quite nicely, thank you.”

Jean, quick to shift gears, said, “That reminds me, about our next event. I’m thinking maybe a Murder Mystery Train. My sister-in-law went on one with her workmates and she said it was great fun.”

“You mean like role-play?” Kerry said. “Dress-ups and all that Agatha Christie stuff? Not my cup of tea.”

Leon laughed, and Pen looked at the floor.

“What about you, Mrs Barber?” He was being mock-formal. “Partial to a bit of *noir*?” he said, rounding his vowels pompously, and Pen had to laugh too.

She was grateful for anything that took Jean’s attention off her. At least her clothes passed muster these days. Pen cringed to remember Jean’s comments on what she’d worn to work in the early days.

“White heels, white jacket, white handbag,” Jean had grinned. “Classic! All you need now is the poodle perm. What’s your middle name – Debbie?”

Pen had had to ask Derrick what she meant. But Derrick had shrugged and avoided her gaze, saying it must be some female fashion thing. But Pen knew it was nastiness in another guise. *Oh, I was only joking...*

Eventually, watching and learning, Pen had toned herself down. There was the odd slip, over the years, mainly in words, though her vocabulary was as large as anyone’s. Once on a staff concert outing she’d made excited observations on a particular tenor’s *timbre*. Jean had tittered and looked around at the others.

“This isn’t *Timbertops*, my girl. I’d have thought you of all people would know how to pronounce it.”

Pen was furious. At home, she’d checked in the dictionary, and Jean was right. But it wasn’t Pen’s error. Where she came from, everyone said it “timber”, not “tamber”.

“She means well,” Derrick had said.

“No, she doesn’t,” Pen had growled. “She’s a snob. She’s always trying to expose – where I come from. She can’t stand the fact that a nobody like me is married to a somebody like you.”

“You’re *not* a nobody,” Derrick had sighed. But Pen noticed he didn’t deny he was a somebody.

Now Jean coughed and banged her fork three times to get the whole group’s attention. Pen made a face at Derrick, down the other end, to plead home-time. Derrick made a face that agreed. With a few nods, gestures, and quick pats on the back to say goodbye, they slipped out of the restaurant before the brandies were brought in.

All the way home Pen was quiet, watching the clouded stars, leaning her head back as she had done in her parents’ car as a child.

“What are you thinking?” Derrick said.

“Nothing,” Pen said. She no longer felt obliged to share what was on her mind; in fact, she felt newly protective of it. She was thinking about murder mysteries, Agatha Christie, the binge-reading she’d done from the public library when she was young. After a while it was like crossword puzzles, or as if you were reading formulas, maths problems.

Her dad had been proud of her in those days.

“Pen takes after me,” he’d say to whoever was visiting. “I love a good crime story.”

And she would cringe and try to point out that Christie was nothing like the True Crime her father devoured – no seedy detail, blood and guts, forensic shudders. It was all about detection. And it hadn’t *really* happened. That was a huge difference.

But it was as if he couldn’t hear her. He said the same thing to everyone.

She was next door, eleven or twelve, pushing Sally Fearn on the swing.

Sally was an only child but had a whole gym set, rings and swings and slide. They’d taken turns hanging from the trapeze until the blood ran to their heads and they had to drop groggily to the sand beneath. Sometimes they got sand in their hair or teeth.

“Harder! I want to go higher.”

Pen shoved so hard that Sally flew forward, face into the ground. Blood welled from the centre of her lower lip as if she were blowing dark bubble gum.

"I'm telling on you!" Sally never cried, but she could get angry. *Throwing a maddie*, they called it.

"It was an accident. I didn't mean to."

"Yes you did. You're sick," Sally yelled, stomping up to the house.

"I am not," Pen said, running after her.

"Yes you are. Just like your dad. My dad says your dad is sick. Sicko."

"He does not."

"Sicko." Sally slammed the back door.

Pen sighed, and turned for home.

Years later, in their teens, she'd asked Sally what she meant about her dad. Sally just said, "Forget it. They were both sickos."

Now she wondered whether she was really that different from her father after all.

She still hated True Crime: in bookshops, she would cross the room to avoid that section. The lurid cover photos, the distinctive chill of the titles. Dad had been obsessed with them.

But working out a whodunit – wasn't that just the reverse side of the same coin, the same obsession felt by the one who plotted it? And wasn't the plotter somehow just like the actual criminal, trying to make things water-tight, leave nothing to chance?

It struck Pen suddenly that her head was a huge repository of deftly imagined crime, however much she had always avoided real grisly news items. She'd spent her adolescence stocking up on these things, without even realising it: undetectable poisons, obtainable weapons, clever disposal of bodies, wiping of fingerprints, concealing motives, rationalisations... She was almost an expert.

But these things were fictional, she thought, and out of date too – nothing you could rely on. Not in tune with the way life was these days, with DNA testing, and CCTV, things you'd have to factor in if you were plotting now.

And yet... she thought, as it said in the old song: *the fundamental things apply*. It was still only a matter of covering your tracks. Leaving no evidence. Despite all those advances, many cases still went unsolved. People still literally got away with murder.

"I don't want to go on that murder train thing," she said to Derrick suddenly. "It's just sick. Sicko."

Derrick grinned. "No argument from me! I think we've done our bit now, anyway. Jean can stop hounding us for a while."

The lecture course was to run for eight weeks, and for Pen they were eight weeks of the same sheer paralysis, as if she were a tongue-tied girl again, unable to act for herself. She absorbed, but did not contribute.

She'd taken the precaution, right from the outset, of enrolling under her maiden name of Stone, though it was tempting for a moment to wonder if Kathleen would ever have connected her married name with the Derrick Barber of so long ago. In any case, there were enough students that Kathleen might not really register their names, particularly as there was no assessment, no roll call.

By the fifth week Pen had been for coffee a couple of times with some of the other class members, so as not to draw too much attention to herself by always going it alone. Despite her initial reservations, they were not a bad lot. And like most students of whatever age, they were stupidly keen to discuss their teacher, which, Pen figured, might glean her more information.

Just what she would use this information for, she wasn't sure. But everyone said knowledge was power, and she felt, little by little, she was gaining some of that power in this deadlocked situation, even if on the outside she seemed placid to the point of numbness.

Each time, Pen simply sat in the group of seven or eight at two tables pulled together, and sipped her strong flat white. The café they chose was large and utilitarian, and a blast of cold air ran through each time the glass doors leapt open, so Pen huddled toward the wall, nursing the cup to warm her hands and give her a focus. It felt as if there were a glass pane between her and the others. She kept her own input to a minimum, and that seemed to suffice for them. They had plenty of talk between them.

Frank, an older male student, was all ears for Kathleen's private life. The ladies shook their heads but tossed in whatever crumbs they had.

"She had a big break-up a couple of years ago," said Delys, who was a part-time something in the healing professions, something a bit alternative. The sort of woman Pen, hard-headed, usually couldn't stand.

Delys had taken several other courses, all with Kathleen Nancarrow since, as she said, they were "guaranteed first-rate".

"What do you mean, a big break-up?" Frank said. Pen averted her face but burned to know.

"Oh, I wouldn't say more," Delys said, scraping the remnant foam from her cappuccino cup, "out of respect for her privacy, you know," and Pen, spotting

the smoothness of the lie now that she herself had entered that domain, realised Delys *knew* nothing more.

“In any case,” one of the other women said, “she certainly hasn’t let it get in the way of her teaching. But do you mean she’s single again? A woman like that?”

Delys chuckled and raised her eyebrows, again, Pen thought, to avoid saying she didn’t actually know. “Well, she does *live* alone.”

The group tutted. “You’ve been to her house?”

Delys nodded: “I had to collect some papers, once. I didn’t go in. But the house looked lovely, and when I said so, she said, ‘Yes, but too big for one person to manage.’”

“Why would she keep it, then?” said Frank.

“Close to the uni. And she has a lot of books, as you would expect.”

It was on the tip of Pen’s tongue to ask where the house was, exactly – but she pulled herself up short, knowing how odd that would look, when she hadn’t said a word till now – and she wanted, for some reason, to appear indifferent.

Besides, if she really needed to know where Kathleen’s house was, now that she knew it was close by, she could follow her.

She had quite naturally and accidentally observed Kathleen’s car one day after class – a late-model silver Corolla. Usually Kathleen went back up to her office when the lecture was over, but on that one occasion, as Pen had been sitting in the Volvo choosing a CD for the drive home, Kathleen walked right down into the car park and drove off.

Pen even remembered part of the number plate. It bore the letters ARG, which made her think of *argument*, or *aargh*, both somehow fitting. The plate was not personalised – they were just random letters, but they stuck in Pen’s brain. Burned onto the back of her eyelids from staring.

If she kept a secret diary of all this, she could refer to Kathleen as ARG. Or she could write it in code, as she had when she was a kid and knew her mother was trying to snoop in her things.

But Pen had decided not to write down a single scrap. Finding Derrick’s letter, the letter that started it all, had brought home to her the treachery of the written word. If you wanted to keep things to yourself, if you wanted real safety, total control, you let nothing outside your head.

Inside your head, you could go where you wanted.

She remembered a song Derrick had taught her when she was first studying German: *Die Gedanken sind frei...* "Thoughts are free, who can guess them? They fly away like night shadows – nobody can know them, no hunter shoot them down..."

If she wanted to follow Kathleen home, just to see where she lived, it wasn't stalking or anything like that. Surely it wasn't. It was to understand, really, to get the full picture of a woman like that, a woman whose existence had shaken the very foundations of her marriage, as if she were an unseen faultline.

Pen thought of the terrible lopsided gash in the earth near Meckering that she'd visited on an outing with school, the houses that had vanished, the little signs pegged in the ground that marked where each family had once lived.

The worst thing about a faultline: disaster could strike again at any time. And yet people always rebuilt, refusing to believe the worst. Was that what Pen herself was doing, stubbornly believing life with Derrick could go on as normal? Without ever telling him what had changed?

If she wanted to follow Kathleen home... she would have to be patient, because Kathleen probably stayed on campus for hours – all that marking, Pen thought, suddenly remembering the burnt essays. Pen blushed to herself. She would have to be patient and discreet, a real night shadow. Unobtrusive, and with all the time in the world.

But she did not have all the time in the world.

All too soon it was the last day of the extension course. After this, Pen would be without excuse. No more reason to hang around the campus, drive to the city each week. She sat through that last lecture with a dull disappointment like a lump in her stomach, barely following anything Kathleen said. Glued to the spot, staring, as if trying to memorise Kathleen's image, for whatever good that would do. If you stared like that at someone, eventually it gave them a halo, flaring against the white wall, the overhead screen. You felt as if you were leaving your body. Pen was so numb that when Delys and the others nudged her at the end, she didn't at first understand them.

"She's going to come for a drink with us," Delys said. "Being the last day, you know."

"She" was Kathleen.

Pen's heart thudded. "I don't drink, really," she said, wondering why this immediate battle inside, this for-and-against.

Delys laughed. "You can still have a lemonade or something. Come on."

They all walked down-campus to the student tavern, Pen lagging behind, eyes to the ground, stealing a glimpse of Kathleen now and then: her long, mesmerising skirts, her sharp-heeled boots – Perth was on the verge of spring, but the campus was still a cold place. Overhead, wattlebirds looped in and out of branches, indifferent to their presence as the women’s heels rang on the brick pavement.

Kathleen had not walked with the group outside class like this before. There was always a kind of detachment or distance. But today was different, because it was ending.

Just once, Kathleen turned around, as if to check who was straggling back there, and smiled at Pen. Pen could not smile, but only nodded.

The tavern was noisy and beery inside, and full of young people who paid them no attention whatsoever, after the initial head-swivel. Not that much older, Pen thought, than Derrick’s own students. The air was thick with the odours of chip fat and burgers, and the clamour of desperate straining after amusement. The group found themselves some seats, and Kathleen brought a couple of carafes to the table.

“It should be the other way around,” Frank said. “We should be shouting *you*.”

“No, it’s a bit of a tradition,” Kathleen said. “Aren’t you having any?” she asked Pen.

Pen hesitated, not wanting to make herself stand out. The one killjoy, the wowser. “Thanks,” she said simply, and proffered her glass. There was no law against it. *One* wouldn’t make any difference, she supposed, to driving home. *One* wouldn’t tell on her breath if Derrick should kiss her.

It might even make things easier...

Pen could not help looking at Kathleen. Being so unused to the wine, Pen was all the more under its sway, all the less inclined to stop staring. Of course Kathleen became aware of this, glancing back now and then, but Pen guessed she was used to being looked at. Professionally as well as personally. It almost hurt your eyes to see her, because there was no flaw. Like a sculpture.

Pen thought dimly of something she had read about the perfection of statues, of a likeness between the acts of murder and making love. Fixing someone to absolute stillness, complete possession. It was in a Patricia Highsmith book. At the time, it had chilled her, and she had put the book aside; yet now, gazing at Kathleen, the idea wouldn’t go away.

"You're very quiet," Kathleen said to her, and Pen lowered her eyes a moment. "What's your name again?"

Pen told her, at once aglow at the attention and yet coldly irritated that the woman didn't even know. The disproportion of it. The lopsidedness of the relation between them. Could she not even understand...?

"And how did you like the course?"

Pen gushed suddenly now – she was all words, and some of her fellow students turned in surprise, having heard so little from her till now.

"I could almost worship Baudelaire," she said, and though she saw some of the others smile into their drinks, she couldn't stop herself. "I don't think it's at all true that women can't take pleasure in reading him; I think it's more complex than that. Yes, it's misogynistic on the surface, but you have to see it on a larger scale..."

Kathleen nodded, excited, flipping open a book to show Pen a particular page, and scribbling lines out on a beer coaster.

"And Mallarmé: don't you think every translation is inadequate? No translator has really managed that honed, chiselled turning of his lines, the way the white space seems to gape at you after them."

Kathleen refilled Pen's wine glass and sent back a volley of her own. For the next quarter-hour they were no longer themselves but a live dialogue, a disembodied argument. It was like a blowtorch.

Kathleen said, when Pen quoted a poem, "You speak French very well, where did you learn it?"

Pen said awkwardly that she had taught herself.

Kathleen stood up, nodding. "Well, perhaps we'll see you here again, on another course," she said, and then her attention was turned back to the group, as if Pen had never existed, and she said her farewells, gathered up her bag, and left.

"Well, you're a dark horse, Pen," Frank said, to break the sudden silence. "You wouldn't say boo to a goose all winter, and you come out with all that on the last day. Talk about teacher's pet!"

"Mixing your metaphors, aren't you, Frank?" said Delys, and everyone laughed. Discreetly, Pen pocketed the beer coaster Kathleen had written on, stood up, and excused herself.

She slipped outside and surveyed the paved area. Kathleen was nowhere to be seen now, though if Pen hastened her step, she might catch her up. But for what, exactly?

Pen ran all the way to the parked Volvo, got in, and locked the doors with one snap. Brightly scarved and coated students went by, brushing the sides of the car in their haste, laughing and shouting. She covered her ears and closed her eyes. What was she doing here? She had embarrassed herself, enthusing like that – it was not what she had meant to do. Not at all. She rested her head on the steering wheel, but could not think. Thinking was not enough – she was as bad as Hamlet, she could not act. She could not even cry, though that was what every cell of her tired body wanted to do.

Now the course was over, it was back to scratch. She would have to come up with a new plan. If she had ever had a plan in the first place.

"Every time I come here," Pen's mother said, "I can't help but think of that poor man."

She *said* it every time, too, Pen thought. They'd come up for a Sunday picnic at Mundaring Weir, because Mrs Stone had wanted to visit, and it was easier that way than having her at the house. Now that they were planning renovations, there was an excuse, but it was really because Pen couldn't bear having her mother in that so-called "personal space".

"I do love her, but..." Pen often said to Derrick privately, and he would interrupt:

"You don't have to say any more. I understand."

Derrick thought Mrs Stone meant well, but there was only so much of her people could take. Pen wasn't even sure she meant well.

"What a tragic waste of a life," Mrs Stone said now, leaning over the edge of the walkway and gazing into the vast body of water as if it were no more than a puddle.

Pen, by contrast, couldn't bear to look down into the depths – it made her dizzy. She always had the feeling, looking at the great dam wall, that it was about to fall, the way you sometimes felt the sky could fall. Or that a chink might suddenly appear and before they knew it, they'd be swept away. Pen both feared and desired it at the same time, a sensation she did not like. It was like the belly of the earth, or as if you were teetering on the edge of a giant's cradle.

The place had an eerie magnetism, all sheer planes and gravity, as if some force could impel you to leap over the barrier, or to push someone over. Like that time she'd come here as a kid with Sally Fearn's family, and Sally's Dad was playing the fool at the side of the walkway, and Sally said, "I wish he would slip."

Pen had said, "You don't mean it."

"Yes, I do," Sally had said, and they'd stared at each other.

"If he'd only had more patience." Mrs Stone gripped the edge of the barrier as she walked. She was talking about C. Y. O'Connor, the man behind the pipeline that carried water hundreds of miles from this place out to the goldfields; that infamous suicide, by the coast, every child here learned about in

primary school history lessons. Legend held that he thought his great engineering vision had come to nothing. "The thing wasn't a failure at all. He gave in too soon."

"Shall we find a place to spread the rug, and have our lunch?" Derrick said, with a sixth sense for how much of this Pen could stand. It wasn't just the clichés, no worse than you'd find in any sentimental tourist brochure. It was the way Mrs Stone repeated them, verbatim, no matter how long had passed since they last came up here together. No matter how often she was corrected with the facts. As if there were only so many scripted lines, so many available conversations, and they were stuck in a familiar pattern. As if nothing could be spontaneous.

Mrs Stone sighed and nodded. "I just can't imagine," she said, "how anyone could get to the point of wanting to take their own life. It's so selfish."

"Here, Mum," Pen said, patting a corner of the blanket. "I've poured you some tea."

She tried not to catch her mother's eye, knowing what the conversation was really about. So many years, and still her mother wanted to harp, indirectly, on Derrick's weaknesses: *how could you marry a man like that?* Pen had heard it often enough in the early days, and now it had gone underground. Mrs Stone saw breakdowns, suicidal thoughts, anything mentally negative, as a moral failing.

It wasn't so much an attack on Derrick, as a snipe at Pen for choosing him. Her mother probably liked Derrick in spite of herself, Pen supposed, but thought his past was a pity. He was not quite what Mrs Stone considered a man, despite having got on his feet and made something of his life in the years that followed.

Despite Pen having got him on his feet, and made something of their life together.

And what would she say if she knew about the letter to Kathleen?

Yet Pen knew too that if she'd married a big, blustery, insensitive type that had "go" in him, to use her mother's word, she'd have come under fire for that too.

The type her father had been...

"Now John Forrest, on the other hand," her mother went on, "*there* was a man who had not only the vision, but the wherewithal to carry it through. You can't imagine *him* giving up, can you?"

Derrick coughed half-heartedly. "You know, Vi, there's mixed opinion on him these days. It's all too easy to glamorise that colonial enterprise stuff, the great explorer and Premier and all that, but there was a darker side to a lot of it."

He was being so polite, Pen thought.

"I don't see what you mean," said Mrs Stone.

Pen wanted to say, *He was a murderer of Aboriginal people*, but she left the cause to Derrick, since he had engaged with it.

Derrick said, "Only that the past, you know, it depends on your point of view..."

But before he could go on, Pen's mother asked him for more tea, and the subject was dropped. It's not *him* she wants to argue with, Pen realised.

Though the sky was a bright painted blue, it was chilly whenever you approached the shade. Pen thought: 'The chill we make between us travels with us.' She unpacked the picnic sandwich items: soft ciabatta this time, because her mother didn't like the bread too crusty, and had carried on about it last time. There were olives, and hummous, and slices of gruyere, and cherry tomatoes.

"A bit fiddly, aren't they?" Mrs Stone said when she saw the tomatoes. "You can't really put them *into* your sandwich. They roll around and pop out."

Pen said nothing. They ate in silence, just as they'd always eaten when she still lived at home, a silence so excruciating she could hear every movement of her mother's jaw and tongue. Their homes had always been poky – "manageable", Mrs Stone would say – and thin-walled, ruling out any privacy. She'd lived with her mother's rhythms, the smell and sound of her, trodden on the heels of her every movement.

Her mother sat daintily, bit and chewed elegantly, but somehow loomed loud. She had been a beautiful woman in her youth, and was still striking now in her late fifties, only a kind of hardness had set in, a sharp turn to her features that Pen feared would creep over her own face too, as if her mother were some kind of magic mirror. Didn't they say you could see the daughter's future in the mother?

Verily it is by beauty that we come at wisdom. Pen thought naturally of Kathleen again, and looked at Derrick, oblivious, munching on his ciabatta as if nothing were any different from the last time they'd picnicked here. His tolerant good nature when it came to her mother; his constant solicitude for Pen's feelings, making a gentle buffer between them.

She could scarcely believe that years of this habitual comfort and kindness were based on deception. She dug about in herself for the feeling of shock, cushioned for months now, like seeking out a bad nerve to press in a wonky tooth, but as she gazed across she still saw only the day-in, day-out Derrick she'd always known. He smiled at her, and she smiled back.

If she had never found that letter, she would have no idea. What difference, then, did it actually make? Yet... and this was the rub... why had he kept the letter? A kind of relic of his True Love, a touchstone, like keeping some horrible pornographic picture to look at when Pen wasn't around? Maybe he even had photos of Kathleen somewhere.

If so, Pen would find them and burn them, one by one, as she had those essay papers. And he need never know, and could never ask, if he did miss them. Not without owning up.

But Kathleen herself would still remain. The one fly in the ointment, spanner in the works...

Pen relieved her boredom now as they ate, ringing the changes on clichés for Kathleen. *Der fünfte Rad am Wagen*, as the Germans said: the car's fifth wheel. Or what poor old Diana had said in her soggy, tell-all interview: something about *three in the marriage*, and it was a *bit crowded*. And they'd got Diana in the end, hadn't they? Pen wasn't usually into conspiracy theories, but that one looked a bit obvious. *Three in the bed, and the little one said: Roll over...*

"You all right, darling?" Derrick said suddenly.

Pen neutralised her face. She must be more careful; it was easy to forget you were watched as well as watching.

"Yes, I'm fine. Just going to stretch my legs a bit," she said, and stood up and walked purposefully back toward the dam wall.

She felt every stone, every twig, every gumnut her shoes crushed and rolled, like the princess with the pea under her mattress, or the little mermaid who trod as if on knives. Everything seemed vivid, highly coloured, speaking to her. Everything imbued with meaning, out to get her.

She re-inspected the railing as she crossed: it was surprisingly low, no real protection. Derrick and her mother were out of range – she was alone on the wall, thinking: *how easy it would be...* But she shook herself. Lately it was if she could see only the world's gaping chasms and sharp edges. All the ways it might allow you to do a little damage in return. The loopholes it might have missed, like a negligent or indifferent parent. They were like so many

invitations. Pen grimaced ironically, thinking of her mother's words: "the wherewithal to carry it through."

In her pocket was the cardboard coaster she'd picked up after Kathleen left the tavern. She took it out now and turned it over. It smelled faintly of spilled beer. She read *Elle y vint! – folle créature! Nous sommes tous plus ou moins fou!* Once home, Pen had Googled it to see where the quote was from.

Baudelaire: *She came along! – Mad creature! We are all more or less mad!*

It was when they were talking about the poet's misogyny, she remembered. The poem was about a man pleased to have murdered his wife.

Pen shook her head, glanced back to make sure nobody was watching, and threw the coaster down into the weir, where it would float and fade and disintegrate. An offering to the dark god of the waters.

Taking one course with Kathleen looked appropriately random; taking another could be asking for trouble. It might draw Derrick's attention in a way Pen didn't want, and could, for others, put Pen too obviously in the picture as some kind of groupie, always hanging around, or at the very least, someone curiously familiar.

She would have to find some other way of keeping tabs on the situation. There was no question of forgetting Kathleen. Simply putting her out of mind. Leaving it alone.

Pen thought of her father, when he'd been angry at her mother, all those times before he walked out. He used to say, *Give it a rest. Leave it alone. Why can't you learn to leave well alone?*

Because I'm not done yet, her mother would say. *Why should you be let off the hook? Why should you get off scot-free?*

Pen, as a child, had looked it up in the dictionary – scot: a payment, a contribution, a reckoning.

Who made you a little tin god? her mother would scream.

The words rang around and around in Pen's head. Like that sign on the door of Head of Faculty, at the uni, a funny cartoon card that said: *Who died and made you Elvis?* It must have been put there by colleagues, taking him down a peg or two, tongue in cheek. Just weird enough that it stayed with Pen.

Who do you think you are? The School motto: KNOW THYSELF...

The best way, Pen thought, would be to do something else that allowed her to be on campus, but that had no direct connection with Kathleen. Keep at a

safe and innocent distance, that was nonetheless closer than anyone else would notice.

So she put in for a job at the University Library.

“You want to work full-time?” Derrick exclaimed. “I thought you enjoyed having the afternoons free. You’d be burning your bridges a bit.”

It was a challenge, Pen pointed out, and she’d grown fond of the uni environment, and it might – if she studied alongside – lead to something better, rising through the ranks... whereas in the job she already had, there was nowhere else to go.

“Sure,” Derrick said, with that non-committal tone he had, meaning he would think it through and make himself arrive at the same conclusion, since it was what she wanted. He was always accommodating.

Pen knew exactly how the pattern of his inner reasoning would run. He would not want to restrict her freedom, to insist that she keep working at the College just because *he* worked there. He would applaud the sense of forward movement. He would probably even offer to help with the application.

So she filled out the form, got some discreet references made out in her maiden name, and kept her fingers crossed. She didn’t really expect anything would come of it. But if this didn’t work, there would be other avenues. You just had to think creatively.

In the interview room, some weeks later, there were three well-dressed women, one of whom was only young but clearly the senior figure, as she spoke first and directed the whole thing. She was lean and serious, her smooth hair cropped, her shoulders padded. Only a smudge of plum-coloured lipstick said, *I am still female...*

“Ms Stone,” she said, biting her glossy lower lip and tapping a pencil on the desk, “We don’t normally take on people who haven’t completed Year Twelve. I imagine you would have seen that on the criteria page when you applied.”

Pen nodded vaguely.

“I have to confess,” the woman went on, “I was curious to ask you in, just to see who you were. I have seen a lot of job applications, but I have never seen marks like these in anyone’s school records. They are astounding. You could have gone anywhere you wanted, you know.”

Pen blushed, and said nothing. She was not the sort for special pleading, to play up her hardships, that she’d had to leave school because of family upheaval, that she’d done it tough. No: she would see what fate served, and hit

back accordingly, always with another move up her sleeve. She was not a cringer.

It paid off.

“Having met and talked with you, and looked through your work history, we’d be prepared to take you on and see how it goes. Fixed-term, you know, on a contract. But perhaps you wouldn’t want to leave a permanent post for that.”

Pen shook her head and explained all about her enthusiasm for the university, about wanting to better herself, knowing immediately she had tapped into this woman’s current.

“Then we’re on the same page,” the woman said, and within ten more minutes of details about giving notice and references, the matter was settled.

Everyone back at the Boys’ College seemed to think Pen was going to be a librarian, as if that were a generic term for anyone who worked in a library. Teachers ought to have known better, but perhaps it was just verbal laziness. At any rate, after two or three attempts to correct them, Pen gave up and let it slide. *Librarian* sounded so much better than *assistant*, anyway.

In fact, the duties were banal, the pay lower than she would have had if she’d gone full-time at the College, and the prestige non-existent.

But the beauty of the library, Pen decided, was the night-shifts, the flexi-time, the cover it afforded for saying one thing and doing another. Because that was the way it had to be now, if she wanted to get back some control. It wasn’t really a matter of wanting to “better herself”. It was about getting to the bottom of things. Things that needed tossing out like excess ballast, if she wanted her life, her marriage, to stay afloat.

There was the College send-off to get through, in the staff room, Jean Sargent full of smiles that barely covered her curiosity.

“This is a big shift in thinking,” she said, opening cardboard wine-casks for the do, after school on Pen’s last day. “How are you going to get all those renovations done, eh, when you’re a full-timer?”

She made it sound like prison, like *doing time*.

Pen just smiled and said, “Slowly.”

“Make a bit of space for you in other ways,” Jean added. “I mean, you and Derrick both working here, you’re in each other’s pockets a lot, aren’t you? Don’t you ever want a bit of – you know, *time out* from him?”

Pen stared at her. She'd always found Jean rather in-your-face, but that was just a personality thing. She'd never considered whether there was any more to it than that. Was it jealousy, or something else? Pen knew she had to stop taking people at face value. Surely she'd learned that the hard way...

"Not at all," Pen said. "Why would we be married, if we didn't like each other's company?"

Jean raised her eyebrows, and then nodded toward the Principal, calling for their attention by tapping a spoon on a glass. The Principal made a little speech, and presented Pen with a lovely bouquet – roses, tulips and babies' breath – as well as a delicate pair of opal earrings.

There was a pile of small gifts and cards from students, too.

All the best, Mrs B.

See you when I get to uni.

You're the hottest office lady we've ever had.

Pen laughed: they'd only ever had two. And a special card from young Cliff in Year Nine: *I'll miss you, you're our Galadriel!* Pen felt a pang at that one: nobody to stand between Cliff and the dreaded Phys Ed. now.

But it was too late to get emotional – she couldn't afford it.

Pen hadn't expected any fuss, yet they were all there, tired but cheery in their cardigans, floral dresses and court shoes, their knee-length twill shorts with socks unevenly hitched. Surely it wasn't for her sake. It must be the free nibbles – somebody had laid out platters on the coffee-stained, laminated benches. Or the excuse to avoid going home for a while...

Crusty old Leon Masters, to her surprise, gave her a squeeze that was almost a hug.

"You'll be well rid of us," he said. "Onward and upward, or whatever the motto is. Haven't you got something like that in Latin?" he asked, turning to dig Derrick in the ribs. Derrick looked bemused.

Leon said, "But seriously, Pen, I hope it goes well for you. It's about time you took your own part against the world," and he raised his glass of cheap cask wine to her.

She stared at Leon, thinking for a minute he had seen right into her.

"How do you mean?" she said.

"Well, I have this theory," he said. When Leon did talk, it was to expound his theories, pithy and unpopular, in the lunch room or at meetings. Probably to the students too. Pen smiled.

"I reckon that men," he went on, "take their own part against the world. Whereas women always seem to take the world's part against themselves."

"Sounds like the vino talking," Derrick put in.

"*In vino veritas*," said Leon drily.

"So you think we women are passive defenders of the status quo." Pen was laughing now.

"That's not quite what I meant. But it will do."

"Well," said Pen, "I'll have to rise to the challenge, then. Cheers."

And with a glance at Derrick, she picked up a glass of red from the table and drained it.

In the basement of the multi-storey library building there was a small café. It was really for the public – students and teaching staff, people the library called “users”, which struck Pen as funny.

My ex-boyfriend was just a user, the girls at school would say, when Pen was a teenager. Meaning he only wanted you for what he could get. Meaning he didn’t love you.

Maureen, who was on desk shift with Pen, and had showed her the ropes for the first few weeks, said, “In the old days, in the public library, we didn’t say *users*, we said *readers*. But it’s got nothing to do with reading anymore.”

During breaks, though library staff had their own private tea-room, they sometimes went down to the public café to buy cream buns or chocolate bars. Pen preferred to sit in there for her breaks because they had real coffee, and benches where you could sit and read and nobody would bother you. And observe the comings and goings.

Only today, she had her back to the room because the last spot left was facing the wall, on a high stool. So the warm *Hello* took her by surprise.

She turned. It was Kathleen Nancarrow.

Pen swallowed, instantly mute.

“Weren’t you in my winter-school group?” Kathleen smiled. “We had a long chat afterwards, didn’t we. Are you taking another course?”

She was leaning her hip against the jutting table, idly scooping the creamy foam from her coffee with a teaspoon and licking at it. She wore a crisp, white collared shirt with darts at the waist, over soft black tailored pants. She smelled of tropical fruit, some kind of fresh perfume.

Pen shook her head. “I didn’t think you would remember me.”

“Of course I remember you. You were very keen. Pen, isn’t it?”

Pen turned slightly back toward her book, torn between the urge to hide in it again, and the wish to seize the moment, say something outrageous, since now she had her chance. But Kathleen reached forward and turned the book over.

“Oh, Highsmith,” she said. “I haven’t read this one. You know she was very popular in France? She even lived there for a while.”

"I don't know about her life," Pen said, at last. "But I like her stories."

Kathleen nodded. "Mmm. Have you read any Simenon? You'd probably like him too, if that's your bent. And you could read him in the French. I use him in teaching, his prose is so clean and precise." She paused. "Why don't you come out and sit with me on the terrace? It's so dark in here, and such a lovely day – you don't want to stay in the cold."

Pen's heart was thumping. "I have to... go in a minute," she said. She almost said "go back to work", but she really didn't want Kathleen to know she was working there. It would spoil... what? What sort of plan did she have in her head, anyway? Pen was confused. She had expected to watch this woman from a distance, to keep the silent upper hand – not this sudden collapse into real contact.

The terrace – sunlight, a moat full of koi around the pavement of the café, swimming back and forward in their shrunken world, flashes of gold and red in the murk – and the great lawns from which anyone might see Kathleen and Pen sitting together. It was too much, too soon. Not this way. Yet to let the chance pass...

"Maybe we can – catch up some other time," Pen said boldly. For a minute she thought she'd been *too* bold: Kathleen gazed coolly at her. But then came another warm smile.

"Yes," Kathleen said. "Why not?" Then digging about in her purse, she handed Pen a card. "You could always give me a call."

The hardest thing was not to have someone as witness to it all. Not even to write it down... Somebody's nose to rub in it, someone to whom Pen could say, *See? I'm not stupid, I can take charge, deal with things. I am not a victim.* To sit all day in the Circulation section idly discharging trolley-loads of books, and not even lean on the relief of gossip: *You wouldn't believe what happened this morning...* Imagine Derrick's face if he knew – and immediately Pen realised she must hide the card, she couldn't take it home with all Kathleen's details on, or the game would be up.

In fact, keeping the card anywhere at all might be a problem. You would have to be one step ahead with everything.

So she memorised the office number, the mobile number, the email address, and threw the card away.

"Sorry, what was that?" Maureen, working nearby, leaned over.

"I didn't say anything," Pen said, flustered.

Maureen gazed at her. "Are you sure? You all right? You look like you might have a temperature."

Pen stood up and stretched. "I might just go and get some water," she said.

In the Ladies' Room upstairs she splashed her face and ran the cold taps over both hands. It was true she looked unwell, she thought, peering into the mirror – could sick feelings show on the outside, were they that legible?

'Too much reading,' she thought, 'too much time alone.'

Pen stared at her own pale features and thought of Kathleen's, of that radiant face stilled to oblivion, extinguished, the way she had imagined it when they had talked that first time at the tavern. Her pulse raced in panic.

'This is ridiculous, I am not a murderer,' she told herself. 'I have never hurt anyone or anything. Just because something crosses your mind doesn't mean you would ever do it.' You couldn't help what you dreamt, for instance, and plenty of harmless people had extreme fantasies – that was clear from the sort of thing that they endlessly churned out on telly and at the movies.

She slapped her own cheeks to bring back some colour, and rubbed herself dry, pulling a huge wodge of paper towels from the dispenser.

'I don't have to ring her, anyway,' she decided. 'I can just let it stop there.'

That evening as she walked in, the house was overly warm and filled with the smell of cooking.

"Surprise," Derrick said, and hugged her. "I thought I should take over the kitchen for once. Seeing you're home later than you used to be."

Pen stiffened, but a glance showed he was speaking innocently – it was not a reproach, it was goodwill. The dining table was laid with cloth and cutlery, something steaming under tinfoil on a cork mat at the centre. Pen lifted the cover and saw a deep-layered lasagne dripping at the edges.

"Impressive," she said, raising her eyebrows. It wasn't any longer the weather for hot, heavy pasta, but Derrick had such a puppy-look on his face – the sort that meant *pat me for having tried*, that she bit her lip and did not say it.

"I have to confess," he began, as they sat to eat, "I cheated."

Pen blinked. "What do you mean?" Even used trivially, the words chilled her.

Derek grimaced. "It was bought. From the deli counter at the organic store. I couldn't believe they had a vegetarian one."

Pen sighed. "Don't feel you have to do extra just because I'm working more. I'm still on top of things, you know."

"I know," Derrick said, placing his hand over hers. "It's only because I thought you'd like to come home to dinner yourself for once. I know you're on top of things – you're a wonder. I'm very proud of you."

She looked at him with detachment. The words, once swallowed willingly – once taken as further proof of their solidity, their permanence together – glanced off now, even felt patronising.

He must have sensed this, because he added, "No, I really mean it. I know I've probably left a lot of this stuff up to you, not because you're 'the wife', you know, Pen, but because you were at home more than I was. But I want you to know I *have* appreciated all that. And I'm thinking... well, for instance, when you're on night shifts and so on – "

Pen placed her other hand on top of his. "Derrick, it's no big deal. And it's not as if you imposed on me. I've made my own choices, haven't I? Stop worrying, darling."

He smiled. "Okay." Then anxiously watched as she ate. "Is it good?"

Pen nodded.

"Did you have a good day?"

She nodded again, and tried to listen as he went on to tell her about his day, the various staff dramas, the new student exchange programme and how hard it was proving to find host parents for the incoming European kids. Already there were two boys signed up from Germany.

"I suppose if all else fails, we could board them here for a little while."

"Hmm."

"Pen? I was saying, if the host families aren't ready in time, we could put one or two kids up here. Just short-term."

Pen was startled. "No, Derrick – it's not a good idea, with the work to be done around this place. I'm sure we don't need the stress."

"Fair enough." Derrick cocked his head sideways. "You okay, darling?"

"Yes. Well, I'm pretty weary, but yes, I'm okay."

Thinking of her day, beside herself, Pen started to laugh softly.

'Like the Wicked Queen in *Snow White*,' she thought, 'plotting how to be rid of her rival.' How astounded Derrick would be, could he really get inside her head. 'I've been talking with your ex, your *amata*, your *femme fatale*, your nemesis. Your *brightness* and *bane*.' It was too absurd.

And yet it seemed more real, the scent of that fruity perfume, more substantial, than this hard table, this dense and rich food, this flesh-and-blood husband sitting opposite her. He was pale as ever – but now he seemed ghostly.

To her shock, she thought, 'I wonder what Kathleen could have seen in him.' And then felt immediately guilty for the notion.

It was worst of all when they went to bed that evening. Pen could tell Derrick was in the mood, charged with feeling from the special effort he had made to spare her the evening chores, the need to build closeness out of that. It was ordinary enough. But her body seemed a leaden weight beside him; she could not will herself to reach over and touch him, and when he instead took the lead, and slipped one hand across her breasts, she shuddered. Of course he noticed it.

"Are you *cold*?" he said. "It's such a mild night."

Pen shook her head but could not speak. His hand crept further down, but still she made no response.

Derrick pulled back slightly, watching her sideways. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head again. "Nothing. Nothing's wrong."

He gave a little smile, and said, "But there is, Pen. You can't be married ten years to someone and not know when something's wrong."

Pen thought, 'Is that so?' But aloud she said, "It's all right, darling. Truly. I'm just a bit tuned out – overstimulated from work, maybe."

Derrick laid his head on her shoulder and whispered, "Just relax. Don't worry about anything."

Now he went on stroking her and kissing her, trying to bring her into sync with his own body, and Pen capitulated, knowing otherwise he would not let it rest till he had got answers out of her. But inside, detached from whatever was happening at skin-level, she fumed and raged.

It was like a boat coming unmoored – ever since Kathleen had resurfaced – nothing was going to stay put, stay on course. It was like being adrift and knowing you had to cross the water without guidance, without instruments to navigate your way. Even into this tiny, private space, where things had always been secure, always known, the woman had intruded.

Seeing Derrick from a distance like that, dull and unfamiliar – such a thought would never have crossed Pen's mind before Kathleen. And Pen herself had made it worse, digging deeper, tracking Kathleen down. If she had only left things alone when she found the letter...

But since she had not, she must carry through. Things would never go back to normal until Kathleen was dealt with.

Wiped, that was what Pen's father used to say, when he washed his hands of someone, shut them out of his life. Dad was always falling out with people, and

always the first one to make the final break, to stay in charge. Quick to make friends, and quick to drop them. Always the dumper, never the dumped.

The problem was *how*.

Pen had never wished anyone dead before, and she wasn't even sure she did now. It wasn't death she wished upon Kathleen: it was non-existence. If only she could *not-be*. It wasn't even pain – Pen didn't wish suffering upon anyone, not even in revenge for Derrick's suffering so long ago. And yet she kept thinking of the old clichés: drinks spiked with powder, pillows held over faces. What shocked her was not that she thought of these, but that she *wasn't* shocked. She was calm and cold.

Derrick came, finally, and sighed – aware that Pen was disengaged, but unable to stop himself. It made him unhappy; his breathing, in the dark, sounded ragged. Pen leaned over as he rolled away, and put her arms around him.

"I love you, darling. Sleep well."

And she lay there like that, holding onto him, until they both slept.

The next morning, under a brisk shower, was like waking up after some sort of trauma, where you don't know who you are or why. Pen rubbed herself dry so hard she was bright red, and stumbled out to the kitchen, where Derrick already had everything under control. Bless him.

"I made waffles," he said, as if compensating for something, and she leaned over and kissed him firmly on the cheek. Then sat and ate them slowly with him, even though it meant they might be late for work.

She watched him chewing, warmed under his occasional, familiar glance. Everything was normal, surely it was. What on earth had she been thinking? Insanity, she told herself, all those night-time thoughts, that desperation. Weariness from her long days, her overly vivid imagination.

It was time to call a halt.

She couldn't easily quit the library without good reason, and even if she did there was no longer a job to go back to at Derrick's college. But she could draw a line under the rest of it. She didn't have to see Kathleen again. She could stop going to the library café, lie low, keep herself to herself.

As if sensing her thoughts, Derrick said, "Is everything okay, the new job and so on? You don't talk about it much. I thought maybe you –"

"No, it's fine," Pen interrupted. "I really like it. Really."

Derrick gazed at her. "I thought maybe we should get some help in with the redecorating," he said at last. "Because you've got a lot more on your plate now, and I'm pretty busy too, and it's not going to get done on schedule."

"There's no hurry, though, is there?" It was literally the last thing on Pen's mind, though the house was in a state, half-undone, ready for remodelling, in suspense almost. The thought of it made her nervous. "We don't want strangers coming in, nosing around. Let's just do it ourselves, as we said."

"Nosing around?" Derrick said. "I can't see why they would. What's to see, anyway?"

"Nothing," Pen said, a little sharply. "I didn't mean that. I just don't like the idea."

"Well, if you can stand the mess, and the delay," Derrick said. "I just have this sinking feeling we might never get it finished. And it's important, you know? It's something we planned together."

He was almost wistful, Pen thought. At times like this, she could believe that he *did* love her the way she'd always supposed. That there never was a Kathleen before her.

Pen collected up the plates and took them to the sink.

"We were going to try to be more open, more sociable, Pen. And it's just not happening. But you don't seem to care much either way," Derrick said.

Pen closed her eyes. "Of course I care, darling," she said, brightly, and put a hand on his shoulder. "Have faith. We'll get there."

Four days later, on the desk in Pen's cubicle, there was a little French paperback.

L'Homme qui regardait passer les trains. The man who watched trains go by.
By Georges Simenon.

It could be a coincidence, she thought. But as French literature was not part of her cataloguing duties, it seemed unlikely anyone had put it there for work reasons.

There was only one person who would have left it there. *Have you read any Simenon? ... I use him in teaching, his prose is so clean and precise.* The rhythms, the intonation, seemed burned into Pen's inward ear.

