

1

Up at the house, Angie told herself, they would be turning in their bunks and pushing
5 off sheets in the growing heat, still dozing but already with their sights on breakfast.
Bacon and eggs and Madge's burnt toast. "Burnt?" Madge would bluster; "I don't call
that burnt, I can do better than that. Besides, burnt toast never did your father any
harm. It didn't kill him off, he thrived on it, so did your uncles. Now, who's for honey
and who wants Vegemite? That's the choice." The children would yowl and make
10 faces but bite into the burnt toast just the same. It was a ritual that would begin
precisely at seven with the banging of Madge's spoon.

Meanwhile, down here on the headland, in an expanding stillness in which clocks,
voices, and every form of consciousness had still to come into existence and the day
as yet, like the sea, had no mark upon it, it was before breakfast, before waking,
15 before everything but the new tide washing in over rows of black, shark-toothed
rocks that leaned all the way inland, as they had done since that moment,
unimaginable ages ago, when the earth at this point whelmed, gulped, and for the
time being settled. Angie drew her knees up and locked them in with her arms.

On the reef to her left, out of sight behind the headland, her father-in-law, Audley,
20 was fishing.

Dressed in the black suit and tie he wore on all occasions, even before breakfast, even
for fishing, and standing far out on the rocky ledge with its urchin pools and ropes of
amber worry-beads, he would, she thought, if you were sailing away and happened to
glance back, be the last you would see of the place, a sombre column—if you were
25 coming from the other direction, the first of the natives, providing, with his fishing
rod and jacket formally buttoned, an odd welcoming party.

She raised her eyes to the sea and let herself drift for a moment in its dazzling
stillness, then, dawdling a little, got to her feet and started up the path towards the
house.

30 A FOUR-SQUARE structure of sandstone blocks, very massive and permanent-
looking, it stood immediately above the sea. Its first builder was Audley's
grandfather. Successive owners had simply added on in the style of the times: two
bedrooms on the south in Federation shingles; later, for the children, the product of
wartime austerity, a fibro sleepout. More recently Audley had added a deck of the
35 best kauri pine where in winter they could eat out, protected at last from the

prevailing southerlies, and where, when the whole clan was gathered, the overflow, as Madge called it, could bed down in sleeping bags. The grass below the deck was scythed—no mower could have dealt with it—and roses, mixed with native shrubs, threw out long sprays forming an enclosure that was alive at this time of day with
5 wrens and long-beaked honey-eaters. Angie, lifting aside a thorny shoot, came round past the water tank. She paddled one foot, then the other, in the bucket of salt water Madge had set below the verandah and came round to the kitchen door.

“Hey, here’s Angie.”

Her son, Ned, leapt up among the scattered crusts.

10 “Angie,” he shouted as if she were still fifty yards off, “did you know Fran was coming?”

“Yes,” she said, “Clem’s bringing her.”

Ned was disappointed. He loved to be the bearer of news.

15 Always ill at ease in Madge’s kitchen, fearful she might register visible disapproval of the mess or throw out some bit of rubbish that her mother-in-law was specially keeping, Angie perched on the end of a form as in a class she was late for and accepted a mug of scalding tea.

“But I thought they were divorced,” Ned protested. His voice cracked with the vehemence of it. “Aren’t they?”

20 Madge huffed. “Drink your tea,” she told him.

“But aren’t they?”

“Yes, you know they are,” Angie said quietly, “but they’re still friends. I saw Audley,” she added, to change the subject.

25 Jenny looked up briefly—“Has he caught anything?”—then back to the album where she was pasting action shots of her favourite footballers. She was a wiry child of nine, her hair cut in raw, page-boy fashion. Angie cut it for her.

“The usual, I should think,” said Madge. “A cold.”

“I thought when people got divorced,” Ned persisted, “it was because they hated one another. Why did they get divorced if they’re still friends? I don’t understand.”

Jenny, who was two years younger, drew her mouth down, looked at her mother, and rolled her eyes.

“Ned,” Angie said, “why don’t you go and see if Ralph’s up?”

5 “He is, I’ve already seen him,” Jenny informed her. Ralph was their father. “He’s writing. He told me to stay away.”

“People never tell me anything,” Ned exploded. “How am I ever going to know how to act or anything if I can’t find out the simplest thing? How will I—”

“You’ll find out,” Madge said. “Now—I want a whole lot of wild spinach to make soup. I’m paying fifty cents a load. Any takers? A load is two bucketfuls.”

10 “Oh, all right,” Ned agreed, “I’ll do it, but fifty cents is what you paid last time. Haven’t you heard of inflation?”

15 “Ned,” Madge told him firmly, “it’s too early in the morning for an economics lecture. Besides, you know what a dumb-cluck I am. Leave me in blessed ignorance, that’s my plea.” She made a clown’s face and both children laughed. “Small hope in this family!”

When she had armed the children with short knives and buckets she flopped into a chair and said: “Do you think we’ll get through today? I’m a dishrag already and it isn’t even eight.”