Pen sank into her swivel chair and turned the flyleaf. Inside was a post-it note: "Thought you'd enjoy this. KN."

The confidence of those initials, as if there was no way they could be mistaken. And the discreet understatement: no pressure, just an assumption of connection.

Pen pulled out the post-it note and shredded it between her fingertips. The book itself she thrust into her desk drawer. Was it a gift, or a loan? Either one required acknowledgement.

This she had not expected. She had thought the decisions would be all on her side – she was the one, after all, with the undeclared interest. Not that Kathleen would seek her out. It was not supposed to be this way.

She could, of course, pretend she had never seen the book; someone might have removed it, mislaid it, or taken it away to read...

Maureen popped her head around the cubicle wall.

“Oh, did you get that book?” she said. “Came in yesterday evening – night-shift left it with your name on, so I brought it up.”

Pen nodded. “Thanks.” No need to say more: it was only a book, after all, and this was a library. It could have been something she’d ordered for herself.

But how did Kathleen know she worked here? They had only met in the café, which was open to anyone. She must have asked around, or looked her up – the staff directory online, maybe. She might still have Pen’s surname – only the maiden name, thank goodness – from her winter-school register.

Pen was spooked. It was one thing to be the observer – another thing entirely to be the observed. She didn’t like it one bit.

All day the book turned this way and that in her imagination, like a restless sleeper. She opened the drawer; she closed it again. She was torn between curiosity – why *this* particular book, was it a message? – and annoyance at the incursion into her private space.

And she feared that she might even start to read it...

After work she had to call into the Foreign Language Bookshop in the city centre, to collect some items Derrick needed for school. She had to drive around and around the block on William Street until a parking spot became available.

When at last she got out of the car, she saw that the shop was no longer there. “We have moved to Hay Street” a sign said, and gave directions.

“Bugger it,” Pen muttered, and stood contemplating whether to walk or to shift the car. Turning, she saw a dingy doorway that said Internet Café. There were all sorts of shiftless types hanging around, moving up and down the dark staircase that led to the basement premises. She made double-sure she’d locked

the car, and headed down the Mall. On foot would be quicker, given the trouble she'd already had parking – and it was near closing time.

There were sales clerks and business people rushing in every direction, punctuated only by slow clusters of teenagers, buskers with dogs, and every so often a young couple smooching in a corner, or on a wooden seat, that awkward display that screamed *Look at me* while feigning utter indifference to the rest of the world. Pen thought of a song on one of Derrick's CDs – Brassens, it was – about how lovers one day realise that

*in the random streets
on one of these fine benches
they've already lived the best part of their love...*

The best part. How it could only be downhill, domestic and confined, from then on.

'Is it all behind me? The best part of our love.' She and Derrick had never made a show of things in public – always discreet, muted, sensible.

She stared at the couples unashamedly as she passed. There was always one or the other who looked back at her, as if to check they were being watched.

'Already dishonest,' she thought, 'from the very beginning.' They pretended to be lost in each other, in their embrace, but it was always with an eye to something else...

She only just made it into the Foreign Language Bookshop; the sales assistant was clearly getting ready to go home. Pen apologised profusely and paid for Derrick's order. As she let the door clatter behind her, she saw in the window cabinet *Dimanche* by Georges Simenon, and all at once the day's nausea rushed back upon her.

Of course it wasn't that coincidental – the man had written hundreds of books, and you'd find him, even in English, in any respectable bookstore. And probably a few not so respectable, she thought. But it was hard, just the same, not to feel that things were closing in on her. As if a big eye in the sky were watching and connecting all the dots, reading her thoughts. As if little bits of Kathleen were planted everywhere, come to stay, never to leave her alone.

She will never go away and leave me alone...

Pen jogged all the way back to the car, put Derrick's books inside, and went on an impulse down the threadbare staircase into the Internet Café, ignoring the unsavoury loiterers. Her head was pounding.

It was true the written word was treacherous. But only when you could trace it to a source. Pen paid her three dollars, brought up a PC, and went straight to Hotmail to set up an anonymous address.

Having sent the message, of course, Pen was left with the problem of *not knowing*. She'd thought there would be satisfaction simply in *saying* it, in sending it off into the ether. But as days went by, it was like waiting for the other shoe to drop... Twice on her way home from work she called into an internet kiosk, nowhere near the campus, to see if there was any reply.

No reply.

She couldn't even really be sure if it had arrived. So she sent another message, a simple variation on the first:

You may think people are disposable, but the past never goes away. You can't get off scot-free. Who do you think you are?

It was stilted, telegraphic, unsatisfying. But too much more would be a giveaway of some sort – she couldn't write anything that would link the message to Derrick, to any specific event. And the strange thing was, as she sat there in the grip of her compulsion, the image of Kathleen insisted its way into her head, the real Kathleen, not this ugly chimera Pen raged at by email, but the warm, scented, friendly form of her, leaning back against the café bench, smiling and inviting her out into the sunshine.

'If I rang Kathleen and made a time to meet,' Pen thought, shaking herself, 'I could see for myself if the emails have made a dent in that – that calm exterior.'

So on her very next night shift, during the evening break, she went to a pay phone off campus, hanging up twice before finally letting the number ring out.

"Why don't you drop round here tonight?" Kathleen said. "I could do with some company, and I don't feel like going out anywhere."

It was all Pen could do not to gasp. "Um, okay. I'll be finished at eight, I can come over then." Her brain was racing at this sudden turn. "Are you sure tonight is a good time? Is there anything I should bring?"

"Have you eaten already?"

Pen had.

"Then just your good self. Let me give you directions..."

When Pen rang Derrick, he was glum.

“What a shame – there’s a French movie on SBS tonight, I thought we could watch it together.”

Pen winced. “I’m sorry, darling, but everyone’s going, and I can’t really get out of it without giving offence. I’ll only stay a little while, anyway, just to do the right thing. They’ll all be getting smashed, anyway – it’s not my cup of tea. Maybe you can tape the movie?”

“Of course.” He paused. Pen could just see his expression resigning itself, ever accommodating. His mind a million miles from divining the truth. “You have fun, and drive carefully. Don’t be *too* late.”

In fact Kathleen’s house was only a short drive away, nestled low on a block a few streets back from the university. The front and carport were overhung with something like ivy or virginia creeper, so that you couldn’t see much of the house from the road. Pen pulled the Volvo in neatly behind the familiar silver Corolla. Bizarre to think she had ever contemplated following that car, and now here she was, on the doorstep, invited.

Why was the woman so keen? Was she a bit *too* keen? It hadn’t crossed Pen’s mind till now. After all, the affair with Derrick – why would she be interested in women? And she didn’t look like a lesbian or whatever. Not that you could really say what they looked like...

It couldn’t be that she suspected Pen of anything – she had sounded relaxed and normal, and besides, there was no reason for her to link Pen to the stolen batch of essays, or the anonymous emails. Pen flushed a moment at the thought of them, then rallied. She had come this far, whatever else happened. She rang the doorbell.

At first there was no answer, so she rang again. This time there came a yell.

“Come in. Just come in.”

The hallway was dark but led through to a bright, open-plan dining area. Kathleen was on the phone in a corner of the kitchen, her hair slightly damp as if from the shower, her face a little puffy. “Look, I’ve got to go, okay?”

Pen stood still, moved back a little, embarrassed.

“No, I’ve *got* to go. See you.”

Kathleen hung up, and turned to Pen, smiling weakly. “I’m sorry about that.”

Pen shook her head. “I can come back some other time.”

“No, no, please, sit down. It’s just... it’s just my ex, one of those horrible stories you don’t need to hear.” (‘As if there were lots of them,’ Pen thought. ‘And Derrick was one of them.’)

“I don’t even know why these things happen,” Kathleen said, “it’s ancient history, but you’ve caught me on the hop. Murphy’s law, isn’t it – that someone like that will call when you’re expecting company? I do apologise.”

Pen thought, ‘She’s surely not one of those women who will launch into all their personal details when they hardly know you.’ Where it started with exes, and ran rapidly downhill to menstrual problems. Kathleen just didn’t seem that kind. Aloud, Pen said, “Well, I brought some chocolate, if that helps.”

Kathleen laughed, and took the box. “I’m sure it will. As long as you eat some too, otherwise I’ll scoff the lot... Look, you go into the lounge, and I’ll make some coffee. I meant to have it ready, before I got interrupted.”

Pen wandered through into a dark, high-ceilinged room with mismatched but lovely old armchairs and a coffee table loaded with books and papers. The walls were bare but for a single painting, portrait-shaped but semi-abstract, that suggested a woman sitting on a swing. It was sombre, at odds with its subject matter, the woman’s figure nothing more than a few deft, black curves carved or stamped tensely into the thick background texture. It looked like a Franz Marc, or Chagall maybe, Pen thought, but it was an original, not a print, so that was unlikely.

“My mother painted that,” Kathleen said, carrying in the tray and nudging the pile of papers to place it on the table. “Pardon the mess. I’m too busy to do much housework, and it seems kind of decadent to pay anyone else to do it. This place is functional, I’m afraid, not fancy. My mother would turn in her grave!”

“She’s passed away,” Pen said, stupidly.

“Cancer, a few years ago. I’m the only one left now.”

“She was a talented artist,” Pen said. “At least, so far as *I* can judge.”

Kathleen smiled. “Well, others have vindicated your judgement – she had a little following, you know, and sold quite a few pictures. But it was harder then. For women, I mean. No career if you were married, and a bloody hard row to hoe if you weren’t. Mum did it hard – my father moved out when I was still young.”

“So did mine,” Pen said, involuntarily. Then burned and flushed again – she had not meant to reveal anything about herself, let alone such a private detail.

“Ah. Well, you know how it is, then.” Kathleen plunged and poured the coffee, and offered Pen a small white jug of cream. “What about you, are you in a relationship?”

Pen hesitated. “No.” There was no way she could let the talk steer to Derrick – she could lie outright, but she could not dissemble, make up some other identity for him, string along. “No, I’m not.”

“Sorry, that was a personal question, I shouldn’t be so abrupt. I just... I’ve had a bad couple of days. But I won’t bore you with the details.”

Pen thought, ‘It’s the emails, of course, they have unnerved her.’

It was a hollow thought, unsatisfying, and she wished now she could undo them.

“I’m not bored,” she said, to compensate. “It’s wonderful being here.”

Kathleen looked surprised at her vehemence, but then smiled again. “Can you stay for a while? We could talk about Simenon... Or there’s a movie on SBS.”

“A French movie,” Pen nodded, inspecting herself for traces of guilt toward Derrick, and finding none. She felt oddly light, as if the inside of her had been emptied out. Maybe it was the strong coffee, this late at night.

The movie was called *Swimming Pool*, and turned out to be mostly in English. It was a shocker: slow, corny, and with the kind of dumb twist that makes you feel cheated. An incoherent plot that was just an excuse to pit an older woman against a younger woman, who never seemed to be wearing a shirt. At the end, they looked at each other and laughed.

“I don’t know why I watched that one all the way through,” Kathleen said. “Must have been the company! If it was the cinema and I was by myself, I’d have walked out.”

“Me too. But sometimes you just keep on with things, don’t you, thinking they’ve got to get better? Even though you know they won’t.”

Kathleen laughed. “Sounds just like life with my ex. Sorry, seems to be the theme of the evening. I’m over it, really.”

“Were you married?” Pen said.

Kathleen cocked her head sideways. “No,” she said, with a curious expression. “No, I’ve never been married. You?”

“Uh-uh.” Pen stood up and yawned. She looked around her again: amazing to think Kathleen had achieved all this by herself, a single woman. And no silver-spoon beginnings, either – though her mother must have been cultured, which would help... “I should probably get going. I’ve got to work tomorrow.”

The disturbing thing was, Pen didn't really want to leave at all, but every minute she waited would make it that much harder to conceal things from Derrick. Already he'd be out of his mind with worry, but she wouldn't be able to ring him until she was well away from Kathleen's house.

"We should do it again. Give me a ring – or do you have a mobile?"

"Actually, no," Pen lied. "Hideous things."

Kathleen grimaced. "A necessary evil, I guess. What's the best number to get you on, then?"

'Get me,' Pen thought, feeling dizzy, but Kathleen's smile melted her fear somehow, and she said, "Just at work. I'm not often home."

Derrick picked up after only one ring.

"I'm just past the city now. I'm sorry, one of the girls had car trouble, and I had to run her home."

Simple was best, Pen had decided. It wasn't so much that she liked lying, as that one lie entailed another, in a kind of chain of necessity. She hadn't realised how you had to think ahead – once you'd given a false plan, your choices were restricted somewhat to the shape of what you'd said. Next time she must leave it more open-ended.

Next time. What made her even think there would be a next time? Pen's heart was beating so loudly she feared Derrick could hear it down the phone. A truck whizzed by, too fast and too close to her car.

"You could have rung sooner."

"I'm really sorry, darling – there just wasn't a good time. I couldn't pull over..."

"But you've pulled over now, you're not talking while you drive, I hope?"

"No." She almost snapped at him. She'd never realised before how nannyish Derrick could sound. "Look, I'll be home soon. The sooner I get off the phone, in fact."

And then only the hours of night to get through, and then work in the morning for them both.

As she drove up to the house in the general darkness, Pen saw that Derrick had left the kitchen light on – maybe because the outside light would suggest no one home. But approaching the steps, gravel crunching too loudly for the lateness of the hour, she was caught in the sudden glare of the porch light as it flicked on. Derrick was at the screen door already.

“Quickly – we don’t want to let in mosquitoes,” he said, avoiding her eyes.

Pen dumped her bag on the kitchen table. “I didn’t think you would still be awake,” she said. “You know you don’t have to wait up at times like this. What with work tomorrow.”

“Yes, well, I’ve got a late start. Curriculum stuff in the city. I thought we might drive down together.” He was looking at her carefully now. Pen folded her arms. “Even have lunch together or something. I could meet you on campus.”

She tilted her head warily. “Sure... but it might be tricky. It takes longer than you think, to get across the city in the lunch hour.”

Derrick swallowed, tense. “If you don’t want to, that’s fine.”

“Oh, it’s just that I’d probably have a later finish. How would you get back?”

“I could get a lift home with one of the others. But you wouldn’t be this late again.”

“Of course not.” Pen eyed him sidelong. “I’m sorry about the lateness. These things happen.” She yawned. “We should get to bed.”

“You weren’t... you weren’t drinking, were you?”

Pen was indignant. “Do I look like I’ve been drinking?”

“No. It’s just – that time way back, at the farewell do. I was surprised at you, with the wine, you know.”

“One glass!” Pen rolled her eyes. “I just got tired of the wowserish image. The way people judge you, as if you’re a freak. It was my last day, for heaven’s sake. More a joke than anything else.”

“And you haven’t touched it since.”

Pen gasped. “What *is* this, Derrick? Some kind of interrogation? I feel like I’m fifteen years old. You’re not my father, you know.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.” He was rubbing his beard now, an anxious habit. Normally Pen didn’t mind; now the crisp chafing sound got on her nerves, already overstimulated. “You’re just very tetchy.”

This was the point where she would usually reach over and kiss his cheek, or squeeze his shoulder – a wordless apology. Instead, she said, “So are you,” and began peeling off her clothes, getting ready for sleep.

Derrick followed her into the bedroom. Pen kicked off her shoes, letting each one fall with a thud.

"All right," he said. "It's just that I spoke to your colleague Maureen..."

"What?"

"Earlier, this afternoon. I phoned looking for you, to tell you about the in-service thing, but you were off somewhere in the library. Maureen never mentioned anything about a function tonight."

Pen let out a big sigh. "Why would she? It was a last-minute thing, and in any case, she probably wasn't asked."

"You said everyone was going."

"Well, they *were*," Pen laughed. "Maybe just not Maureen. Darling, you're getting paranoid. And I've said it before, it's not great to ring me on the work phone."

"But your mobile just rang out."

"Okay, fair enough." She smiled. Now was the time for the little kiss on the cheek, the sisterly hug.

Derrick sat down on the bed at last and began to undo his shirt. He looked wistful, a small boy. "I don't know. I'm sorry, Pen. I guess I'm just not used to evenings without you, and I'm thinking, there must be other men there too, and they're all drinking, and things can run away..."

"Nothing's running away," Pen interrupted. "And I'm not interested in any other men. You should know that by now, sweetheart." Appalled, she saw that his eyes were faintly teary.

Derrick smiled wanly. "Okay. I know. Trust is the thing. I'm sorry, Pen."

"You don't need to be."

"But I am."

She tousled his springy hair, and held one hand to the bedside lamp switch, until at last he eased in beside her.

"Anyway," he said, wrapping one arm tightly around her waist, "we'll do lunch tomorrow, and I'll make it up to you. We haven't had lunch together in ages. It'll be good for us."

And before Pen could think of an objection, he was breathing raggedly, and asleep.

The main thing was to keep him off the campus. Not that she expected Kathleen to cross their path exactly – just that it was better not to be seen with Derrick. You never knew who was watching, or who spoke to whom. Pen grinned wryly to herself: hiding her husband, as some people hid their lovers. Now that she had two worlds, she didn't want to mix them.

So on the long drive down, she said, "Let's meet in West Perth, get some sandwiches, and walk across to Kings Park."

Their old stomping ground, after a fashion. They kept to the side away from the hospital, the mental ward. But that was all long ago.

Derrick spread the plaid car rug on the grass and they sat half in shade, half in sun. People were dotted all over the lawns, or reading under trees; you couldn't ever get real privacy. Every so often machinery revved and whined – a mower, a chainsaw – and then died, so that the smaller sounds of birds and insects seemed to balloon against the silence.

Beside them a crow with broken-off beak tilted its head back so another crow could feed it.

"Would you look at that," said Derrick. "Not the way we think of crows, is it? Not exactly *nature red in tooth and claw*..."

"No, only humans are like that," Pen said. She felt a shudder – arsonists had been through here on more than one occasion, and diggers of shallow graves...

Suddenly the able crow lunged at their lunch bags, and missed. Pen and Derrick both laughed.

"It's good to see you happy, Pen," Derrick began. "I've been worried about you."

"Why?" Pen was genuinely surprised.

"Is something stressing you? Something bothering you, at least?"

Pen shook her head, curling her lower lip.

Derrick paused a while. "I've been wondering, you know, how you want to handle the holidays. Not the term ones – I guess I'm doing German camp on my own this year, if you don't have leave. But there's the long summer break."

"That's a little while off yet."

"Yes, but I mean – we won't be able to do the Albany thing, clearly."

They'd always had the long school holidays together, of course, but this year would be different. Pen hadn't worked a full year at the new job yet, and even when she had, her holidays would only be four weeks long.

"I'll still get a week off from Christmas to New Year. The library will be shut then." She felt a chill as she said it. At home a whole week. Why did that trouble her now?

Derrick sighed. "It's not quite the same, though, is it?"

"Things can't always stay the same," Pen said. "You wanted us – we agreed to try to be more open to change. More spontaneous."

'In any case,' she thought, 'I shouldn't have to apologise for the conditions of my job. Not all spouses work in the same place and take their holidays at the same time!' But she couldn't say that aloud.

"Okay, I can see that. But it's an awfully long time for me to be by myself."

Pen smiled gently, but as she leaned back and gazed at him, the sun making a soft halo of his curls, she thought, for the first time, 'He's a grown man afraid to be alone.' Once that would have made her glad to be needed. Now for some reason it felt *heavy*.

"Well, there's always the house," she said, lightly, because renovations were still only half underway. "Or if you get bored with that, you could write your book."

Derrick had been saying for years he wanted to write his own language textbooks, frustrated with the gaps and shortcomings of the ones on the market, which were always American or British, and hugely expensive.

"I guess I could do that," he said, brightening. "And I could come down and meet you for lunch like this more often."

Pen swallowed. Her "yes" was merely mechanical. Her legs were numb beneath her, and her palms, where she had leaned, stippled with small twigs, but her mind was elsewhere. She was thinking, suddenly, Kathleen's summer holidays would be at least that long, worse than Derrick's. Didn't academics take *months* off-campus? Perhaps she would even go overseas, some kind of study thing. That's what they did.

Pen hadn't factored that in. She must move – she must make her move – and soon.

According to some legends, vampires had to be invited in. And statistically, even outside legends, your murderer was likely to be someone you knew – maybe someone you even asked over. When it came to your nemesis, your destiny, all too often, it seemed, you were “asking for it”.

All that time plotting to get near Kathleen, and it turned out as simple as a dinner date, at *her* instigation.

Pen hovered around the buckets of flowers at the 24-hour store – too much choice. Waxy-looking tulips in three shades, orchids proffering their silent, spotted throats. Cut flowers were such a sinister thing – they’d wilt and stink before long. Which bouquet might Derrick have brought Kathleen, all those years ago?

“I’d love to,” Pen had said, “but I can’t stay late... I’ve got a long drive home.”

“If you want, I could come to you. I mean, bring some food around.” Kathleen was that keen, then.

“No, no, it’s too far. And – it’s in the middle of renovations, things are a mess. Otherwise you’d be welcome.”

Did it sound like so many excuses? The irony was, it was all true. Pen was glad she hadn’t suggested a restaurant. It wouldn’t do to be seen out.

This time she’d swapped an evening shift with one of the other library staff. Derrick wasn’t likely to ring – she’d told him they were way too busy, and she’d switched her mobile off. She’d have to find some reason or other, when she eventually made the shift up. But there was a time limit beyond which her story would not seem credible. It was a skill that grew on you.

A skill Derrick must know all too well, Pen thought bitterly. Perhaps after many years, you even forgot your lie was untrue, because it *felt* true.

The shop was icy, over-airconditioned so that Pen chafed at her hands and arms. Odd people wandered the aisles, luxury-browsing, not the usual supermarket types. Perhaps they were all up to no good, like Pen. She was about to give up on the flowers and make do with the Belgian chocolate mousse – couldn’t exactly bring something home-made – when the scent arrested her. Hyacinths, pink and blue, growing in pots just outside the shopfront. Salt-sweet

and pervasive, they'd always made Pen swoon. She grabbed one of each and put them on the counter.

"You all right, Ma'am?" For all the gourmet chic of this place, the clerk was still a be-fringed teenager chewing gum.

"I'm fine, thanks."

"You sure? You look a little pale."

"I'm naturally pale."

Pen paid and hurried back to the car, through a maze of lanes and bays where drivers hunched angrily over the steering as they waited to pounce on a spot. All potential road-ragers... She put the pot plants in the footwell, where they wouldn't tip over as she drove, and sat the mousse on the passenger seat, thinking how once she'd imagined powders, poisons. *Sparkling Cyanide*, the first Christie she'd read. All those lovely ladies dropping off like wilted petals. It made you turn blue – like "cyan" in the printer cartridge they had at home. Like Picasso figures of the Blue Period.

She imagined Kathleen's fragile beauty in a Picasso sketch, as if bathed in moonlight. Those bluest eyes... But you'd have to put the poison in the individual serve, and make sure the right person got it. Especially if you were eating some yourself.

So steeped in blue, Pen nearly ran a red light: the car sat slightly over the white line. She shook herself, and glanced about for cameras. Imagine getting a fine – Derrick saying, "What were you doing on Walcott Street at that time of night?" She switched on the radio, and it came on too loud – the "golden oldies" station – *Tonight's the Night*.

Dad used to have a Rod Stewart album, when she was small. That raspy voice, the way her mother had hated the innuendo – well, you couldn't even call it innuendo, it was plain-speaking, overt smut. *Smut!* her mother would hiss. Still, Pen had always misheard the words, she realised now – instead of "your man's desire", she heard "your mad desire". A mondegreen – that's what they called it, she knew that from television. Like in that Tennessee Williams play, *blue roses for pleurosis. Tonight's the night...* She started to laugh, until someone tooted their horn.

The lights had changed.

"You look – lovely." Pen hadn't meant to say it, but Kathleen in the doorway was radiant, a breath of summer in a simple cream linen shift, sleeveless and skimming just below the knee, so that her smooth arms and

calves seemed like satin by contrast. Pen felt suddenly self-conscious in her t-shirt and cotton pants. It wasn't that Kathleen dressed up – she wore flat scuffs and no make-up. It was the way she carried herself, fluid and strong. No wonder the younger, impressionable Derrick – and here Pen blushed – had let Kathleen take charge. She had natural authority. You were compelled to admire her, even despite yourself.

“Thank you. Come through.” She took the hyacinths with delight, and immediately drank in their scent.

Pen felt a curious relief to be inside the house again, with its muted cream walls. Books lined every available shelf, yet did not seem to shrink the rooms. You could breathe in there – no fussy ornaments, no bric-à-brac. It was as if the house was allowed to be itself, and each object had been chosen carefully, not for display, but for the pleasure and use it gave the owner.

Dinner was laid out on the table already, to make the most of the time. Here was the same simplicity – plain, cream cloth, streamlined setting, warm aroma – that put you immediately at ease. Pen remembered how her grandmother once said to her, “There’s a huge difference between the word *house* and the word *home*.”

“It looks – lovely,” Pen stammered, realising she was parroting herself. Two steps inside and all her composure was gone.

Kathleen just laughed. “I’m afraid I bought the food in. I’m no good at it, and I’ve never really taken time to learn. I love eating, however!” She turned away to open some wine. “My ex did all the cooking.”

“How long have you been – alone?” Pen asked. “If that’s not too personal a question?”

“Ages. I should make an effort. But life’s too short. And it seems too much bother to cook just for yourself, don’t you think?”

Pen smiled. “Well, I got a store-bought dessert, too. So at least it will match.”

Starters of fragrant falafel with hummous and pink ginger, then lamb and tagine-cooked vegetables, spicy couscous – Kathleen said, “I know it’s silly of me, but it’s because of a little place I went to once in Paris, fond memories, you might say. Les Délices des Pharaons, not far from Notre Dame – do you know it?”

“I’ve never been to Paris,” Pen said.

“Well, you must! I try to get back once a year – I have to, really, for work. I’m actually going this summer – though it’ll be winter there, of course, and not quite the same.”

“For the whole summer?” Pen said.

“I wish. No, only a few weeks. It can be quite expensive. Compared to here. I mean, I have friends to stay with, but you can’t impose for too long. Besides, I like to be independent, to get around and do things. And I try to bring back resources, for teaching, so it’s not just a holiday. Where do you go for your holidays?”

“Albany,” Pen said.

“Ah, well, that’s even lovelier.”

“And probably just as cold as Paris around Christmas,” Pen said ruefully.

“True.” Kathleen cleared the plates away. Pen reached to help her stack them, then blushed as she grazed Kathleen’s fingertips. “Why don’t you try Paris this year? I’d be happy to show you around. And my friends would be pleased to have you,” she added, as if suddenly conscious it might be beyond Pen’s budget. “There are still some good fares available.”

“You’re not serious.”

“Why not?” Kathleen ushered her through to the lounge room, and then went for the mousse, set out on a tray in little glass dishes, with the same strong coffee they’d had last time. “There’s got to be a first time.”

“But you hardly know me,” Pen said.

“I’d like to *get* to know you.”

Pen stared at her. “Why?”

Kathleen laughed. “You funny thing. Why shouldn’t I? I like you. I liked you straight away. You’ve got a kind of intensity about you, and an intelligence, and you’re sweet – what’s not to like?”

Pen lowered her face, burning now. ‘If she really knew me...’ she thought – but her anger seemed dissolved, what she felt was a mixture of shame and gratitude. Shame at thinking ill of Kathleen, gratitude for the reflected self-image, even if it was a mistaken one. For the moment she forgot all about her emotional vendetta. Forgot Derrick, even. All she wanted was to bathe in the present moment.

She studied the room again, which seemed now to rotate around the pot of hyacinths, which Kathleen had placed at the centre, on a low table with an old lace runner. It altered the whole composition, dominating even the painting that had so struck her the first time she came.

“Do you like the hyacinths?” Pen said shyly.

“I adore them. You know, they remind me – it’s not the same as lilacs, but the perfume is so strong... I had the most wonderful experience years ago, the kind of thing that stays with you and you know that, say, at the moment of your death, you’ll remember it, or hang onto it.”

Pen wanted to say: don’t talk about death. But Kathleen was off in another space.

“It was an early evening in Paris, and my friends had all gone out to dinner but I was going back to my hotel. I stopped on a little bridge crossing the Seine, and everything was entirely still – silver water, perfect sky, and nobody else there – which is rare in the spring – and I was utterly overwhelmed by the smell of lilacs. It was like something supernatural. Time had stopped. Your hyacinths – even though the scent is not the same – when you walked in with them, that’s what I thought of.”

“Bit of a poet,” Pen smiled.

“Did I sound mushy?”

“No, that’s not what I meant.”

Kathleen got up and went to a sideboard. “Speaking of poets,” she said, “though I hardly count myself among that company! – I thought we could watch this film – it’s about Rimbaud and Verlaine, but a drama, not a documentary.”

She dropped the DVD into Pen’s lap and sat beside her on the sofa. *Total Eclipse*. Pen fingered the cover. She loved the idea – but there was the lateness of the hour, having to cover with Derrick. Derrick, for god’s sake! Already she had stayed too long.

Pen checked her watch rather too obviously.

“If you’re worried about the time,” Kathleen said, “you could always stay over.” She placed one hand on Pen’s shoulder, and gently turned her face with the other.

Pen’s blood ran hot and cold. It was the adrenalin that always sang so loud in her, overruling. She opened her lips to speak, but Kathleen kissed them swiftly, before any sound came out. It was not even surprising – it was logical. Everything fell into place.

Pen did not even stop to think: this is how Kathleen might have kissed Derrick.

Afterwards, she had to concoct a story. The worst of it was keeping things from both of them. She couldn't ring from Kathleen's – it would have to wait until halfway home.

"Darling, I'm at the after-hours GP." There was one at the hospital in Midland, not far from home. "Yes, I've had a bit of a fever this afternoon and I vomited in the dinner break, so I thought I'd better see someone... No, I'm okay to drive. I don't think it'll be too much longer. Probably just a virus. Hopefully one of those twenty-four hour things. I'll give you another ring when I'm leaving."

Then on up to the John Forrest National Park – she'd never been in here at night – you could see the lights of the city from some angles. By daylight the city was often obscured with a dirty haze, and the sprawl was obscene, malignant growth on the coastal plain. By night it was deceptively beautiful, a *chapelle ardente*. Pen drove into a lookout bay, turned off the engine and waited, till enough time had passed to make her story believable.

It all hardly seemed believable to Pen herself.

In any case, the virus idea was a passable excuse, and it meant Derrick would have to keep his distance. At least for tonight.

"Are you sure you're okay for work?" Derrick said, buttoning his shirt into the wrong holes, hastily pouring coffee for her. "You do look wan. I can ring in sick myself, take the day off to look after you, if you want."

Pen shook her head. That was Derrick at his most extreme – usually too conscientious for sickies, but ultimately more worried about her. And perhaps, too, trying to get back the time together that he felt he was missing.

"No, you don't want to lose a day. And neither do I. I'm pretty sure it's gone. Maybe something I ate."

"That wouldn't account for the fever, though," Derrick mused. He put one hand to her forehead. "Well, you don't feel hot now. But you should take it easy. I don't think night shifts are good for anyone. Research has shown they really mess people up."

"Yes, but that's when they work right through the night and sleep by day," Pen said. "Anyway, I'd better get moving," and she kissed him lightly on the cheek and took the car keys.

'Fever,' she thought. Not the kind Derrick was thinking of. It was a species of madness, one that had never crossed her path till now. All she could think of was an Emily Dickinson poem:

*And now, I'm different from before,
As if I breathed superior air –
Or brushed a Royal Gown...*

The words, said aloud, made her laugh and shiver at the same time as the drove.

She could have made it all more plausible by ringing in sick herself, but she couldn't bear the thought of a day alone in the house, and her head was full of Kathleen. Longing to see her, and yet wanting not to at the same time. The new intensity of her feelings made Pen impatient with the need for inventing further fictions – she couldn't be bothered. Derrick could just take her word for it. If this was a risky attitude, a kind of hubris – too bad.

At lunchtime, Kathleen was waiting for her in the library tearooms. Pen's head spun. She pulled up a stool, leaned close and whispered, "If you come too often, people will talk."

Kathleen gave an uncertain smile. "Why would they? Friends can meet any time, can't they?" She put one hand on Pen's hand, which Pen quickly withdrew. "In any case, I'm not ashamed of how things are."

'How things are,' Pen thought. 'How indeed...'. Aloud, she said, "Okay – but it's my workplace. And this – all this is new to me. I don't think of myself as – you know. I can't get my head around it. I don't understand what happened."

"Is it a problem for you – I embarrass you?" Kathleen spoke without harshness, as if somehow she expected it.

"No, it's not that. It's just that... we need to be discreet, don't we?" Pen's heart was fluttering – the touch of Kathleen's hand brought back the dizzying knowledge of last night.

Could they see it on her face, or in her body, those carefree kids hunched over their laptops while they ate, or texting with one hand while downing a Coke? Would they care anyway, if they could? To them she was already an old woman, uninteresting. No drama in *her* life, part of the furniture. She took a deep breath.

"It's all going a bit fast for me. I don't like the feeling of whispering in public places, looking over my shoulder," she said at last.

Kathleen nodded. "Fair enough. But when can we meet?"

Pen couldn't look at her. "Soon. Of course." She was helpless now: it was like staggering down a very steep slope. However you tried to arrest it, you knew you couldn't stop. "It's not easy when I've got work. My time's not as flexible as yours."

A wagtail hopped into the tearooms from the terrace, pecked up a few crumbs at their feet, and bounced out again. Students laughed and pointed, and Pen felt all eyes were on her. Kathleen was oblivious, pondering.

"I've got a teaching break coming up," she said. "It's not holidays – just study week, there are no classes. Can you get some leave? We could have a couple of days somewhere. So you wouldn't have to be rushing off."

Pen closed her eyes. Even if she could get a few days of her annual leave, pro rata for the months she had worked, it would be tricky. Then she clicked: German camp. Derrick would be on Rottneest for a week, with the students. She was almost certain his term break – at least half of it – would coincide with the university study break. If it was only two or three days, he wouldn't ever have to know.

"I can try," she said, gazing directly at Kathleen now. Never had any woman appeared so flawless, smooth. Pen thought of the perfume of her milky hair, and the soft feel of her – like suede. Then the image seemed repulsive, since suede was dead skin.

But she could not unseat the sensation from her memory.

Kathleen lowered her voice. "I haven't been able to stop thinking of you."

It was vertigo, the low voice, the proximity. "Yes," Pen murmured, as if in a dream. "Same."

Kathleen stood to go. "Ring me. We have to make this happen."

"Somewhere quiet," Pen said, pleadingly. "I don't want to be around lots of people."

"Me neither. A little cottage in Pemberton or something. If that's not too far... I've got marking to do, but I can knock that off beforehand. I already lost a batch of essays this year – have to get on top of it."

Pen swallowed. "What do you mean, lost?"

"Well, between you and me, I think somebody filched them. Right off my office door. Fortunately I'd already submitted the marks – but the students were a bit miffed not to get their copies back. I've a fair idea who it was, too, because there's been other stuff going on – but it doesn't matter. In any case," she leaned joyfully close to Pen, "I don't want to think about *her* anymore. I've got you to look forward to."

“Six days,” Derrick sighed. “Six days and then I’ll be home again. I’ll have baked beans coming out of my ears.”

It wasn’t easy being vegetarian on German camp.

“You could eat the sauerkraut,” Pen said, absent-mindedly. She was dropping him to the tour bus, which would then take him, two other teachers, and a horde of boys exhilarated to be out of uniform, down to the Rottnest ferry.

“Oh, I’ll survive,” he said, grimly. “In any case, it’s an important thing for them, the nearest they’ll get to immersion for most of them.” The French students had trips to Mauritius or La Réunion; for the German kids, it wasn’t that simple. He looked at her sidelong. “Pity you couldn’t come too.”

Pen shrugged, and could think of nothing to say.

“I’ll miss you,” Derrick tried again, as they rounded the corner to the college car park.

“Yes. Me too.”

“We can talk in the evenings, anyway.”

“Of course.” She leaned over to kiss him. “Goodbye, darling.”

She kept the engine running. Derrick grabbed her, impetuously, and kissed her again. Pen put a hand to her cheek where the bristles of his beard had burned – he’d just trimmed it.

“Sorry,” he grinned. “Wait till I’m back – it’ll be even worse. Robinson Crusoe from Rottnest.”

Jean Sargent was there, organising the boys, and strode toward the car as Derrick got out. She looked in her element, laden with plastic bags, hats and towels, and carrying a first aid box. The bus door hissed open and let out a reek of zinc cream, Twisties, old sandshoes and orange peel.

“Well, well,” she said. “Long time no see. Not up for a free island idyll this time then?”

Pen smiled, but said nothing. Jean seemed very tiny and far away, as if already well across the water. She belonged to another life, with the long line of students, the heap of backpacks and sleeping bags. School camps were nightmares to Pen – everyone in each other’s pockets. In the past she’d only gone along to keep Derrick company and – if she were honest – to keep an eye on the one or two other women who always went. People got up to odd things when they were away from home, away from routine.

This time she had plans of her own.

The drive down to Pemberton was long but glorious – the worst of the holiday traffic had been through some days before, and they were in no hurry, having left early. They took Kathleen’s car because it was better on fuel – “ARG”, Pen remembered, the silver Corolla she had so often stared at in the days before...

“We’ll have lunch in – maybe Busselton? I’d prefer to go that way – Bunbury’s too big,” Kathleen said. “Maybe even a swim – you did bring your bathers?”

It wasn’t quite warm enough yet, but Pen had brought them anyway. The day was unclouded, high and blue. Pen had a distant memory of diving into a forest pool as a small child – a big, dammed rectangle in the river, among tall trees, cool and majestic.

“That’d be Fonty’s Pool,” Kathleen nodded. “I don’t know if it’s still open these days. There was some kind of safety issue, no fences or whatever.”

“You know the area quite well?”

“A bit. I grew up over east. But I’ve been down south before with – friends, you know, now and then.”

Pen swallowed. She couldn’t ever be sure what Kathleen meant by “friends”, since the whole definition had now been rejigged. She thought for a moment, ‘Maybe she is repeating a pattern – bringing me somewhere she’s been with someone else’. It wasn’t a pleasant thought – not jealousy, exactly, but the sense of compulsion about it – and yet here *she* was, playing out Derrick’s own past despite herself. Maybe that was all people ever did; maybe they never genuinely interacted with anyone.

But then Kathleen’s hand wandered over and squeezed hers, and she remembered the sheer fact of her, the overwhelming scent and texture of her beauty. That was not a repetition, surely.

By the time they pulled in to Busselton the sun was well and truly out. Pen’s heart surged at the long line of trees flanking Causeway Road as they entered the town. Imitative, a little would-be Europe, it made her think of Monet’s poplars, and the idea of France – with Kathleen – flashed into her mind.

Logistically impossible. But she was wistful. Why couldn't life be like that, instead of this constant battle?

"Let's go for a dip first," Kathleen said, "otherwise if we eat, we'll have to wait too long before we can hit the water."

They had to keep moving further down because there were too many kids in the jetty area. Pen went to the change-rooms and when she came back, Kathleen was already in the shallows, sleek in a black halter-neck suit, her wet hair gleaming.

"It's bracing," she said, "but I haven't been in the sea for ages. Come on!"

The slap and sting of salt brought Pen up with a shudder. She rose from the waves not sure where she was, or which way she was facing.

"If you keep your shoulders in, you'll soon get warm. It's the breeze that makes you cold," Kathleen laughed.

It was true: it was just a matter of acclimatising to another element. Before long, you forgot your displacement and didn't ever want to get out again. Pen was a moderate swimmer, Kathleen a strong one. Watching her strike out for the deeper water brought a lump to Pen's throat. There was grace in her swift movement, yet she looked miniature against the distant waves, bobbing and signalling for Pen to follow. If she *went under* out there, no one would even see her.

Pen shook her head and gestured toward the shore, jogging through the tug of the shallows back to the sand, wrapping herself in a thick but gritty towel till no chink remained. Peering out through a slit, she watched as Kathleen emerged from the waves – *Venus*, she smiled to herself, thinking of every pop-cultural imitation of that moment, from Ursula Andress through Bo Derek through to the banality of the wet t-shirt competition... like something obsessively replaying. Droplets trickled from Kathleen's throat and chest as if designed to mould, to mark her out; now her skin was prickled with cold.

"Towel!" she said, gasping, laughing, and Pen quickly threw one over her, with the mental image of throwing a blanket to put out a fire.

"Let's go and eat. I'm famished." Kathleen went to take her hand to help her up, but Pen pulled it away guiltily, surveying the area around them. "Pen, it's okay," Kathleen said, but Pen just gazed at the sand as they walked, embarrassed and unsure. "It's a free country, you know?"

Despite the wide and airy streets, Busselton was packed. They had to walk up and down for ages before finding a café. Being damp and salty didn't matter

– most of the guests were extremely casual, and no one batted an eyelid. They ordered strong coffee – “still a lot of driving, and only weak instant in the roadhouses!” Kathleen smiled – and grilled panini with mozzarella and warm artichoke that melted on your tongue. There were so many patrons, so much noise, that they could barely hear each other.

“Lucky to get a seat,” Pen said.

“We were lucky to get a place to stay for tonight, come to that. Most places were booked out. The chalet’s only available because the owner’s a friend of mine.”

Pen felt a sudden chill.

“I thought we were just having time by ourselves,” she said. “I didn’t think we were staying with people you knew.” She put down her sandwich, sickening sharply.

“Hey, slow down – it’s not a big deal. It’s self-contained, you’re not staying *with* anyone. They’ve got about ten of them. Come on, eat up – it’s delicious.” Sticky cheese dripped onto her plate, and she scooped it up with a fork.

“Still,” said Pen. “You might have told me.”

Kathleen gazed at her. Then she said, “Don’t be annoyed – I’ve got such a good time planned. You don’t have to see anyone you don’t want to. If it’s an issue for you. Being with me, I mean.”

“I like being with you.” But she couldn’t afford for anyone to know who she was – even remotely, even third-hand.

“But it’s hard for you. You’re not *out*, are you?”

Pen frowned and looked at the ceiling fan, then at the waiters.

“It’s all right, I understand,” Kathleen said. “Really, I do. We’ve all been through that. There’s a lot for it, and a lot against it. I don’t tell everyone, you know? Need-to-know basis, that’s my approach. I guess that makes me not so political. But I’m not ashamed, either.”

Not ashamed. Had she dumped Derrick all those years ago for a woman, perhaps? Was it possible to swing from one life to another and not lose your identity altogether?

“I’m not ashamed either,” Pen said. But right now her life seemed like Alpha Centauri. And maybe it wasn’t just the deception. Maybe she did feel a bit strange about – what she was doing, with another woman. It hadn’t ever exactly been part of her self-image up till now. She didn’t want to think about what it meant, how it fitted in with the past.

That was the tension: she knew she should find it odd, and yet she didn't. It felt natural, for all the world as if she'd clicked, at last, into the right place.

After Busselton Pen took the wheel. Kathleen dozed a little, and Pen gazed sideways now and then, sneaking glances at her. The stilled face, the delicate breathing. Asleep, she looked even younger than awake, and yet she had a good few years on Pen. Pen no longer thought of her as the "older woman". Sometimes she even forgot how they'd come to meet, as if she'd really gone back to scratch and started everything over. She *had* to feel like that, or she couldn't keep up the pretence. As it was, she marvelled how few questions Kathleen asked. But then, she saw, that was Kathleen's nature – spontaneous, happy-go-lucky. She might have been a thinker, but something in her had decided long ago, it seemed, to get what enjoyment she could from life.

They stopped briefly in Nannup, Pen pleading a toilet break. She knew it was going to be too hard to ring Derrick from the chalet, and they'd already topped up on petrol and a few grocery items in Busselton, so she had to think of something.

She stepped out near a small playground with dank grey sand, one small girl leaning listlessly in the centre of a climbing frame. *Cage à poules*, the French called it – "chicken coop" – and she did look like a little lost yellow chick, trapped all alone in the bars. Pen smiled at her, but the chick poked out its tongue.

Pen did her best not to take too long in the cubicle, while Kathleen sat in the car.

Derrick's mobile was switched to voicemail. Pen strained to keep the relief out of her tone. He might ring her back later, but she could leave her own phone switched off, at least on this first night, and he wouldn't think anything awry. And if he tried the landline at home, there was a message bank – she could easily be under the shower, or out in the garden...

"Hi, darling, sorry I missed you. Hope it's all going well. Everything's fine here. I'll give you another call tomorrow" – that might hold him off. In any case he had his hands full supervising the mob. Communal meals, communal wash-up – and then evening entertainments. Charades and quiz shows, all in German. There'd hardly be a moment to himself.

When they finally drew up at the forest retreat, Kathleen went to collect the key. Pen sank in her car seat, trying to keep out of sight should anyone emerge from Reception. Though it was late, a little sun still streamed at an angle through the tall karri.

But only Kathleen appeared.

"Phil's not here anyway," she said, "as it turns out. So you can breathe easy – your secret is safe for today..." Pen darted a glance at her, but she was joking. "He did leave us a lovely bottle, though," and she held up champagne and a card. "Let's go play house."

The chalet was made of rammed earth and scented timber, and the leadlights meant a weird light streamed through around sunset. Kathleen flopped on a lounge chair and put her feet up, but Pen scuttled about investigating – a little kitchen, fully equipped, a queen-sized bed, a full bathroom with spa.

"You've got three nights, you know," Kathleen called, "you don't have to memorise it all straight away!"

"Very decadent," Pen said, wandering back in, perching opposite Kathleen on the other armchair, and biting her lower lip nervously.

Kathleen beckoned her to sit closer. "It's a honeymoon cottage," she smiled.

"I've never had a honeymoon," Pen mused, sadly.

Kathleen wrinkled her forehead and laughed. "You and me both." Pen was jolted at her own careless thinking-aloud. They'd had to choose, she and Derrick all those years ago, between house deposit and trip away somewhere exotic. You had to be sensible if you wanted to get ahead in life. It was her choice – Derrick would have blown the money to please her if she'd insisted.

"Penny for your thoughts, Pen-ny," Kathleen said.

"I was thinking about the spa," Pen said. "And I hate being called Penny. Just so you know."

"Okay, okay. Fancy the spa, do you?"

"Actually I was thinking how... how unhygienic it must be. Do you think there's any Pine-O-Kleen in the cupboards?"

"You're a true romantic, then," Kathleen said. "They do clean the place between guests, you know."

"Yes, I can just imagine the kind of poisonous stuff they use."

Kathleen rubbed Pen's shoulders. "*Chill out*, as my students say. Or even just *chill*, these days. It changes so fast I can't keep up with it. Mostly they don't talk, anyway. They're too busy texting."

Pen was silent a while. "You get along well with your students, don't you?" She thought, 'Rather too well in some cases...' She was watching Kathleen.

"Yes, generally. I like teaching."

“Do they know that you’re... are you ‘out’ with them? I mean, at work, you know. Doesn’t it – affect things?” Maybe “out” was the wrong word, since Kathleen must be “both ways”, Pen thought, and then blushed, realising people could say that of her too now. If they knew...

“I have no idea. It never comes up. It’s probably discussed – who knows? – but not to my face. I’m a fairly private person, anyway. Some of them might have guessed. I found a note, once, screwed up in the classroom, where someone had written, ‘Prof Nancarrow has balls’. That’s the closest it’s ever come. Given the boy who wrote it, I chose to take it as a compliment.”

Pen thought suddenly of a calendar she’d seen when she was a kid, at one of her father’s workmates’ houses, in the backyard toilet: a naked caricature of Martina Navratilova with both vulva and testicles. She smiled, with a sudden, sad affection for Martina.

“What’s funny?” Kathleen looked tentative.

“Actually, for some reason, I was thinking of tennis.” Which was sort of true.

“Do you play?”

“No. Well, yes, I’ve tried, but I haven’t got the wrist-strength. Badminton’s about all I can manage.” Only the well-off kids at Pen’s school had taken tennis lessons, extra-curricular. “What about you?”

“I used to play quite seriously. Speaking of which, have you seen the film *Match Point*? We should get it out while we’re here. I’m sure they’ll have films in town – or at reception. It’s a load of fluff really, but quite watchable. It’s a crime thriller. Scarlett Johansson.”

“She’s very lovely,” Pen conceded.

“She’s practically edible,” Kathleen laughed. “But eye-candy aside – and the gaping holes in the plot – since you like suspense, Highsmith, Simenon and so on...?”

“Sure,” said Pen. Then she yawned.

“I’ll assume that’s fatigue rather than boredom,” Kathleen said, as if she were responsible for keeping Pen amused. “How about we have a quick bite and then retire? Curl up with that champagne. We can save the spa for another time.”

Pen was more nervous than she liked to admit to herself. This second time she could scarcely pretend she did not know what was happening. The honeymoon might be illegitimate, but it was no less daunting for that – she could not imagine any more anxious or apprehensive bride. *Play house,*

Kathleen had said – but this was utterly, uncompromisingly real. More real to Pen right now than the empty pretend-house in the Perth hills, abandoned and languishing in the middle of an eternal makeover. And in that house, Derrick’s insistent and treacherous letter.

Morning in the karri forest was crisp despite the sunlight. Kathleen was an early riser.

“Where do you get all this energy?” Pen said.

“You don’t do too badly yourself.”

They ate crusty rolls warmed in the oven and swept the crumbs outside for the birds, before setting off for a walk.

“Now these are what I call trees,” Kathleen said, breathing in deeply. “Nedlands might have green verges and old gardens, but there’s nothing like the bush. You live up in the hills – you must have a fair bit of bush around you?”

Pen nodded. “Not as much as there used to be, though. You can’t even walk much because of the dieback thing. It’s jarrah mostly, and banksia – nothing like this.”

‘And nothing like where I grew up,’ she thought – a drained swamp and filled-in rubbish tip, with cheap brick veneer housing that flooded every winter and no one would take responsibility. Barely a tree left standing.

“I expect there’s a dieback problem here too,” Kathleen said. “You can’t get away from it. We’ll have to watch our step. Speaking of which, I’d like to climb the Gloucester Tree. Are you up for it?”

Pen groaned. “I don’t know. Have you been up there before?”

“No. Are you all right with heights?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, you’d know if you *weren’t*.”

Derrick suffered from vertigo, so there’d never been any question of doing such a climb till now.

“I like to try things I’ve never done before. It keeps you – aware you’re alive, somehow,” Kathleen said, “I like to push myself.”

“So long as you don’t push *me*,” Pen joked. “Is it really safe?” Imagine if she fell, or was injured – how to explain that once she was back home?

“Safe enough, perhaps. Lots of people climb it.”

But few made it to the top, they discovered from Reception’s brochure.

“Only about twenty percent of people who attempt the climb,” Pen read aloud, as they arrived. The Gloucester Tree was a massive karri that had been used for a fire lookout tower, and was now open for the public. A small group had already arrived to try the sixty-metre ascent, but they were early enough that it wasn’t yet a crowd.

“How do you want to do this? I can go before – or after, if you think you’re likely to back down.”

“*Back down* being the crucial term!” Pen winced. “No, you can go first. It will give me something to aim for. In any case,” she said, “there seem to be two sets of pegs.”

“Steps”, it said in the brochure, but they really were pegs, or spikes at most, driven at right angles and in a spiral pattern all the way up to the lookout platform. Widely spaced enough to fall through: she could hardly imagine being able to latch on to one of the spikes if you slipped, dangling there like a Barrel of Monkeys toy... If you didn’t look, you might feel all right. But then looking was why you went up, wasn’t it?

“Why are we doing this?” she whispered to Kathleen as they approached the tree’s base. No harnessing, no supervision – just yourself and the tree.

“Because it will be unlike anything we’ve ever done before.” Kathleen seemed faintly amused at Pen’s timidity. “And because we can. Onward and upward!”

Uncanny – it jarred – the same thing Leon Masters had said to her when she was leaving the Boys’ College. Like anything else, Pen supposed, it had to be mind over matter. There was no reason her body couldn’t do this – she was fit enough, young enough, agile enough. It was one of those things where you had to fall into a rhythm and stick with it, tune out a certain level of your attention and bring it to focus on the crucial movement only.

Nevertheless, she couldn’t resist looking up to see how Kathleen was getting on. Kathleen’s hair swung, Rapunzel-like, as she moved steadily up, just as elastic as if she’d been on a treadmill or stepping-stone without the metres of gaping air beneath her. Pen felt a pang of fear for her. ‘And this is the woman I wanted gone,’ she thought. A horrible image of Kathleen, broken and askew, blood-covered, at the foot of the giant tree, flashed across her sight, and she paused, leaning on the spike ahead of her to get her breath. Tachycardia, everything irregular. ‘If I fell,’ she thought, ‘it would be something like justice.’

She gazed out then across the miles of treetops, literally trying to get things in perspective. Ancient trees, that had long preceded her and should long

outlive her, in the natural order of things. But what was the natural order of things? These trees – there were other such towers not far away – had been altered, disfigured, to construct the lookouts, but she supposed it was necessary to damage a few in order to save the rest, if fire should rear its fearsome head.

She thought of the forestry men, able to reckon the location and distance of the threat by taking this tree or that as reference point. With a trained eye. But she had no bearings for any of this. To Pen it was a sea of unearthly green: you felt you could almost dive out into it, as sailors were said to think they could walk on the ocean.

She was lost, and she knew it, but she had to keep moving.

At the summit, Kathleen hugged her, and nobody thought twice about it. There was a palpable exhilaration among the climbers up there, though, as Pen quickly pointed out, you still had to get down again.

She looked at the high railing and said to herself, 'Once I would have wanted to topple her. I would have been looking for the gaps,' and she shook her head in astonishment. It must have been temporary madness.

"Now tell me that wasn't worth it!" Kathleen said, and Pen had to smile. Alone, she'd never have attempted it, even apart from Derrick's vertigo.

"I think you're insane," Pen joked, "and it's rubbing off on me."

"Uh-uh," said Kathleen, "I'm afraid you were already there, milady, before we met... Now: a kiss for luck before we descend!" and though Pen turned frantically, futilely, to make sure no one could see, Kathleen had grabbed her chin and planted a fat, deep kiss on her sweating lips.

"And a photo to prove we did it," she said with triumph, pulling a tiny camera out of her pocket. Another climber agreed to hold it for her, and lined up to snap.

Pen protested, but was shouted down with good humour. Her legs went numb. Flustered, she reasoned, she would have to delete the picture somehow later. Or lose the camera, whichever was easier. She should have thought, of course Kathleen would want photos. There were so many things to think of – she would have to smarten up.

When Pen stepped out of the shower the following morning, she heard Kathleen's voice.

"... in a few days. No, I'm not alone."

Pen stood stock-still and quiet, oblivious to the cold with the towel only loosely wrapped around her. In the wall tiles, slick and glassy with damp, she could see her own stricken face ghosted over and over. She shut her eyes.

"Not an old flame – a new flame." Kathleen's soft laughter.

Pen let the bathroom door clatter behind her. Kathleen, already dressed but still pinkly glowing from her own quick shower, looked up smiling, then quizzical when she saw Pen's glare.

She straightened her expression, muted her tone.

"I'll catch you later, got to go now."

And she folded the tiny gadget into her handbag.

"Who were you talking to?" Pen said, realising she sounded abrupt but too anxious to care.

"Just a friend."

"Which friend?"

"Cindy, if that makes you any the wiser. Pen, what's the matter? You'll catch a chill if you stand there like that." Kathleen stood up and began brushing her hair. Pen examined her reflection in the mirror, bold and solid after the eerie white repeating image of the bathroom tiles. She stood behind Kathleen, contrasting their faces. Her own was set in a hard pallor; Kathleen's was still softly flushed.

"I don't want to be gossip material," Pen muttered. "I told you, privacy means a lot to me. I don't want you telling people about me, I'm not – not ready for that." She knew it was lame. But how else to keep things under wraps?

A sickly wave swept through her – she'd never considered how many people Kathleen might already have mentioned her to. She'd just made sure they were always alone, so far. As alone as she could manage.

Kathleen sniffed, slightly put out. "Pen, you've no need to be so uptight. Cindy's an old friend, she's not going to advertise anything. She was just curious. *She rang me*, I didn't ring her. And besides, it's not as if I was naming names."

“Well, please don’t.”

Kathleen laughed, her usual good humour getting the better of her. “What shall I call you then – Madame X? Or Mademoiselle, rather...”

“I’m sorry.” Pen rested her hands on Kathleen’s shoulders, thinking how slender, how vulnerable her neck was. And how soft her skin. “I shouldn’t have snapped like that. I just really want to be discreet.”

“Understood. You want the strong and silent type,” Kathleen joked. “But if this thing lasts, Pen,” and she turned around and looked deep into Pen’s eyes, “you won’t be able to hide forever, you know.”

Pen swallowed. *If this thing lasts*. But what was *this thing*? It seemed to be taking place in a dream-space, a parallel world, not the life she’d lived till now. She had no way of plotting her position, no way of understanding the course in front of her from what she’d already known.

If they could only stay here, away from others, and learn the contours of this new arrangement. But it was like the chalet, at once a home and a strange set of coordinates. Every time you woke, you must remind yourself where and who you were...

Kathleen threw open the curtains, and wound the window open to let in fresh air.

“Now you get dressed, and let’s have some breakfast,” she said, “and figure out what to do with the day. Because tomorrow will be all swallowed up with driving, you know.”

Pen pulled her overnight bag from the bedside shelf, and her own mobile phone slid out. She thrust one hand down to cover it, but too late.

“I didn’t know you had a phone,” Kathleen said. “You’ll have to give me your number. I thought you said you didn’t like them.”

“I don’t.” Pen pushed it back into the bag. “I just got it. Only because of work shifts, they put pressure on me to be available. I didn’t even realise I’d brought it.”

At least now she didn’t have to hide it – deleting Derrick’s texts and messages on the sly. But it meant Kathleen would eventually want to be ringing her, once they were back in the city, and she’d have to keep on top of that. Maybe she could write the number down for her with one digit wrong. That was plausible, with a supposedly new phone. She must be the one calling, not the one called.

By afternoon it was sunny enough, if not exactly warm enough, that Kathleen suggested going to look for Fonty's Pool.

"You really love swimming, don't you?" Pen rolled her eyes.

"Don't *you*?"

Their bathing suits were flapping on the tiny back line behind the chalet, like two deflated bodies, parodies of themselves. 'Second skins,' thought Pen. The salt-smell of Busselton lingered on the fabric, despite rinsing. It was crazy the way you carried one place to another, unable ever to shuck anything off. The world of the senses was so heavy, so indelible. Pen packed the suits into a carry-bag with some towels and sat the camera gently on top of them.

Again she considered how to remove yesterday's photos. If she deleted them, there was surely a trace that remained on the memory card, as there was in computers, even when you thought you had got rid of something.

She was still thinking like someone plotting. If... then... Why would anyone ever check for traces on that card? Surely she wasn't still imagining murderous scenarios. Surely her main reason was for no photos to betray her to Derrick.

But Kathleen would wonder how they had got deleted. Too tricky. You could pretend to delete one or two accidentally, but not a whole series. And if she merely removed the memory card, that would be even weirder. There was nothing for it but to get rid of the camera itself. People lost cameras all the time, didn't they?

She thought: 'Camera dumped in one place, memory card in another.'

That was the only way.

Fonty's Pool was still there all right, but very changed. Once open to the elements, now fenced. Pen remembered the wildness, the overarching and dizzying trees above the water. But now it seemed tame, regular, squared.

"It used to feel as if you were merged into the forest," she said to Kathleen, dipping a toe in at the edge. "Oh, too cold."

"I know what you mean. I went ice-skating once – in Zurich it was – in the middle of the woods. Practically primeval. It was bliss. Ordinary rinks just don't feel the same way. Just don't *cut the ice*, you might say! Come on, I'll help you in," and she reached out to draw Pen toward her, like someone inviting a dance partner. 'Two kinds of people,' Pen thought – those who always plunge straight in, and those who dip the toe. And never the twain...

But here: the twain. She closed her eyes and let Kathleen take her in her arms; the liquid crept up her sides like a dark blanket. Kathleen had crouched

into the pool and then come up again. Her nipples showed hard through the shiny bathing suit. Pen remembered her own first swim here at twelve or so, her mother's admonition:

"Go and put a t-shirt on!"

It was a new halter-neck suit Dad had bought her, and the two gathered cups – no cups really, just stitching – were wrinkled and limp as empty bags where her breasts should have been. The suit was the right size, but she hadn't *developed* yet. She laughed – must have been the first time any girl was told to cover up what she *didn't* have.

"What's funny?" asked Kathleen, gliding out into the chill with Pen still between her arms, towing her so lightly they barely seemed to be touching.

Pen told her the memory.

Kathleen kissed her neck. "Well, you've more than made up for it now."

Pen glanced around. There was scarcely anyone near the pool, and those who were seemed not to notice anything. She looked down furtively at her own front, the bathing-top now close-fitting enough not to let her breasts float upward, yet they bulged in a way that made her ashamed.

"Does it put you off?" she said, self-conscious. Kathleen's own chest was lightly curved and elegant, no sign of ageing and weight, as lithe as the rest of her. She was the sort of woman whose body would probably never change.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Kathleen said. "They're gorgeous. How can you not know that?"

Pen was embarrassed and yet somehow relieved. Derrick had never spoken much about her body, or if he had, it seemed formulaic – he *knew* not to say anything that would hurt her, so she could never gauge the truth of his reactions.

"You know, the problem with you, Pen," Kathleen went on, resting her head backwards so that her hair spread out in the water like the rays of a pale sun, "is you just don't seem to know how lovely you are."

"Silly," Pen said, and turned her face away.

"No, seriously. Haven't you ever been to, say, a nudist beach? Then you'd see. Most people aren't a tenth as perfect as you are."

Perfection has no degrees, Pen's friend Sally used to say at school. You can't have *more perfect*. You can't say *usually always*. Oxymorons and tautologies, all the contradictions of language that were impossible and yet meant something. Nudist beaches! She looked at Kathleen in amazement. Maybe Kathleen had taken Derrick to places like that. Pen felt suddenly queasy. What was she doing

here with this woman? Where was Derrick, after all? She was losing her bearings again.

“I’ve got to get out now,” she said. “I’m starting to get goosebumps.”

Kathleen opted to swim a little longer. Pen went to get dressed, and used the privacy to extract the memory card from Kathleen’s camera. Sliding the little square into her pocket, she waited till Kathleen herself got out of the water and went to change – then ditched it as far out into the pool as she could throw. No one could know she wasn’t tossing a stone or a twig.

The camera itself was not so easy. Pen was about to walk further down beside the river and drop it in there, when Kathleen emerged and beckoned toward the car. Too late.

Pen crammed it back into her carry-bag and thought, ‘Somewhere in the bush along the way.’

“What were you throwing into the water?”

Pen started: how long had Kathleen been watching? She’d not seen her till afterwards.

“Ah – just a little flat piece of bark. I wanted to see if I could skim it, you know, across the surface.” She knew she must hold Kathleen’s gaze with confidence, despite the doubt flickering in it.

At last Kathleen smiled and nodded. “You’re just a big kid at heart.”

Hungry from their exertions, they stopped for Devonshire teas before going back to the chalet. The tea-rooms were imitation colonial, with bushranger prints on the walls, and staff in what passed for period costume. These places never changed. But the scones were huge and fluffy, and the cream overwhelming.

“Like the cream in that Katherine Mansfield story,” Kathleen said. “The one where they have a garden party while somebody’s dying.”

Pen only vaguely remembered, from school maybe. “I thought you were French literature, not English,” she said.

“Ah, yes, but my mother was a Mansfield devotee – I was named after her, you know. Her real name, Kathleen Beauchamp. Funny how we say ‘English’, since she was a New Zealander.”

“I meant writing in English.”

“Anyway, we read all those stories. She’s wonderful. You should read her. She was bisexual, you know.”

Pen looked around her: no one had heard. The mob-capped waitress went on serving teas; the other customers went on with their conversations. Why did that word sound so loud?

“Meaning? Is that how – is that how you would describe yourself?” She was thinking inevitably of Derrick.

Kathleen patted cream from her lips with a serviette. “Isn’t this dinky?” she said, “silver forks and cloth napkins... Well – I suppose so. I haven’t been close to a man for a long time. But I certainly did *experiment* when I was younger. I just try not to use labels. And you?”

“I don’t want to think about it,” said Pen. Which was true now. Thinking about any of it made this more real, instead of a fantasy holiday dropped into the course of her life out of the blue. One more night, and then they would be back in the daily grind. She would have to pick up where she’d left off, smooth things over before Derrick came home from camp.

Act as if nothing untoward had happened.

“One more night,” Kathleen said now, squeezing the last of the over-stewed tea from the pot, prolonging the moment. “I mean one more where you don’t have to hurry off. Where we get to wake up together.”

Pen was silent. For a split second she thought, ‘I could come clean. Not about everything, that’s impossible, but tell her – that I’m not free. Even that I’m married.’ She pondered where that could lead.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean – I’m not trying to push you. I know it’s early days yet. And they always say that time apart is healthy for a relationship, don’t they?” Kathleen smiled and squeezed Pen’s hand across the lacy tablecloth. “It’s just that I’ve so enjoyed this little interval.”

“Me too,” Pen said weakly.

“How do *you* feel? You don’t say much, Pen.”

Pen gazed into her large, liquid eyes, mesmerised and teetering.

“There’s something I have to tell you,” she began. Waited then, as if for Kathleen’s reassuring prompt. But none came. Surely she couldn’t do it. “I – I’m not the person you think I am.”

Kathleen laughed. “None of us is what others think, Pen.”

“No, but I’m really not... not a very good person.”

“Why do you say that?”

Pen faltered, fidgeting, pressing at spilt grains of sugar on her saucer till her fingertips were sore. Her breath felt stale with tannin and fear. Everything would fall apart. If she went further.

"I'm just no good, that's all."

"Good enough for *me!*" Kathleen said, trying to break the spell. "Don't be morbid, Pen. Sometimes when things are just great, people feel they have to pay, you know. Self-sabotage and all that."

"What do you mean?" Pen was monotone, to stop herself teetering.

"You've got a self-esteem thing, and from what you've said about growing up with your mum I'm not surprised. She seems pretty down on you. I'm sorry if that's too blunt. But you know what? You're exactly fine the way you are."

The moment of madness passed. Pen forced a watery smile.

"If you insist," she said, with faint irony.

"I insist!"

That night she lay awake a long time, contemplating Kathleen who was always, it seemed, a sound sleeper. The bed was firm, but the bedding was all feather-filled, which tightened Pen's chest and irritated the nape of her neck.

'Just to think,' Pen mused, 'I had ideas of smothering with pillows, of somehow getting rid of her.' And now here she was, utterly trusting, utterly in Pen's power.

As Pen was in hers.

She remembered suddenly an old, musty piece of sheet music in her grandmother's piano stool, which she'd often rummaged through as a child. There was a picture of Audrey Hepburn on the cover, so it must have been a song from a movie. *Fascination*. The lyrics leapt at her: *And it might have ended right there at the start...*

Pen knew the tune, too, because Nanna had given her a music box that played it. The sort that had a plastic ballerina with a real net tutu, pirouetting as the music tinkled. Lined with pink satin that eventually tore away from the edges and exposed the rough insides of the cheap, painted wooden box, the stippled metal barrel inside. Pen would wind it over and over, compulsive.

Fascination, like being held by a serpent's gaze. Except that this woman was no snake, no tempter, no witch – so far removed from what she had imagined as the trap a youthful Derrick had fallen into.

Or else if Kathleen were indeed a trap, then Pen too had now fallen in, and no longer possessed the ability to see it.

She thought, 'In the morning I go home – *home* – to my other life.' It was vertiginous, the chasm that had opened up between the two halves of her

terrain. Her head spun, and sleep receded further and further away. She could see no end to it, and no way of things continuing either.

If only it could all be over. Everything.

Pen toyed with the edge of her pillow now, in the dark. Suffocation, like she was feeling now. If you were strong enough. A sleeping woman taken by surprise. It might be possible.

Little Pen flipping her ju-jitsu teacher to the floor.

Better if you got them drunk first. (Where did that idea come from? A movie?)

But perhaps a pillow like this was not thick enough.

Plastic bags. Completely airtight. But how would you do that to anyone without their cooperation?

It was the same as suicide: no point trying unless it was guaranteed to work.

But different too, because you would be left with the body, the whole situation to get rid of.

Dazed, Pen got up from the bed, shivering, and staggered to the bathroom, locking herself in.

“What on earth are you doing?” Kathleen called through the door. It was light now, but Pen hadn’t woken. “How long have you been up?”

“A while.”

“You going to open up? Why did you lock it?”

Pen pulled the door open, eyes to the floor. “Habit, I guess.”

Kathleen laughed. “You live alone, but you lock the bathroom door?”

“Living alone is more reason to lock doors.”

“I don’t.”

‘More fool you,’ Pen thought, but there was no pleasure in the thought. She felt a leaden weight of disgust with herself, of shame at the places the night had taken her to.

Maybe this whole business of going against the grain, of sleeping with another woman, was leading her down a slippery slope to all kinds of evil. But no, that was a cliché and she didn’t believe it.

She glanced up at the framed print on the bathroom wall, rippled from moisture underneath the glass. All night in the gloom it had looked down at her, murky and submarine, till she’d turned the other way. Now with daylight

to clarify, it was only a seaside watercolour, the bland sort of thing you bought from Kmart. She rubbed her eyes.

“Have you been crying?” Kathleen said, holding Pen’s chin to inspect her face. “You look a little puffy.”

“No. I’m fine. I had a bit of trouble sleeping.”

Kathleen pulled her close. “You don’t have to hide it from me, if you’re upset about something.”

“I’m not,” Pen muttered into her shoulder. Her lips met the satin of Kathleen’s nightshirt, giving her an involuntary shudder. The bathroom’s whiteness was growing more than she could bear.

“You’re cold. Come on, let’s have a hot shower and get rugged up and packed up. We might as well get away good and early.”

“You go first, then,” said Pen, thinking: ‘her shower is the only time when I can check in with Derrick. Or maybe get rid of that camera.’

“Oh,” Kathleen smiled, and slipped one hand inside Pen’s singlet. “I meant shower together.”

The camera would have to wait.

“Where’d you get this?” Derrick asked. “Very swish, I must say.”

He was up before Pen, dressing for school, rummaging to find a carry bag for some new textbooks he had to take.

She rose in the bed, blinking. It was the camera. Kathleen’s. She’d forgotten to dump it on the drive home, and it had sat there in the wardrobe a few days now. Probably socks and underwear in the same bag. Why hadn’t she been more careful?

“Work. Belongs to one of the ladies.” Truth, at least. She paused to gain thinking time. “I’m s’posed to find her a new cable and a new card. She lost the card.”

Derrick bit his lip. “Why you?”

“I don’t know. She doesn’t drive, and I offered. I just haven’t got around to it yet.”

Derrick came closer, pulled the quilt up and sat on the edge of the bed.

“The woman who couldn’t say No,” he smiled. “When am I going to meet any of these folk?”

“Meet?”

“Well, it seems odd somehow. I mean, you running chores for people I don’t even know.”

Pen turned her face wearily into the pillow. “It’s no big deal, love.”

“You’d better be up, sweetheart. It’s getting on.” He leaned over and kissed Pen on the forehead. His eyes were wide with all he wasn’t saying. He knew something was amiss, Pen could sense it, but he didn’t know how to broach it without making it worse. Or perhaps he didn’t really want to know what it was. Like Pen herself, not telling him how she’d found his letter to Kathleen...

She felt a terrible pang.

“Derrick.”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you chuck a sickie? Why don’t we both? And just have a day at home together? I feel like – like we barely even get to see each other.”

Derrick sighed. “Yeah, okay – but I can’t just take a sick day, Pen. I’ve got too much on, and there’s no one to cover for me. Not at this particular time.”

She pouted. Back and forward it went, like ping-pong.

"I missed you that whole time on camp."

He looked surprised. "But you hardly called."

"I didn't want to intrude. I mean, it's work, isn't it. But I did miss you."

It felt true now.

"I couldn't actually reach you most of the time," Derrick said. "Your phone was off."

"No, I'm sure it wasn't. Maybe it was playing up."

Derrick averted his face, checked his watch. "Your mum said she dropped around a couple of times, and you weren't even here."

Pen pushed back the covers indignantly, and grabbed her wrap. "She forgets that some of us work for a living."

"At night?"

"You *know* I work some nights. She knows it too. What a troublemaker she is – and why have you been talking to Mum, anyway?"

"She was concerned – she rang me, just in case you'd gone along to camp after all."

"As if it's any of her business," Pen said, heading for the en-suite. "Is this some kind of interrogation? I have to get ready." She turned on the exhaust fan and the shower taps, flicking her hand back and forward under the spray until the heat was just right.

Then she stepped in.

"I didn't mean to upset you, Pen," Derrick said. He was a hazy outline through the waffled glass, the blur of steam. She was safe, cocooned for the duration of the shower. She would have to think faster, more clearly.

When she came out of the cubicle Derrick was still sitting on the bed. He beckoned her over and pulled the towel off her.

"I love you, Pen. You are so beautiful. I don't tell you that often enough."

He kissed her belly, her breasts, and rested his cheek on the inside of her thigh. They hadn't made love since before school camp – 'before Pemberton,' Pen thought, and heat welled in her – and for some reason it was urgent and insistent now.

"But I've already showered," Pen said.

"We can shower again together afterwards." Derrick smiled and checked his watch again. "It'll just have to be a quickie."

Déjà vu. Or mirror image. A doubled thing, like a page with a Rorschach blot. Repeating the action, the shower-twosome, Pen felt faithless to neither of

them. It was as if she possessed both Derrick and Kathleen in one; as if the pieces of a puzzle finally fitted together.

At work Maureen called her over, low-voiced, discreet.

"Is everything okay? I know you just had some time off and it's not my business, but if you're under some kind of stress I'm happy to help out, that's all."

Pen shook her head. "What makes you ask?"

Maureen put down the files she was sorting and patted a stool for Pen to sit.

"Just that you've – there've been rather a lot of mistakes. Don't worry," she added hastily, "nothing dreadfully serious. It's just unlike you – you're so thorough."

She'd reshelfed a whole lot of books, apparently, that hadn't been discharged – picked up the wrong trolley or something.

"Nothing we couldn't sort out – it was only a small bunch."

Pen closed her eyes, then opened them again. "What else?"

"It doesn't matter."

"But it does. You must let me know. I don't want to create problems for everyone else. I must have been having a bad day."

Maureen went cautiously, apologetically, through her little list of Pen-induced mishaps. The things people stored up behind your back! All in the days since Pemberton. It was true she'd been running on autopilot – her mind constantly engaged with managing complexities quite other than the library routine.

"Sorry, Maureen. I'll get on top of it. It won't happen again."

Maureen laughed, embarrassed. "Oh, wait till you start menopause," she said. "It becomes a way of life, that hazy thing. Hazy and crazy..."

At least Maureen hadn't taken it any higher. Pen nodded, thanked her, and excused herself, nervous she was about to get a blow-by-blow description of hormone-deficient Senior's Moments. The way these things got nicknamed, as if that made them funny. Menopause! Thank god it should be a long way off yet – she was only thirty-two.

In the lunch-hour, Kathleen called in for just a few minutes.

"Semester's full-on again now," she said, "and this time exams at the end. So it's going to be a bit tougher."

She was all in white, soft skirt and a knitted cotton top that grazed the upward curve of her bust and hung lightly. Pen felt woozy to look at her.

"I was hoping you could give me a landline number or something. That way we could chat, in the evenings. That mobile number is wrong, by the way. Or have you changed it, to avoid me?"

Kathleen was grinning, blithely unaware of the ironies.

"I – I don't have a landline anymore," Pen said. "Too expensive, and now that I've got the mobile, I don't really need it."

She scribbled down the mobile number for Kathleen, correctly this time. The devil had only a small bag of tricks, and they wouldn't go on working indefinitely. At least with the mobile she could control access – Derrick wouldn't pick it up...

"But maybe on the weekend?" Kathleen said.

Pen frowned. "My mother's got me busy this weekend."

"And you'd rather not – combine us?"

"It wouldn't work. Truly. I've told you what she's like."

Kathleen shrugged and nodded. "Fair enough." She placed a hand on Pen's shoulder, but Pen pulled deftly free of it, conscious of other library staff, even if they stood at a distance. "Maybe the following weekend, then. I'd like to come up for a change. I can't believe I *still* haven't seen your place."

Pen pondered that. She could suggest somewhere else when the time arose. And anything could happen between now and then. "Yeah, maybe."

Kathleen turned to go.

"Oh, you haven't got my camera by any chance, have you? I wanted to print off those shots but I couldn't find it."

Pen shook her head. "Maybe it's still in the car."

"Hmm. I'll have to look again." She smiled at Pen. "Be nice to have something of us together. Hardly feels real now. I miss you when you're not there."

Pen swallowed and looked around again, in case anybody had heard.

"Which is most of the time," Kathleen murmured. Then she brightened artificially, almost grimly. "Well, I'm off to finish marking the first-years on their subjunctives, or they'll be on my doorstep any moment. Catch you soon."

'Catch me,' Pen thought. *Perdition catch my soul...* Shakespeare, back at school. *Perdition catch my soul, but I do love thee.* She couldn't remember the rest, or what it was from. *But I do love thee.* She'd always thought she knew what love was – married over a decade now, after all. These days, she wasn't so sure.

When Pen came back from her solitary lunch – sandwich in brown paper bag, coffee in paper cup on the grass at Crawley Bay, walking distance from the library – there was an urgent message on her email.

It was very unlike Derrick to use her work email, because he knew how her time was supervised. She double-clicked.

“Can you get time off this afternoon? We’ve had a crisis at school and I need to talk to you. Really urgent. If you could pick me up at three?”

Pen dashed off a confirmation, then deleted the email, and signed off “sick”. She could just about make it to the College by three.

She waited for ages in the College car park, the home-time crowd rushing, flowing, parting, then eventually slowing to a dribble around the Volvo. Windows up, to discourage anyone from stopping by to chat.

Now the car park was virtually empty, she could see there was a police car up near Reception. She tried Derrick’s mobile but it went to voicemail. Just as she was getting out to go and look for him, she saw him crossing the asphalt from the main office. She leaned back on the car door until he reached her, and beckoned her to get back in.

“Thanks. No, don’t start up yet, I think we should talk now.”

Pen felt the old familiar chill in the lower legs. *Fight or flight*. What did Derrick know?

But it wasn’t about her.

He folded his fingers and lowered his gaze to the footwell.

“I’m afraid it’s really awful news,” he said. “One of the boys.”

“An accident?” Pen said. If Derrick was involved – her mind flicked over all possible outcomes. Duty of care...

“No, worse. Hanged himself, in the boys’ change-rooms.”

Pen’s mouth fell open. Then she said, “Not Cliff! Cliff Eldridge?”

Derrick turned to her in surprise. “How did you know?”

She shook her head. Grimaced, nauseous with shock.

“It’s just devastating. To think none of us saw it coming. I feel responsible. Like there’s something I should be able to do.” Derrick was agitated now. “Me, of all people, with what happened when... You know, I should have had radar for this sort of thing.”

Pen took his hand. “It’s not your fault, Derrick.”

“It’s everyone’s fault,” he said.

At the house, strangely echoing with their day's absence, a vacant smell she'd forgotten since she'd started coming home later, Pen made tea. Neither of them was up to eating. The afternoon was hot, but they did not feel it. An intimate chill had descended and shrouded them both.

"Does his mother – has she been let know?"

"Straight away," Derrick said. "She was – well, you can imagine. I hope I never see anything like it again." He was slow now, agitation overtaken by some kind of stupor. "We all had to be – *debriefed*, they called it. Counselling for the boys from tomorrow. Principal may have to talk to the press, or at least fend them off. It's all too much to take in, Pen."

"Yes."

She closed her eyes and felt the weight of all Cliff's brooding, welling contentions.

"Will there be an inquiry, an inquest, or whatever?"

"I guess there will. You can imagine the dramas. How the school will be trying to play it down. It's disgusting that should even matter! A boy is dead..." Derrick leaned back and looked at her. "Pen, he confided in you sometimes, didn't he?"

"It was a fair while ago. I thought maybe he was being bullied, but if he was, he didn't want to say so. He hated Phys Ed, I know that for sure."

Derrick flushed. "I told you that was too bad, didn't I? I remember that. Fucking hell, how could I be so callous?" He banged a fist on the table.

It was unlike Derrick to swear.

"Pen, what else did he say?"

Pen shrugged. "I don't know – lots of things."

"He didn't ever talk about *me*, did he?"

Pen got up and put her arms around Derrick, wishing it didn't feel merely the correct thing to do. Actually, she had no idea what to do.

"You didn't cause it," she said. "You just feel helpless, because there's nothing you can do."

Derrick stared off into space. "I certainly never meant him any harm," he said softly.

Cliff's funeral was a whole week later, and though it meant yet another day off, Pen knew Derrick needed her to be there.

They spoke little of what had happened, but she sensed from the way he clutched at her arm, or held her a touch longer than usual, that Derrick was finding it tough going.

She didn't think he'd been terribly close to young Cliff, but Pen supposed it might be the similarity, a kind of identification. Derrick's own thoughts of suicide at seventeen and eighteen – his breakdown – the disaster of his tangling with Kathleen.

Pen tried now to conjure up those feelings of outrage – where had they gone? – that had driven her to track down Kathleen. In their place was a kind of hollowness, an inverted knowledge of her own utter solitude, as if everything else around her were something like a game. Not real. Perhaps that was the place Cliff had reached. Completely cut off.

Kathleen had been leaving messages for her now and then, but Pen couldn't pick up. Least of all these last few days. Pen pushed it to the back of her mind and concentrated on the service.

The minister was discreet: no direct reference to the means of death, but plenty of allusion to *our failure* as a society to *hear* our young people.

Pen was keenly aware, though she avoided looking, of Cliff's mother in a tired blue suit, staring stiffly ahead – estranged husband, for once, right by her side.

No more than two or three fellow students in the pews. The Eldridges had asked to keep it small, so it was just the boys he'd grown up with, the close ones, if you could say "close". Karrakatta afterwards would be family only. The teachers all sat together, as if bolstering each other. Six of them – Derrick included – were pallbearers.

Afterwards, back at the house, Derrick, "You never think you'll see off... he could have been our *own* son. Age-wise."

"Just about," Pen said softly. "It makes you realise..."

"Yes."

"Are you okay?"

Derrick shrugged. "I don't know. I mean, it's not *about* me. I don't want to sound – like some sort of egomaniac. But it does bring home – just how short it can be, and what matters. Sounds like a rotten cliché, eh? What everyone says at these times."

He turned on a fan and stood before it, moving his face from side to side. Pen noticed a trace of tears on his cheek.

“Pen, what it brings home to me is how much my life is not where I want it to be. You and I – we used to be so close. Something’s just not there now.”

Pen bit her lower lip, averting her eyes.

“Darling, you’re just upset. Funerals do that to people.” She made for the kitchen, teetering on the split-level edge, but Derrick grabbed her arm.

“What is it, sweetheart? What’s happening with you? I don’t want to spend the rest of my life with you becoming more and more of a stranger.”

Pen didn’t even feel angry: she felt nothing. “I don’t mean to be a stranger,” she said. “I guess since I started working full-time...”

“It’s not the work,” Derrick put in. “It’s something else, an attitude. You know I wouldn’t care if – if you had to go to Woop-Woop for work – I’m not some sort of *gaoler*. I’m happy for you to have... that freedom. But you *feel* different.”

Pen sighed. If she simply kept denying it, they would go around in circles. So she said, “Actually, Derrick, I think I may be a little off-colour. Maybe that’s what you’re picking up on.”

He sighed too, and let it go.

It wasn’t untrue. She’d been nauseous a few days now, and assumed it was her period coming on, combined with the distress of Cliff’s suicide.

But the period hadn’t come. A cold wave swept through her now as she rapidly added up the days.

Wait till you start menopause, Maureen had said... but she was only thirty-two, it couldn’t be.

A shock could make you miss your period. Pen knew her mother had missed a few when her father left. The sort of thing you shouldn’t know about your own mother, she realised – but still.

She’d been taken aback by Cliff – but enough to be in shock? It didn’t feel as if that were the case.

Derrick hadn’t even remarked on it, though he knew her cycle. Maybe too distracted with all this... ‘all this *death*’, Pen thought. The glamour of death was such a lie – all those crime thrillers, the Christies, Chandlers, Simenons, the morbid forensic police shows – when what it really came down to was like this. A kind of blank: a mother staring stiffly, a father not knowing what to do. Nobody knowing what to do.

“I tell you what,” she said slowly. “That funeral really took it out of me. I’m going to nick back into town and get some Panadol or something from the chemist. Then I might have a lie-down.”

She knew the chemist sold test kits for pregnancy. Her heart was thumping. She had to find out for sure.

"I think we've got Panadol," Derrick said.

"Well, something stronger. I'm really a bit under the weather."

Derrick kissed her. "Of course. Do you want me to drive? I could go and get it."

"No, that's okay. I won't be long."

He looked confused. "But if you're not feeling so good."

Pen thought fast. It did sound odd. She could hardly refuse.

"Okay, if you want to run me up to the kerb, that way I can be quick, and you won't have to find a parking spot."

She didn't want to tell Derrick about the test kit, but she couldn't bear to wait either. If it came up negative, if it was all nothing – she would feel small, foolish.

And if it came up positive?

It reminded her somehow of the spirit level her father had used for carpentry when she was small. A little window that told true. In a little white box, in a little locked room, in a little tinderbox of a home where she could hardly breathe.

The sharp blue line, like a divider between one half of her life and whatever was to come.

Like a slap in the face. *Wake up.* As if she'd been wandering around in a dream and only now clicked into reality.

The reality that what people called impossible had been possible after all. And when she'd least expected it.

Pen wrapped up the discreet plastic wand and hid it in the bottom of her handbag, to be disposed of at work, or Derrick would see it in the garbage for sure. And if he didn't recognise what it was, he'd soon figure it out.

Of course he would have to be told. But first she needed time to think. And there was only going to be so much time now.

She must break with Kathleen. The baby – *baby!* – changed everything.

Assuming she got through these first three months without losing it.

She could quit work. A month's notice. As soon as she knew it was safe, not going to bleed away from her like that other... They might wonder why she didn't just see out her contract, but that didn't matter.

It would be hard without the money, but she couldn't see how else to get out of the tangle she'd made.

She went to the library as usual next morning, pushing on through the nausea and urge to stay home curled up in bed. Or to pull the car over and sit in the national park for a while, thrashing things out. As if she could bracket the day, mark it out as different, give it what it needed.

Keep everything the way it is as long as you can.

The air was hot already this early, thickened and fixed by the undulations of glinting cars and the stench of trucks descending the last hill into the city.

The hills were like a medieval city wall, shutting out all that space that pressed on it from the land's interior. But they made you feel no safer.

It was like having something ticking inside you – strange that no one around you could tell. She remembered from primary school when some Youth Theatre had come to their class and put on *Peter Pan*. The crocodile that had swallowed a clock so you always knew when it was coming.

Look behind you! He's there!

The children's delighted terror. Akin to this nausea, a feeling of blissful encroachment.

"Are you all right?" Her workmate at the library counter was solicitous, as if she had a sixth sense. Pen examined her – a new girl, probably a student doing part-time shifts to help fund her way. Nevertheless, that carefree aura, before adult life fully set in.

Pen had been like that once. Surely she must have been, only you couldn't see it in yourself.

It took all Pen's mental strength not to blurt out, "Actually, I've just discovered I'm pregnant." Instead, she murmured, "Yes. Just didn't sleep too well," and smiled.

"You look white as a sheet."

"I'm always white. It's just my colouring." ("So much for maternal glow," Pen thought.)

"Can you show me where these go?"

She got caught up in the morning's routine, showing the new girl the ropes, and barely noticed when tea-time came. Kathleen was peering through the glass doors, waiting for her.

"I've missed you," she said, leaning forward, but Pen pulled back from the imagined kiss.

"Please, not at work."

"Right, okay... Can you come for a walk with me?"

"I've only got fifteen minutes. There's a new staff member."

Pen clutched the rail as they descended the curving staircase outside the library. The ground seemed vividly treacherous – as if everything would conspire to trip her up and rob her of her precious state. The moat beneath the stairs was empty of koi now, just black murk and scraps of garbage in the silty water. It seemed a bad omen, so she turned her face the other way.

They sat on a bench in a nook between huge palm trees, cooler and more private. Parrots arched between the foliage, their cries momentarily deafening.

Wattlebirds looped through the clearing back to their own trees. It was an enclave, a moment apart. Nobody could see them.

Kathleen peeled open a Mars bar and offered Pen a bite.

Pen shook her head.

“Go on, it won’t hurt to eat something sinful for once,” she said. Pen sighed and took a mouthful. It stuck to her tongue and palate, cloying, but she forced it down. *You’re eating for two now.*

“I’ve got something else too,” she said. “Now don’t be cross, because I thought, *one of us* has to take the plunge.”

She opened her raffia basket and pulled out an envelope.

Jetset, the logo said.

“I took the liberty of starting to arrange the trip. If we leave it any longer, it will be too late.”

Pen slipped a finger inside and saw: Perth International Airport to Paris-Charles de Gaulle. December 15. A revised itinerary for Ms Kathleen Nancarrow, estimated costs for two persons. Limited seats remaining. Pen’s heart leapt, then sank.

Kathleen grinned. “It’s all just provisional right now. It’s not paid up yet, and I’ll need your details for that – your full name, and at some stage your passport number and so on.”

Pen swallowed and looked at the ground.

“And your actual address,” Kathleen went on. “I checked the enrolment file, but it’s only got your PO Box...”

‘She’s been researching me,’ Pen thought, stiffening.

“And what *is* your middle name, anyway?”

“My middle name? I don’t have one,” Pen lied.

“Okay! When we’ve got that sorted I’ll charge the tickets. I said to myself, ‘If Pen won’t take it as a gift, she can reimburse me.’ But I hope you *will* take it as a gift. It would make me very happy. I like being happy – I haven’t had that feeling for a long time, but I have it with you.” Kathleen was excited.

“It’s too generous. I can’t.”

“Then you can pay it off – whenever – no hurry! I won’t take no for an answer.” She took Pen’s hand and chafed it softly. “I want us to do this – it will be marvellous. One of us has to take the plunge,” she repeated. “I want you to understand that you mean a lot to me. This is something I can do to show you that.”

Pen was dizzy, and didn't know whether it was morning sickness or shock. She stood up, uncertain what to say.

"My break," she said. "Have to go back."

Kathleen laughed. "Have I reduced you to monosyllables? Poor darling," and she leaned over and kissed Pen on the mouth. Pen put her hand to her mouth, as if words would start spilling out in response.

"I really must go," she said. "Let me think about this, okay? It's a big surprise." And then she added, as if suddenly remembering her manners. "But thank you."

Kathleen squeezed her hand and released it. "Give me a ring, won't you?"

Back in the library, Pen found herself doing the same task two or three times over. The new girl must think she was loopy. Or premenstrual. Or menopausal. Pen grimaced to herself. It was like a warped, dark fairytale. A beautiful woman appears out of nowhere, falls in love with you, and offers you a holiday in Paris, wants to live *happily ever after*.

Only she hadn't appeared out of nowhere. Pen had conjured her up.

Up out of Derrick's past, a very specific time and place – and that was where she belonged. But how to put her back there?

At all costs, Kathleen must not buy those tickets. Or not with Pen's name on, anyway.

The new girl said out of the blue, "Is she a friend of yours, Prof. Nancarrow?"

Pen was startled, as much by that "Prof." as by the question. It gave her an outside view of Kathleen again, the fact that she mattered elsewhere, in a bigger world than Pen's own crowded head.

"No – who do you mean? The woman who came to the door there?" She was sure she was blushing – where was her usual lying composure? Maybe pregnancy made you florid like that, outside your control.

The girl nodded.

"No, not personally," Pen said, and went off abruptly to return a file to Closed Reserve. She felt like Peter denying Jesus, afraid and ashamed.

"She's wonderful," the girl gushed. "I had her in first semester."

Pen smiled to herself – 'had her' – how grotesque. But there was no sexual allusion. The girl was an innocent. No need to worry there – the conversation would soon be forgotten. Kathleen had been in and out of the library now and

then, but academics were always dropping by, for obvious reasons, and nobody at work really connected the two of them.

Yet at the end of the day, Kathleen was there at the glass door again. Pen stepped out of the library's air-conditioning into the lingering evening heat, and it was like the gateway to another world. Kathleen was tired but luminous, her hair slightly mussed, her blouse and skirt creased, as if she had come straight from her office in haste.

"I'm sorry to jump on you like that," she said, striding alongside Pen to the car-park. "I didn't mean to give you a fright. Only I couldn't wait. Have you thought about it? The trip? We'll have to start organising. Have you got a good winter coat? I don't mean like the ones people wear here – I mean a really solid one. Maybe we can go shopping. Please say you'll come."

Pen couldn't get a word in. At the door of the Volvo, she said, not knowing how else to break away, "Okay. I'll come. I'd love to come."

"Fantastic." Kathleen hugged her, oblivious to passersby, and Pen tried not to squirm.

"But please, hold off paying till I've checked my passport and stuff. It might not be up-to-date."

She had to temporise, after all. If she broke with Kathleen now, she'd still have to work her month's notice, and it would be awkward. Better to wait till that month was over, and make it a *clean* break.

There was nothing to pin her down, no trail of crumbs or pebbles in this would-be tale. She had been careful about that all along. She must stay careful.

At dinner that night, Derrick was solemn. He'd been solemn a while now, since Cliff's death in fact. He toyed with the Waldorf salad she'd brought home and barely touched his chickpea patties.

"That inquest business," he said. "It looks likely. Takes months, apparently. By which time I guess most people will have forgotten things."

Pen put her fork down and reached over to touch the back of his hand. He was so fragile, she could see that, from the ginger tendrils at his temples – overdue for a trim, not bothering – to his soft underlip.

"Forgotten what things?" she asked.

"I don't know. Whatever there is to tell. Doesn't the mere fact of an inquest mean they are looking for someone to blame?"

Pen resumed eating, doggedly. "*You're* not to blame."

“Not directly.” He considered a few moments. “It was Pollard, wasn’t it, who upset Cliff a lot of the time?”

“Yes. But not only Pollard.”

“Who else? You know they’re going to ask me these things. Not the inquest – but the head, who will have to attend, I imagine. He said today he wants to talk it through, to get the full picture.”

“I don’t know much else.”

“He didn’t bring up – you know, *interference* of any kind?”

Pen screwed up her face in distaste. “There isn’t a problem of that sort at school, is there? I never heard talk of it.”

Derrick shrugged. “I’m just trying to understand.”

“Maybe it was the whole culture of the place,” Pen said. “Don’t forget he had problems at home, too. But Phys Ed was his bugbear. And the science teacher, the woman who made them do dissections. Are you going to mention this stuff?”

“Would *you*?”

“Do you mean *would I*, hypothetically, or *would I please*? You want me to speak to the Head?”

Derrick appeared dissatisfied. “I don’t know. It’s kind of dropping my colleagues in it for very vague accusations. Aren’t we all guilty of neglect, if someone – does what Cliff did?”

“He said Pollard was a sadist.”

“Yes, but people use that word quite freely these days, like Nazi or whatever, appalling as that is. It’s not very specific.”

Pen sighed. “I think maybe you just need to mention stuff in very general terms, when you talk to the principal,” she said. “Because Cliff’s not here any more to explain what he meant. That way you are telling the truth but not overdoing it. It’s tricky.”

“And yet you guessed it was him,” Derrick said. “That day it happened. You must have known he was in a pretty bad way. He didn’t – mention me at all?”

Strange that Derrick should ask her that again.

She shook her head. “I suspect it was more to do with type,” she said. “Something I could just read in him, something familiar.”

Derrick looked away. *You have consumed me and spat out the wretched pieces – can’t you feel how wretched I am?* What he’d written to Kathleen. Kathleen of all

people! Pen remembered that wretchedness in him when they'd first met, his delicacy of soul – Cliff had reminded her of that in Derrick.

“Anyway, there’s something else I want to talk to you about.”

There was never going to be a perfect moment. And none better than countering all this death-talk with baby-news.

Nights, now, he slept with his arms wrapped right around her, as if afraid to let go of her – their child – for one moment. Tentative, too, about making love, perhaps fearful of doing damage, though they both knew that was unlikely.

They'd made an appointment with an obstetrician, and Pen had quietly given in notice at work.

To Maureen she told the truth – the relative truth – and asked her not to repeat it. Maureen was solid that way.

“I lost a baby before,” Pen said. “I’d rather keep it to myself until I know all’s well. That’s the other reason I want to take it easy now, you see.”

It would do as an explanation for leaving work so early in the pregnancy, these days when everyone expected you to be superwoman right up till the last month or so – *taking it easy* because of previous miscarriage. Only Maureen would know, but she could fend off the curiosity of others. Pen’s belly wouldn’t show for a few months yet, and by then – before then – she could have dealt with Kathleen.

But each time she went to Kathleen’s house, she felt herself sinking in deeper. A couple of times she pleaded off – too tired, not feeling well – yet she had to keep up the appearance of normalcy, or Kathleen would figure out something had changed. So Pen drove around in the evening to watch a movie with her as usual, or brought takeaway for them to share. It was always at Kathleen’s place, the excuse being her own was still not finished, and too far away.

“It’s not that far,” Kathleen said. “I don’t care about the building stuff. I’d just like to feel a part of things. However bad your house looks, you don’t have to hide it from me!”

“I’m not.” They were eating hokkien noodles from tall shiny boxes on the sofa, about to watch Alain Delon in an early French version of Highsmith’s Ripley. *Plein soleil*, it was called: right out in the sun, in full sunlight, the sort that would burn you or give you heatstroke.

“Like Meursault,” Kathleen pointed out, “when he commits murder. Maybe it’s an allusion to that. He doesn’t know why he does it, he thinks maybe it was the sun...”

“I *know* the book,” Pen said, rather sharply. They’d studied it at school, even in English.

Kathleen looked at her, surprised. “I wasn’t meaning to be patronising. I was just musing aloud.”

Pen said nothing, merely pushed the remote control. Something in her was brewing, the urge to start an argument, to have done with it all. She must keep control of herself.

The DVD whirred into action: trendy sixties credits and design. Ripley and Dickie – here he was called Philippe! – at an outdoor café.

Something was wrong, but it took a moment to realise.

“Oh, no, it’s in English,” Kathleen groaned. The mouths were moving out of synch with the words. “I can’t bear dubbed movies.”

“Me neither,” Pen said, and pressed STOP. “No point.”

They looked at each other. “Well, that puts paid to that.”

“We could watch something else,” Pen said.

Kathleen shrugged. “Or we could snuggle up and just enjoy each other. It feels like ages, Pen.” She ran her hand up the inside of Pen’s leg, just so far that it made Pen tremble.

“Can’t you stay the night?”

Pen shook her head.

“But you can stay a while. At least as long as the film would have taken.”

She meant to say no, to think up some excuse, but the fine grain of Kathleen’s palm and fingertips on her thigh was mesmerising. It was like tumbling down a familiar slope, giving in to gravity. The fighting urge she’d felt before, but melted into another shape, a compulsion to push, to tear, to devour the other person until you were replete. The heat of her a blaze that must be obeyed. People said desire was irrational, yet it was so blatantly logical – *this, then this, then this* – so logical it was impossible to counter. As easy as falling...

Afterwards, they fell asleep, and it was near midnight before Pen could extricate herself.

Derrick would be out of his mind.

Pen smiled to herself at the expression, and patted her cheeks, trying to sober up. Like the Emily Dickinson poem: "Inebriate of air am I/And debauchee of dew." She'd had nothing to drink, but you didn't need drink to be intoxicated.

"You're not really going," Kathleen murmured. "Stay in bed, Pen. It's getting ridiculous."

Pen looked at her watch. 'The witching hour,' she thought. So late that it would be near-impossible to explain anyway.

She said, "I just have to use the bathroom."

The bathroom was not far from Kathleen's room; Pen ran a tap to help cover the sound of her phone.

"I was feeling unwell after the evening shift," she told Derrick, "so I'm at Maureen's. She said she can put me up. I'm going to wait till morning – don't want to risk the drive."

He offered to come and get her, but she said, "Darling, it's so late, it's not worth it. Yes, I'm sorry, I should have rung earlier. I know. I know. No, really. I love you too."

She was whispering.

When she crept back to the bedroom, Kathleen said, "Who were you talking to? Or was I dreaming?"

Pen laughed. "Must have been. Unless I was talking to myself. Which is quite possible, you know."

She slid back under the covers, nestled against Kathleen's smooth shoulders, and slept again instantly.

“Can I come round this evening?” Pen spoke softly.

Kathleen was silent a moment on the other end of the line. Then she said, “Yes, do. I’ve got some marking, but that doesn’t matter. If you don’t mind. I’d rather see you than not.”

It was like sleepwalking. Each time she’d been with Kathleen lately, Pen had told herself, ‘I won’t do this anymore. I won’t do it this time.’

Then she would see the fine white bloom at the side of a silken cheek, or the slight pulse visible above the collarbone, and she knew the logic would have her again.

It was as if, because she knew it was coming to an end – *had* to come to an end – her hunger for Kathleen had grown enormous. Not only could she not say no, she was even seeking her out.

This was diametrically opposed to her actual intention, which was to break things off. As soon as work was finished, as soon as the last goodbyes on her last day there, she meant to cut the tie. Without a trace.

Derrick was wry and rueful, the nights she was home.

“I thought pregnant women were supposed to be... you know.”

“What?” Pen was munching on halva, avoiding a sink full of dinner dishes. She didn’t care if people said cravings were mythical. For once she was listening to her body. And as Derrick pointed out, halva was made of sesame, and sesame was full of calcium. Never mind the sugar overload... You could justify anything if you only looked at it from certain angles.

“Well, you know. Raving with lust for their husbands and all that.”

He was trying to soften it by making a joke, the way he said it. But she could hear the hurt behind the hyperbole.

“Oh, well,” she said, trying to match with the same affected lightness. “You’ll soon have me all to yourself again.”

It was frighteningly true. Soon there would be nothing to fill her days except the waiting, and getting the house ready. They’d put in a concertina room-divider, like the ones used at school between classrooms, where the wall had been knocked out, needing the extra bedroom back again.

The room where Pen had found the letter.

"All to myself!" Derrick laughed. "I think not. I think I'll be the one sleeping in the spare room. You'll have your hands full with a third party, don't forget."

A third party. Redolent with irony. Pen thought yet again of Diana: *There were three of us in this marriage, so it was a bit crowded.* Why did this always come back to her? Acid wit designed to win public sympathy – a skilled speechwriter, no doubt. The other woman present from the very beginning. You had to fight her with whatever came to hand. Nobody else would do it for you.

Pen had no public to bear witness, no ally to vindicate her cause. She would have to look out for herself, just as she always had. *Take your own part against the world,* Leon had said.

But which was your own part? When she thought of giving up Kathleen, her body ached. Kathleen was her own private victory, her stash, her hoard, her trophy. No longer Derrick's other woman, but her own.

For the first time, Pen felt panicked.

"Maybe we should think about moving," she said to Derrick. "Rather than all this work. It might be simpler. And a fresh start."

Derrick contemplated it. "That's probably just as much work. Even if we really wanted to leave here. You've never wanted to leave here, Pen."

"It's just an idea."

"Okay, but think about it. We'd still have to get the house ready to sell – nobody's going to look at a place halfway renovated. And then there's the whole process of finding another one – subject to sale, all that stuff. We've not even been following the market. It takes ages. No, I think now is not the time."

Pen fretted at her fingers, the cuticles, the knuckles. Derrick tutted. He was always policing her little habits. And she his. The way he rubbed at his beard, or scratched his scalp in his sleep. Only years together could create such patterns, a kind of interlock.

If she'd lived with Kathleen, she would have known all her habits too. But she could not live with Kathleen. Not now. And probably never. She must face facts, with a child on the way.

"Could we go away somewhere, then?" she said. "I don't want Mum breathing down my neck once the baby's born."

That much was true.

Derrick laughed mildly. "Don't worry, darling. I'll protect you. You know what: it's just the changes in your body making you jittery."

He put his arms around her and placed his rough cheek beside hers.

“And I thought they called them *happy hormones*... Why don’t you come to bed now and I’ll cheer you up.”

“The dishes,” Pen protested. The greasy load of them still in the sink, a kind of resistance to the real.

“Leave ‘em. I’ll do them in the morning.” Derrick often said that, but then he usually forgot.

Pen stood up shakily and allowed herself to be led.

In her last week at the library, Pen took the precaution of changing her mobile phone number, and clearing out all the little details you might usually leave lying behind you.

She did not tell Kathleen she was leaving her job. Instead, she made a time to meet for coffee.

‘I don’t have to see her,’ Pen said to herself, pulse racing, as she waited in the café. ‘I could just disappear, tell her nothing.’

But she’d decided against that for at least two reasons.

One: if she disappeared, Kathleen would look for her. Complete silence would beg inevitable questions, even pursuit. Doubtlessly pushing her library colleagues for information, trying to find out whatever she could, and understandably so. Better to make things clear.

Two: she cared for Kathleen. She owed her at least the honesty of a decisive split, if not the whole story. The whole story was not an option.

There was a sweet excruciation in the process of breaking something that felt so whole. Pen knew it at once as Kathleen stepped into the café, her eyes seeking Pen with their same ordinary trust.

Pen could have slapped her then, as if to say, This is what you get for such an open face. This is what you get for love. She tuned out the silky black shirt, the Indian cotton skirt that lifted slightly with a breeze through the door. It wouldn’t do to linger about this.

Instead, she nodded and stayed seated. In command. She’d chosen a spot on the terrace, empty of customers.

Kathleen scanned the bare table-top. “What can I get you?”

Pen reached into her pocket for a fiver. “Just a decaf.”

“Don’t be daft,” Kathleen pushed back the money and whipped out her purse. “You can pay next time. And since when did you go decaf?”

Pen shrugged. She watched Kathleen stroll up to the counter; watched too her deftness in balancing the tray all the way back, then sinking onto the stool

opposite. So far, so good. Pen breathed deep. If she could manage not to touch or be touched, she could do it.

“We really need to talk.”

Kathleen straightened her cup. “That sounds ominous.”

Pen bit her lower lip. *Steady.*

“Is it about Paris? It’s past crunch time, you know. The ticket will be astronomical. If there’s even a seat left. Are you getting cold feet?”

“Cold feet, maybe, though I wouldn’t have put it that way. But it’s not the trip, Kathleen.”

Kathleen was silent and regarded her with a flatness Pen had not expected, as if stiffening some inner part of her. Then she said, “Go on.”

As if she knew. As if she was primed for moments like this, whether from instinct or from past experience. As if she could not be derailed, ever, by any surprise. Perhaps that was what it meant to be older.

“I...” What a silly word. “I want to stop... I don’t want us to go on seeing each other anymore.”

To her own surprise, Pen found she could not look Kathleen in the eye. It was unbearable, what she might see there.

“May I ask why?”

The words were no clue. Still Pen kept her eyes averted. That was less than ideal, but it was all she could manage.

“I don’t feel comfortable. It just doesn’t feel right. It’s not what I want.”

“I see.”

Pen looked up now, but the eyes by this time were no clue either.

“I’m sorry,” she added. It was lame. She must gird herself better for what would follow. Suddenly the sing-song words of some hymn she’d heard from street-preachers in the mall: *No turning back no turning back.*

But Kathleen merely laughed, a dry, humourless laugh that came from no depth.

“I knew it,” she said. “When I saw the Vixen this morning, after all this time, I knew it was a bad omen! I always know these things.”

“What? What do you mean, the vixen?”

Kathleen looked at her with a crazed detachment. “Never you mind, it’s an old joke. An oldie but not a goodie. And the joke’s on me, it appears.”

She stood up suddenly, her coffee untouched. The head on it gone cold, grimy as river-scum. “That’s it, then?” she said.

Pen was taken aback. She had steeled herself for some sort of struggle, and it was as if the floor had fallen away just where she sat. It no longer felt like a seat of command. She could not speak.

“I knew it was a bad omen,” Kathleen said, and pulling her handbag gracelessly off the back of her chair, she strode out of the café.

For a day or two Pen felt a weight had been taken off her, as if sandbags that had held her down were cast aside, and she floated somewhere in the upper atmosphere.

She did not even want to think about what she had done. She wanted to go on floating, swelling balloon-like over the coming months, gliding into a certain future.

In the morning, she slept in. By afternoon, she drifted down the hill to Gatelands shopping centre – semi-consciously sticking to her own side of the city, as if it had some kind of force-field to shield her from running into Kathleen. And in a way it did, because people from Kathleen’s part of town almost never set foot in places like this.

Hills people did, rich or poor, because it was their nearest option. But however many new stores were brightly announced, or fast food venues sprang up, it still had the feel of grimy, dejected boredom cheaply assuaged.

Vaguely she browsed for skirts and pants with elastic waists. Her belly was not even swollen yet, but she was paranoid about putting pressure on it with her normal clothes. And then there were baby items to price and compare, ideas to take home to Derrick.

Pen had never really been a shopper. Partly because she’d never had the time, being a worker; partly because goods were not what she desired. Unlike her dad, who’d had almost a fetish for beautiful things.

“You see this suit,” he’d say to her as a small, awe-struck child, adjusting his tie and cufflinks in front of a mirror. “This suit is Yves St Laurent.”

He said it *Wives* St Laurent, and for years, before Pen learned French, she’d thought that was the way you said it. He said you had to have the right trappings if you wanted to mix with the right people; he said Jack was as good as his master.

“A cat may look at a king,” he’d say, ruffling her hair, and head off somewhere elegant, someplace where you had to impress people to get by, to move on up. Pen never knew who Jack was, or why the cat should look at the king. *I’ve been to London to visit the Queen...*

He collected bits and pieces of bric-à-brac, old polished wooden furniture *bought for a song*. She'd imagined him singing to the sellers in his wavering, croony tenor, charming the items off people. *Little Tommy Tucker sings for his supper...* He was convinced they were undiscovered antiques that would bring him a fortune.

When he left, these bits and pieces were all Pen and her mother had of him. Worthless.

She'd never thought goods were the way to *move on up*. It was so much more complex than that. You could lose them in one stroke – fire, flood, one false move in your finances and then bankruptcy...

No, what she'd worked for all this time could not be found in the plasma television screen or the limestone water-feature on the backyard lap-pool. Such things turned her stomach, like the smell of skewered meat coming from the shopping centre's food hall, mixed with the reek of steaming curries and the unreal sweetness of those whipped, flavoured coffees all the truanting teenagers and middle-aged ladies were sucking on.

She felt faint, and pulled up a chair on the edge of the lunch area, resting her head on her arms. The table-top was slightly sticky, and her stomach heaved again.

"Pen! Pen Barber!"

Despite the muzak and crowd noises, she could hear her own name with perfect clarity.

It was Jean Sargent, from Derrick's school. But today she was laid-back, not in her teacher's gear. Bermuda shorts and a tennis shirt; just a smudge of pale lipstick as if to smarten up her casuals.

"Haven't seen you for ages! Are you okay, Pen? You don't look so good. I'd say morning sickness, but it's afternoon." She laughed at her own joke.

So obviously Derrick had talked at work. Everyone always knew everything in that school. Except when a boy was suicidal, Pen considered grimly.

"I'm fine, just a bit tired."

"A spot of baby-shopping?"

Pen nodded. "You're not teaching this term?"

"Oh, I am, I am. I've just got the day off. Actually it's long-service leave, but I've opted to use it up as two days off per week. That way I keep my hand in – and keep an eye on my spot, as it were. You've no idea what backstabbers that lot can be."

She licked her lips and sat down opposite Pen, uninvited.

“But perhaps you do. Derrick’s had a pretty swift rise, hasn’t he?”

Pen pondered that. “How do you mean?”

“Hasn’t he told you? About the deputy-headship?”

Pen said nothing.

Jean smiled a very small smile. “Well, it’s still only in discussion. But he’s certainly in line for it. Mellors has put in his resignation. Some say retiring, but it’s rather early for that. Personally I suspect he’s had enough of all the *scandal* lately.”

“Are you referring to the *tragedy*?” Pen said coldly. Strange how one choice of word could be such a clear signal.

“Yes, yes, of course.” Jean tapped the table. “Nice to be offered the position, but a shame it has to be on the back of something so nasty.”

“*Nasty*.” It was like speaking two different languages.

“However you look at it. Still, I suppose if he takes it, the extra pay will surely come in handy,” and here she gestured toward Pen’s belly, as if it were suddenly public property, an objective reality rather than an intimate part of her person. “You must be pleased.”

“I’m sure Derrick will do whatever’s right in the circumstances,” Pen said.

But Jean was still on her own private wavelength.

“And you’ll need that extra pay, having to give up work yourself,” she said. “Do you miss the university?”

“A little.” Pen was cagey now.

“My sister works there, actually. I don’t know if you know her – Alice Henley? She’s in admin. In the Arts building.”

Pen’s heart quickened, but held steady. She didn’t know Alice Henley, and there was no reason Alice would know her.

“No, doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Well, it’s a small world. But then I guess you weren’t there very long really, were you? Are you having something to eat?”

Pen shook her head. “I must get going, in fact.”

Jean dispensed the usual banalities – you had to be grateful when it was just that, and not the veiled spite. Pen moved off swiftly, empty-handed. She’d get the clothing another time.

She had not reckoned on the whole degrees of separation thing. Kathleen was in another world – but how close, in some respects, that world was. Didn’t people always say, “Perth is a small town”, even though it was well on the way to two million people now? True, Kathleen knew her only by a different

surname. But a word here or there to the right person – the wrong person! – might conceivably bring her undone.

Pen wished again that she could simply move away. Have the baby elsewhere.

But that was even less likely now, if Derrick had the deputy-headship within sight.

As she came to the huge glass exit doors of Gatelands, a sign caught her eye. SALON PARIS-CHIC. She thought with a pang of the Paris she would probably now never see. Certainly not with Kathleen. Sweet, generous Kathleen...

But Pen had resolved against second thoughts: the baby made anything worth giving up. It was only the business with Jean and her sister, spooking Pen a little, thinking people would recognise, connect her. She had to put all that behind her.

Under the salon's sign was chalked, in a most un-chic manner, *Walk-ins Welcome*.

A colour-change would make her almost unrecognisable, but she was pretty sure the dye wouldn't be safe for the baby. Still, there were other ways of looking radically different. So Pen walked in and asked the girl to cut her hair really short.

It was just a little more weight lifted. She felt so light now, she was floating again. And cutting off your hair was a sign of commitment – like nuns entering the convent – she was re-entering her marriage. *No turning back no turning back*.

The house was a flurry of hired workers over the next few days, an intrusion Pen could hardly stand, but there was no other way the place could get finished, with her pregnant and Derrick in his last weeks of term. Pen had spent hours on the net tracking down eco-paints that wouldn't give off fumes and harm the baby, but even so, Derrick was adamant she mustn't do any of the work.

She was clock-watching now, waiting for him to pick her up for a lunchtime appointment with the ob-gyn.

"I could drive myself."

"I want to be there, darling. I've got some free time at the end of the lunch-hour, and it makes sense."

He wanted to do *everything* with her now. On the one hand, Pen was grateful; on the other hand, she'd grown used to having a bit of her own space. Hadn't that been their plan all along, to open up to other people, not to be so fused with each other that they shut out the rest of the world?

All she wanted now was to be by herself, and shut out the rest of the world...

But it was his child too, of course. Even if in some bizarre way, she sometimes dreamt it had sprung from her passion for Kathleen. Passion: the very word made her feel sick now. Pen blocked it out of her mind: ridiculous.

"Why now?" she'd said, the first time, to the specialist. "After losing one, and trying for so many years? I thought I just couldn't conceive."

The specialist was a woman of their own age, with a sharp, angled haircut and expensively cut summer trousers. She crossed and uncrossed her knees each time she made a statement, as if self-conscious. Then Pen realised, 'She's *flirting* with Derrick.'

Derrick seemed oblivious.

"Well," the woman said, "sometimes it's the anxiety that prevents it happening. The more you think about it, the more you can't conceive. Without going into personal details, I once knew a woman who had so much trouble conceiving that she adopted a child, and then immediately fell pregnant."

"Because she'd stopped worrying," Pen murmured.

“Yes.”

“Like a china egg,” Derrick said. They both looked at him. “I mean, when a hen won’t lay. It seems to work.”

Everyone laughed.

This second visit, the specialist was even more flirtatious, Pen thought. The woman wore a low-cut blouse, just a little less than professional, as if she’d dressed for the specific appointment. Surely not – maybe she just affected that manner to make the husbands feel included. To put them at ease with her handling of their wives’ bodies.

Derrick was like a little boy again, perched on his stool, nodding at the doctor’s every pronouncement. Pen could hardly get a word in.

“Is it going to be all right?” she said finally.

The doctor sat back; her smile gleamed faintly patronising.

“At this stage, everything looks fine. But you know, Penny, there are no guarantees in this business. We’ll just take it month by month.”

Pen stiffened. “You mean everything’s *not* all right.”

Derrick intervened. “Pen, the doctor said everything looks fine. She’s just speaking generally.”

He smiled and nodded at the woman again.

“We just do the best we can, Penny,” she said. “There’s no need to be fearful.”

Afterwards in the car, Pen was disgruntled. She wanted to be annoyed with Derrick over the flirting, but in truth it hardly bothered her anymore. Once it would have outraged her.

“I didn’t like that *no guarantees* business,” she said to Derrick.

“Lighten up, darling. They just have to be truthful. She didn’t mean there was anything wrong.”

“It was cold. She’s so cold.”

“That’s her job. You want a cool head when you’re giving birth, don’t you?”

“Cool, maybe. Not cold. And she keeps calling me Penny.”

“They can’t remember everything, darling.”

“It’s not everything,” Pen said. “It’s my bloody name!”

Derrick looked surprised. “Calm down, sweetheart.” He leaned over and squeezed her hand. “You know, that short hairdo really suits you. It’s taken me a while to get used to it. I kept thinking there was a stranger in the house. But it actually looks quite pretty.”

‘Buying me off with flattery,’ Pen thought. ‘After the flirt.’

“Can you call in at the shopping centre on the way through?” she said finally. “I’d like to pick up the mail.”

It would save her a trip after school, since Derrick had the car today, and it wasn’t on his route home.

“If you can be quick.”

Funny how he always said that, as if the time it took were wholly at her discretion, and not dependent on the crowd or the queue. Derrick sat in the Volvo with the engine humming while she went up the brick steps, her walk permanently cautious now, her movements studied and slow. She unlocked the box and pulled out a pile of bent envelopes and junk mail slips.

Among the bills and bank statements, she saw at once a letter addressed to Pen Stone.

There was no return address, but she knew the handwriting was Kathleen’s.

No time or privacy to open it now – if that was even the right thing to do. Pen shoved the envelope down to the bottom of her handbag, shuffled the other letters together, and turned back to the car.

“Anything I should know about?” Derrick checked over his shoulder and swung out into the traffic again.

Pen shook her head.

“What was that one you put away?”

He said it lightly, as if it really didn’t matter and had only grazed the edge of his curiosity. But how surprising that he’d noticed. He must be watching closer than she thought.

“Just a library-overdue,” she said. “I think I’ve already returned it.”

Derrick looked at Pen, and then smiled, in sequence. The infinitesimal lapse in between chilled her. He was opaque; perhaps he had always been.

For a few seconds it seemed as if all other people were opaque, like aliens, or automata. The big trucks, cement mixers, road trains grinding before and behind them, groaning up the highway to cross the hills and head east with their pointless, greedy loads, endlessly coming and going – all seemed to be running by daemonic order, unrelated to human beings. Pen could hardly breathe, and it wasn’t just the carbon monoxide.

“I wish you didn’t have to go back,” Pen said, as Derrick dropped her home. She would have liked to lock the doors and draw the blinds. She felt enormously tired. Wanted someone else to do it all for her.

“It’s only a few hours till school’s out,” Derrick said.

When he had gone, she pulled out Kathleen's letter, turning it over twice, three times, as if the outside could tell her anything. It was a fat letter; it had been posted the day before.

She feared reading it, in case it shook her resolve. Kathleen might have been abrupt on the day they split up, but clearly she had a lot to say now. The temptation to read it – just to read it, not to respond – was huge.

Yet it could only be anger, or pleading. Neither of which Pen felt up to facing.

She couldn't cross it out and say "Return to Sender", since there was no sender's name. Though that would have been the best way to tell Kathleen it was futile – just as Kathleen herself had done to Derrick, more than a decade ago.

Neither could she write "Not at this address", or the thing would go back to some dead-letter office, she supposed, until someone figured out how to find 'Pen Stone', or else binned it. But still not a good idea, in case it ever fell into curious hands.

She opened the Bushman stove: it was musty and foul from disuse, even though Derrick had cleaned out the ash at the end of winter.

At first the letter, sealed and compact, wouldn't catch, so she scrunched up some newspaper and thrust it in to build a little pyre.

To crown the pile, she went into the former study and reached down the old letter Derrick had sent to Kathleen, the letter that had started everything. Now was the time, if ever. Pulled open and torn into pieces, it punched the air at once into lucid flame.

Pen sat carefully by the glass door, and pulled the handle back into locking position.

"You shouldn't use the fireplace in this weather, you could send up burning ash and set off the whole bush out there."

Pen turned, incredulous. Her mother stood just inside the glass sliding-door, untying a large-brimmed sunhat and patting her hair.

"It's not the fireplace," Pen said, standing up, "it's the stove." But she knew her mother was right.

"Still." Mrs Stone stepped over, peering in through the dark stove-door. "What on earth are you burning? Is it letters?"

Pen ignored the question, sullen. "I didn't hear you knock."

"No, I thought you didn't, so I came in. It's very dark in here. Gives the place an awful mood, Penelope."

Pen shrugged. "Just your tinted glasses, from being outside. They'll come good in a few minutes. Did you want a cup of tea or something?"

Mrs Stone's lips drew tight. "You mean, what am I doing here?"

"No, I meant do you want a cup of tea." Pen went gingerly down the steps into the kitchen and filled the kettle, mechanically. Anything to keep occupied.

"Didn't Derrick mention I was dropping by? I've got a box-load of baby gear from Eleanor's daughter – they thought you might like to look through it."

Derrick *had* mentioned it, but he hadn't said when.

"Thanks." Pen peeked inside the box lid: it was full of woollens and gro-suits in pastel colours, some of them faintly stained. "I don't know where I'll put all this stuff, though. It's a bit soon. Months away."

"It'll pass soon enough. And besides, I wanted to sort out what we're doing for Christmas. Martins are giving me a free ham and it's no good all on my own."

"Derrick doesn't eat ham," Pen reminded her.

Mrs Stone frowned. "No, but *you* could. Can't do that vegetarian thing with a baby on the way, you know."

You can, actually, Pen wanted to say, but there was no point, since she wasn't vegetarian anyway, and with her mother she had to pick her battles.

She brought the teapot to the table, and sat down wearily.

Mrs Stone sniffed. "Have you only Earl Grey?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

Mrs Stone nodded and held out her cup.

"I'm not one for mixing my flavours. Bergamot is one thing – but all these new coffees, for instance. I went to lunch with Eleanor last week and it was all vanilla coffee, hazelnut, you name it. Whatever happened to plain old coffee?"

Pen said nothing: this was a familiar recital. She laid out a plate of digestive biscuits – Mrs Stone wouldn't eat fancy ones – and they talked over the plan for Christmas Day, which would, of course, be the same as it always was.

"Oh, by the way," her mother said, "I had an odd phone call, someone looking for you. Might have been an old school-friend or someone who knew you before you were married – said she was trying all the Stones in the phone book. That'd be a mammoth task, I imagine."

"Who was that? What did you tell her?"

"I don't remember the name, but it didn't ring a bell. In any case, Penelope, I never give out information. Not these days, with all this identity theft going on."

Pen tried to speak, but her mother waved her aside and went on.

"You know I read that overseas, insurance companies are going to charge higher premiums for people who use that Facebook. It'll happen here too. I hope you've got more sense. I know you're always on that internet."

"Not always, Mum. And I don't use Facebook. Who would I use it for?"

"For whom."

"Whatever."

"Oh, don't – you're sounding so *American*." American, for Pen's mother, was faintly pejorative. Not for broader political reasons, but because it smacked of commercial television and slang.

"That aside," Pen said. "You didn't give out any details."

"No, that's what I said. I have to protect my own privacy too, you know."

"Why odd, then? You said it was odd."

Mrs Stone drank the last of her tea and topped it up herself. "A bit pestering. I don't know. Just a feeling. Don't make mountains out of molehills. I almost forgot about it, anyway. It was days ago."

So, before the letter. Which would suggest she'd had no joy from the phone calls. Assuming it was Kathleen trying to find her. Pen allowed herself a sigh of relief, then smiled. For once, her mother's uptight view of the world had worked for her, instead of against her.

"What are you smiling at?" Mrs Stone said, as if smiling too were odd.

"I wasn't aware I was smiling. I'm just tired. Been to the doctor's today." Pen hoped her mother would take the hint, but she showed no signs of moving.

Instead, her mother said, "I wonder if Derrick would mind running me home when he gets in. Marjorie dropped me off going to the city but I don't like to ask her both ways."

Pen looked at the clock. "Of course, Mum."

That's how it had been with Mrs Stone, ever since Pen's father had left. A network of friends, Marjorie, Eleanor, scores of others, all providing favours. Pen thought of Blanche Dubois – *I have always relied on the kindness of strangers...* But that was unfair to her mother, she knew.

"In some ways I admire her for it," Derrick said that night, after taking her mother home. "It can't be easy on your own, and there'd be quite an art to... weaving your way into a community, making sure people are aware of you, that you don't get stranded. Everything's so set up for couples, for families."

Pen remembered only too well the shock her mother had got all those years ago, the way certain married friends had ceased inviting her over once the separation was known.

“As if I had some sort of contagious disease,” Mrs Stone had said. “As if they might catch something called Deserted Wife.”

That was the label in Mrs Stone’s day. Meaning, when she was young, before she was ever a wife herself. Pen marvelled at how her mother always said, “in my day”, as if the present were not also her day. *Deserted wife, divorcee.* Pronounced in a hush. *Broken homes.*

“It’s not called that now,” Pen had said to her mother. “Not even when you and Dad... Now we say single-parent family. It’s not so looked down on, it’s much more common.”

But that was euphemism, she knew, and didn’t change some people’s attitudes. Even now, decades after the Family Court Act, it wouldn’t be as simple as the legislation made it look.

If Pen herself left Derrick, for instance – pregnant – not that she’d seriously consider it – she would still be bound to him. Still subject to restrictions on where she could live, how she could raise the child.

Not for a moment could she contemplate, say, a future with Kathleen. Whatever her feelings might be. It just wasn’t feasible.

On the last day of term, Derrick brought home a postcard, and slid it casually across the dining table to Pen. Printed in Paris, it showed a mass of cherries and blossom, and carried four lines of gilt script in French from Verlaine:

*Here are fruit, flowers, leaves and branches too
Along with my heart which beats only for you
Do not tear it to pieces with your two white hands
Let this humble gift appear sweet to your lovely glance...*

Pen turned it over. “Please ring me – K.” And a number.

She flushed deeply, not knowing what to say.

“That’s from ‘Green’,” Derrick said. “It has an English title. I’ve taught that poem to my Year Twelves.”

He waited for Pen to speak, but she could not compose herself.

"I don't know why it came to the school," Derrick said. "Or why it's addressed in your maiden name. Is there something I should know about?"

Pen flicked the card away. "I have no idea."

'The school!' she thought. Kathleen must have tracked down her connection that far, even without her married name. She must have asked around. A cold shudder went through Pen, and she stiffened.

"You must have some idea. Who's this K?"

"Not sure. Maybe – maybe someone who did that French poetry course with me. That would make sense, wouldn't it, with a quote like that?"

Derrick gazed at her. "I rang the number," he said, and again waited for her to respond.

She must be cool now, or all was lost.

"And?"

"I got message bank. Not even a name."

Pen stood up, tore the card in two, and dropped it into the pedal bin. Then she went to the sink and washed her hands.

"Must be some kind of joke," she said. "Please don't bring home anything like that again, it creeps me out."

"You really don't know who sent it?"

Pen shook her head. *No turning back. The wherewithal to carry it through.*

"Then it's a kind of stalking, Pen. We should report it."

"Probably a one-off, Derrick. I wouldn't worry about it. At least they obviously don't know where I live, or it wouldn't have gone to school." Pen sat down and put her feet up on the nearest chair. "We just don't need any stress, you know?"

Derrick didn't look convinced, but she could see he was making an effort. He leaned over her, put his arms around her shoulders and said, "Well, I'm glad term's over, anyway. At least now we can focus on each other. Darling, I can feel your heart thumping through your ribcage! You really must take it easy."

One hot afternoon soon after, when Derrick had driven into the city about some book orders for next year, Pen had to work up an irritating sweat walking to the local shop for milk and potatoes. Anything more than that would have meant a bus down to Gatelands, and she couldn't face the Christmas crowds.

She trod carefully, fearful of rolling honky nuts, of dry looping twigs that sprang up underfoot. The gravel drive itself was an issue now. Pregnancy a matter of constant navigation, a spatial thing – manoeuvring safely, keeping to

the right gradients. Imagine how much worse once she got heavy... She bent slightly at the knees as she turned up the slope toward the house, calf muscles twitching with fatigue.

A silver Corolla in the drive. ARG 362.

Pen almost stopped breathing. Panic in her legs, her arms. The bag of potatoes suddenly too much: she let it drop, and the contents tumbled away downhill. She could turn, now, and go – but where?

Kathleen was not in the car. She was sitting on the front doorstep. She looked tired, shabbier than normal, and yet collected.

“Do you want a hand with those potatoes?”

“What are you doing here?”

“You didn’t answer any of my messages. I wanted to see you.”

Pen flung around in desperation. Derrick could be home any time.

“I don’t want you here. I want you to go.”

“Pen, that’s not fair. We need to talk.”

“I don’t want to talk.”

“Please.”

“It’s over, Kathleen.” Pen was whispering now. Imagine if the neighbours heard. Trees shrouded the view, but voices carried in these hills.

“Just let me come in.”

What could she say? *If you don’t leave, I’ll call the police?* And it would all go on the record. Better perhaps to deal with this inside, where no one would hear. Pen fumbled for the key, and ushered Kathleen into the house.

Inside the house was still less than orderly, with offcuts lying around from the new floor coverings and the odd small pile of tools or paint can. But Pen had no space for embarrassment at the mess.

Kathleen glanced about her. "Well, at long last. Renovations all done, eh?"

"Who gave you my address?" Pen said.

"Pen, don't be like that. You're sounding like a stranger."

"I am a stranger."

Kathleen sat down on the edge of a lounge chair.

"You're not – that's silly. And you have no right to be angry with me. If anything, it's the other way around."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you lied to me. About not being in a relationship. And not just a relationship – you're *married*, for God's sake. Why didn't you tell me?"

Pen covered her face with her hands. It was logical. Since Kathleen knew where she lived now, she must know a lot more too.

"Who told you all this?"

"Doesn't matter, does it?"

"It does to me."

Kathleen reached out a hand to touch her, but Pen pulled away.

"I was stumped, Pen, when you broke it off, even if I've got a clearer picture now. I should have pushed, asked what was going on. I just didn't want to risk spoiling things. And then I'd run into my ex that morning, and you wanted to end it, and it was just all too much. But we could have worked things out. We still could."

Pen stared at her. "Don't you hate me now that you know? Why would you want anything to do with me?"

Kathleen sighed. Weariness did not diminish her glow; Pen felt a pang.

"I think you're confused. I was pissed off at first, but I didn't think you were faking."

"Faking!"

"It's pretty common, Pen, for married people to find out they have other feelings. Men too, you know. I think you need to be brave and face it, not to run away from it. Not to run away from me."

Kathleen stood up and moved toward her, softening. Pen shook her head and stepped back. Touch was fatal – she would crumple, lose her nerve. There was no option now.

"You don't know what you're talking about," she said. "You really should go. It's more complicated than you think."

"It's always complicated, Pen."

"Please, please just go," Pen said. "You're making it so hard."

"It's been hard for me too."

Pen was sweating still, and dizzy now, from heat and panic. She could not think straight. Must think of what to do.

"You have to go. My husband will be home soon."

"Your *husband*. At least you've said it now. What's his name then?"

"That's none of your business."

Imagine if Kathleen found out the whole truth. Imagine her face upon seeing Derrick. The whole thing unravelling.

"But Pen, it's every bit of my business. I daresay you two've had a good few laughs under the doona at my expense. Maybe you're what we call a *lesbian tourist*."

So there was anger, after all. Pen said nothing.

"Unless he doesn't know about me," Kathleen tried. "In which case, I think I should wait a while and get to meet him."

She sat herself comfortably in Derrick's armchair and crossed her knees, almost parodically, one foot tapping on the hearthrug. *You'll keep*. What Pen's mother used to say, when she was a kid, if Pen was naughty at someone else's house and couldn't be told off till later.

"You can't do this," Pen said quietly.

"Why not? Why can *you* do what *you* did? I'm just trying to bring things out in the open. I'm not doing anything wrong."

Pen had to think carefully, and fast. There was only one way to deflect Kathleen, and she would have to use it. Otherwise Kathleen would never back off. She was not one to be sidelined, or to take things lying down.

"You want things out in the open," Pen said at last. "I can understand that. I never meant to do you harm."

Kathleen winced, but Pen went on.

“So I have to tell you this. Kathleen, I’m pregnant.”

She begrudged the confession, but nothing less would work.

Kathleen blanched. “What!”

“Yes. I’m having a baby.”

“You’re lying. You’re trying to shake me off.”

“I can show you the ultrasound.”

Kathleen reclined slightly in the chair, stretching out her legs. “My god, Pen,” she said. “So you were not only still sleeping with him, which you might have told me – but planning a family!”

“No,” Pen said softly. “It’s not like that. It was – unexpected.”

“As if you don’t know about the birds and the bees.”

The sarcasm was unbearable, but Pen knew it came from deep hurt. No use explaining the years unable to conceive. She must keep a forward momentum.

She moved toward Kathleen and placed one hand over hers. Timing would be everything.

“It’s not that my feelings have changed,” she murmured. “I don’t really have a choice. I need you to try to understand that. Please don’t rock the boat with my husband. Darling Kathleen,” and she swallowed the lump of her own suavity, “I need a chance to do the right thing. I’ve done so much that’s wrong, and you’ve copped a lot of it. Please let’s move on and accept that it’s over.”

Kathleen was fretting at her quicks with a pointed fingernail, and biting her lip. She seemed to be working things through. That rational glimmer that never left her eye – Pen was counting on it.

Suddenly Kathleen let out a deep breath, and stood up.

“Fair enough,” she said, dully. “It’s not exactly something I can argue with. I guess this is where I butt out and go get a life. Where else can it go?”

Pen kept the relief from her impassive face.

“I’m not an unreasonable woman, Pen. Unlike you, I don’t play with people.”

“I wasn’t playing, Kathleen. None of it was fake.”

“Yeah. Sure. But it doesn’t matter now, does it? I guess no one’s really got the moral high ground, in the end.”

Kathleen swept up her handbag and strode to the door, sidestepping some rolled-up vinyl sheeting the workmen had left lying on the floor. At the threshold, she turned and said, “Goodbye, Pen. I wish you luck. You’ll need it. And you know what, I hope he’s worth it.”

When she had gone, Pen's first impulse was to pack a suitcase and go. Anywhere. Far away.

The call was too close for comfort. *Knapp*, as the Germans said. Her brain was buzzing with all the ways it could have gone.

She strode to the storeroom cupboard, but the cases were under too many heavy items for her to pull out. She sank to the floor and tried to decide what to do. It was stupid to think of going off alone, with a baby coming. No job, and the certainty of being found.

She could try Derrick again with the idea of selling up, going elsewhere. But he'd resisted it last time; there wasn't much chance of persuading him now.

Don't look back. A song her father used to sing when she was tiny: "One day at a time, sweet Jesus..."

And why not be brave and brazen. *Take your own part against the world.* She had managed to get Kathleen to retreat; why not have faith in her own powers? She was no fragile creature; she was canny as an orb weaver, certain of which strands were safe under her tread.

Not exactly something I can argue with. A baby changes everything: no contest.

She lay back on the floor, staring at the ceiling, and began to laugh.

"Pen? Are you all right?" Derrick stood behind her. "What are you doing down there?"

She turned to look at him, smiling, her cheeks bitterly wet.

"I'm fine, darling." She got up, groggily, and gave him a hug. "How did you get on?"

He recounted his trip to Perth and back, but she did not really take it in.

"Who was that in the silver car, darling?"

Pen stared, wondering how long he'd been home before coming in.

"Dunno," she said. "Mormons called by, but I didn't see their car. I just said I wasn't interested."

She no longer even noticed she was lying.

"Send 'em to your mum," Derrick smiled. It was a long-standing joke between them, the way Mrs Stone would argue for hours with the Mormons, neither side budging an inch. "By the way, love, why are there spuds all over the drive? I nearly went head over heels."

"Oh. Sorry. I dropped them." Pen took one from his hand and tossed it like a juggler's ball as they made their way to the kitchen.

Two days later, Derrick had to run his German exchange students to the airport. Pen stayed home in the cool, watching a DVD and eating a bowl of strawberries, because she still had a craving for sweet things, and the ob-gyn said they were good for folic acid. Even if she had showered them with sugar.

The DVD was one she'd started that night months ago with Kathleen, but they'd never finished watching it. *Total Eclipse*. Pen had spotted it a few days ago, in a Gatelands bargain bin.

Derrick had read the cover and demurred.

"What do you want to watch something like that for?"

"I thought you'd be interested, since it's French lit. And you usually quite like Leonardo DiCaprio."

Derrick had turned away, shrugging. "Sure. What people do is their own business, you know me. But gay stuff's not my thing."

"Oh." Pen had smiled to herself. True, Derrick was mostly liberal-minded, so why did he blush? "Well, I can watch it some time by myself."

Midway through the film, there was a knock and rattle at the back sliding door. Outside: Kathleen's wan face, pressed to the glass as if under a microscope slide. Pen jumped up, shooting the remote at the screen to stop the movie, and shoved the case under a sofa cushion.

"Please let me in," Kathleen called through the glass.

Pen could hardly stand there and say no. She opened the door, and Kathleen bolted in.

"What is it? Are you all right? You don't look so good."

"Can I sit down?"

Pen nodded. Kathleen took her place by the cold hearth, the long-disused fireplace. She knocked Derrick's favourite floor lamp as she sat down, but caught it with her foot. The armchair sighed as she sank into it.

"I just wanted to see you again. It's been a lot to process, Pen."

"And?"

Kathleen frowned. "I don't believe you."

"About the baby? Still?"

"No," Kathleen said carefully. "The baby is one thing. I just don't believe it's over. I don't *feel* it is. I think you are fooling yourself. Because you want to conform, you want to play happy families and have things 'normal'."

Pen could sense her adrenalin rising.

"I thought we *agreed*..."

“Just hear me out, Pen. I don’t want to fight with you. I want you to consider. If I were a man – ”

“You’re not a man.”

“My point is, what we had doesn’t just go away. You can’t switch it off like a – like a movie.” Kathleen nodded toward the television screen. “I understand you want to do the right thing by your – your child. But how can you be sure it *is* the right thing? When it’s me you care for?”

“It’s not,” Pen said sharply. “Now I really think you should leave. We’ve had this out already.”

“No, we haven’t. We’ve had you relying on me to pull out quietly, for the sake of your little ménage. It’s not doing either of us any good to plaster this over. In the long run it won’t be good for your baby, either.”

“It’s my husband’s baby too,” Pen said curtly. ‘You might sit in his chair, but you can’t fill his boots,’ she thought bitterly. “Just what do you propose, that you and I bring up a child together? How do you think that would work? It’s completely insane.”

Kathleen stood up suddenly, and stepped toward her.

“I don’t know the answers,” she said. “But you need to talk to him about us.”

Pen had a vision of the three of them, reduced to stark pronouns: *him, us*. Names, personalities, histories dropped away like flesh to leave a skeletal geometry: the triangle.

“I can’t do that, Kathleen,” she insisted. What right had this woman, after promising to back off, to roll up again making demands?

But had she promised anything? How foolish of Pen, to be so relieved after Kathleen had left last time. She should have known it would never be that simple.

“Pen, if you won’t tell him, I will.”

“You wouldn’t. Not now I’m pregnant.”

“I will. Because I love you.”

Kathleen grabbed Pen by the shoulders, her arms stiffly extended, as if she could squeeze or force compliance into her. Pen thought of “Oranges and Lemons”. *Here comes a chopper, to chop off your head.*

“Don’t touch me!” she hissed.

Kathleen laughed bitterly. “You used to like being touched. So what’s changed? Don’t you miss me?” and she leaned forward to kiss Pen.

The kiss scorched her mouth, spot fire before a conflagration. Pen felt her revulsion and her fury rising, and pushed Kathleen away with an almighty thrust.

Something caught Kathleen's lifted heel as she slid: the hearthrug, or a piece of detritus left from the building work. She slipped backwards, arms flailing, knocking her head against the stone mantel.

Veering sideways, she snagged the edge of the steps, and fell into the sunken kitchen with a huge thud.

"Oh, Kathleen! I'm sorry. I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to do that."

The moment's thrill, the rush of self-assertion, had faded as quickly as it flared. It had happened so fast, she could not move to stop it – could she? Pen's arm trembled – surely she had not pushed so hard? Those bloody steps!

But Kathleen lay limp in a way Pen had never seen, even in sleep.

"Kathleen?" Pen got down on the floor and shook her very gently.

Pen had no first-aid training – she thought of what she'd seen on t.v., on film: don't move the person, feel for a pulse.

How did you bring someone round? Smelling-salts, slap on the cheeks? Everything whirled in her head. Don't make a *Wirbel*, Derrick often said, German for whirlpool. Derrick would be here soon.

Derrick would be here soon.

There was no pulse. But Pen had always had trouble finding pulses.

She ran to the bedroom and grabbed a small cotton blanket, draping it over Kathleen, and then put one ear to her chest.

Surely Kathleen had only passed out. Unconscious. *Only*, as if that were not bad enough.

But blood was seeping from under her lovely hair.

Wasn't that blood on the edge of the Toodyay stone, where she had clipped it? Glinting along with the quartzite, like something warm and organic. And then the impact of the kitchen floor.

Pen raised Kathleen's head ever so slightly, and almost fainted at the gash she saw in the back of the skull. She felt her gorge rise, her own heartbeat in drastically loud contrast.

She must call an ambulance. But if Kathleen was already dead... Did you still call an ambulance when someone was dead? *Dead*. Pen's brain could not take it in. She knelt by Kathleen again and listened again at her chest, but she knew nothing would change.

She was still kneeling there, in a stupor, an hour or so later when Derrick appeared at the sliding door.

He stepped in slowly, halting at the sight of them.

"It was an accident," Pen stammered. "An intruder."

Even now she could lie. Though it was partly true. Wasn't it an accident?

"She slipped, Derrick, and I think she's cracked her head."

Derrick crouched and urgently checked over the body. "Have you called for help?"

"Yes. No. I haven't. I can't."

"What? What happened?"

Pen said nothing.

"Why haven't you called?" Derrick said, standing again, helpless, looking around. "We'd better get an ambulance." Then he said, "But the car, in the driveway...?"

"We can't. Derrick, I pushed her. It was – it was self-defence. But they won't believe me."

"You can't just let her die." He felt again for a pulse, then for a heartbeat.

"Oh Christ, Pen, I think she *is* dead."

Pen nodded.

"The longer we leave it to call someone," Derrick said, "the more trouble... Didn't you try to revive her? How hard could you have pushed her?" He rubbed at his beard and looked around wildly, his gaze snagging in the living room. "Pen, is that her *handbag*?"

Pen turned in a daze. She hadn't even noticed Kathleen's sleek little beige clutch bag, left beside the armchair.

"This is someone you know, isn't it? The car," he said suddenly. "I saw the same car..."

Pen didn't answer.

"I think you need to tell me what's been going on, and you'd better hurry."

Pen tilted back her head. Derrick took her face in his hands, an adult quizzing a child.

"Is it something to do with that stalker – that card you got, by any chance?"

Pen sat back on her haunches, wrapping her arms around her calves.

"Don't you recognise her?" she said coldly.

Derrick stared. "Should I? I've never seen her in my life before."

Pen considered that, blankly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, of course I'm sure!"

She sat a few minutes, rocking where she crouched, and groaning now and then. Finally she said, "Derrick? Derrick, you're going to have to help me."

Surprisingly, the bald facts didn't take that long to recount. Pen felt as if she were telling him the plot of some awful movie, bringing him up to speed.

She had no choice. But there were still some smaller options, nuances. She could leave some things out. Tell him how she'd hunted Kathleen down, harassed her, sent her emails, out of jealousy and possessiveness, all those months ago – but leave out the affair...? Leave out her thoughts of murder?

Yet wherever she skipped over, or summarised, Derrick pressed until he got what he was after. It wasn't as deeply humiliating as she had feared. It was more of a relief, to let out all she had stored up.

The worst of it was, Derrick didn't stop staring the whole time. His eyes never once left hers. She watched for some change, some fluctuation in him that would tell her the game was up, finally.

But he did not so much as even flicker.

When she stopped at last, he said, "And that's everything?"

She nodded.

Derrick got up, went over to where Kathleen's body lay, and pulled the blanket over her face, as easily as if he had done it a million times before. Then he turned back to Pen.

"Pen, I believe it was an accident. I don't know why I believe it, after all these months of lies. *Lies*, my God! It may be that I don't know you at all as I thought I did. But I do know you're not a murderer."

He stopped, closed his eyes, then opened them again.

"Having said that, I can't see anyone else believing it. The way it all stacks up."

"I'll have to go to the police," Pen said. "Even if I have to tell them about – about the affair... Derrick, I can say it was self-defence, it really was."

Derrick shook his head slowly from side to side in a way that unnerved her completely.

"Pen, do you not understand they will look into everything? It's not that simple. If you go to the police, you have to accept you will be arrested and charged, and it doesn't look good. At the very least, you'll end up having our baby behind bars." He hugged her absently, stroking her stomach. "If baby even survives."

"Don't say that."

"We have to face facts. Even if you pleaded – I don't know – temporary insanity or something, which is what I think it must have been – God knows what you'd get."

He held her tighter and kissed her.

"I can't believe you would let things get so out of hand. Why didn't you talk to me?"

Pen shrugged, teary. "When I found that letter..."

"I'd forgotten all about that stupid letter! Christ, Pen!"

"But you kept it."

"Yeah, maybe – but only to remind myself how idiotic, how obsessed I'd been. Lost track of it years ago. Barely gave it another thought. That was another life."

'Another life,' Pen thought. You could run through so many, and they wouldn't go away, but you couldn't get them back. Not one of them. A paradox. *The presence of the observer alters the nature of the observed. You can't step into the same river twice.* Her tired head was milling with maxims.

"I couldn't talk to you," Pen said. "I was afraid."

Derrick shook his head. "Well, there's much more to be afraid of now."

"Don't!" She clutched at him.

"If you'd asked me, I could have told you all about it. The Kathleen I knew wasn't remotely like – like *that* woman."

"I don't understand. It *had* to be her." A chill descended throughout Pen's limbs. 'I have killed a woman, and not even the woman I thought.'

"Well, it's not. And in any case it was her married name, Nancarrow. And she was much older. Pen, I was in a bad way back then, I didn't know whether I was coming or going."

"I thought you loved me. I believed you," Pen said.

"But I did! I always have. I knew it in my bones when we met. I just – had a lot to work through. You should have trusted me." Derrick ran his fingers through his hair, pulling at the ends in agitation.

"You've made a terrible mistake, Pen. But *that* mistake is beside the point, god knows. Even if it *had* been the same woman... What did you think you were doing?"

He was almost in tears now, but he wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand.

"And I don't believe this lesbian thing, either," he said. "I'm not a bigot, or a prude, but you've never shown any inclination that way. You've always been –

normal with me! I think you just got led – led astray, up the garden path, whatever.”

Pen did not contradict him. She no longer knew what was true. *Normal*, she whispered bitterly to herself.

“What am I going to do?”

“You mean, what are *we* going to do.” Derrick took a deep breath and stretched back his shoulders, as if testing his strength. “We’re in this together, Pen. We always *have* been, even if you didn’t fully understand that. Wait here.”

He went outside and after some time reappeared with a roughly folded tarpaulin that must have been in his shed.

“First we’re going to move the body somewhere out of sight,” he said, “and then we’ll work out a plan.”

The body. It was already a *body*, not Kathleen.

Derrick wrapped the body swiftly and dragged it up the steps, across the living room, and into the study, then shut the concertina door.

Cover of darkness would mean a long wait, since the sun wasn't setting till quite late now. But they could see no other way. Derrick said it would take two of them to lift the body into the back of the Volvo (Pen thought bitterly, 'Pregnant women are not supposed to lift things'), and two to take it out the other end.

The other end was still a matter to be settled.

Then there was the question of the silver Corolla. Dumping it somewhere would only draw attention.

"I assume you've been to this woman's house," Derrick said, keeping all trace of emotion out of his voice.

"Yes, but..."

"Just wait. I think the best thing is to take her car back to her own house. Nobody has any reason at this stage to think she's missing, do they? If I drive down separately in the Volvo... I can pick you up afterwards. At night, nobody's going to notice who parks the car, especially if it's a woman as usual. Whereas they'll soon notice if the car doesn't come home at all. Yes, I think that's the way to do it."

He was talking as much to himself as to Pen, who let everything wash over her with an irresistible force.

"You'll have to wear gloves when you drive," he said. "No doubt your fingerprints will be all over things at her house, but that's not a problem in the way the car might be. You've never been fingerprinted for anything, have you?"

"No," Pen said. Schools in the last few years had discussed fingerprinting for library membership, but thank goodness Boys' College had never agreed with it. All the things you had to think of...

"Now, go and take a shower," Derrick said. "You're going to feel very tired by the time this night is over, and you'll need all your strength. I'll make dinner."

Pen winced. "I don't think I can eat."

"Rubbish – you have to. You can't just think of yourself now – food is vital for the baby. Just do as I say, and I'll take care of it."

It was appalling how much better she felt after the shower. She even washed her hair – quick to dry now, since you could towel off a crop with no further trouble.

She dressed in a clean pair of navy cotton jeans and a black shirt, as Derrick directed. Blending in with the coming darkness, like a puppeteer. It would be a starry night – but would there be a moon?

Derrick had swiftly grilled lentil burgers and opened a can of veg ravioli.

“It’s a bit of a mish-mash, but it will do,” he said. “Get that into you... Then as soon as it’s dark, we get the car thing out of the way first, because that’s the most visible. Otherwise, someone will spot it in our drive eventually. Besides, we’ll need to get the Volvo up close to the house – afterwards.”

Pen shuddered. *Afterwards* was the worst bit.

Derrick leaned forward and covered her hands with his. “Darling, try deep-breathing. You’ve got to drive a fair way, and without drawing any attention. Don’t be tempted to speed.”

“I never speed,” Pen said.

Derrick smiled. “That’s my girl. And we keep our phones off. Don’t even try to leave voicemail, unless something goes entirely wrong, okay? We have to be intelligent about this.”

He cleared away the plates and ran the sink.

“I’ll just knock these off and then we’ll get going. I’ll wait for you at the corner, that big rose garden on the highway. *Bon courage!*” he said.

Afterwards, Derrick pulled the Volvo back into the drive and parked as near the glass sliding-door as he could. He drew a deep breath and looked at Pen.

“Halfway there,” he said. “But at risk of making a bad pun, we’re not quite out of the woods yet.”

There was a near-hysterical edge to his voice that made Pen swallow hard. She thought, ‘Derrick’s as mad as I am. To crack jokes at a time like this.’

The hour’s drive to return the Corolla, though it had gone smoothly, was enough time alone to give her pause. On the drive back, ensconced together, they had argued, with great civility under the circumstances, about where Kathleen should be buried. The thick bush of the National Park would be ideal, but the ground up here in the hills was too hard at this time of year, even using a mattock.

They would have to go further afield. Derrick knew of a plantation – ‘an alien forest,’ Pen thought – in sandier ground. They would need spades and

torches. *Pinus pinata*, *pinus radiata* – she remembered learning about them in Year 5. Importance to the economy. Everything was in there, stored in her memory – that was the horrible thing. The boys at school had yelled *Penis! Penis radiata!*

“I’m going out to the shed,” Derrick whispered now. “Wait for me inside.”

Pen crept into the house and kept the lights low, more for her own sake than from any fear of being seen. She couldn’t bear the idea of anything stark, true, bright just now. Muted and blurred meant it was all unreal. She sat on the sofa with her back turned to the study, as if it could be willed out of existence, a collapsed space, like a black hole.

The phone began to ring. Derrick entered hastily.

“At this hour!”

“Don’t pick up,” Pen said. “Let it go to message-bank.”

He did so, then dialled up to hear the recording.

“Christ,” he said, pressing down on the cradle. “Pen, I have to deal with this.”

It was Peter and Uwe, the exchange boys. Their flight had been turned back – some kind of fault with the plane – and delayed till the following day, so they were stuck at the airport. They’d been trying Derrick’s mobile and landline all evening.

Pen started laughing in disbelief.

“Can’t they go back to the host families, just for tonight? I thought airlines gave you a motel room when there was trouble. We can’t put them up here. For god’s sake, Derrick.”

“I don’t know about the motels. There was only one host family, and they’ve gone east for Christmas – left this morning – that’s why I took the boys down.”

“There must be someone else who can take them. We don’t have time for this,” Pen said. “We’ve got to *move*.”

Derrick shot a glance at the study. “I know. But this could work *for* us, you know. In case we ever need an alibi. We let them bunk down here, we wait till they’re asleep, then we slip out. We’d be back before morning.”

“Leave them alone in the house!”

“They’re not babies, Pen. And it’s better than being alone at the airport all night.”

“But if they heard – or saw something.”

"We'll be careful. We have to be careful anyway."

"It's crazy." Pen covered her face with her hands. "Absolutely crazy. And what kind of alibi could they give, once they're back in Germany?"

"You never know what will happen further down the track. Anyway, if I don't at least ring them back, we won't have any sort of alibi – it will look as if we were out all night. You have to think forward, look back from the future, as it were."

"As it were," Pen repeated.

Derrick rang and arranged to collect the boys as soon as he could.

First, it was a matter of getting the body through the lounge-room and out the sliding door, into the shed.

"Are you sure there's enough room in there?" Pen said.

Derrick looked at her impatiently. "I know what my shed can hold."

The study's new concertina door ran smoothly to one side. The swaddled tarpaulin bundle was hardening, nothing like a person. That would make it difficult to get into the car later, of course. Derrick planned to take out one side of the back seat if he could.

They lumbered through lounge and kitchen, jolting at a huge clatter as they crossed the threshold. Pen swung her head around in the dark.

One of Kathleen's shoes had dropped on the tiles.

Pen stared.

Derrick hissed, "Pick it up, don't leave it there."

The shoe that had tripped her to a ghastly end. Shoe that bore the familiar shape of her foot which Pen had even kissed. She felt the old frisson of desire and disgust. She thought of a fairytale in those books Derrick brought home from school, the Cinderella that Germans called *Aschenputtel*. It had a terrible refrain you didn't find in English versions... *Rucke die guck, Rucke die guck, Blut ist im Schuck*. Turn back and look, turn back and look, there's blood in the shoe. The shoe is too tight, the bride is not right...

A wave of nausea nearly knocked her to the floor.

"Pen, we have to hurry."

"Do I *have* to come?"

Derrick looked at her sternly. "Some might say, if you've made the bed you have to lie in it," he said.

Pen thought of her mother. *Why should you get off scot-free?*

"You have to pull your weight," Derrick said. Literally. Now let's get this thing in the shed."

Thing. When the body was safely stowed, Derrick cleaned himself up briskly, and instructed Pen.

“Put your dressing gown on over your clothes. Everything as normal as possible, okay? They’re good kids, these two – nothing to worry about. I’ll make them Milo or something and they can go straight to bed. You pull out the sleeping bags from the storeroom. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Pen did as she was told, and set out mugs and a plate of fruit mince pies in case they were hungry.

She picked up Kathleen’s handbag. Derrick of course would insist on getting rid of it. It felt warm and malleable and smelled of Kathleen. Pen stuffed it into the bedroom wardrobe. It could wait.

Then she sat on the sofa. It was too warm for the dressing gown, and she pulled continually at the neck of her shirt for air.

She was keeping vigil. She considered the German word, the French word, the Italian word for *vigil*. What did people do at a vigil? Pray, she supposed. Vigil, related to vigorous, full of life, she knew that from the root of the word, you could tune out anything if you focussed on connections like this... and from vigour to rigour, and then *rigor*... she thought suddenly of Kathleen in the shed turning hard like that, all her soft suppleness in the chill grip of nothingness, stiffening to a *thing*, no longer a person. Empty of life.

A shudder went through Pen’s spine, as if her own body would stiffen by association. Outside, something was hooting – a tawny frogmouth, perhaps, uncannily like a human sound.

Then there were voices, real ones, on the doorstep, and Derrick fumbling with the key, so Pen ran forward to unlock.

“Darling, this is Uwe, Peter, and this is Mrs Barber.”

The boys were tall, gangly, embarrassed but grateful to be there. They had that pasty airport pallor that comes of standing or sitting upright for hours in sealed and air-conditioned halls.

“Come through,” Pen smiled, “I’ll make you some supper.”

Derrick went out discreetly to make preparations. Pen sat with the boys in the kitchen while they munched on the little pies and drank Milo, asking them about Wuppertal, which was home, and what they would do for Christmas Day. *As normal as possible*.

“You are lucky here,” Uwe said. “Where I come from, if you want to get away, to live simply, there’s nowhere to go. Too many people! This is maybe

the last place left on earth where you could still find a way. To invent – to reinvent yourself.”

Pen thought, ‘He’s sixteen, and already he wants to reinvent himself.’

Peter said, “Don’t worry about him, he’s a *Menschenfeind!* I like the big cities.”

“You don’t like it here so much?” Pen mused.

Peter tried to be polite. “Here it’s beautiful, that’s true, but when I first came, I thought, with all this space, all this emptiness... It makes you so alone with yourself. I thought I would just *zerfallen*, break up, you know?”

“Disintegrate,” Pen said. She felt as if they could read her mind, see right through her.

The boys laughed. “Yes, exactly,” Peter said. “And I don’t like that feeling.”

“I do,” said Uwe, laughing, and looking conspiratorially at Pen. Then in a low voice he said, “I am glad we got to meet you. We didn’t think you were real.”

“Why on earth not?” Pen was amused.

Uwe looked at Peter. “Well, the other boys insisted you used to work at the College. But we could hardly believe Mr Barber would be married.”

Pen said, “What do you mean?”

But at that point Derrick stepped back into the kitchen, and Uwe shook his head with a smile. Pen inhaled deeply, pondering.

“Anyway,” she said, gathering up the mugs, “we’d better let you boys get some sleep.”

“Yes,” said Uwe. “We’ve got a hell journey ahead of us.”

Pen nodded. ‘So have we,’ she thought.

Derrick sat upright on the bed for an hour or more to make sure of staying awake, but it wasn’t necessary; Pen couldn’t have slept for the world. She lay on top of the sheets in her clothes and stared at the ceiling. They had to keep everything down to a whisper.

Fortunately, the room the boys had bunked down in was easy to close off. After they’d settled, Pen and Derrick crept out to transfer the body the short distance from shed to car.

Spades and torches were already packed. They would bypass the city on the northern side, still largely unlit and quiet by this hour.

Once in the car, Derrick put it in neutral and let it roll carefully, half-walking it down the drive, so as to minimise noise. Pen dragged the wheelie bin to the kerb so as to have a feasible story if the boys did hear anything outside. One noisy mistake as she stumbled on a loose potato, forgotten from the afternoon that already seemed many lives ago. A dog yapped three times from down the street. But nothing else stirred.

It was like an anti-burial. You felt the urge to mark the spot, to place some kind of item of remembrance that would differentiate it as sacred ground. Even when pets died, people did that. Not to acknowledge the site... that was the obscenity. To flatten the earth again and spread over it a covering of dry pine needles, a baffling against the cries of the dead. Pen thought of Rottnest, the outrage of building a holiday resort upon or beside a mass grave. Generations of day-trippers oblivious or indifferent. As walkers or riders might traipse right here, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.

There was a strong wind lifting now, and the tops of the pines began to knock together, a ghoulish percussion, like a death march.

"Let's go," Derrick said, brushing off his gloved hands, and carrying his tools to the back of the Volvo, parked on a nearby roadside.

En route he said, "Pen, there are some more things, I need to know, and we'd better discuss them now, before we get back to the house."

"Okay." She felt passive and calm now, willing for directions.

"This woman – Kathleen – is going to be missed pretty quickly. I mean, right on Christmas, you know. It's not going to be long before someone reports..."

He drove smoothly, waiting, but Pen did not know what to say.

"She must have family?"

Pen shook her head.

"But there'll be friends, neighbours. Colleagues. Everyone has someone. How strongly – I mean – will people expect you to know where she is? I'm trying to get the lie of the land here. What we're up against."

Pen adjusted the air vents, but still she could hardly breathe.

"What we're up against," she said. *We*. It occurred to her now that there was only *we*. There was no Pen apart from Derrick, because Derrick knew all. If he had not loved her, he could have turned her in.

She stared at him now, imprinting his expression on her very retina, like a newborn creature that has to remember in order to survive. If Derrick chose,

even for a moment, to let go... She must never, never alienate him. There was no longer anything to hold back. Pen tugged at her collar again, and again could barely breathe.

"I don't know," she said finally. "She wouldn't be expected back at work till February, you know, when the academic year starts again. But as for friends... I never met them, Derrick. She was planning to go to Paris."

"To Paris." Derrick swallowed. "On her own?"

"To stay with some people. But maybe she cancelled, or she would have left by now."

"Well, that may work for us, if her neighbours think she was going away. Was she a talker?"

So clear-cut, practical. But you had to keep a level head.

"She might have said stuff. Though I asked her not to."

"You were discreet," Derrick murmured. "Of course you were."

Pen strained for traces of sarcasm, but there were none. He reached left and squeezed her hand.

"It's all right, Pen. You don't need to doubt me. I'm the same as I've always been. Except more so." He laughed. "You might as well tell me everything – you can't escape me now, can you?"

Pen wanted to laugh too, but she wasn't sure he was joking.

The orange light of the high street lamps flashed every now and then across his ginger beard.

"Now," he said, "the facts. Who else might know?"

"There was one woman she mentioned me to, on the phone," she continued. "But I don't know how much – at that stage she didn't know where I lived... There'll be an investigation, won't there? And if Kathleen could track me down, she must have talked... oh, Derrick."

Derrick clutched her shoulder. "Don't panic, Pen. We will get through this, I promise you. You're a capable woman, and you've taught me how to be capable too, over the years. Look how far we've come! And we have a very strong incentive now," he said, sliding his hand down to rest on her belly. "In any case, if they don't find the body, they have nothing."

"That's a very big if," Pen whispered, her throat dry.

Derrick smiled. "I can handle a big if. And so can you. So long as we pull together."

His voice was soft and sure. Before long, Pen was drifting into a numb and bobbing sleep, as if in the lightest of boats, a halcyon's nest.

She woke to the smell of pancakes and maple syrup, and the warm cadences of male voices carrying from the kitchen. She didn't remember getting to bed, but clearly Derrick had matters under control.

She thought, 'Now I am permanently under his control.'

If she could lie here forever, and not let the day begin...

But it would begin, and it was only a matter of whether you let it crash over you like a king wave, or caught that wave and rode it to safety.

She showered, dressed brightly, as Derrick had suggested, in a loose cotton sundress and slingbacks, and dug Kathleen's handbag reluctantly out of the wardrobe. It must be dumped in a bin somewhere, on the way back from the airport perhaps. But first she would have to remove any sign of identification.

The bag was clean and tidily arranged inside, as Pen knew it would be. There was a purse with a small amount of cash, a booklet of cards, chequebook, comb and lipstick. The lipstick said *CAFÉ AU LAIT* on the base. Pen wound it up and touched the tip, angled and slightly curved where Kathleen's mouth had taken its stroke. She went to the mirror and watched herself paint a perfect cupid's bow where her own dull mouth had been.

Then she tucked the lipstick into the soft patch-pocket of her sundress. Cards and chequebook and comb would be burned; the cash she could drop into one of those airport donation bins. The idea of spending it seemed indecent. But the lipstick she would keep until it was worn down, eaten away. There must be something she could keep.

The boys were still at breakfast when she came out. Uwe's blue eyes opened wide under his grassy blond fringe. His mouth was shiny with syrup.

"Mrs Barber," he exclaimed. "You look lovely."

Pen smiled. "Thank you, Uwe. Did you boys sleep okay?"

"Like a stone," Peter said.

"In English," Pen corrected, "we say, like a *log*."

The boys laughed.

Uwe said, "I kept dreaming, and then waking. There was an engine, very early – maybe someone goes to work?"

"Probably the rubbish truck," Derrick said, catching Pen's glance, and pouring her a decaf.

Uwe pulled a chair out for her, and sat gazing as she drank. "You will be a beautiful mother," he said.

Pen blushed. It felt good to have a compliment, but slightly sickly coming from one so young, though he was already taller than Derrick. Uwe was as wide open as a flower, and the way he'd said *beautiful* made her tingle. He was rather beautiful himself, in that girlish stage some boys went through. She averted her gaze, not knowing how to answer.

"Oi, stop embarrassing her," Derrick said, "or we'll have to pack you off to Wuppertal." He got up to run the sink, patting Pen gently on the back.

"Now eat up, darling," he said, yawning and stretching with satisfaction, "and we'll get this show on the road."

**THE CRIMINAL PARVENU:
NARRATIVES OF
TRANSGRESSION AND UPWARD MOBILITY**

(dissertation)

Introduction

There is nothing new in the study of fictional narratives that focus on the trajectory of the upwardly mobile. From Lionel Trilling's 1948 delineation of the "Young Man from the Provinces" (Trilling, 2009, p. 152), through various studies in languages other than English (Huet, 1975; Kubler, 1982), to Bruce Robbins's wide-ranging *Upward Mobility and the Common Good: Toward a Literary History of the Welfare State* (2007), the social climber has been a frequent subject of critical attention – necessarily so, because he or she has also been the subject of the creative writer. Indeed, on the part of novelists, concentration on this theme has been so widespread that a critic such as John Fletcher (1978) may speak of "the parvenu theme – so intimately linked with the development of the novel, the parvenu genre" (p. 200).

If they are central, however, parvenu-narratives are still only a subset of the broader novel and other kinds of narrative. Within that subset we may distinguish another, more specific variety which is here referred to as the narrative of the criminal parvenu, and a selection from which forms the subject of this dissertation, because the thesis's creative component, *Dead Reckoning*, derives from this narrative tradition. Though fictional parvenus are often studied, their strikingly common tendency to commit serious crime is less frequently highlighted. That is the "new" aspect of the present study: the emphasis on both criminal *and* parvenu.

The word "parvenu" is used here most basically in the sense indicated by Marie-Hélène Huet (1975) when she writes of the French verb *parvenir* from which it derives (to arrive at/manage): "it means going from one point to another in a given direction, in this case specifically leaving an ordinary social situation in order to attain a superior state [or status]" (p. 32, my trans.). A parvenu is frequently seen as not only one who has risen socially, but one whose attitudes, looks, behaviour or manners signal that he or she does not "really" belong in the newly attained class. The term is used in a loosely interchangeable sense with others such as upstart, arriviste, and sometimes, though the rise may be only in status and not in wealth, nouveau riche. Although there may be doubt about the applicability of the term "parvenu" to some of the protagonists under consideration here, since they exhibit varying degrees of *belonging* in their new class positions, the usage is still relevant because, it may be argued, in each case their criminal act distinguishes them as misfit.

It is not feasible within the constraints of this dissertation to consider every instance of this kind of narrative, even within the novel form – but a broad overview may be given, tracing a possible line or lines of intertextual “descent” and, in addition, considering patterns of meaning arising from motifs that the narratives have in common. Though the narratives span times and places across which the potential for, and consequences of, social mobility have inevitably varied, each makes a specifically transgressive form of that mobility its theme and focus. The approach here is essentially comparative, ranging from instances in French literature through to British and American examples, and concluding with observations on how the creative element of this thesis relates to those works.

We will see that as the criminal parvenu tradition develops from the work of Stendhal in the nineteenth century and into twentieth-century narratives, certain factors recur. Some of those factors include: an ambivalence and ambiguity in the status and nature of the protagonist’s rise and crime; a marked emphasis on the role of imitation, even plagiarism, in all the texts considered, and the repeated use of either two primary love interests, or a powerful motif of doubling and splitting in the main characters themselves. It is this literary context that has largely inspired and generated the current thesis’s novel component, *Dead Reckoning*, with its married-woman criminal parvenu(e).

Early precursors to these criminal parvenu narratives may be seen in the many tales of rising foundlings, valets and peasant social climbers, male and female, of eighteenth-century European literature. In French literature, Alain-René Lesage’s *The Adventures of Gil Blas of Santillane*, published between 1715 and 1735, the picaresque tale of a valet who works his way to a high position, is one of the first major models, alongside Prévost’s *Manon Lescaut* (1731), the story of a lower-class woman who uses her infatuated aristocratic lover as a means to high living.

These are followed by Marivaux’s *Le Paysan parvenu* (unfinished, 1735)¹ and, later in the century, Rétif de la Bretonne’s epistolary novels of “perverted peasants”, first *Le Paysan perversi* (1775) and then *La Paysanne perversie*² (its

¹ The Chevalier de Mouhy published a *Paysanne parvenue* (1735) in response to Marivaux’s *Paysan*; from the earliest examples, these stories beget reproduction, reversal and parody in response. 1737 saw yet another variant, M. de Catalde’s *Le Paysan Gentilhomme...* (Wyngaard, 2004).

² The female peasant’s tale is subtitled, “The Dangers of the City”. Pierre-Jean-Baptiste Nougaret had also written a riposte to Rétif de la Bretonne’s male peasant, entitled, *La Paysanne*

female counterpart, 1784). These last three all recount the movement of a peasant character to the big city and the adventures undergone as a result of this displacement. They contain criminal (and in the case of Rétif de la Bretonne's books, "immoral") elements that we will see repeated with variations in the more psychologically nuanced and realistic novels of the nineteenth century and after. Wrongdoing accompanies rise, and entails punishment – only temporarily in Marivaux, whose peasant-protagonist Jacob is arrested and briefly incarcerated for a crime he did not commit, but released again – or disastrously in Rétif de la Bretonne, whose *Paysan* has a "catastrophic dénouement involving the retributive death and dismemberment of the eponymous protagonist" (Wagstaff, 1998, p. 458). Wagstaff notes Rétif's contribution with these works "to the growth of the embryonic 'roman d'ascension sociale'" (novel of social climbing or social rise) (1998, p. 454).

Similar themes preoccupy English-language novelists from the eighteenth century, whether in Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1721), or Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740), which was soon parodied with the heroine's virtue reconstrued as criminality in Henry Fielding's *Shamela (An Apology for the Life of Mrs Shamela Andrews)* (1741). Fielding's later *Tom Jones (The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling, 1749)*, which further amplifies the tradition, was a favourite of and major influence on Stendhal (Alter, 1986, p. 199; Imbert, 1956), who forms the main focus of our first chapter.

That first chapter will closely examine Stendhal's novel *The Red and the Black* (1830/1998), which Stirling Haig (1989) describes as a "landmark of European literary realism" (p. 1), and from which, it is argued here, subsequent major versions of the criminal parvenu story derive their impetus, whether directly or indirectly. Though it is indebted to many of the earlier works listed above, *The Red and the Black* introduces detailed psychological realism into the criminal parvenu story and is hence our starting point. In this novel Julien Sorel, son of a timber merchant of peasant origin, misfit in his own family because of his intellect, sensitivity and readerly disposition, is taken on as tutor in a wealthy provincial family, where he begins a love affair with his employer's wife, Madame de Rênal. Separated from Madame, Julien is sent on to a seminary, where he is also a misfit, to study for the priesthood.

From there he is offered a role as secretary in the household of a powerful nobleman, and begins a second love affair, with the nobleman's

pervertie, ou Mœurs des grandes villes, subtitle meaning "morals or mores of the big cities", in 1777.

daughter, Mathilde. Nearly about to marry Mathilde, Julien attempts to shoot his former mistress, and is tried, condemned and executed. Chapter One will examine how the “two women” motif that dominates this novel, and which will be found in variant forms in those that follow, helps to complicate the idea of temporally bound and fixed identity; and how the “unfixed” figure of the parvenu resists neat cooptation into either a progressive or a reactionary political reading. The chapter will also briefly consider other, similar nineteenth-century parvenu narratives³ deriving directly or indirectly from Stendhal’s model, primarily Honoré de Balzac’s *Lost Illusions* (1837-43/1897), and conclude with comments testing the links between that model and William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1847-48/1963).

Chapter Two, “Rocking the Boat: Mimetic Desire and Female Power in Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*”, extends these concerns into the early twentieth-century American literary landscape. Dreiser’s massive 1925 novel, inspired like Stendhal’s in his own day by exposure to real-life news stories of similar crimes, repeats many of his concerns with class, wealth, social power and relations between the sexes, as well as relying on a similar plot: a young, impoverished but sensitive man, beginning to rise in the world, plans the death of his first mistress in order to be able to marry a second, richer woman, and is tried and executed for the crime. Establishing connections between this novel and the earlier French tradition – Stendhal via Balzac – while acknowledging that Dreiser’s protagonist Clyde Griffiths is a weaker, attenuated version of Julien Sorel, this chapter will read the novel through critic René Girard’s (1961/1976) model of triangular, “mimetic” desire already well-known for its application to Stendhal’s text.

Chapter Three, “‘Justice... is so last century!': Patricia Highsmith’s *Ripley and After*”, is largely concerned with another twentieth-century novel, Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955/1999), and the way in which it merges

³ One may note in passing here the prevalence of this theme throughout the nineteenth century. For the French part, there is Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1856), whose married female protagonist seeks an increase in status and material comfort, as well as a sense of romance, through adultery; also Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education* (1869), which features the “older woman” motif found in Stendhal and Balzac, as does Guy de Maupassant’s *Bel Ami* (1885). None of these is, however, strictly speaking, a crime story, although the last-mentioned features blackmail and dishonesty. In British literature, many of Dickens’s novels feature social climbers; several Thomas Hardy novels may be read as such, as may Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), in terms of the rise and machinations of Heathcliff (who operates, however, within the law). The theme is possibly even more pervasive in the American context, continuing into the early twentieth century with Edith Wharton (*The Custom of the Country*, 1913) and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), contemporary with Dreiser’s *Tragedy*. It is not possible to deal at length with so many works in the present dissertation, so its attention has been limited to those most pertinent to the Stendhalian criminal parvenu model.

the Stendhalian motifs with the Balzacian pattern (“two men”, doubling) and yet at the same time carries the criminal parvenu story in a new direction, that of the crime *without* punishment. Highsmith’s novel, it is contended, directly inherits many of Dreiser’s concerns in his *American Tragedy*, but updates the parvenu figure with a more cynical rejection of the concept of “justice” in depicting how Tom Ripley succeeds where Dreiser’s Clyde Griffiths failed. The novel is also placed in the context of its debts to Dostoevsky. Following this reading of *Ripley* with a brief discussion of two later narratives that omit punishment, Piers Paul Read’s *The Upstart* (1973) and Woody Allen’s film *Match Point* (2005), the chapter argues that these non-punitive narratives shift the focus of ambivalence and ambiguity from the *person* of the parvenu, although that is still in question, to the possible meaning of his or her *going unpunished*.

The dissertation then turns in its Conclusion to an examination of the ways in which the thesis’s creative component, the novel *Dead Reckoning*, contributes to the tradition of criminal parvenu narratives, and derives also from the noir fiction whose themes of social exclusion make it compatible with the parvenu mode, especially since noir may be seen as related to the earlier literary tradition through naturalism, as in Dreiser. The Conclusion summarises the insights gained from study of the criminal parvenu tradition, particularly in relation to the political malleability of the criminal parvenu protagonist and his or her undermining of the notion of stable identity, and suggests further related areas for fictional and critical exploration, for the tradition outlined in this dissertation, beginning in its realist form with Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*, is sufficiently rich and flexible in creative terms to show continued relevance across cultures and through centuries.

CHAPTER ONE
TWO WOMEN AND A QUESTION MARK: ON STENDHAL'S *THE RED AND THE
BLACK*

This chapter begins with a detailed examination of some aspects of Stendhal's novel *The Red and the Black* (1830/1998). We shall consider the role of the protagonist's romantic entanglement with two women, and the critical contention over both its meaning and the meaning of his crime, before turning to a briefer discussion of some other nineteenth-century works that follow in its wake and demonstrate its influence.

In *The Red and the Black*, the parvenu's crime is committed at what appears to be the culmination or climax of the main story. Julien Sorel, former peasant, is on the point of marriage to rich, young and noble Mathilde, himself artificially and provisionally ennobled by her concerned father the Marquis. Behind the scenes, though, that potential father-in-law has been doing his own detective work, and turns up a letter that indicts Julien as a shameless and destructive social climber:

Being poor and grasping, this man used the most consummate hypocrisy, and resorted to the seduction of a weak and unhappy woman in his attempt to acquire status and turn himself into a somebody. (Stendhal, 1830/1998, p. 467)

This disastrous accusation from Julien's previous mistress, Madame de Rênal, confirms the nobleman's worst fears. Like the criminal who "has form", Julien is condemned by virtue of having *done the same thing before*.

If there were no sign in his past of having sought "to seduce the woman who wields most influence" in order to gain "control over the master of the house and his fortune", there would be no reason for the Marquis to worry. But the story outlined in the letter confirms the imagined pattern. Rather than the unique and spontaneous love that would justify the Marquis's permitting the marriage, it identifies Julien's conduct toward Mathilde as a *form of repetition*. It implies that the only reason for his second attempt to rise, via a woman, is the failure of his first.

Clearly this doubling of narrative motif (two women are seduced in turn) is central to the narrative of the criminal-parvenu that derives from

Stendhal, because we see it repeated in most of the novels considered here. It occurs in Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925), where the pregnant working-class Roberta is left behind for the wealthy young Sondra; in John Braine's *Room at the Top* (1957) where the married older woman is left behind for the cosseted daughter-of-the-house⁴, and in Woody Allen's film *Match Point* (2005), where penniless (and pregnant) actress Nola is rejected for, once more, the cosseted daughter...

These parvenus commit not just any crime, but a crime (or wrongdoing) that is repeatedly associated with two women, one of whom is at some point pregnant. The pregnancy may represent a burden to be rid of (Dreiser, Allen) or a means of securing an otherwise-unlikely cross-class marriage (Stendhal, Braine), but it is a factor consistently present in most of the narratives. We should therefore ask what its meaning may be in relation to the parvenu's rise and crime, and will begin by focusing first on the "two women" in Stendhal's text.

Stendhalian criticism has certainly not ignored the "two women" motif in *The Red and the Black*. Leslie W. Rabine (1985) remarks, "With a few notable exceptions, critical studies have seen the heroines as the symbolic poles of an opposition" (p. 96). She admits that in a pseudonymous essay he wrote to promote his own novel, even Stendhal himself suggests this opposition, despite the fact that, as Rabine goes on to observe, "the novel as a whole does not treat the two heroines in terms of this comparison" (1985, p. 97).

Critics have frequently tended to see Mme de Rênal as a mother figure in opposition to the "unmotherly" Mathilde. This view may be found even in overtly feminist criticism where we might expect to see closer textual attention paid to the question. For instance, in Lisa G. Algazi's (1999) "psychoanalytic feminist reading" of the novel, it is argued that Julien ultimately prefers Madame over Mathilde because of his perception of her maternal devotion and Mathilde's "inability to fulfil that role" (p. 134). Yet the novel explicitly shows us Julien admiring Madame's willingness to *override* her maternal devotion in favour of her love for him. What makes him prefer Madame is that she loves

⁴ Stendhal's novel seems to have provided a detailed model for John Braine's highly successful novel *Room at the Top* (1957), set in post-war Britain, also made into a film and followed by a television series. Despite revisiting all the other major motifs of Stendhal's plot, including the hero's involvement with two women in turn, Braine's novel contains no crime, however, and will thus be excluded from detailed examination in the present study despite its exemplary status among modern parvenu narratives deriving from Stendhal. Its hero, Joe Lampton, nonetheless feels guilty at the end about his "older woman's" accidental death in a car crash, and appears to regret that he cannot be punished for having betrayed her. He marries a wealthy man's daughter who is expecting a child with him.

him more than her children, whereas his perception of Mathilde is that she really loves herself and not him at all. As Marilyn Lukacher (1999) notes, "Mme de Rênal's inability to live without Julien [after his death] stresses that her passion is stronger than her love for her children" (p. 152).

Julia Kristeva (1987), reading Stendhal as aggressively masculinist, in turn dismisses his deployment of the two women as

a safeguarding strategy. In order not to be swallowed up by one of them, the egotist grants himself at least two... The single passion, Stendhal's narrative seems to say, is deadly and leads to confinement and unrepresentable confusion (p. 359).

(There is a curious conflation here between the author who "grants himself" these imaginary women and the fictional protagonist.) Yet Kristeva's reductive and arguably emotive assertion overlooks the degree to which the male protagonist is indeed "caught" by both women, at the same time that she ignores their temporal sequencing (he is not involved with both women at once, after all.)

By contrast, the before-and-after status of the two women in Stendhal's novel, which is generally unaddressed in the criticism, is crucial to this male parvenu's story.⁵ Julien's crime only happens because the two episodes, which should have stayed sequential, come into conflict or collide in simultaneity – as in the colloquial phrase, "the past catches up with him". As Carol Mossman (1984) notes in the service of a different argument, "Mme de Rênal's is quite literally a call from the past" (p. 65). And the past changes its meaning as it catches up with him, because Madame's letter construes that past episode differently from how either of them saw it at the time.

There is a sense in which Madame figures the past's mutability in relation to the present: she is what may be reinterpreted and used against you. When Algazi (1999) argues that "Julien's infatuation with Mathilde was a child of his vanity, a product of mimetic desire" (p. 137), she omits to indicate that so too was his initial bond with Madame de Rênal. It is only afterwards that Julien can differentiate: realisation of Madame's worth comes only *after* the second

⁵ Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891/1974), whose eponymous heroine is arguably akin to a criminal parvenu but with some significant divergences, contains an equivalent, gender-reversed pairing in Alec and Angel, before and after; similarly, the past catches up with Tess when Angel learns of her former relations with Alec. The two men here constitute a comparable motif to that of the two women in Stendhal et al. Likewise, Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895/1985) moves from Arabella to Sue but the repressed of Arabella returns to complicate matters.

experience. Kristeva (1987) complains of this contrastive method, "As if a woman were visible only when compared with another" (p. 359), but there is nothing unusual in a novel defining characters against or in contrast with one another, and even here it is not limited to the female characters. What makes the Madame-Mathilde nexus distinctive is its afterwardsness, similar to the Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*, wherein an earlier experience is not understood except through a later stage in development (Freud, 1895/1966, pp. 353-54, and elsewhere).

Tied to the temporal subsequence of the two women, there is a sense in which their repetition, rather than polar opposition, also offsets the possibility of belief in "one true love" for the protagonist, at least in the reader's eyes. Rather than fearing being caught by one woman, it might be argued that what the Stendhalian text fears is repetition's logical meaning here: that passion is not exclusive, unique and singular but iterable. Thus the text must work to make one of the loves "trump" the other.

In a straightforward narrative of successful upward mobility, this would seem to entail the second ("higher") woman's triumph over the first, and initially we expect this to be the case when Julien begins his affair with the much higher-placed Mathilde in Paris. Pragmatically the two women are sequential because they are in two different places, provincial and then Parisian, as if standing for the necessary stages in the parvenu's trajectory⁶. It is not that Julien has chosen to *end* his involvement with Madame, but that circumstances have separated them, and while out of sight is not quite out of mind in his case (he does occasionally recall Madame as contrast to Mathilde), the new location excludes the prior liaison even if other factors such as the existence of Madame's marriage had not already complicated it.

Yet in Stendhal's story the direction is not "onward and upward" via the second woman as it initially appears to be: there is another movement altogether, *because of the crime*. When the past calls, Julien runs back to deal with it by trying to kill his former mistress, in a manner that most critics, whether positively or negatively, have seen as the novel's most mysterious aspect.

Uncertainty about Julien's motive in shooting his former mistress has predominated in Stendhal criticism. Indeed, this fictional act is so controversial

⁶ A large number of the historical parvenu narratives depict space through a binary motif (country/city, provincial town/capital) that represents something of a divide in the protagonist's experience.

that, despite repeated foreshadowing and well-flagged suggestions in the text, some see it as a false narrative move. Mossman (1984) tells us,

many treatments are in some way or other explicitly preoccupied with explaining Julien Sorel's decision to nip his brilliant career in the bud by taking his erstwhile mistress's life. The pistol shot which rang out in that church in Verrières a century and a half ago resounds to this day. Somehow, somewhere, it is felt, the novel has gone awry (p. 13).

The response has frequently been a critical approach that Mossman (1984) glosses as "character-coherency modes of explanation" (p. 15). As Stirling Haig (1989) points out, "...Stendhal's detractors allege that Julien's attempted murder of Mme de Rênal is out of character for the calculating ruser" (p. 17). Haig himself sees the meaning of the crime as narratological and intertextual:

the crime figures as *The Red and the Black's* own recognition (and consequent rejection) of the smug plot of the traditional nineteenth-century *arriviste* novel... the shooting would be an attempt to unwrite the plot in the conventional pattern and to restart novelistic paths (1989, p. 84).

The novel itself provides no clear and final explication of Julien's crime; the closest it comes, overtly speaking, is when Julien later muses, "...I tried to kill her out of ambition, or love for Mathilde" (Stendhal, 1830/1998, p. 504).

But is this really lucidity on the criminal's part? First, there is that crucial "or" – Julien himself is not sure – and second, do these options even make sense? It is hard to imagine a way in which attempted murder might have furthered Julien's "ambition". It seems in fact that Stendhal chooses to leave his motivation open for the reader, to underscore what Julien eventually indicates when he says, speaking of his cancelled future, "I'm the only one who knows what I might have done... For everyone else, I'm nothing more than a QUESTION-MARK" (Stendhal, 1830/1998, p. 506).

Mossman's strategy for dealing with the crime's meaning is, in some ways similar to Algazi's, feminist and Freudian in derivation – and, it will be argued here, similarly unsatisfying, because it insists on viewing Madame as a mother figure, over and above her status as Julien's lover.

By reading his "crime" in term of a repressed mother-son incest and attendant castration motif, Mossman reduces the text to the level of the sexual and affective, de-emphasising the social and political elements of the parvenu

narrative. Seeing Julien's trial and execution as to some degree "narrative anomalies" (1984, p. 65), Mossman interprets the material as Freudian dreamwork, arguing

The trial stands as a structure of deflection which permits the emergence in the text of a guilt too heavy to bear, but too unbearable to expose... As a barometer of guilt, the trial signals a return of the repressed (1984, p. 66).

It has indeed become a commonplace or even truism of Stendhalian criticism, probably based in biographical knowledge of the novelist's early loss of his adored mother, to see the Madame-Julien bond as mother-son⁷, with emphasis on images of uterine enclosure in prison and grotto. (Algazi [1999] for instance sees Madame as "Julien's surrogate mother" [p. 133]). But if we refuse to start from this biographical conflation, we may instead see that Madame is *displaced* from her maternal role in a manner that is more overt and conscious than "dreamwork", and may be argued as political.

It is true that the novel itself shows us Madame more than once thinking of Julien as a child; there is plenty of textual evidence that appears to support the assumption – yet the power of the relationship, as I have argued above, is located in Madame's *rejection* of her maternal role, her superseding or transcending of it in her passion for Julien. Lukacher (1999) insists, "I contend that Mme de Rênal transgresses the frontier of traditional motherhood even in her death" (p. 153). And Rabine (1985), pointing out that the maternal stereotype is "imposed on women", adds, "It is like a shell that will be broken to release Mme de Rênal" (p. 86).

Indeed, the only pregnancy in the novel pertains to Mathilde, and there it does not take the form of the enclosing, impeding maternal, but of the "merger" that is expected to confirm Julien's rise; as a facilitation of movement rather than a stalling. It is simplistic to read the crime's result of imprisonment as a return to the womb, and its result of execution as castration. Though Mossman cites the intertext of Abelard as evidence for her Oedipal reading, it is in the context of *Mathilde*, not of Madame, that Julien says to himself, "Watch out for Abelard's fate!" (Stendhal, 1830/1998, p. 347), meaning castration.

⁷ Julien himself says at his trial, "Madame de Renal had been like a mother to me" (Stendhal, 1830/1998, p. 501) – but one must remember Julien here is determined to bring punishment on himself, and his statement is a deliberate distortion. Earlier, we read of Madame, "there were days when she had the *illusion* of loving him like her own child (Stendhal, 1830/1998, p. 102, my emphasis). "Illusion" underscores the non-maternal aspect.

Abelard's "crime" was related to the seduction of a *younger* woman where he was tutor in the house, and provoked by deception (secret marriage) – nothing to do with the Oedipal triangle involving mother and son.

Rather, it can be argued, as Bruce Robbins (2007) points out, speaking more generally, that

the many pairings between younger men and older women that follow [Rousseau] in the nineteenth-century novel represent something other than a mass outbreak of Oedipal regression (p. 25).

Rejecting the argument that this parvenu's "nonsensical" crime can be explained as an instance of "dreamwork" covering the motif of incest guilt, then, we are still left with the question all the critics face. If it makes no sense for the parvenu to commit a crime against his own best interest, some feel obliged to argue that he is not "really" a parvenu at all.

Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (1999), in an article entitled "The Specters of Revolution; or, Politics at the Concert", says of Julien's crime, "this rash act counters every notion of the parvenu literature (and life) purveys. A true parvenu would never have risked so much" (p. 28). Ferguson is at pains to distinguish Julien from the classic parvenu, though she concedes that at first sight his story appears to locate him as one. She sees this as a limiting factor that belies his socially disruptive energy:

For much of the novel... revolutionary potential is obscured by the focus on Julien as a parvenu, an individual who crosses the boundaries that society has set between social classes, an individual concerned above all with making his or her... way. It is as a parvenu that Julien is perceived and even, at times, perceives himself. The parvenu is quite the opposite of the revolutionary, since mobility is a strictly personal enterprise (1999, p. 26).

So too M. E. M. Taylor (1975), despite seeing much "of the solitary and often misguided Revolutionary in the mental make-up of the 'arriviste'" (p. 3), argues that the influence of Rousseauism led to the arriviste's belief that

his private war on society was fully justified, and that any crimes which he committed against a society in which he wished to make his way were only part of his own private and legitimate revolution to attain liberty and equality for himself (p. 47).

Taylor is referring to crimes committed along the way to the goal of success, whereas Ferguson, like many others, sees Julien's crime as at odds with his

goal. Yet in Taylor's comment too, we see the parvenu inverting the meaning of "revolution" or at least emptying it of its social dimension. The enterprise is personal; the revolution is private. To summarise Ferguson's stance: the crime in Julien's case identifies the parvenu as *not really one*; it is the act that ensures we cannot entirely read Julien as parvenu, a term which would exclude his revolutionary power, since parvenus are about only *self*-advancement.

Ferguson is not alone in viewing Julien Sorel as somehow not quite a parvenu. The negative associations that term carries are seen as repellent to readers. Haig (1989) points out that Julien's ambition "invariably makes for uneasy reader reaction" (p. 56). Crouzet (1995), while clearly accepting that Julien is driven by ambition (p. 116), still distinguishes him from the other, more conventionally parvenu characters (Julien's "grotesque and inferior doubles", 1995, p. 120, my trans.), pointing out, like Ferguson, that Julien's crime contradicts any interpretation of him as simply ambitious (Crouzet, 1995, p. 145), and citing Hamm's description of Julien as a "parvenu qui ne parvient à rien" (quoted in Crouzet, 1995, p. 121) (or an arriviste who never arrives; an upstart who never starts up, to simulate the French play on words here).

Haig (1989) resorts to a splitting of Julien into at least two selves – the parvenu whose novel effectively "closes" (p. 59) after Madame de Rênal's accusatory letter, and the other Julien: "...Julien's crime saves him from his ambitious self and returns him to his better one" (1989, p. 87).

Bardèche, while accepting *The Red and the Black* as "an ascensional novel" (quoted in Haig, 1989, p. 56), also insists that we must see Julien against the backdrop of the unjust society against which he struggles. "Then Julien Sorel ceases to be ambitious – and, in fact, he is not deeply, essentially, an ambitious man. We then see him as he is, excluded, rejected" (Bardèche, 1947, p. 193); "of the race of the beaten... but a beaten man who does not accept it. He is the enemy of laws because laws are directed against him" (1947, p. 194; both my trans.).

This is despite the fact that Julien is the son of a rich peasant (not poverty-stricken, just not well-born) and has had some education. It is difficult to agree that Julien – who continues to do well, and does progressively better and better until his crime – is really one of the beaten, though at times it suits him to assume that self-image. This view is part of the common tendency to project onto the figure of Julien and to assimilate the novel to a straightforward political critique. "His revolt is that of Spartacus", Bardèche asserts (1947, p. 194). Here the method is to say, "not really a parvenu but a *révolté*" (or rebel).

It is true that the novel takes pains to distinguish Julien from other, primarily money-driven characters who are also parvenus or arrivistes. As Taylor (1975) writes,

Stendhal's introvert "arriviste" was not interested mainly in actual wealth: a psychological victory, a Napoleonic outmanoeuvring of the victim or the foe ... meant far more to him than fine gold (p. 148).

Yet for all such qualifications, it is clear that Julien does actively seek upward mobility, and that this does include desire for the kind of financial security and power that would ensure such victory and outmanoeuvring. The Napoleonic reference here is key, as Taylor herself goes on to note; and as Haig (1989) confirms, "... Bonaparte's phenomenal rise from artillery lieutenant to master of Europe has stimulated and coloured [Julien's ambition]" (p. 56). So too Peter Brooks (1984/1992), who remarks, "Napoleon represented the possibility of *la carrière ouverte aux talents*: advancement through merit, the legitimation of class mobility, legalized usurpation" (p. 68). Julien's adulation of Napoleon makes him *more* of a social upstart, not less so. Let us consider one distinction the text makes, between Julien and the parvenu Valenod, as example.

Much has been made of the contrast between Julien and the successful Valenod, because of the discomfort Julien feels in Valenod's house:

Everything was magnificent and brand new, and he was told the price of each piece of furniture. But Julien felt there was something base about it which smacked of stolen money (Stendhal, 1830/1998, p. 146).

Thinking with distaste of the Valenods, Julien says to himself, "So there you see the stinking riches you will acquire, and you will only enjoy them under these conditions and in like company" (Stendhal, 1830/1998, p. 147). He feels "disdain" (Stendhal, 1830/1998, p. 150) for the Valenods, and a renewed sense of his own inner nobility after having to mix with them – "He felt every inch the aristocrat" (Stendhal, 1830/1998, p. 149).

This is sometimes taken to mean that Julien is no parvenu, with the tackiness that term can imply, because he is truly noble in the best sense of the word. Yet surely it also indicates that he wishes to rise even higher than a Valenod, and the better to integrate and dissemble the traces of his rise – not that he is less ambitious. When he eats at the Rênals' house, he does not trouble so much over the poor who go without, or over how their money was acquired.

It is as if he does not really reject the “stinking” aspect of riches and inequality – only his having to “smell” it. He even subsequently tells Madame, “You nobles have reason to be proud” (Stendhal, 1830/1998, p. 151) because they are superior to Valenod’s vulgarity.

Julien’s plot is indisputably one of attempted upward mobility even if his trajectory is often impelled not by his own acts but by other people’s intervention. Rather than try to explain away his unattractive, unpalatable ambition and desire to rise, or else try to avoid the “fact” of his crime by decrying it as a wrong narrative move, we might consider what meanings may be derived from retaining these two elements apparently in tension with each other: Julien wishes to succeed, Julien undoes his own success. Julien is a parvenu and then a criminal; these two factors may be contradictory, but if we are prepared to take that as part of their significance, what do they amount to?

On the one hand, we might rather simplistically read the effect as follows, constituting something like a conservative ideological trope and logic: the parvenu commits a crime because his or her nature is essentially base; s/he will fall because s/he tried to rise against the social order and must consequently suffer punishment. Even if the low person succeeds in rising, his or her lowness ultimately wins out (as in the colloquial phrase, “a leopard can’t change its spots”).

Yet this reading would be too strongly at odds with Stendhal’s narrative, as Julien’s nature is repeatedly shown to be anything but “base” in the terms with which his society defines that concept; he is shown to have more in common with the upper classes than with his family of origin. Can Stendhal’s text really be seen as “wanting” Julien punished? Is this a cautionary tale against seeking to rise?

We may rather, on the other hand, detect in the criminal parvenu narrative the possibility of a subtler and potentially progressive argument, implicitly critical of inequality. In this view the very rigidity of the social structure necessitates or requires its transgression if there is to be individual liberty; the parvenu is bound to commit a crime and not to be understood as evil for his/her liberatory act. There is a further view based upon this notion of social injustice that may lead to a very different politics again: the parvenu commits a crime *because* a superior being outside the laws and mores of his/her time and place.

This reading is sometimes attributed to Stendhal’s text because of his beliefs about “*énergie*” (Crouzet, 1984, p. 63) arising only among the lower

classes, and the vital purity of what he perceived to be Italian-style passion and violence. However, Stendhal's novel is ironic and ambiguous about these qualities in Julien, and stops short of conveying him as any kind of "superman".

As we will see, the questions of the "superior" being entitled to commit crime will be pursued more overtly in Balzac and Dostoevsky. For now we are simply enquiring as to the political thrust of Julien's crime. Inside the text, it is left unexplained. Outside the text, it invites us to ponder whether his trajectory is meant to win our approval; what sort of political stance, if any, this parvenu-criminal novel asserts. Harry Levin (1988) concedes that *The Red and the Black*, "accepted at its face value, could be made to serve as reactionary propaganda" (p. 32), and cites Paul Bourget's novel *The Disciple* (1889/1901) as a subsequent example, modelled after Stendhal, of this kind of cautionary tale. But Levin goes on to insist – correctly, this thesis argues – that Stendhal is ultimately on the side of the "interloper" (1988, p. 32).

This is not to go so far as Bardèche and others in seeing Julien as a man of the people, a Spartacus or rebel-hero. Crouzet (1995) has described this development in the criticism, noting it was not until Bourget's novel, later in the nineteenth century, that there appeared "a certain reduction of [Julien's] character to its political sense... at first grasped as the Révolté, the absolute individual who styles himself the equal, the adversary of the social principle" (p. 110), and then, with Blum (1914) and Bardèche (1947), a view of Julien as one "within his rights since society is in the wrong" (Crouzet, 1995, p. 111, my trans.)

Julien, then, throughout the criticism, has a role as either parvenu *or* not-really-parvenu; as either ambitious man of self-interest *or* social revolutionary. Without seeking an artificial resolution of these contradictory views, we may turn again to Bruce Robbins's (2007) suggestion that "upward mobility stories" might in fact be "doing something other... than peddling simple wish-fulfilment fantasies or the shopworn ideology of individual self-reliance we have come to associate with them" (p. 2).

In his study *Upward Mobility and the Common Good: Toward a Literary History of the Welfare State*, Robbins (2007) considers fictional narratives of advancement ranging from the film *The Silence of the Lambs* through nineteenth-century French and British novels, to nineteenth and twentieth-century American fiction. He begins from the notion that upward mobility narratives, "by focusing on the passage *between* identities and how one gets from here to

there... reveal something important about power, which can never be located within one identity alone" (p. xii). Part of Robbins's approach is to focus on "the erotic component in upward mobility" (xiii) in order to consider how the narratives convey "motives of the protector and protégé" (xiv) as "allegorical of social hypotheses" (p. xiv):

If what exists between them may be love, for example, and if the motives of love are at least conceivably disinterested, then the hypothesis emerges that, despite the protagonist's apparent self-interest, the society the upward mobility story aims at may also involve some degree of disinterestedness. In other words, reading upward mobility stories may be deviously teaching us not to be self-reliant and self-interested, as is usually taken for granted. It may be teaching us to think about the common good. (xiv)

Hence Robbins's assertion quoted earlier, that we need not consider all younger man/older woman couples of French novels to be about Oedipus. Considering the relation between Rousseau (in his *Confessions*) and the "Maman" who was of course not his mother, and which serves as model to so many of the fictional pairings (including Stendhal's), Robbins points out,

the peculiar love between the two departs from the norm both in its gesture toward the levelling of conventional gender hierarchy and that it does not end in, aim at, or imitate the realm of biological reproduction (p. 23).

Without needing to pursue to its full extent Robbins's argument regarding the welfare state, it is useful here to consider the pattern his study establishes – speaking of Benjamin Constant's novel, he says,

The ending of *Adolphe* is echoed by many other endings in which upward mobility either fails or is renounced, and in which the failure or renunciation is again presided over in some sense by an older woman (p. 30).

This pattern of renunciation is of course epitomised in Julien Sorel's choice, near the end of *The Red and the Black*, to refuse to exonerate himself, and is indeed linked with a return to the older woman who had initially facilitated his rise. We return here to the question of the "two women". In one sense, Julien's rash act of firing upon Madame – his crime – may be read as a momentary attempt to extirpate the traces of that facilitation. If Madame at least partly

stands for the (eroticised) social support that enables upward mobility, the attempt to remove her – as if she could be retrospectively edited out for the alternative narrative she might represent – is an attempt to secure the narrative line as pertaining to the parvenu alone and consolidate the individualist (anti-social) thrust (“my story’s ended” [literally, “my novel is finished”], Julien tells us [Stendhal, 1830/1998, pp. 462-3] well before the end of the actual book).

Instead, of course, Madame survives the attempt, and the “two women” remain at hand as a kind of contestation of the truth of Julien till the real end of the story, though only Mathilde goes on living into its imagined future (Madame dies shortly after Julien). In many ways this narrative, like the others we will consider in detail, seems to be fighting or countering the idea of a temporally bound identity formed by sequential development, while at the same time relying on readers’ notions of temporal unfolding for the suspense mechanism to work.

If we are to be condemned because of our past, tied to it – if the sum of our actions adds up to who we are – then such narratives might show how sequential we *are not* – how we can even be more than one person at the same time; hence the continual doubling and splitting here (the doubling of the women primarily) and as we will note, elsewhere, in pairs of women and within central characters. The doubling and splitting may be read as impeding the narrative’s forward movement, and in this example from Stendhal, the entanglement caused by the “two women”, overlapping or doubling back, so to speak, contributes to that impeding factor. Not only is “Julien’s novel” *not* finished, it will continue to haunt narratives that come after and repeatedly revisit major elements of its plot and characterisation.

Many subsequent novels will turn back to Stendhal’s, and given constraints of space, we may touch briefly upon salient instances from the nineteenth century here. Julien’s first direct major heir as parvenu in fiction is Lucien Chardon or de Rubempré, whose story is told in two novels of Balzac’s *Human Comedy: Lost Illusions* (1837-43/1897), and *Splendours and Miseries of Courtesans* (also published in English as *A Harlot High and Low*, 1838-47/1970). Lucien is not Balzac’s only fictional upstart, but he is the one perhaps most fruitfully compared and contrasted with Stendhal’s Julien.

Apart from the faint echo in the protagonists’ first names, there are many apparent similarities between them at the beginning of Lucien’s trajectory in *Lost Illusions* – sensitive, poetic, quasi-feminine and gifted, they also share a socially inferior status, although in Lucien’s case his mother’s family has a

noble background (hence his eventual assumption of the name “de Rubempré”, equally as artificial as Julien’s acquisition of “de la Vernaye”; both men seek to be divested of their fathers’ “common” surnames). Like Julien, Lucien begins in the provinces, and in the same era; he is taken up and mentored by a provincial married lady who sees a great future for him; he then goes to Paris where he engages in another relationship.

Most striking of all in terms of similarity is the text’s insistence on Lucien’s talent, like Julien’s, for mimicry, reproducing codes, and even plagiarism. As Annie Jourdan (1988) notes, “Having read much and compared much, Lucien might even be closer to the plagiarist than to the writer” (p. 68, my trans.). She adds,

Lucien’s ambition to enter the clan [of nobles] gives him the idea of learning their language without delay, and reveals in him a certain talent for acquiring the codes in question (1988, p. 69).

Similarly, Alain-Philippe Durand (2001) writes of “the central role played by copying and plagiarism in this novel” (p. 250, my trans.), and describes Lucien as becoming a “reflection of the world around him, prisoner of a spiral that compels him to copy and plagiarise” (p. 250, my trans.).

Balzac, a great admirer of Stendhal’s work, had certainly read *The Red and the Black* (Taylor, 1975, p. 133), and it is easy to suppose he had Julien in mind when he began to develop his “Lucien”. Yet as readers soon discover, the similarities between the two parvenus are essentially superficial, for Lucien will exhibit a weakness of character never seen in Stendhal’s protagonist and thus undergo a very different course of events.

At the outset a dreamer, son of a deceased chemist who has left him without means, spoiled and indulged by his mother, sister, and future brother-in-law David, Lucien imagines he will make his name and his fortune through literature. *Lost Illusions* follows him from province to Paris and back again as he is disabused of this fantasy. In Paris, unable to bear the poverty and social isolation that serious literary work would entail, he falls into the quick earnings and moral equivocation of cut-throat journalism. Balzac shows us the ethical compromises and deceptions that accompany the parvenu’s rise, culminating in Lucien’s forging documents to draw money against his brother-in-law’s good name.

His initial downfall through this non-violent crime is halted near the end of the novel when, on the verge of committing suicide, Lucien is interrupted by

a supposed priest who persuades him to cast his lot with him and make a fresh start. Though the reader will not realise it until the next novel, the priest is in fact an arch-criminal in disguise, and the second part of Lucien's story, as told in *Splendours and Miseries of Courtesans/A Harlot High and Low*, will see Lucien mutate into something like a weak and malleable double to the forceful personality of Herrera/Vautrin/Collin (for this corrupting criminal mentor has many aliases and appears in several of the *Comedy's* novels).

In this second part of Lucien's story, the crime is more serious, and is orchestrated by Herrera ("initiatory father", as Jourdan calls him, 1988, p. 73) in something reminiscent of a Mephistophelean or Satanic pact (Jourdan, 1988, p. 73). All that Lucien must do is consent: the master-criminal will use his skills to bring his protégé to wealth and power. We might suggest that here the parvenu is "split" across two beings, one angelic and the other demonic, and should note that by contrast with Stendhal's novel, in Balzac's the crime is committed *in order to rise*, rather than *after rising*.

The "two women" motif is echoed in *Lost Illusions* by the sequence Madame-Coralie, but Coralie is no daughter of nobility – rather, she is an actress-courtesan who fleeces a wealthy man and shares her gains with Lucien. She is followed, after her death, by the similarly compromised Esther in *Splendours and Miseries*. Rather than focussing on the parvenu's rise as mapped by the two women in Stendhal, Balzac creates a split or doubled male motif (which we will later see picked up in the work of Patricia Highsmith), and which is discreetly conveyed, though not overtly stated till near the story's end, as homosexual. As Michael Lucey (2003) points out,

the pairing of Vautrin with Lucien de Rubempré... has been immensely suggestive for later writers interested in thinking about or portraying male same-sex relations (p. 171).

In this instance it is another case of the "queer tutelage" (term borrowed from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick by Robbins, 2007, p. 4) that frequently accompanies the rise of the criminal parvenu; considering first the older male "criminal mentors" of Balzac and Dickens and then the "older woman" mentor of many French novels, Robbins (2007) reads these unconventional arrangements as figuring an outcome other than the reproductive: "To reject the option of joining with the hero to found a family is not to rule out love. But it means that love will look different, and will prefigure a different sort of society" (p. 12).

Following Balzac⁸, within the French tradition, Paul Bourget's much later novel *The Disciple* (1889/1901), which we have briefly seen mentioned by critics above, is consciously modelled upon Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, to the extent of including overt reference to its story, though the material is temporally rearranged (the crime has already happened at the outset, and we are reading the explanation or confession of how and why). Bourget's book is concerned to examine the effect of reading on an individual's moral behaviour (the protagonist has been driven by trying to follow principles he has read in a contemporary philosopher's work), and despite the allusive gestures, is very unlike *The Red and the Black* – as John Cowper Powys (1916) writes:

Devoid of irony, deficient in humor, lacking any large imaginative power, Paul Bourget holds, all the same, an unassailable place among French writers. Though a devoted adherent of Goethe and Stendhal, Bourget represents... the conservative ethical reaction. He upholds Catholicism and the sacredness of the "home" (p. 33).

Described by J. C. Fewster (1992) as "a striking example of the fragility of literary reputations", Bourget, though in his own time widely admired and successful, suffers from "relative obscurity today" (p. 259), and it is unlikely that *The Disciple* has had much or any influence on the subsequent criminal parvenu stories we shall examine.

A more popularly influential criminal upstart, though less clearly connected to Stendhal's, is Becky Sharp in William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847-48/1963). Becky is a satirical, picaresque figure in a playful, ironic text that is certainly indebted to the earlier tradition sketched in our introduction, and her crimes are committed in order to rise, rather than as a compromising act to bring herself undone. She is by no means the first *parvenue* – or female social climber – of dubious virtue, and she tends to use the traditional "feminine" means in this context (deception, swindling, seduction and marriage) to attain her ends. Though Stendhal's novel is also politically and socially satirical, and frequently employs an ironic tone, including direct address to the reader, in Thackeray we are far from the psychological realism and drama of *The Red and the Black*, and it cannot anyway be established with certainty that Thackeray read the novel. Lidmila Pantuckova (1972) writes

⁸ As previously noted, he is also followed by Guy de Maupassant's *Bel-Ami* (1885), which despite blackmail themes is not strictly speaking a crime story, although its social-climber protagonist is unscrupulous; like Balzac's Lucien, he is a journalist.

The possible influence of the second greatest French realist of the period, Stendhal, upon Thackeray is in my opinion almost certainly out of the question... there are even closer and more numerous parallels between Thackeray's and Stendhal's aesthetics and creative methods than between Thackeray's and Balzac's... [but] there is a complete absence of evidence as to whether Thackeray ever read any works of his great contemporary – he does not refer to them or their author in any of his public or private writings. It is most probable, indeed... that none of this novelist's works ever got into Thackeray's hands, for Stendhal was rarely read in England until 1861... (p. 95)⁹

Stendhal himself had earlier written – but not finished – the rollicking story of a spirited female social climber named Lamiel, begun in 1839 but only published in 1889, well after his and Thackeray's death, so she cannot count as an overt literary foremother to Becky Sharp. There are areas of common ground here but no pattern of intertextual relation or descent that can be profitably examined, and since the field must be delimited for this thesis, it is to the next century – and the United States of America – that we shall turn in the following chapter for further examination of major narratives that revisit Stendhal's criminal parvenu story.

⁹ Pantuckova (1972) does acknowledge, but is sceptical of, Jerome Donnelly's (1965) argument for strong direct Stendhalian influence in Thackeray's *Henry Esmond* (1852) – which is not a parvenu story – based on internal evidence. Thackeray's *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* (1844) resembles our criminal parvenu narratives in some aspects, though Barry's origins are among the gentry. It is also curious that Thackeray, fluent in French and having lived in Paris, should *not* have read Stendhal, since Thackeray was widely read in an extensive period of French literature, including working as a contemporary reviewer (Pantuckova, 1970). Pantuckova also maintains that, though he read Balzac, Thackeray was not under his influence (1972, p. 94).

Chapter Two
Rocking the Boat: Mimetic Desire and Female Power
in Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*

This chapter concentrates on the Stendhalian themes and influences found in a major American novel of the twentieth century, Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925), and will read the "two women" motif in that novel in the context of René Girard's (1961/1976) theory of mimetic desire better known for its application to *The Red and the Black*. The *Tragedy* is not the only one of Dreiser's novels to be concerned with social climbing, success and wrongdoing, but it is the one that most immediately recalls Stendhal's model. In addition to reading widely in the literature of his own country, Theodore Dreiser was a keen reader of French literature. In *A Book About Myself* (1922), later republished as *Newspaper Days*, Dreiser tells of his first encounters with Balzac's work in 1894:

For a period of four or five months I ate, slept, dreamed, lived him and his characters and his views and his city. I cannot imagine a greater joy and inspiration than I had in Balzac these Spring and Summer days in Pittsburgh (p. 412).

Dreiser's debt to Balzac, and for that matter to English novelist Thomas Hardy, is frequently acknowledged in his own non-fictional writings and in the criticism. By contrast, although his *An American Tragedy* (1925) is often analysed alongside Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, and noted as sharing some of its features, it is rare to find any reference to direct Stendhalian influence. Indeed, Stendhal is notably absent from Dreiser's extensive personal library as acquired by the University of Pennsylvania after his death. Nonetheless, there is evidence he did read Stendhal:

Ford Madox Ford recalled his first meeting with the American writer [i.e. Dreiser] where they spent 'three or four hours' talking of 'nothing but words and styles', with Dreiser offering his opinions on a range of authors from 'Defoe and Richardson, to Diderot, Stendhal and Flaubert...' (Giles, 2004, p. 58).

Enough of *An American Tragedy's* plot appears to derive from *The Red and the Black* that readers might well suppose a connection even without that evidence.

In any case, we could still adduce Stendhalian influence derived at one remove via Balzac, whose *Lost Illusions*, as we saw in the previous chapter, drew strongly on *The Red and the Black*, and was a favourite of Dreiser's (Dreiser, 2003, p. 942). Harry Levin (1988), writing on *The Red and the Black*, explicitly links Dreiser's novel to Stendhal's:

In Dreiser's *American Tragedy* a century later, as it happens, we see the same factors at work: bigotry and venality, the climb towards success, the compromising affair, the murderous impulse, the trial and condemnation and execution (p. 32).

It is thus within the model derived from our reading of Stendhal that Dreiser's novel will be considered here.

An American Tragedy is the story of how Clyde Griffiths, young man from an impoverished background, seeks to rise in American society, at first by taking on a position in a factory owned by his rich uncle. When Clyde's secretive relationship with factory-worker Roberta leads to her pregnancy, it forms an obstacle to his desire and ambition regarding the wealthy and higher-class Sondra, who might well be induced to marry him and thereby facilitate his rise beyond what he can achieve through work. Unable to free himself from Roberta, Clyde plots to drown her while boating on a lake, but cannot carry it out. When she does drown, accidentally as it happens, Clyde is arrested for her murder, tried and executed.

Like Stendhal, who drew on newspaper crime reports to devise the plot of *The Red and the Black* (Crouzet 1995, et al.), Dreiser based significant elements of his novel on "true crime" that had been widely reported, especially the murder of Grace Brown by Chester Gillette (Pizer, 2009, p. 435, et al.), who shares the very initials of Clyde Griffiths – and to the extreme degree of quoting verbatim Brown's letters to Gillette, which appear as Roberta's letters in the novel (Cassuto, 2004, p. 212)¹⁰. Possibly it is this strong grounding in non-fiction, as well as his constant reference to other influences, that helps deflect general attention (other than in Levin, 1988) from the debt Dreiser's plot owes in a broad sense to Stendhal, not least in this very method itself of borrowing from "real life".

Nonetheless – despite the common elements of ambition and social climbing, a handsome and frequently feminised male protagonist, an

¹⁰ They are not always quoted verbatim – Pizer (1976) tells us Dreiser "mixed verbatim quotation, loose paraphrase and new material – yet maintained the emotional texture... of the original letters" (p. 226).

entanglement with two women in which the earlier engagement comes “back” like a return of the repressed to undo the later, an obsessive focus on clothing, imitation and self-presentation, an unexpected pregnancy, an ambiguous crime, imprisonment and finally execution – the two novels are also markedly different.

The difference in fictional setting (and place of origin) is of course the most self-evident, though here again both books arise from a period of transition in their respective countries. Stendhal, straddling the turn of a century and able to recall several subsequent regimes (before and during the Revolution, and then the Napoleonic periods and the Restoration: a sequence of rapid changes), creates a misfit who secretly worships the former Emperor but must conform to “the uniform for [his] century” (Stendhal, 1830/1998, p. 336). Aesthetically too, Stendhal spans a transition in his country from sentimental fiction to the beginnings of nineteenth-century realism. Dreiser – according to Leonard Cassuto “at the end of one era and the beginning of another... at a key crossroads” (2004, p. 196) between sentimental fiction and presaging the “hard-boiled” American approach that would follow – depicts a protagonist equally ill-fitted for his time:

Clyde Griffiths embodies the division between nineteenth-century family-and-faith-based morality and the commercial acquisitiveness of the new commercial, consumeristic age (Cassuto, 2004, p. 200).

And again, Cassuto remarks, Clyde “stands as a transitional figure, socialized in the old ways but hungry for the new ones” (2004, p. 203). A background of rapid industrialisation and the spread of mass-produced goods is reflected in the way this particular “transitional figure” conceives his fantasy of ambition: the “paradise” to which Clyde aspires belongs to an America of consumable items and affluent lifestyles. Where the previous chapter noted some doubt among critics as to whether Julien Sorel’s ambition envisaged wealth or a more ideal “greatness”, here we must assert that for his twentieth-century American counterpart the goal is firmly material; the “beauty” which so enthralled Clyde is rarely abstract.

Clyde’s covetous selfishness also sharply differentiates him from Julien Sorel, who appears more capable of self-scrutiny in regard to sympathy with others which Clyde, by contrast, may feel but not act upon. If Julien’s contradictory nature has made many readers ambivalent about him, Clyde is perhaps even less likeable – Pizer (2009) notes one critic’s “extreme personal

distaste for Clyde's character and behavior (a distaste indeed shared to some degree by many readers)" (p. 440).

Though Julien too has his readerly detractors, in this respect Clyde is less like Julien than like Balzac's Lucien, who seemed never to learn from his mistakes and only to replace one "lost illusion" with another – both Lucien and Clyde are weak, greedy, and narcissistic. Jackson Lears (2004), who sees Clyde as the "worst" of Dreiser's novelistic protagonists (p. 71) observes, "He learns nothing... Clyde is as full of self-pity and status anxiety at the end as at the beginning" (p. 77). Ellen Moers (1970) writes: "Clyde Griffiths... is that statistical wretch, the inexplicable, unsympathetic delinquent... Dreiser does not pretend either to explain or to like Clyde" (p. 231).

Some critics situate this aspect of Clyde within a social critique on Dreiser's part – George Goodin (1985), in *The Poetics of Protest: Literary Form and Political Protest in the Victim-of-Society Novel*, reads Clyde alongside Julien Sorel and others as belonging to the "flawed victim" category:

Flawed victims are the most subjugated of all victims of society, because injustice damages their character as well as body. They may even lack enough privileged inner space or self to resent the injustice against them or to attribute their suffering to the right causes. The deformation of their character indicates both the pressure and the nature of the environment or milieu in which they live (pp. 90-91).

Such a view would interpret Dreiser's novel as socially progressive in a similar vein to some of those critical approaches to *The Red and the Black* surveyed in our previous chapter: the criminal-parvenu as social rebel, though as Goodin also points out:

Flawed victims [*as opposed to "virtuous victims"*]... may display excessive individualism and an inability or refusal to associate, so that we may call them rebels... Or they may show too little individualism by adopting the values of the dominant society, in which case we may call them conformists. Although opposites, rebellion and conformism are quite similar. Both require the hero to endure solitude, even if in a crowd. Moreover, both may be realized in the same character, since both derive from the same underlying flaw and people are not always consistent (p. 90).

Clyde, like Julien and Lucien before him, seeks to rise through conformity at least in externals to the expectations of the society around him. All of our criminal-parvenus thus far have been endowed by their authors with exceptional good looks and a kind of charm or appeal that makes their social

and economic mobility more likely than it might be if they were considered unattractive.¹¹ Further, all seek to capitalise on external appearance through obsessive attention to clothing and in particular, *imitation* of looks and manners. These protagonists must disassemble what they have formerly been in order to resemble what they would become, and in a degree that surpasses ordinary social habits of imitation: it is as if they derive their substance, such as it is (Moers [1970] refers to the “desubstantiation” of Clyde [p. 235]) by cribbing elements of other people’s being in a kind of personalised plagiarism.

Like Julien, who recites memorised sections of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* to impress a woman with romantic speech, like Lucien who as we have seen in the previous chapter becomes little more than a walking plagiarism, Clyde takes his cues in self-presentation from others, and even his crime (however ambiguous) is based on someone else’s idea – a news story about a drowning that so impresses him he derives his “plot” from it.¹² It is an idea “presented to him by this paper in this way. Wasn’t that strange?” (Dreiser, 1925, p. 507). While on one level this is a kind of denial of agency within Clyde’s own mind, it is also reminiscent of Julien Sorel’s uncanny moment in church, when he sees a newspaper article about the condemnation and execution of one “Louis Jenrel” (an anagram of his own name, which he does not recognise, though he notes the other’s name (like his life?) “ends like mine”(Stendhal, 1830/1998, p. 27).

Crucially, however, these irruptions of (imaginary) newspaper reality (not unrelated perhaps to their author’s process of deriving fiction from newspaper stories) differ in emphasis. Julien, unknowing, sees only his own future condemnation mirrored in the article; Clyde sees his future *crime*, as if the “way of the lake” (Dreiser, 1925, p. 537) is being pointed out to him in a quasi-supernatural manner. Julien’s crime may be prepared for in the text, but it is spontaneous, unpremeditated; Clyde’s whole process is premeditated, and it is that which brings him undone – not that he *did* it (the novel remains

¹¹ This extends back even to their pre-realist models, such as Jacob in *Le Paysan Parvenu* (1735), whose handsome appearance is the initial key to his good fortune, leading in this and the other texts to a kind of feminisation and fetishisation of male appearance more usually associated with female characters, and contributing to a sense of the protagonists’ *passivity* as regards their own rise.

¹² Later in the novel a character will decide that “as a plotter of crime Clyde was probably the most arresting example of feeble and blundering incapacity he had ever met” (Dreiser, 1925, p. 677). The weak protagonist of Patricia Highsmith’s *The Blunderer* (1954) similarly derives the idea of his crime from one he reads about in the newspaper, and similarly fails to imitate effectively. Dreiser’s influence upon Highsmith will be considered in the next chapter.

ambivalent), but that he *thought* so much about doing it, no jury would ever believe him innocent.¹³

Nevertheless, both these protagonists are intrinsically interwoven with other people's identities and stories they either imitate or seek to imitate, as too is Balzac's Lucien. Indeed, this motif of the copy, the plagiarised self, even down to the level of clothing as readable social text, runs through most of the history of novelistic social climbing and is there in its very roots, as traced by Marie-Hélène Huet in her extensive 1975 study of eighteenth-century social mobility novels, *Le Héros et son double (The Hero and his Double)*. Huet begins by considering *Gil Blas* (1710-1735) – known to have been a favourite of Stendhal's (Fullerton, 1912, para. 26) – which of course long precedes the realist novel but already lays down what are by now familiar elements. Gil is a valet whose adventures take him socially upward through various masters, accompanied, Huet (1975) tells us, by a

parallel progress in the art of imitation; and soon Gil Blas, not content to act "like" the lord he serves, borrows his very identity, and describes a whole carefree world that is a reproduction, an irreverent representation of lordly existence played out by a troupe of clever valets... (p. 16)

One of the ways in which Gil Blas learns the skills necessary to his rise is by copying out sermons. Gil is not a rounded character in a realistic setting – that is a long way in the literary future – but it is in such figures, with their humour and irony, that we see the beginnings of the realistic "parvenu" who will complicate his trajectory with serious crime (Gil also spends some time in prison). Notably, the text exhibits a quality that at least one critic will later find in Dreiser; Huet (1975) states that Gil the valet eventually acquires his own valet in turn, and we encounter a kind of *mise-en-abyme* or hall of mirrors:

The novel is constructed so that various aspects of society are successively reflected in the protagonist and so that he finds in his valet the essence of his own personality. The models multiply, as do the images, and, by the book's end, there are no gestures that do not recall other gestures, no scenes that do not recall other scenes, no situations that do not send us back to identical circumstances. Each character bears within him the effigy of another... (p. 22).

¹³ Exactly the same process has been explored in *Dead Reckoning*, the novel section of this doctoral thesis: so much premeditation, so many attendant petty actions, combine to make the protagonist *look* guilty of murder by intent, whether or not it was enacted. There, the models pertain to crime fiction rather than newspaper stories, though the latter are there at one remove, in that the protagonist's father was a devotee of "True Crime" tales.

This observation regarding an early picaresque social-climbing story could just as easily be applied to Dreiser's *Tragedy*, with very different effects. Lee Clark Mitchell (1985), concerned to defend Dreiser against criticism that he is repetitive and excessive, notes that

the sheer intensity of the novel's recurrences produces a curiously unsettling effect. Instead of ensuring event and solidifying character, repetition draws both categories into question, and by offering sameness in difference again and again, it slowly erodes a series of conventional assumptions... Whether as echo, prefigurement, recollection or revenge, as helpless compulsion or willful [sic] imitation, repetition in the novel finally denies the possibility of progressive behaviour and coherent identity (p. 40).

So the imitation in Dreiser is not simply internal to the characters' actions in speaking, dressing or moving like other characters, but, in the form of repetition, integral to the textual logic – the structure and the narrating language.

Imitation in fictional narrative is closely analysed in René Girard's influential study, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (1961/1976), which considers works by several major novelists including Stendhal and Balzac. Girard distinguishes in their novels a pattern of what he calls "triangular desire". Imitative and mimetic, it is, according to Girard, a form of "metaphysical desire" to which we are all prey, whether through seeking "vertical transcendency" (in God) or "deviated transcendency" (in our fellow beings). Desire for Girard is triangular because it is always mediated, never linear or direct. It is not that the subject simply desires the object, but that the subject only feels desire *for what another person desires*. The object has value because of *another* who appears to give it that value. This other is the "mediator", on whom the subject really focuses, and whom he or she seeks to resemble. Desire is thus *contagious* (Girard, 1961/1976, p. 98): "every desire redoubles when it is seen to be shared" (Girard, 1961/1976, p. 99).

This observation is certainly borne out by the text of *The Red and the Black*, to which Girard devotes a chapter¹⁴: we can readily concur that "all the intense desires of Julien are imitated desires" (1961/1976, p. 21). We can also see how Stendhal puts to use his understanding of this process when, for

¹⁴ Girard's widely acknowledged reading of *The Red and the Black* is nonetheless challenged and qualified by Annika Alling (2003). There are also, arguably, problems in Girard's privileging of a Christian standpoint, but they do not bear centrally upon the issues considered here.

instance, Julien increases his worth as a tutor to M. de Rênal by making sure he knows his rival Valenod would love to employ him, or when Julien excites Mathilde's interest by allowing her to know he is desired by another noblewoman, Madame de Fervaques (whom he has wooed, we may note, with *plagiarised* love letters written by and for someone else) (Stendhal, 1830/1998, p. 411). Desire "for" Julien arises in each case because the person thinks someone else desires him.

Given how strongly Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* belongs to the line of "desiring" narratives Girard discusses, we might expect the theory of mimetic desire to be equally pertinent here as in Stendhal or Balzac. Though it has been applied to other works of Dreiser – for instance, to his earlier *Sister Carrie*, in a reading of that novel by Lahoucine Ouzgane (2004), among the critics, Girard's theory is less extensively deployed in relation to *An American Tragedy*.¹⁵ That novel is widely seen to be a novel of desire – and indeed, for Girard this is always the novelist's theme, and works are differentiated according to whether they merely reflect the existence of the mediator or expose it, the latter category consisting of the "great" novels. In the original French title, Girard's study distinguished between "mensonge romantique" (the romantic lie) and "vérité romanesque" (novelistic truth).¹⁶ For Girard, "It is a victory over metaphysical desire that transforms a romantic writer into a true novelist" (1961/1976, p. 307); novels may either be collusive with the hypocrisy they depict – the concealment of how desire works – or they may lay it bare.

Where does *An American Tragedy* – not studied by Girard, but as I have argued, affiliated with the novels he examines – fit into this schema? And how may this schema illuminate the factor of crime in the rise of this particular parvenu? "In the birth of desire," Girard tells us, "the third person is always present" (1961/1976, p. 21). From the very earliest parts of Clyde's narrative, we are made aware of *his* awareness of the third party's opinion:

The principal thing that troubled Clyde up to his fifteenth year, and for long after in retrospect, was that the calling or profession of his parents was the shabby thing that it appeared to be *in the eyes of others* (Dreiser, 1925, p. 11, my emphasis).

¹⁵ It is mentioned in passing in surveys of American literature, and was also the subject of an unpublished conference paper by Professor Rosemary Johnsen, "Mimetic Desire in Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*", 15th Annual Meeting of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion. Saint Paul University, Ottawa, Ontario, June 2006.

¹⁶ This titular wordplay does not translate well into English since its root "roman" (novel) only obtains in French: *romantique/romanesque*.

Thus even Clyde's rejection of parental values, the goad to his initial desires for something better, is derived from the assumed "other". One of the concrete expressions of this pattern is his wish to enjoy the "young beauties" (Dreiser, 1925, p. 28) he sees going out with well-dressed young men he feels are superior to himself, stirring his wish to escape his family's life of poverty and religious self-denial:

You bet he would get out of that now. He would work and save his money and be somebody. Decidedly this simple and yet idyllic compound of the commonplace had all the luster and wonder of a spiritual transfiguration, the true mirage of the lost and thirsting and seeking victim of the desert (Dreiser, 1925, pp. 28-29).

Though Clyde's earliest ideas are of working and saving to "rise", and the goal is the acquisition of clothing and girls, he soon learns it is not so simple: the money he earns is not enough. Instead his trajectory will prove rather more passive and marked by fortuity: helped along by his good looks and manners (learned by imitation), he will obtain a place at his uncle's factory less by effort or skill than through his uncle's wish to compensate out of guilt, after he and Clyde meet accidentally, that Clyde's father did not inherit as he did.

Dreiser's description of Clyde's banal ambition as possessing "the luster and wonder of a spiritual transfiguration" (1925, p. 29) is not ironic ridicule so much as a Girardian observation on the nature of desire as "mirage" – illusion, ever-receding as it is approached, and grounded in the urge toward transcendency even when it appears petty and linked to material objects:

There is nothing less materialistic than triangular desire. The passion that drives men to seize or gain more possessions is not materialistic; it is the triumph of the mediator, the god with the human face (Girard, 1961/1976, p. 61).

This not only reduces one perceived gap between Clyde and Julien, who was seen, rightly or wrongly, as "not interested mainly in actual wealth" (Taylor, 1975, p. 148), by reasserting the spiritual drive, however debased, in Clyde's case also. It also invites us to look more closely for the presence of the mediator/s in Clyde's story.

According to Girard's theory, mediation in a literary text may be *external* – where the model whose desires are imitated is distant from the protagonist – or *internal* – where there is only a small distance between the two. In the first

case, because of the great distance, no rivalry is involved; in the second, the subject must hide his or her attempts to imitate (1961/1976, p. 9) and something far more noxious ensues, because both model and subject are competing in a “rivalry of desires” (1961/1976, p. 9):

The subject is torn between two opposite feelings toward his model – the most submissive reverence and the most intense malice. This is the passion we call hatred (1961/1976, p. 10).

In Clyde’s case, rather than seeing the two women he desires in turn as *objects* of his desire, we might construe them in Girardian terms as mediators. As Clare V. Eby (2004) points out in a chapter entitled “Dreiser and Women”, “Clyde is variously influenced – practically determined – by women... In *An American Tragedy*, women form both channels and obstacles to the social power that Clyde craves” (pp. 152-154). The notions of channel and obstacle at least partly point to the possibility of reading the women as mediators (the models whose desires are imitated) rather than desired objects. Girard indicates that

The closer the mediator gets to the desiring subject, the more the possibilities of the two rivals merge and the more insuperable becomes the obstacle they set in each other’s way (1961/1976, p. 26).

Rather than picturing Clyde as desiring these women because other men do – and thus locating his models in other males he would seek to emulate (his uncle, or his cousin Gilbert), there is a sense in which we may read him as pursuing the same objects the women do.

In this view, Roberta, the poor working woman, would constitute an internal mediator, close to Clyde in every way and becoming an obstacle for him. In the article already cited, Lee Clark Mitchell (1985) surveys Clyde’s many possible textual “doubles” as part of the pattern of repetition Mitchell discerns. Though the most superficially obvious of these is Clyde’s cousin Gilbert, Mitchell suggests,

their relationship lacks a characteristically daemonic power. And for that notably absent quality, we need to look elsewhere – most obviously, at the tension between Clyde and Roberta (p. 42).

While “...Roberta hardly seems a traditional double” (Mitchell, 1985, p. 43), “the psychological doubling results not from physical similarity, but from a social and economic resemblance” (p. 43). Noting the likeness in their

parentage, temperaments and circumstances, Mitchell goes on, "They are both spurred by loneliness and mutual desire, and it is as if they could hardly do other than discover self-images in the other" (1985, p. 43). Mitchell locates this doubling in terms of Otto Rank's ideas about projection of guilt onto an alter ego, but it is just as intelligible in Girardian terms: each has made the other his/her mediator in a case of "double, or reciprocal, mediation" (Girard, 1961/1976, p. 101).

Like Clyde, Roberta from the very first is depicted as having an imagination that means she is "always thinking of something better... A newer and greater life" (Dreiser, 1925, p. 280), and although she is clearly prepared to *work* her way there, she nonetheless shares "the world-old dream of all of Eve's daughters... that her beauty and charm might some day... smite... the soul of a given man or men" (Dreiser, 1925, p. 280), possibly implying a more traditionally passive feminine way forward. After meeting Clyde and "sensing the superior world in which she imagined he moved" (Dreiser, 1925, p. 287), Roberta is "seized with the very virus of ambition and unrest that afflicted him" (Dreiser, 1925, p. 287). It is easy then to see why Clyde might be a model/mediator for Roberta – but in what sense can we say that she forms a mediator for him?

It would be a mistake to see Roberta merely as sexual object for Clyde, for although he is clearly compelled by her physical presence, the text has been at pains to show us an earlier Clyde in the grip of mere sexual attraction, as in his forays with the minor character Rita Dickerson, whom nonetheless he decides eventually to resist. While physical magnetism certainly plays a role in his relation to Roberta, Clyde is at first drawn to her for more complex reasons:

She was, as he decided on sight, more intelligent and pleasing – more spiritual – though apparently not less vigorous, if more gracefully proportioned [than the other girls]. As a matter of fact, as he saw her at first... [she had] a certain wistfulness and wonder combined with a kind of self-reliant courage and determination which marked her at once as one possessed of will and conviction to a degree (Dreiser, 1925, p. 275).

The text is at pains to establish that these are Clyde's perceptions "on sight" and "at first": later, Roberta's impressive qualities will prove insufficient for Clyde. But it is important to note that it is not a case of meeting her first and then seeing her surpassed by Sondra. It is actually Sondra whom Clyde sees

first, before Roberta even applies to work at the Griffiths' factory. Sondra arrives on his first visit to his wealthy uncle's home:

as smart and vain and sweet a girl as Clyde had ever laid his eyes upon – so different to any he had ever known and so superior... To Clyde's eyes she was the most adorable feminine thing he had seen in all his days. Indeed her effect on him was electric – thrilling – arousing in him a curiously stinging sense of what it was to want and not to have... It tortured and flustered him. At one moment he had a keen desire to close his eyes and shut her out – at another to look only at her constantly – so truly was he captivated. (Dreiser, 1925, p. 251)

Here the most striking contrast in the first perceptions of each of the two women is between Roberta's status as a full person with distinct moral qualities, and Sondra's designation as a "thing" whose effect on Clyde is "electric" and "thrilling", leading to feelings of torture and captivation. If indeed these two women will stand as mediators to Clyde, we may say that Roberta is close to him and the mediation is "internal" in Girard's terms; that Sondra is so distant from him as to seem other than human, and her mediation thus "external". Clyde when waiting to be introduced to Sondra feels "fairly tremulous with a sense of his own inadequacy... For to him, youth and beauty in such a station as this represented the ultimate triumph of the female" (Dreiser, 1925, p. 252).

When Roberta first comes on the scene, she shares in these qualities of distant charm because apparently unattainable – so strong is Clyde's fantasy-projection onto her as she works in the factory that even her sweat seems precious: "little beads of perspiration... like jewels, they seemed only to enhance her charm" (Dreiser, 1925, p. 290). When by chance she appears outside working hours at the same lake where Clyde is canoeing, it is as if he has "realized a dream" (Dreiser, 1925, p. 296), and to her he is also like a vision, "[a]s though he were a pleasant apparition suddenly evoked out of nothing and nowhere, a poetic effort taking form out of smoke or vibrant energy" (Dreiser, 1925, p. 296).

At work again, after their time on the lake, we read, "Clyde saw that she was hopelessly and helplessly drawn to him, and indeed he was to her" (Dreiser, 1925, p. 304). Being poor herself, she does not represent a higher stage in his aspiration to upward mobility, but a form of access to more immediate pleasure he has long coveted. There is no doubt in the text that his feeling for Roberta is fully sexual, and yet that is not the only component of their relation –

indeed, as Donald Pizer (1976) has observed, “One of the most powerful ironic currents in the novel is that... Clyde and Roberta have in their backgrounds and temperaments the basis for a deep and binding love” (p. 250).

It is ironic because, like Julien Sorel initially throwing away his happiness with Madame de Rênal for an altogether more hypothetically happy, powerful and wealthy imagined future, Clyde’s capacity to be content with Roberta is mitigated by his inability to rid himself of the image of Sondra and her world: from the beginning, “he could see how he could be very happy with [Roberta] if only he did not need to marry her. For now his ambitions toward marriage had been firmly magnetized by the world to which the Griffiths belonged” (Dreiser, 1925, p. 296). Even when he is furtively dating Roberta and dancing with her, he muses, “And as for Sondra Finchley, well, she had ignored him and he might as well dismiss her from his mind – and yet even here, and with Roberta, he could not quite forget her” (Dreiser, 1925, p. 322).

It has frequently enough been noted that Roberta is to Clyde as Clyde is to Sondra: each in turn pins hopes of social betterment on the other. While Clyde does not pin any hopes of such betterment on Roberta, he shares her aspirations and senses in himself the lack of “self-reliant courage and determination... will and conviction” (Dreiser, 1925, p. 275) that he observes in Roberta at the outset. Where a girl he had courted elsewhere in the past, the grasping Hortense, kept Clyde at a tantalising distance, the text tells us, Clyde craved Roberta

with all of the desire of which he seemed to be capable, and with which he had craved Hortense Briggs – only with more satisfaction, since as he saw it she was simpler, more kindly and respectable (Dreiser, 1925, p. 290).

Roberta initially has the strength and dominance of Clyde’s “other” women but without the cruelty, so that winning her affections, “[i]t seemed at the moment as though life had given him all – all that he could possibly ask of it” (Dreiser, 1925, p. 315). He is nonetheless still the weaker party – where she must often take the initiative to make things work in practical terms, having “a certain fighting quality inherited from her mother” (Dreiser, 1925, p. 325), Clyde is an impatient vacillator:

his was a feverish, urgent disposition where his dreams were concerned, and could ill brook the delay of disappointments that are

the chief and outstanding characteristic of the ambitions of men (Dreiser, 1925, p. 342).

Indeed, Clyde's weakness and passivity, which will result in the ambiguity of his status as "murderer" (he can plan but not carry it out; does that make him guilty?), combine with many other factors to present him as more stereotypically feminine than the women characters. Cassuto (2004) remarks that Clyde is rendered "again and again in feminine terms" (p. 205). Evidence of Clyde's physical narcissism¹⁷ abounds: in addition to manifold examples of his sartorial obsessions, he enjoys canoeing because he likes his own appearance when doing it (Dreiser, 1925, p. 293), and is conscious of his good looks in the eyes of others. Upon his "conquest" of Roberta, he admires himself in the mirror and sees himself "as a youth of the Don Juan or Lothario stripe" (Dreiser, 1925, p. 345).

Yet this preening on the male pride of his role, like Julien Sorel's, is self-delusion: Roberta, whom he nicknames "Bert", and whose pet name at home was "Bob" (Dreiser, 1925, p. 390), is certainly the dominant figure of the two. In fact, Clyde's position regarding all the women is masochistic and submissive. It is only when Roberta falls pregnant that he has no option but to consider acting in the reverse position, that of sadism's logical end-point: murder.

We recall that Girard says internal mediation leads to rivalry – here it is a kind of metaphoric rivalry between a man and a woman for the ultra-feminine position. Who will be the "kept woman"? Clyde wishes to marry only if he can "rise" by marrying, as women are supposed to. To put it colloquially, Roberta's closeness to Clyde, their "competition" for the same kind of goal, means one of them has to go. As Girard notes,

The closer the mediator comes, the more bitter are the fruits of triangular desire... This adoring hatred, this admiration that insults and even kills its object, are the paroxysms of the conflict caused by internal mediation (1961 / 1976, p. 42).

At the point where Roberta's physical and social priorities threaten Clyde's own (illegitimate pregnancy without access to abortion means, in the given era, the only respectable means of rescue for a woman is marriage¹⁸), the two upwardly

¹⁷ In reality, narcissism is clearly not limited to women, but it is traditionally and stereotypically associated with them.

¹⁸ Cassuto (2004) observes, "Social security became law in 1935; *An American Tragedy* illustrates the lives and fears of the poor before the government stepped in to provide what the family

aspirant characters reach an impasse. Clyde's crime takes place because of this impasse – if we may finally call it a crime, since the novel, despite his premeditation, allows for doubt as to his intention at the actual moment of Roberta's death. Her rise would mean the end of his, as he has conceived it, for he has glimpsed the possibility of himself rising through marriage, and whatever stands in the way of that possibility must be eliminated. We will observe a similar motivation for crime, with less uncertainty, in the next chapter's American parvenu-protagonist and heir in many ways to Clyde, Tom Ripley, whose elimination of his double and mediator is equally premeditated but more "successfully" carried out.

once did" (p. 212n). Roberta's family would not be in a position to help her materially, even assuming she could bring upon them the shame of revealing her predicament.

Chapter Three

“Justice... is so last century!”: Patricia Highsmith’s *Ripley* and After

Patricia Highsmith’s 1955 novel *The Talented Mr Ripley* is one of her best-known works, and from 1999 onward has enjoyed a resurgence of public and critical interest (Shannon, 2004, p. 17) due to Anthony Minghella’s film version¹⁹ under the same title. Although that film also fits within the pattern of criminal parvenu narratives under examination here, our focus will remain largely with the novel because of its most distinctive feature not retained by Minghella’s film version: the complete absence of punishment for the protagonist’s crimes. Tom Ripley’s trajectory, unlike his predecessors’, is a rise without a fall. As Noel Mawer (2004) states, “Ripley escapes in every way: no guilt, no detection, no death” (p. 119).

Like Julien Sorel, Lucien Chardon and Clyde Griffiths before him, Tom Ripley wants a better life than the one he has to begin with; Edward Shannon (2004) describes him as “first and foremost an American bent on ascending the ladder of class and privilege” (p. 17). When the wealthy older American Herbert Greenleaf, whose son Dickie is lingering in Italy, mistakenly believes Tom knows Dickie better than he actually does, Tom eagerly takes up Greenleaf’s offer for him to travel to Europe, all expenses paid, and persuade Dickie to come home to America.

However, once in Europe, and once accepted as Dickie’s friend, Tom grows enamoured of his lifestyle, coveting the luxury, ease and access to culture that Dickie’s privilege affords, and no longer has any intention of persuading him to return to America. Like his predecessors in imitative social climbing, he begins to model himself on Dickie, copying his manner of dress and noting all his habits. When Dickie decisively rejects Tom, Tom decides to kill him and assume his identity. As in *An American Tragedy*, the death scene takes place in a boat and the body is disposed of in the water. But the blow struck to Dickie’s head is unequivocally deliberate (unlike Clyde’s accidental blow to Roberta) – and, once again more “efficiently” than Clyde, who uses traceable pseudonyms, Tom has been discreet: “They had not told their names to the Italian boatkeeper at San Remo” (Highsmith, 1955/1999, p. 102).

¹⁹ Minghella’s is not the only film version; *Plein Soleil/Purple Noon* (1960) was an earlier, French interpretation by René Clément, also introducing punishment not found in the novel. In Minghella’s film the punishment is psychological; in Clément’s, Ripley is caught by the police.

Tom's initial "success" at this murder, so different from Clyde's fumbings, is briefly compromised by the suspicions of Dickie's friend Freddie, who will not be placated, so Tom "has to" kill Freddie too ("He hadn't wanted to murder, it had been a necessity", [Highsmith, 1955/1999, p. 155]). After various setbacks which mean he has to abandon Dickie's identity and revert to being Tom, Tom manages to create the general impression that Dickie has committed suicide. Forging Dickie's will, he makes himself Dickie's heir, and the novel ends with him (as a self-pictured hero, "like Jason or Ulysses returning" [Highsmith, 1955/1999, p. 239]) taking a boat to Greece, which he has long wished to visit.

At first encounter, *The Talented Mr Ripley* might seem, even as the avowed story of a criminal parvenu, to diverge too strongly from the pattern under consideration here to merit inclusion. Partly this is because where the previous novels we have considered focussed largely on a single crime, Tom is a repeat offender, committing two murders in the first novel that features him, not to mention those in the sequels. As E. Turzynski (2005) notes in the context of consumerism as theme, "As a serial killer and social climber, he [Tom] consumes, not just products, but people and experiences as well" (para. 33). Partly, too, it is because *The Talented Mr Ripley* is devoid of the "two women" motif – indeed, even of a one-woman motif, because Tom is not interested in women. By contrast, there is a "two men motif", a pattern which is common in Highsmith's oeuvre (Mawer, 2004, p. 28). There is thus no pregnancy as impediment or boost to Tom's trajectory (as in the cases of Julien or Clyde) and no risk of overdetermination in terms of mother figures and their Freudian dynamics.

Nonetheless, this chapter will contend that Highsmith, with this novel, is augmenting the tradition of the criminal parvenu directly in the line of Stendhal, Balzac and Dreiser that has been traced in this dissertation. Concurring that Tom Ripley might be seen as "a prototypically American arriviste" (Sperber, 2010, p. 16), I will argue that *The Talented Mr Ripley* is nonetheless one possible end-point in the descent from Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*. Ripley takes as point of departure the apparently amoral, inexplicable and irresolvable parvenu figure that Stendhal instigates, and reimagines that figure in the modern American context as an irreducibly successful and unstoppable force.

The most self-evident connection between Highsmith and the tradition investigated here is her relation to the earlier American, Dreiser, though it is

only very recently that critics have begun to examine this relation. It is documented that Highsmith read Dreiser while in college (Schenkar, 2009, p. 126) and even, anecdotally, that Highsmith's own mother accused her of being "as egotistical as Theodore Dreiser" (Schenkar, 2009, p. 124), suggesting more than a passing acquaintance with his work in the Highsmith family. Josh Lukin (2010, pp. 23-28) has remarked on the common ground between other novels by these two authors (Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* [1900] and Highsmith's *Strangers on a Train* [1950], in each case the writer's first novel), particularly in terms of their focus on upward mobility and "education in desire" (Lukin, 2010, p. 24). Even more recently, Donald Pizer (2011), among other things an eminent Dreiser scholar, has published an essay explicitly, though not in depth, marking the links between *An American Tragedy* and *The Talented Mr Ripley*. Pizer's concern is to establish grounds for taking *Ripley* more seriously as literature than has usually been the case. Pointing out that the novel is "usually examined in the context of noir fiction"²⁰, Pizer argues for placing it in the context of earlier literary fiction including Dreiser's:

...Highsmith consciously shapes *The Talented Mr Ripley* in relation to the depiction of American values and identity in several major American literary texts... it is the powerful ironic tension between this literary subtext and the events of the novel that offer [sic] the possibility of considering the work as far more interesting and richer than has usually been held (2011, p. 49).

Beginning by exploring *Ripley's* deliberate evocation of Henry James's *The Ambassadors* (1903), Pizer only turns in the very last part of his essay to the Highsmith novel's hitherto unacknowledged debt to Dreiser, which he discusses relatively briefly. Remarking on "the striking parallel between Dickie's murder and the death of Roberta" (2011, p. 53), Pizer provides a summary of the stories' similarities and differences, declaring their essential resemblance in the idea that "[t]he pull of the American Dream of Success is so great that men otherwise not criminals²¹ will murder to fulfill [sic] it" (p. 53).

²⁰ "Noir fiction" is a term employed almost as generally and diversely as the well-known "film noir", so called for its dark and claustrophobic appearance, themes, and settings, and noir fiction and film are intimately connected, since many films noirs were based on novels. The length of this dissertation precludes a detailed examination of the parameters of noir fiction, but an in-depth exploration of the kind of fiction Pizer indicates here may be found in Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller* (2001). It is also worth noting that other critics have drawn a strong link between literary naturalism (Dreiser's field) and noir; see for example Jeff Jaeckle (2011).

²¹ "[O]therwise not criminals" is a debatable description: long before he contemplates murdering Roberta, Clyde is a passenger in the car that causes a child's accidental death, and he

Ultimately, Pizer concludes, Tom Ripley represents “a far more talented Clyde Griffiths” (p. 54).

In fact we have much less of Tom Ripley’s “back-story” than we do of Clyde’s, since Dreiser devotes far more of his narrative to tracing the protagonist’s early life. Highsmith’s novel is shorter, and by contrast establishes very little about Tom’s past. We learn that he is an orphan²², a factor Mawer (2004) connects to “conventional fairy tale” (p. 17). More shrewdly for this instance, Robbins (2007) notes the upward mobility genre’s “well-known favouring of orphans” (p. 57), seeing in their state a means for narrative to avoid the problem of those left behind by the protagonist’s rise – in this context: “[w]e can think of orphanhood as the disguised vestige of an earlier murder” (Robbins, 2007, p. 58). Signalling the fictional peers who do not rise along with the protagonist, Robbins suggests a metaphorical view of why parvenu stories are so often entwined with murder or attempted murder:

Someone has to die in order for someone else to rise... This logic fills the upward mobility story with deaths just as it fills the upward mobility story with prisoners. The genre’s signature effects include immobile bodies, bodies mentioned casually in passing or stepped over... (2007, p. 55).

Where Clyde had loving, if repressive and ineffectual parents, orphan Tom has been raised by an unsympathetic aunt, with whom his sole remaining tie is his need for money – until he meets the Greenleafs and is able to sever even that connection. We also know that Tom has, before the story begins, previously boarded with a man called Marc who resembles the “benefactor” figures of Horatio Alger’s upward mobility stories as discussed by Robbins (2007, p. 67). Tom recalls Marc as

an ugly mug of a man with a private income and a hobby of helping out young men in temporary financial difficulties by putting them up in his two-storey, three-bedroom house, and playing God... (Highsmith 1955/1999, p. 24).

The resentment implied by the expression “playing God” indicates that this narrative will not indulge American myths of a “helping hand” for the

runs away from the scene of the accident and changes his name. More directly criminal, long before he murders Dickie, Tom Ripley amuses himself with tax fraud and threatening letters.

²² Tuss (2004) interprets this orphanhood and another character’s as comparable to that of Frankenstein’s monster, noting they are “orphans set adrift amid the indifference of society, return[ing] to plague their inventors, the cultures and value systems that shape them” (p. 95).

otherwise “self-reliant” popularised by the Alger books. Marc’s power-wielding is reminiscent of the “suspicion of unspeakable self-interest” (Robbins, 2007, p. 18) attached to Alger’s fictional benefactors.²³ Alex Tuss (2004) explicitly situates the novel against the background of these stories, describing it as a “darkly perverse rendering of the classic Horatio Alger story, the rags to riches parable that figures so prominently in the mythology of the American Dream” (p. 97).

Like Clyde Griffiths, Tom has no difficulty separating himself off from his fictional peers, and moves onward without pity for the limitations of their world, despite having experienced it himself. Just as Clyde – like Lucien and Julien before him – felt himself superior and deserving of better things, Tom wishes to distance himself from “the riffraff, the vulgarians, the slobs” (Highsmith 1955/1999, p. 28) who appear to be his main company, if not truly his *friends*, before he gains access to the Greenleaf world.

Yet despite his contempt for his initial lower-class companions, Tom appears more likeable than Clyde; critics frequently note the degree to which readers are drawn into siding even against their own moral judgement with Tom:

The feeling of complicity experienced when following Ripley on his nail-biting adventure only becomes truly disturbing when the reader takes a step back and realises that he/she has been lured into willing a murderer to escape justice (Turzynski, 2005, para. 56).

And this is despite the fact that we know Tom Ripley to be “a coldly calculating social climber who kills his friend once he is done with him” (Shannon, 2004, p. 21). The vacillating weakness we observed earlier in Clyde Griffiths is absent from Tom, who, regardless of his negativity toward the lower classes, is an altogether more positive figure: “The emphasis... is strongly on his typicality, his American versatility and blankness of character. He has the optimistic American belief in fresh starts...” (Horsley, 2001, p. 119).

²³ This same “suspicion of unspeakable self-interest” is also attached to Derrick in the novel-component, *Dead Reckoning*, which bears undertones – deliberately kept unconfirmed – of his possible exploitation of the boys in his care. In a reversal of roles, he is also depicted as having been exploited as a younger man by his much older university teacher, the first Kathleen, linking him to another form of the “queer tutelage” that Robbins (2007, p. 4) adapts from Sedgwick – the Older Woman. Pen is symbolically offered the idea of this role at the novel’s very end, with the admiration of the young German boy Uwe; the upwardly mobile in turn becomes the potential mentor. Horatio Alger (1832-1899) was a prolific American author of upward mobility stories, usually focussing on boys and their adult male mentors.

Indeed, where our previous parvenu characters were trapped or brought down by a returning factor from their past, Tom's trajectory transcends this: by taking on Dickie's identity, he obliterates (and then reinvents) Tom Ripley: "Murder... serves this fantasy of upward mobility, disposing of the inconvenient facts of a subservient past" (Horsley, 2001, p. 118). This is of course what Clyde Griffiths also wished to achieve, but indecision, formed from a mix of weak will and genuine conscience, prevented his "success". In another context, Horsley and Horsley (1999) write of the "knowledge that is always at the heart of the noir world, that there is no real way to insulate the present from the past" (p. 388)²⁴. Tom Ripley, then, created by an author whose oeuvre is, we recall, "usually examined in the context of noir fiction" (Pizer, 2011, p. 49) stands as a challenge to this knowledge and a subversive intervention within both the noir tradition and the literary tradition we have been tracing in this dissertation.

Julien Sorel and Clyde Griffiths intend or enact violence upon a *past* figure who stands in the way of their future; Tom Ripley does so upon a *present* figure he sees as representing his future. After one too many instances of Dickie's rudeness and coldness, the narrator tells us:

He wanted to kill Dickie. It was not the first time he had thought of it... If he killed him on this trip, Tom thought, he could simply say that some accident had happened. He could – He had just thought of something brilliant: he could become Dickie Greenleaf himself. He could do everything that Dickie did. (Highsmith 1955/1999, p. 87)

The imitation so intrinsic to the parvenu's story – the mimicry in clothing, manners, speech, taste, we have seen through all the previous stories – has led here to its most extreme possible conclusion. We may recall, from the previous chapter, Girard's "adoring hatred... admiration that insults and even kills its object (1961/1976, p. 42), and how "the desiring subject wants to become his mediator; he wants to steal from the mediator his very being" (1961/1976, p. 54). Tom has earlier described himself as having "a thoroughly forgettable face" (Highsmith 1955/1999, p. 31), adaptable enough to resemble Dickie's, and when Dickie first asks him what kind of work he can do, Tom lists among his

²⁴ *Dead Reckoning*, the novel component of this thesis, explores a central anxiety about "insulating the present from the past" and, like Highsmith's writing, derives from the tradition Horsley and Horsley discuss in their 1999 essay, "Mères fatales", concerned with "the ways in which women writers have drawn upon and modified a different kind of male crime fiction, in which there is no solving detective figure bringing tidy closure" – fiction that is part of what they label "a-heroic noir"(p. 373). The conclusion of this dissertation will further consider *Dead Reckoning's* relation to the works studied here.

skills, "I can forge a signature... impersonate practically anybody" (Highsmith 1955/1999, p. 51).

It is not difficult, regardless of their difference in firmness of will, to see resemblances between Tom Ripley and Clyde Griffiths – and the doubling in *An American Tragedy* we considered in the previous chapter is revisited more centrally, more focally in Highsmith's novel, since the plot turns more directly upon it. One of the most striking parallels between Clyde and Tom as characters is their reverence for goods. Clyde's may seem more naive, even greedier, yet we remember the almost spiritual quality Dreiser mentions in Clyde's reverence for fine clothes and appearances: "this simple and yet idyllic compound of the commonplace had all the luster and wonder of a spiritual transfiguration" (1925, p. 29). Tom, more certain than Clyde of how to choose the right "objects", more certain than even the wealthy who can afford to, also exhibits this reverence for goods, yet in a specific, also pseudo-spiritual manner:

He loved possessions, not masses of them, but a select few that he did not part with. They gave a man self-respect. Not ostentation but quality, and the love that cherished the quality. Possessions reminded him that he existed, and made him enjoy his existence (Highsmith 1955/1999, p. 214).

Conversely, we might suppose this to distance him from Julien Sorel, who is aghast at his fellow seminarians' reverence for money and food, for mere material goods (Stendhal, 1830/1998, p. 192) – yet as we have seen, Julien too begins by seeking the wealth that would allow him the luxury of such an attitude, that sense of detachment and ease that mark the upper classes in all the texts we have studied here. And just as the critics were divided over whether Julien was really materially grasping, so too with interpretations of Tom Ripley we find similar qualifications. One camp states, like J. Dale (2010), that "it is very clear that the self-concept he targets is framed in terms of material status and wealth" (p. 416), and that

Acquisition and possession are integral to Tom's self-definition; in this he is emblematic of the egregious materialism engendered by the booming post-war economies of North America and Europe (p. 417).

On the other hand, Fiona Peters (2011), who cites and rejects an argument similarly made by Harrison that objects are "constituting and defining" for Tom (cited in Peters, 2011, p. 157), maintains,

Money and societal position are never the driving force of Highsmith's protagonists. Even for Tom Ripley, desire is for aesthetic refinement outside the limitations of the American ideal rather than for progress up some middle-management company ladder (p. 13).

While it is true that Tom has no intention of rising via any kind of company ladder, this negation opposes two elements that are not strictly separable in any of the texts we have studied – in the novel, “aesthetic refinement” is shown as only attainable through “money and societal position”. All of our parvenu-protagonists wish not to *appear parvenu*, which is surely one of the defining features of that state. To deny money and social status as driving forces in Tom Ripley is to ignore how, directly after the murder, Highsmith's narrator tells us, “Tom had an ecstatic moment when he thought of all the pleasures that lay before him now with Dickie's money” (Highsmith 1955/1999, p. 97).

The fact that these pleasures may be refined and aesthetic does not alter the lust for money that lies behind them, needed to facilitate them. The polarity implied in Peters's statement is a false one, evoking the idea that aesthetic refinement is somehow unrelated to material means. It is very like the false division Julien Sorel makes for himself in admiring the (aesthetically refined) way the nobles live, and despising the low attitudes of the bourgeois newly rich, when both are enabled by money derived from exploitation.

In the same way that critics, as we saw, could not agree on the meaning of Julien's crime, the response to Tom Ripley is also contradictory – not really on the level of motive, for it is clear enough why Tom kills Dickie, but on the level of Tom's moral attitude to his own actions – whether or not he feels guilt or is capable of doing so. All the parvenu protagonists we have studied have evinced this sort of ambiguity, and induced ambivalence in critical response. In the case of Tom, critics like Fiona Peters (2011) can write, “Ripley is Highsmith's alter ego, a man who, as the ultimate ‘normal’ psychotic, exists without conscience or guilt” (p. 30); Michael Cohen (2000) says, “Ripley has a brain in which the technical has taken over all the moral functions” (p. 77) and Slavoj Žižek (2003) asserts that Tom “seems to lack even an elementary moral sense...” (para. 12) Noel Mawer (2004), factoring in change over the course of the narrative, sees Tom as becoming, with each self-justification of his acts, “more and more the type of ... the amoral, unfeeling sociopath”(p. 20). Yet others can state the opposite:

Tom *does* have ethical perceptions and these do reference societal norms... Tom feels guilt... [his] immorality results from periodic displacement of moral norms from the center of his consciousness to allow for the pursuit of egotistical goals (Dale, 2010, p. 419).

Wendy Lesser (1995) is even more specific: "Ripley feels guilty even before he does anything wrong... He feels guilty only when it's not the appropriate emotion" (p. 67). Lesser maintains that the novel serves to relieve reader anxiety upon emergence from the reading experience, in the way that dreams of failure were thought by Freud to bring relief to the dreamer upon waking: "Ripley's free-floating guilt has left him and entered us" (1995, p. 67). Leonard Cassuto (2009) refers to "Tom Ripley's disordered sense of guilt" (p. 138), and notes that Highsmith herself stated, "Tom Ripley just doesn't feel guilt in a normal way" (cited in Cassuto, 2009, p. 137).

If there is critical dissension as to the existence of guilt and moral sense in Tom Ripley's character, there is less ambivalence regarding his potential for social critique. Regardless of reader-complicity with his story, he is not heroic in the way Julien Sorel is sometimes seen to be. The extent to which Tom's crimes are committed for pure personal gain alone, his callous greed and dubious moral sense, do not fit him for any kind of emblematic role as rebel or revolutionary. He does represent, as Lee Horsley (2001) indicates, a "subversive principle in the world" (p. 118), but nobody has argued that it is a positive or commendable one, and, as Mawer (2004) states, speaking of the Ripley sequels as well, "No coherent social criticism emerges from the Ripley novels" (p. 44). Dale (2010) clarifies: "Far from being a Camusian absurdist hero in revolt, Tom is the antithesis..." (p. 415); "Tom does not wish to be liberated from the societal framework in which he finds himself, he tends rather to wish to be advantageously integrated into it" (Dale, 2010, p. 417).

Where Julien Sorel's semi-heroic status was bolstered in Stendhal's novel by intimations of his Christliness (Simon, 1986), Tom Ripley, while far more distinctly an anti-hero, may also be read in bizarrely Christian terms at certain points in the narrative. The scene of Dickie's murder in the boat is replete with imagery of rebirth (as is indeed the scene in *An American Tragedy* where Roberta is drowned). As a kind of baptism motif, it recalls John the Baptist's words from the New Testament, but reversed, for Tom's view is "he must decrease, and I must increase". It is as if Highsmith is turning the meaning of the act of murder inside out. Leonard Cassuto (2009) locates this, against a background of "hard-

boiled” crime fiction’s links and tensions with the sentimental tradition in fiction, as

a perversion of the defining image of sentimentalism: the sacrifice of Christ. Highsmith laces the scene of Dickie’s murder with crucifixion imagery... Dickie’s murder cleanses Tom as Christ’s sacrifice was supposed to cleanse everyone else... Highsmith’s religious language makes the point abundantly clear: Tom has “sacrificed” himself and is resurrected through murder (p. 142).

Tom’s perverse status as resurrected Christ tends to lower and ironise the religious ideal rather than to raise Tom to any kind of role model or approved figure. Indeed, in a much later Ripley novel, *The Boy Who Followed Ripley* (Highsmith, 1980), the idea of Tom’s being any kind of a model to emulate ends in the follower’s suicide from guilt.

We may ask what it is that enables Tom Ripley to “succeed” in evading punishment where previous characters (and this later fictional follower) “failed”. The question is significant for the tradition of the criminal-parvenu narrative because it is this that distinguishes Highsmith’s work from what precedes it.²⁵ Michael Cohen (2000), writing in the context of “mystery fiction”, calls *Ripley* a “real category breaker” and adds, “After Ripley, all things are possible” (p. 77). He asks,

Are we outraged at his escape or happy for him? Highsmith cannot make us love Ripley, but she has involved us in his fortunes and made him interesting, she has let him get away with murder, and she has changed crime fiction... [it is] a watershed book (p. 79).

By contrast, the very aspects of Clyde Griffiths that allow reader sympathy and “involvement” – his few moments of sympathy for others, his intermittent reluctance to do harm – are part of what prevents him “getting away with murder”, what causes him to “fail” at his ill-considered plan. He is not as efficient (that is, callous) as Tom Ripley and he is, like Julien Sorel, more at the mercy of his feelings for women. In Julien, this feeling is primarily emotional and psychological (the sexual aspect in Stendhal’s writing is widely acknowledged as downplayed, understated [Brombert, 1962, p. 161]), but it is still expressed through sexual attachment. In Clyde, sexual need is almost the cause of everything that goes wrong: “his abnormal interest in girls” (Dreiser,

²⁵ Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*, in the 1721 novel known by that name, ultimately goes free, but she is jailed and punished along the way.

1925, p. 266) has got Clyde into trouble more than once, and will be the ultimate trigger of his downfall:

His was a disposition easily and often intensely inflamed by the chemistry of sex and the formula of beauty. He could not easily withstand the appeal, let alone the call, of sex (Dreiser, 1925, p. 273).

Quite the opposite is true of Tom Ripley. Where Minghella's film adaptation of the novel presents Tom as clearly homosexual (Keller, 2002, p. 69; Shannon, 2004, p. 18, et al.) Highsmith's original protagonist is far more ambiguous and never entirely defined one way or the other, though the novel contains many suggestions that Tom has mixed in homosexual circles before leaving the USA, and other characters make remarks that imply they interpret him that way. In later Ripley novels he is married, but with the same apparent flatness of affect and sexual neutrality that characterised him as a single man. As Slavoj Žižek (2003) observes, Tom is "disconnected from the realities of the flesh, disgusted at biological life's cycle of generation and corruption" (para. 14). Where Clyde Griffiths is unable to emulate the "mentally and worldly elect" he sees in the elite Chicago club where he works, whose success partly requires that they show "no faintest trace of that sex element" (Dreiser, 1925, p. 192), Tom Ripley is at an advantage, since he is sexually unattracted to women and does not have to struggle with this particular impediment to upward mobility that the earlier novels have posited. Žižek (2003) remarks, in terms reminiscent of René Girard,

Tom should not be thought to be homosexual. Dickie is not an object of desire for Tom, but the ideal desiring subject, the subject who is 'supposed to know' how to desire... (para. 11).

The complex nature of the novel's rendering of Tom's sexuality is further signalled by Edward Shannon. Conceding that Highsmith "explicitly addresses homosexual desire in the Ripley novels", he nonetheless affirms that Highsmith "did not envision Tom Ripley in terms quite so exclusive or conventional" as Minghella's film version does – adding, "Desire may be what drives Tom Ripley, but it is not sexual desire... More than men or women, Tom desires things" (Shannon, 2004, pp. 22-23). We may recall here Lucien Chardon, parvenu-protagonist of Balzac's *Lost Illusions*, of whom Michael Lucey (2003) has written,

Male same-sex sexuality circles endlessly but elusively around Lucien. Lucien's sexuality is consistently held open to question; the novels about him clearly intend to provoke such questioning. But they seem written more in order to keep that questioning going than to provide specific and explicit answers to any questions (p. 185).

Exactly the same is true, with different results, of Tom Ripley. By maintaining the ambiguity (and non-centrality to the story) of Tom's sexual drive, Highsmith is subverting²⁶ the truisms of the sublimating, puritan work ethic familiar to readers of American upward mobility stories and so troubling to Dreiser's protagonist. Her more general subversion of elements of the criminal-parvenu novel tradition results in an ironic, blackly humorous atmosphere (Peters [2011] notes "the Ripley novels verge on the comic" [p. 146]) that points back more strongly to Stendhal, tonally, than it does to the more immediately obvious antecedent in Dreiser.

In fact, despite the outward difference in their fates, the sentiment shared by Julien Sorel, as he faces execution, and Tom Ripley, as he boards that final boat to Greece, is the desire to brave the outcome with the requisite nobility and pride: "He was not afraid. This was it. This was the way he had hoped he would feel, sailing to Greece" (Highsmith, 1955/1999, p. 243). Tom does not yet know for certain that he will not be caught, but "[d]uring the voyage [he] lived in a peculiar atmosphere of doom and of heroic, unselfish courage... He felt possessed of a preternatural strength and fearlessness..." (Highsmith, 1955/1999, p. 245).

Since Tom will not, even throughout the sequels to *The Talented Mr Ripley*, ever be apprehended and punished, the social and political meanings of his trajectory must differ from those of his novelistic predecessors. We have seen that critics may claim the criminal parvenu symbolically for either reactionary or progressive causes, depending on interpretation, but that it is even harder to align Tom Ripley with a specific political stance²⁷. If Highsmith was, as Dale (2010) writes, "the true voice of those who feel inexplicably 'shut out' from the success which they feel should be their due in the prosperous post-war world" (p. 408), Tom is a curious choice of representative for their cause, since his narrative is self-limiting – we cannot all do as Tom did to attain our "due". Instead he stands as avatar of a nihilistic acceptance of human

²⁶ She is also disallowing any too-easy, homophobic conflation of "homosexual" with "criminal".

²⁷ Cf. Jackson Lears: "...Dreiser transcended the formulas of progressives and reactionaries alike" (2004, p. 66).

behaviour that resists offering viable solutions to injustice whether of class difference or criminality. As Highsmith stated in a book about her writing practice: “I find the public passion for justice quite boring and artificial, for neither life nor nature cares if justice is ever done or not” (Highsmith, 1981, p. 56).

This attitude differentiates Highsmith from her avowed influence, Dostoyevsky,²⁸ and from Balzac, whose protagonists *are* punished. Though Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (1866/1987) is clearly related to the tradition explored in this thesis, influenced by Balzac and influencing subsequent writers in turn, several factors preclude it from detailed consideration here, foremost among them the lack of space. We may concede that Highsmith has clearly drawn upon certain aspects of its protagonist Raskolnikov, who commits murder for philosophical and psychological reasons – to see if he is equal to it, to see if he is a “superior being”, out of a reasoning derived from observing Napoleon, whether he has, in Georg Lukacs’s words, “the ability of Napoleon to step over men for the sake of great aims” (1949, para. 12). It’s true Raskolnikov is also in debt, and his victim is a pawnbroker whose money he takes, but his prime reasons are philosophical; he is not driven by a desire for class mobility or consumer status. Similarly, though, our parvenu-protagonists conceive of themselves as superior beings to whom the normal rules somehow should not apply.

But Raskolnikov is no true social climber, despite his wish to escape extreme poverty – no “rise” takes place in his story – and, unlike Tom, he receives standard punishment and is redeemed. The protagonist may be seen as amoral, but the text is not, and cannot be read as endorsing his actions (though it validates the importance of his questions). The link to Balzac is strong in *Crime and Punishment*: the cynical Vautrin/Herrera’s²⁹ code and unveiling of the drive to power in *Lost Illusions* is what Raskolnikov resumes and tries to follow to its logical outcome, as well as Vautrin’s earlier interaction with Balzac’s other upwardly mobile protagonist, Rastignac in *Old Goriot* (1835). As Lukacs (1949) remarks:

²⁸ Schenkar (2009, p. 126) records that Highsmith read and “relished” *Crime and Punishment* at age 13, and then again at age 19, during her second year at college. She also notes a dream of Highsmith’s, “borrowed from her favorite Dostoyevsky novel”, that Highsmith had “murdered an old lady with an axe... The murder was motiveless” (2009, p. 398). Andrew Wilson (2003) also discusses Dostoyevsky’s strong influence on Highsmith, who called him her “master” and wrote of *Crime and Punishment*, “I know morally this had a great effect on me” (quoted p. 126).

²⁹ Vautrin is known by various false names at different points in Balzac’s narratives.

Raskolnikov is the Rastignac of the second half of the nineteenth century. Dostoyevsky admired Balzac, had translated *Eugenie Grandet*, and surely quite consciously resumed the theme of his predecessor... Raskolnikov is unthinkable without Balzac (Lukacs, paras 8 & 16).

Reference has been made earlier in this thesis to M. E. M. Taylor (1975), whose study of the arriviste figure in the French novel identifies two strands in the tradition (Taylor's arriviste is nearly equivalent to our parvenu here³⁰). Stating that Stendhal creates the arriviste by updating and modernising the traditional hero, Taylor argues that Balzac then crosses this figure with the villain to establish a second strain (1975, p. 2). Tracing the origins of these trends in ideas of Rousseau and Napoleon, and arguing that where the Stendhalian arriviste is amoral, the Balzacian is immoral, Taylor writes,

Balzac does not understand the 'amoralism' of Rousseau and Stendhal. He is not as intellectual or progressive as Stendhal, and his 'morality' is a retrograde step in the field of ethics and the study of human behaviour (1975, p. 146).

The distinction, however, may not be as clear as Taylor suggests, since as we have seen, it is possible to read both novelists' criminal-parvenus in more than one direction politically (as too with Dreiser's). Tom Ripley exhibits features of both strains: if he descends from Balzac via Dostoyevsky, he is also nonetheless, in Taylor's terms, a Stendhalian arriviste in being "essentially aristocratic" in manners and sensibility despite his ordinary origins. In her suspension of judgement (Abel, 2008, p. 92), Highsmith is allowing the figure of Tom Ripley to stand as proof of that "mental experiment with himself"³¹ that Lukacs (1949, para. 15) sees in Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov, and for similar reasons; Lukacs's description of Dostoyevsky's fictional men fits Tom Ripley as if he were one of them:

lonely men – men who are completely dependent on themselves as they understand life and their environment, who live so deeply and intensely in themselves that the soul of others remains to them forever an unknown country. The other man is to them only a

³⁰ Taylor (1975) distinguishes it from the term parvenu which she reserves for the more obviously ill-at-ease social climber, stating that the Balzacian arriviste is always "smacking... of the 'parvenu'" (p. 148). The word "arriviste", however, carries the same unaccepted misfit status as "parvenu".

³¹ Lukacs (1949): "The experiment with oneself, the execution of an action not so much for the sake of the contents and effects of the action, but in order to know oneself once for all, in depth, to the very bottom, is one of the main human problems of the bourgeois and intellectual world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (para. 17).

strange and menacing power which either subjugates them or becomes subject to them (1949, para. 24).

We may see this alienated position articulated in *Ripley* at the point where Tom realises he is rejected by Dickie. He is staring at Dickie's eyes:

nothing but little pieces of blue jelly with a black dot in them, meaningless, without relation to him. You were supposed to see the soul through the eyes... They were not friends. They didn't know each other. It struck Tom like a horrible truth, true for all time, true for the people he had known in the past and for those he would know in the future... he would never know them. It was too much: the foreignness around him, the different language, his failure, and the fact that Dickie hated him. He felt surrounded by strangeness, by hostility (Highsmith, 1955/1999, p. 78).

Grasping this alienation is what will permit Tom not only to murder Dickie, but to discard his usual "self" and take on the self he constructs as Dickie's. If, as Lukacs adds, "by this immersion of the subject in itself, the self becomes bottomless" in Dostoyevsky (1949, para. 25), then in Highsmith it also becomes a matter of indifference which self is which. If no self is any more real than one's own self, one may with impunity dispose of other "selves": the very word "self" has been emptied of its meaning. We see what Dale (2010) describes as a "fundamentally egocentric recruiting of an image of 'the other' into [the protagonist's] consciousness" (p. 412). After the murder, Tom feels socially comfortable: "This was the clean slate... This was the real annihilation of his past and of himself, Tom Ripley, who was made up of that past, and his rebirth as a completely new person" (Highsmith, 1955/1999, p. 110), recalling his baptismal re-emergence from the waters in which he nearly drowned while disposing of Dickie (Highsmith, 1955/1999, p. 93). When Lucien in *Lost Illusions* is saved from suicidal waters by his criminal mentor, and told that he has nothing in common with that "poet recently deceased" (himself!), Vautrin/Herrera boasts,

I have fished you out of the water, I have brought you to life again, you belong to me as the creation belongs to the creator, as the efrits of fairytales belong to the genii, as the janissary to the Sultan, as the soul to the body (Balzac, 1837-43/1897, p. 350).

But in Balzac's story, the bond is still metaphoric – the two men retain their actual separate identities, even if they form a couple. In Highsmith, the merger is total. A police officer asks to see Tom's (Dickie's) passport:

Tom produced it, and the officer looked sharply from Tom to the picture of Dickie, more sharply than anyone had ever looked at it before, and Tom braced himself for a challenge, but there was none (Highsmith, 1955/1999, p. 135).

The challenge never ultimately comes, even if there are occasional suspicions (and suspicion will continue to follow Tom Ripley throughout the sequels, without result), because of the novelist's belief that "neither life nor nature cares if justice is ever done or not" (Highsmith, 1983, p. 56).

If *The Talented Mr Ripley* is, as Cohen (2000) suggests, a "real category breaker" (p. 77), it may also have helped to cement a new category, that is, of criminal parvenu narratives in which the protagonist goes unpunished. In 1973, British novelist Piers Paul Read published *The Upstart*, whose protagonist, Hilary Fletcher, is of an ordinary background, but covets the lifestyle of the Metheralls who own the local grand house, and falls in love with their daughter. Rejected, Hilary embarks on a life of extreme and vengeful criminal activity (including the murder of a baby) that makes it impossible to "like" him as a character, though the sheer picaresque energy and lucid style of the tale make the narrative for the most part compelling. In a *Guardian* feature article (Wroe, 2010), Read is quoted as making explicit reference to the story's relation at least partly to Stendhal:

My novel *The Upstart* is based on my experiences of the snobbery of worrying about saying the wrong thing. It was almost a 19th-century society and I knew exactly what those social-climbing young men in Maupassant and Stendhal were talking about and would get frightfully excited myself about an invitation to the Duchess of Devonshire's ball. But I gave it all up a long time ago. I sort of climbed up, looked over and then began climbing down again (para. 9).

Far from conventional punishment, in fact, Hilary experiences religious conversion, and the plot difficulty – the problem of what to do with the criminal parvenu – is "solved" by his turning to God and reforming his ways. Though the narration suggests his punishment is in having to settle down into marriage and family life after antinomian freedom, the tone is facetious and the outcome is a "happy ending"; he is essentially unpunished. Hilary is a successful criminal parvenu who makes good through religion. Marian E. Crowe (1998), describing Hilary as "implausibly converted" (p. 322), further

notes, "Because it is not prepared for, this transformation does not seem credible" (p. 323).

There is, then, a huge disjunction between the amoral stance of the first-person narration and the sudden "turn" in plot, previously realistic if indeed depicting extremes of behaviour, that strains credulity and results in the novel seeming a didactic vehicle for the author's own religious views. Mary Reichardt (2010) writes of Read that "in his opinion his Catholic beliefs have affected almost everything he has written" (p. 178), and *The Upstart* is yet more evidence of the ideological flexibility of the criminal parvenu narrative, for here, as in Paul Bourget's nineteenth-century novel, *The Disciple*, a plot derived from Stendhal is used to further conservative Catholic ends whose antecedents in his own time Stendhal himself rejected and satirised.

Diametrically opposed to Read's tale of a parvenu finding God is Woody Allen's 2005 film *Match Point*, again a scenario in which the criminal parvenu goes unpunished, but with completely irreligious, far more nihilistic overtones. *Match Point* is not the film version of a novel; it is made from an original screenplay with literary debts to the tradition considered here – as Naremore (2008) observes:

The influence of Dreiser on noir persists down to the present day: Woody Allen's *Match Point* [2006 (sic)], the story of a tennis pro who murders his lover in order to maintain his upper-class marriage, could be described as a fusion of *American Tragedy* with Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr Ripley* (p. 279).

The film appears to access Dreiser's influence through the George Stevens film version of *An American Tragedy*, *A Place in the Sun* (1951), which Pizer (2011) tells us was part of what gave Dreiser's reputation "a major boost" (p. 49) around that time (just before Highsmith wrote *The Talented Mr Ripley*).

Like Dreiser's story, *Match Point* considers a social climber, Chris Wilton, torn between two women, the poorer of whom becomes pregnant by him. Where Allen's character departs from Clyde Griffiths is that again, he is "successful" at murdering the burdensome pregnant girlfriend (as well as her neighbour); he manages to marry the upper-class woman, and is never convicted or punished. As Joseph Henry Vogel (2006) points out, after comparing the film to Dreiser's plot as interpreted in *A Place in the Sun*, and contrasting the outcome, "justice at the end of a movie is so last century!" (para. 26).

Allen references the debt to Dostoyevsky by showing Chris reading *Crime and Punishment* in bed, and he alludes visually to Stevens's film version of Dreiser by having Chris and Nola meet while playing table tennis (in Stevens's film it was a pool table, and it was the "other woman", the rich society girl, who played, but the visual connection to the earlier film is clear). However, in terms of derivation from the original Dreiser, some critics have seen Allen's film as reactionary – for example, Joanne Laurier (2006) comments:

Allen's superficial and accommodating view of modern society is sharply at odds with Dreiser's harsh critique... [some] critics have invoked Dreiser's *American Tragedy* as the source material for *Match Point*. This is an unjustified slight against the great novel, which is a scathing indictment of a social mechanism that encourages dreams only to mercilessly use and destroy those who attempt to pursue them... Unlike Allen, Dreiser demonstrates that his protagonist, Clyde Griffiths, should not *want* to be part of a cruel and exploitive elite... (para. 12).

Completely at odds with this reading of Allen's film as complicit with the social order is an interpretation touched on by Joseph Henry Vogel (2006), whereby one might read (and some critics *have* read) the film to suggest a critique of contemporary political oppression. Citing the scene in which the "ghosts" of Chris Wilton's murder-victims appear to confront and question him, and in which Chris tells one of them that she was simply "collateral damage", Vogel (2006) notes,

The term "collateral damage" is more than just a euphemism. It is code for the U.S. Military *doublespeak* that dates back to the Viet Nam War. The expression has been resuscitated in the wake of tens of thousands of civilian deaths in the ongoing Iraq War. Woody Allen's placement of "collateral damage" in the most reflexive scene of the movie is highly significant but not at all obvious. It requires the critic (para. 31).

Vogel then goes on to clarify by quoting one such critic:

The movie veers in directions that cause the audience to cry out in amazement, but most of the positive reactions to *Match Point* I've encountered provide an alibi for the audience, some excuse for the pleasure this movie affords. For instance: *It's really an allegory of the Iraq War and the things we'll do to pay for our quality of life* (Matthew Wilder, quoted in Vogel, 2006, para. 31).

These two widely differing interpretations – on the one hand Laurier’s “superficial and accommodating”, on the other, Vogel’s and Wilder’s detection of socially critical allegory – demonstrate that the absence of punishment at the end of a criminal parvenu narrative is not necessarily straightforward in meaning: for one, it implies a condoning of greed and ambition in line with the social order, for others, it holds a mirror up to the reader/viewer to provoke consideration of our complicity with the criminal protagonist: to ask ourselves, in what ways am I, or are we, Chris Wilton (Julien/Lucien/Clyde/Tom)? In what ways do we daily condone the criminal protagonists of real-life narratives, so as to achieve or retain our own financial security and social status? Chris Wilton’s “success” may be read as an echo of Balzac’s arch-criminal Vautrin’s statement, in *Old Goriot*, that “[t]he secret of great fortunes with no visible source is a crime forgotten because it was neatly done” (1835/1951, p. 116).

In both Highsmith’s and Allen’s unpunished antiheroes, then, we see a shift in the location of ambivalence; we do not question only the *nature* of the protagonists, but the meaning of their avoidance of punishment. It is not that we have to decide, as we might have tried to with Julien, Lucien or Clyde, about their personal actions and attitudes, because Tom Ripley’s (conscience or no conscience) and Chris Wilton’s are so clearly maleficent – but that we must choose how to read the text’s allowing them to go free, and consider how we are made to identify with their fate.

In the case of Piers Paul Read’s unpunished criminal parvenu, Hilary Fletcher, the answer is already (over)determined for us, since the narrative world is subject to the Catholic God in whom the author believes, and is designed to illustrate the possibility of repentance (one might argue, the possibility of having one’s cake and eating it too). But the fictional worlds of the Highsmith novel and Allen film are encompassed by no such moral guarantor. From the second half of the twentieth century onward, with its knowledge of two world wars and the Holocaust, and its experience of nuclear weapons, belief in justice cannot be straightforward, and fictional narratives, unless committed to a religious view as in the case of Read’s, will reflect loss of certainties in that realm. Some of these factors, along with questions raised by the earlier criminal parvenu narratives that did include punishment, have played their part in the creation of this thesis’s creative component, *Dead Reckoning*, whose narrative does not include punishment for the protagonist, but at the same time does not offer certainty of freedom from punishment in the imagined future. Our concluding chapter will turn to a consideration of *Dead*

Reckoning in the context of the criminal parvenu narratives we have studied thus far.

Conclusion

This conclusion will focus on the thesis's creative component and how it contributes in a new way to the criminal parvenu narrative tradition, as well as suggesting some areas in which its exploration might be extended or diverted in other possible fictional approaches.

The psychological suspense novel, *Dead Reckoning*, was developed in the context of reading and studying the tradition outlined in the dissertation, and bears marks of influence from all of the novels examined here. Highsmith's influence on *Dead Reckoning* is particularly direct, in the concern with identity in flux and interpersonal obsession, and in concluding without punishment, as well as in stylistic approach. From Dreiser, *Dead Reckoning* takes some of the passivity of the protagonist, and the work's ambiguity regarding criminal intent (did the protagonist really kill the victim?); and from many of the foregoing novels, its variation on the "two women" motif, here reconfigured as an extramarital lesbian affair.

Dead Reckoning derives from the parvenu narrative line because of its emphasis on the upward mobility that the protagonist, Pen Barber, achieves (with limitations) through marriage, as well as that achieved by her husband Derrick, whose background is more favourable but who requires the stability and intimate support provided by marriage to achieve some degree of financial security and social status.

Pen's family of origin was a mixture of working-class and aspirant petit bourgeois, thrust back into financial hardship when her would-be parvenu father left them. In marrying a man with more educational and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2010) than herself, and pushing him to expand that capital (further study) and realise it in bourgeois terms (becoming head of a language department in a private secondary school), she has attached herself vicariously to the middle class and attempted to acquire its cultural trappings, primarily as an auto-didact. Derrick is referred to sarcastically by Pen's mother as "the discount version... the markdown" (p. 16) because his early episode of mental illness has mitigated his otherwise firmly bourgeois status, embarrassing his family of origin and setting him at a distance (p. 16).

Hence the nature of the parvenu under scrutiny in this novel is that of the (apparently heterosexual) *married couple*, as opposed to the male parvenus of Stendhal, Balzac, Dreiser, Highsmith, and others, or the females again in Stendhal, in Thackeray and elsewhere. In focusing on marriage-based social

climbing, the novel necessarily raises and complicates questions of identity, since marriage traditionally requires “the exclusion of all other”, the notion that two become “one flesh”, and an emphasis on shared goals.

Within the world of this novel, in the balancing act that is marriage, one or both identities may become submerged or curtailed either for the benefit of the other, or for the notion of benefit to the whole. Concentration on the couple, in this novel, leading to complete isolation from other people, creates a precarious “stability”: should one element go awry, there is a sense that the whole may crumble. This is the beginning of our story: the discovery of a letter from the past that indicates not all is what it seems in the couple.

It is Pen’s attempt to re-stabilise the couple, her obsession with extinguishing an element from Derrick’s past that threatens her sense of reality, that triggers the action of the novel, and brings her (and eventually Derrick) into the realm of the *criminal* parvenu. We will recall again here Horsley and Horsley’s (1999) comment regarding the “knowledge that is always at the heart of the noir world, that there is no real way to insulate the present from the past” (p. 388). *Dead Reckoning* blends elements of domestic noir, suburban noir, and Horsley and Horsley’s aheroic noir (as distinct from detective-hero-type fictions), in certain examples of which, they state,

the protagonist is in fact the perpetrator; the normal world is shown to be vulnerable and easily disrupted; there are no clear distinctions between guilt and innocence; love ends in crime and death; the resolution is ambiguous and irony is pervasive; there is no heroic detective figure in the ascendancy; instead, obsessed, alienated, schizoid characters struggle to make sense of chaotic reality, haunted by dark secrets, their lives possessed by the past, their identities destabilised (1999, p. 3).

It is against precisely this background, derived from both the popular modern field and the earlier literary works that historically precede any usage of the term “noir”, that *Dead Reckoning* is intended to be read. It is a crime novel but not a detective fiction, for reasons Horsley and Horsley (1999) encapsulate thus:

For women writers, a preoccupation with the problematisation of female identity is often part of a more general expression of “disease with the family,” which has been a pervasive theme in feminist crime fiction. But what distinguishes the noir crime novel from other forms of female crime fiction (and particularly from much female *detective* fiction) is the refusal to offer positive female role models. Instead, women’s noir very often challenges assumptions

about female identity and, through the sympathetic representation of “transgressive” female desire and insecure, fragmented female identities, subverts the idealised cultural possibilities of stereotypical femininity (p. 6).

In a manner that shares some of these features, *domestic noir* has elsewhere been described, in a way that may recall the extreme case³² of claustrophobic intimacy at the centre of *Dead Reckoning*, as

characterized primarily by a rancid view of domestic life, and especially married life. It’s not about good marriages gone bad – instead it reflects a jaundiced view of the domestic realm, sees it as corrupt, no longer viable, infected by the moral chaos, the existential bewilderment, of the wartime and post-war world... In the *domestic noir*, the existential dread symbolized by *noir*’s dark city has penetrated the “normal” world, transformed it. Both traditions are dealing with the same existential dread, but viewing it from different angles – different enough to constitute two distinct traditions (Lloydville, 2007, para. 4).

Since Cassuto (2004) saw Dreiser as sitting at the crossroads that led toward hardboiled crime fiction (p. 196), and noir may be seen as deriving from hardboiled (Spicer, 2010, pp. xl et al.), so the popular tradition described here is arguably connected to our line reaching back through Dreiser to Stendhal’s great literary crime novel, *The Red and the Black*, with which we began this study.

Like Stendhal’s novel and the other parvenu narratives we have considered, *Dead Reckoning* may also be understood in terms of René Girard’s (1961/1976) theory of triangular and mimetic desire.

A third party. Redolent with irony. Pen thought yet again of Diana: There were three of us in this marriage, so it was a bit crowded. Why did this always come back to her? (p. 120).

Pen had a vision of the three of them, reduced to stark pronouns: *him, us*. Names, personalities, histories dropped away like flesh to leave a skeletal geometry: the triangle (p. 141).

³² The extreme case is not intended to imply a norm, but to subvert the idea of marriage as a narrative *solution*: marriage here is not the goal, as it is (though a failed one), for both Julien Sorel and Clyde Griffiths; or the material reward, as it will be for Tom Ripley marrying wealthy Heloise in the sequels to *The Talented Mr Ripley*. Rather, it is the starting point for the exploration of social mobility. (What might Roberta Alden’s life have looked like if she had succeeded in marrying Clyde Griffiths, for example?)

It is not simply a matter of a “love triangle”, but of desiring what the model or mediator desires. Derrick has all along been Pen’s model in her attempt to rise – her acquiring his languages, following his reading, avoiding alcohol, working in the same school, are forms of imitation whose equivalents we have seen in the earlier novels – and he becomes her model in desiring when, seeking out his former object of desire, Pen finds herself unexpectedly caught up just as Derrick was in the relationship with Kathleen. As Girard writes, “true jealousy... always contains an element of fascination with the insolent rival” (1961/1976, p. 12). Pen is Girard’s “chronic sufferer from jealousy, who always thinks [her] illness will be cured when the current rival is eliminated” (1961/1976, p. 131).

Ironically, in “real” terms within the narrative, Kathleen is not the actual object known to Derrick but a different woman with the same name – a sign of the futility of ever attempting to change or control the past, for the past is never what one now thinks it was. It is elusive, it slips away and defies understanding, leading to error – in this case, fatal error. Slippage in identity is such that – especially in this internet age – one person can easily be taken for another. If Kathleen’s surname had been just a little more common, Pen would not have assumed she was the same person as the earlier Kathleen; if it had been very unusual, the chance of there being two working in a similar field would be small.

As in many of the earlier criminal-parvenu novels we have studied, pregnancy in this novel provides a turning point³³. Just as it was compromising for Clyde Griffiths, or status-securing for Julien Sorel, in *Dead Reckoning* it is the unplanned element that forces a decision on Pen’s part regarding her choice between Kathleen and Derrick, and an ironic “seal of approval” upon her dangerously claustrophobic domestic situation, since a baby is the one element she has previously lacked to make a conventional marriage. Because of her expected child with him, and because he alone knows what Pen has done and could tell others, she is at the end of the story more dependent upon him, not less:

³³ An earlier parvenue like Becky Sharp in Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1848), whom we briefly considered in Chapter One, also marries, and bears a child, but neither of these constrains her; she has very little to do with her child, and her narrative trajectory exceeds the time of her marriage, both before and after. Even earlier (1721), Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* marries several times and bigamously, but abandons her children to other people’s care.

It occurred to her now that there was only *we*. There was no Pen apart from Derrick, because Derrick knew all. If he had not loved her, he could have turned her in.

She stared at him now, imprinting his expression on her very retina, like a newborn creature that has to remember in order to survive. If Derrick chose, even for a moment, to let go... She must never, never alienate him. There was no longer anything to hold back. Pen tugged at her collar again, and again could barely breathe (p. 152).

This sense of claustrophobia stems from the novel's debt to noir fiction as evidenced most immediately in the work of Patricia Highsmith, and yet belongs as well to the longer history of the novelistic social climber, who is also locked in a kind of struggle with his or her social environment and whose transgression against that background is to assert mobility. In this respect Lee Horsley's (2001) description of the noir thriller conveniently makes explicit noir's compatibility with the parvenu tradition this thesis has investigated, since the following might strikingly equally apply to the literary naturalism in Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* or the historical consciousness of Julien's position in *The Red and the Black*:

noir characters... are usually doomed to be isolated and marginalised. The main themes of the noir thriller are generalisations of the ill-fated relationship between the protagonist and his society. Characters suffer either from failures of agency (powerlessness, immobilising uncertainty) or from loss of community (isolation, betrayal). Obsessed, alienated, vulnerable, pursued or paranoid, they struggle with fatality... The protagonist feels his course to be shaped by society's injustices, failures, prejudices or pressures... (p. 11).

These factors, whether we pinpoint them in the historic criminal parvenu novel or the more recent noir thriller/psychological suspense novel, have formed the writing of *Dead Reckoning*. Having sought stability and a "place" in the world through marriage, Pen is not much further ahead than in the bitterly deadlocked relationship she experienced growing up with her mother (and in which her mother still attempts to persist). Though not an orphan as so many of our parvenus have been, she has nonetheless experienced the loss of her father in her youth, and the subsequent financial hardship of the single-parent family, an early lesson that contributes in her case to fearful clinging within marriage, a sense of unspecified threat to its security:

Before her father left, Pen had never noticed the cost of anything. Afterwards, it was like a refrain: *can't afford, can't afford*. A negative mantra.

Afterwards meant grey suburban isolation, flat yards in cleared, sandy areas where the only verticals were asbestos fences. Pen and her mother had lived in rental homes and had to move every year or two, when the cost went up or the owner was selling (p. 5).

Yet, like Julien Sorel (rather than Clyde Griffiths or Tom Ripley, who revere objects), Pen's desire for improvement relates consciously to refinement rather than mere acquisition of material goods:

She'd never thought goods were the way to *move on up*. It was so much more complex than that. You could lose them in one stroke – fire, flood, one false move in your finances and then bankruptcy...

No, what she'd worked for all this time could not be found in the plasma television screen or the limestone water-feature on the backyard lap-pool. Such things turned her stomach... (p. 124).

Even after marriage and eventual improvement in circumstances, Pen has had to learn, like all literary parvenus, the new manners that enable "passing" as a member of a higher class – usually embodied in external trivia such as items of dress (figured in Stendhal, Balzac, Dreiser and Highsmith as almost a form of costume or disguise for a new role, and requiring financial outlay even where the protagonist is in denial about desire for money and goods):

At least her clothes passed muster these days. Pen cringed to remember Jean's comments on what she'd worn to work in the early days.

"White heels, white jacket, white handbag," Jean had grinned. "Classic! All you need now is the poodle perm. What's your middle name – Debbie?"

Pen had had to ask Derrick what she meant. But Derrick had shrugged and avoided her gaze, saying it must be some female fashion thing. But Pen knew it was nastiness in another guise. *Oh, I was only joking...*

Eventually, watching and learning, Pen had toned herself down (p. 36).

Pen has also had to acquire cultural capital through Derrick:

Appalled at what she didn't know, and that fact that she mostly read genre novels, he'd guided Pen over the years, till she was at least as well-read as he was.

At first his guidance had hurt her pride a little. Then she found it useful. These days she could hold her head up with any of his colleagues, even if she was only office staff (p. 12).

Yet this “rise” from the relative poverty and limited cultural access of her youth has only increased Pen’s isolation and alienation, since like all our literary parvenus she is awkwardly situated *between* classes. She has joined the bourgeoisie but experiences what Pierre Bourdieu (1979/2010) calls “hysteresis of habitus”³⁴ (p. 138) in that some aspects of her mindset and practices still arise from “conditions of existence” (Bourdieu, 1979/2010, p. 166) under which she no longer lives. She cannot identify with the middle-class women of privilege who are now her peers, as we see when she enrolls in a university extension course:

Pen stood at a distance and observed. The human group was mostly middle-aged, and mostly female, all thick hair, fine teeth and quality fabrics. She felt again that attraction and repulsion these sorts of women always provoked in her, with their shawls and “interesting” beads, their well-fed figures, their complete carelessness of their own leisure and good fortune.

She knew, too, that this was a prejudice, and that she couldn’t have it both ways. There was this, or there was where she had come from, and that hadn’t worked for her either.

‘I belong nowhere,’ she thought glumly, not for the first time... (p. 31).

Isolation and loneliness also attend Julien Sorel, Clyde Griffiths and Tom Ripley, too bookish, sensitive or, in the case of Tom Ripley, fastidious for their peers in their class of origin, they experience this same “attraction and repulsion” for the members of their newly attained class. However strongly or loosely this “belonging nowhere” may be stressed as a cause of their crimes, it is always linked to the disaster – in Julien’s case, because the tenuousness of his position means he can be “unhinged” by a letter exposing his past; in Clyde’s case, because it means he must conceal his lower-class sexual liaison from his upper-class relatives; in Tom’s case, because the sudden understanding of his alienation from Dickie, as we have seen in Chapter Three, enables him to premeditate Dickie’s murder. In a moment similar to that of Tom’s estrangement from Dickie, Pen briefly perceives the gulf between herself and Derrick:

³⁴ Bourdieu (1979/2010) writes of “the practice-unifying and practice-generating principle, i.e., class habitus, the internalized form of class condition and of the conditionings it entails” (p. 95).

Derrick looked at Pen, and then smiled, in sequence. The infinitesimal lapse in between chilled her. He was opaque; perhaps he had always been.

For a few seconds it seemed as if all other people were opaque, like aliens, or automata. The big trucks, cement mixers, road trains grinding before and behind them, groaning up the highway to cross the hills and head east with their pointless, greedy loads, endlessly coming and going – all seemed to be running by daemonic order, unrelated to human beings. Pen could hardly breathe, and it wasn't just the carbon monoxide (p. 129).

The difference of course is, it is not Derrick she has plotted to murder, or will accidentally push to his death. Rather than blame her husband at any stage for the concealment of the situation with his earlier Kathleen, Pen has, in a state of denial, focussed her blame and jealousy on the woman (or the woman she imagines Kathleen to be). In fact Kathleen is a successful independent woman who has overcome some difficulties similar to those in Pen's background, being raised by her mother and abandoned by her father.

Thus the "attraction and repulsion" forms an even more pronounced polarity in Pen's attitude to Kathleen. In a manner deliberately reminiscent of Clyde Griffith's indecision over Roberta, Pen both plots – at times semi-consciously – to be rid of Kathleen, and feels strongly drawn to her. By the time Pen causes Kathleen's death, she has abandoned all intention of doing so: as with Clyde and Roberta, it is an accident. But just as Clyde, even if he did not murder Roberta, could never make a jury acquit him because every piece of evidence points to his guilt, so too Pen has laid a trail of evidence, with her stalking and petty persecution of Kathleen, her secrecy and deceptions, that would indicate her guilt to anyone who discovered the dead body in her house.

Anyone except Derrick, that is, because ironically he is, in their shared social isolation, the only person who knows Pen well enough to believe her. Indeed, he commits himself to the same necessity for ongoing deception – makes himself criminal as accessory after the fact, either because he loves Pen, or because this strengthens his hold on her; readers may interpret his action as either or both of these. In this regard and in strict plot terms, the outcome is "reward", not punishment, since the protagonist's aim was to secure her marriage. Yet in another, more subterranean sense, if Pen's unconscious and unintended drive was to find some sort of freedom apart from Derrick, the outcome is a kind of punishment, for she is now locked in more securely than ever before.

There is, then, fundamental ambiguity in the novel's outcome. And Kathleen-who-is-not-Kathleen also possesses symbolic ambiguity: she is first imagined as the husband's "other woman" whom the wife dreads, but she proves instead to be the "other woman" who embodies the "lesbian possibility" (Rich, 1980/2003, pp. 17 & 31), an option Pen's fear causes her to reject, even though she finds their time together "utterly, uncompromisingly real. More real to Pen right now than the empty pretend-house in the Perth hills, abandoned and languishing in the middle of an eternal makeover" (p. 89).

Much of the setting in Perth and Western Australia is depicted as artificial, false and strained, for this story takes place in what is essentially a "parvenu state", founded in its European-settler-invader history not as a convict colony but arguably as a form of "land-grab" by British and Irish colonists wishing to better their material circumstances³⁵. Brief but symbolic reference is made in the text to figures such as Sir John Forrest, colonial explorer and first Premier of Western Australia, "one of the wealthiest of the first generation of Federal politicians" (Crowley, 1981, para. 28), who nonetheless began as the son of farmers who had come to Australia as servants, and whose rise was partly facilitated by a socially and financially advantageous marriage. The novel makes no overt political statement about colonialism, but the setting and character-discussion of such historical figures is intended to underscore the basic thrust of criminal parvenu narratives, that "[s]omeone has to die in order for someone else to rise..." (Robbins, 2007, p. 55).

The larger political dimension is one aspect of the criminal parvenu story that could fruitfully be taken further, novelistically, in the Australian context, both in the respect that non-indigenous "prosperity" can be seen as achieved through criminal dispossession of indigenous peoples, and also in terms of what Robbins (2007) considers in his final chapter, "Luck of Birth and the International Division of Labor", when he describes "the latest transnational forms" of the upward mobility story, in which "a post-colonial migrant's upward mobility can only happen at the expense of someone at home whom

³⁵ See for example Mary Durack, *To Be Heirs Forever* (1976), on the establishment of the Swan River Colony, which was to become Perth, Western Australia; early arrivals included "small struggling farmers *anxious to become landed gentry* of a new country" (my italics, pp. 29-30); and in general, "The idea of coming out... as individual investors, had appealed to most of them as a challenge to their initiative and enterprise and a unique opportunity of *acquiring vast private estates*" (my italics, p. 42). Durack goes on to focus on their disillusionment – but these were their aims. The crime aspect of this parvenu state, it may be argued, is the dispossession and frequent killing of Aboriginal peoples.

she might know" (p. 243), since Australia continues to be a migrant and multicultural nation.

There is also much room for the criminal parvenu novel to expand on the theme of gender in a contemporary setting – Lamiel and Becky Sharp may have been shocking in previous centuries, and, turning briefly again to film, *Baby face's* ambitious, scheming Lily Powers (played by Barbara Stanwyck in 1933), had to be cut and censored even in pre-Code Hollywood. How does the twenty-first century create – and receive – a lone female criminal parvenu; does she too go unpunished?

In all these areas, the flexibility we have noted throughout this dissertation in the deployment of the fictional criminal parvenu figure, his or her capacity to suggest ambiguous or even contradictory political meanings, offers the contemporary writer a focus both for narrative interest – the parvenu's trajectory is, because deviant, inherently *narratable* (Brooks, 1992, p. 85 & p. 139) – and for potential social critique. But this critique must grapple, among other problems, with the two factors identified by Gary Day (2001) as "objections to the idea that we are now living in a classless society... The first, the continued existence of inequality... the second, the claim that mass culture is an expression of bourgeois values" (p. 192). To write fictions of the criminal parvenu from whichever point on the political spectrum is to invite the difficulty that one may reinforce complicity with the negative aspects of the social structure one wishes to examine. The risk is, however, inexhaustibly generative and regenerative.

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