20 The Tylers were what people called a clan. Not just a family with the usual loose affinities, but a close-knit tribe that for all its insistence on the sociabilities was hedged against intruders. Girls brought home by one or another of the four boys would despair of ever getting a hold on the jokes, the quick-footed allusions to books, old saws, obscure facts, and references back to previous mealtimes that made up a good deal of their table-talk, or of adapting to Madge’s bluntness or Audley’s sombre,
25 half-joking pronouncements, the latter delivered, in the silence that fell the moment he began to speak, in a voice so subdued that you thought you must have been temporarily deafened by the previous din.

30 Even when they had been gathered in as daughters-in-law, they felt so out of it at times that they would huddle in subversive pockets, finding relief in hilarity or in whispered resentment of the way their husbands, the moment they crossed the family threshold, became boys again, reverting to forms of behaviour that Madge, in her careless way, had allowed and which Audley, for all his fastidiousness, had been unable to check: shouting one another down, banging with their great fists, grabbing

at the food or scattering it to left and right in a barbarous way that in minutes left any table they came to a baronial wreck.

Audley claimed descent from two colonial worthies, a magistrate and a flogging parson, both well recorded. His roots were as deep in the place as they could reasonably go. Madge, on the other hand, had no family at all.

Adopted and brought up by farm people, she had been, when Audley first knew her, in the days when they came down here only for holidays, the Groundley girl, who helped her old man deliver milk.

“Goodness knows where you kids spring from,” she used to tell the boys when they were little. “Only don’t go thinking you might be princes. Just as well Audley knows what little sprigs of colonial piety and perfect breeding you are because there’s nothing I can tell you. Gypsies, maybe. Tinkers. Malays. Clem could be a Malay, couldn’t you, my pet? Take your pick.”

“I was fascinated, you see,” Audley would put it, taking people aside as if offering a deep confidence. “I’d been hearing all my life about my lot—the Tylers and the Woolseys and the Clayton Joneses—made me feel like something in a dog show. Then Madge came along with those blue eyes and big hands that belonged to no one but herself—old Groundley was a little nut of a fellow. In our family everything could be traced back. Long noses, weak chests, a taste for awful Victorian hymns—it could all be shot home to some uncle or aunt, or to a cousin’s cousin that only the aunt had heard of. My God, I thought, is there no way out of this? Whereas I can look at one of the boys and say, Now I wonder where he got that from? Can’t be my side, must be her lot. The berserkers. The Goths-and-Vandals. It’s made life very interesting.”

People who were not used to this sort of thing were embarrassed. But it was true, the boys all took after their mother, except for Clem, who took after no one. They were big-boned, fair-headed, with no physical grace but an abundance of energy and rough good humour. Not a trace of Audley’s angular refinement, though they were free as well of his glooms.

As little lads Madge had let them run wild, go unwashed, barely fed—in the upper echelons of the public service where Audley moved it was a kind of scandal—but had been ready at any time to down tools and read them a story or show them how to spin pyjama cord on a cotton-reel or turn milkbottle-tops into bells. She wrote children’s books, tall tales for nine-year-olds. Twice a year, regardless of household moves or daily chaos or childhood fevers or spills, she had produced a new title—she was proud of that—using as models first her children, then her grandchildren, all thinly disguised under such names as Bam or Duff or Fizzer for the boys and for the tomboyish girls, McGregor or Moo. “It’s lucky,” she told Ned and Jenny once, “that

Audley had all those family names to draw on. I'd have let my fancy rove. If it'd been up to me I'd have called the boys all sorts of things."

"What would you have called Ralph?" Ned asked, interested in catching his father for a moment in a new light.

5 "I'd have called him—let me see now—Biffer!"

The children went into volleys of giggles. "That's a great name!" Ned yelled. "It really fits him. You should have called him that."

"I did," Madge said, "in one of my books, I forget which."

10 "I know," Jenny shouted, "The Really-Truly Bush, I've read it. The boy in that was Biffer."

"Well, hark at the child, she got it in one." Madge gave a snort of laughter.

But Ned was affronted. "That's not Ralph," he insisted; "that's nothing like him. That's not Ralph."

15 "No," Madge agreed, "but that's because a whole lot of different things happened to that boy. If they'd happened to Ralph he'd be just like it."

"Would he really?" This from Jenny.

Ned, whose idea of the world was very different, was unconvinced.

Madge laughed again. "Really and truly."

20 She got letters from her readers, which she answered in the same distracted style as the books and had been looked up to by three generations of children as the mother they most wished for, a cross between a mad aunt and a benign but careless witch.

25 The boys too had had no complaint, though they had from the beginning to give up all hope of shirts with all the buttons on or matching pyjama tops or even a decently cooked potato. It was Audley who had attended to them, wiping their noses, picking up their toys, dishing up Welsh Rarebit, which he had learned to make at cadet camp when he was a schoolboy and which had remained his only culinary skill. They had had to fend for themselves, shouting one another down in the war for attention and growing up loud and confident. They admired their mother without qualification and were fond of Audley as well—too much so, some would have said. "The true sign of a

great soul,” they would have replied, citing Goethe, “is that it takes joy in the greatness of others.” They were quoting their father, of course.

5 Today was to be a meeting of the clan. All the Tylers would be there with their wives and children, a few cousins, and neighbours from as far as fifty kilometres off if they cared to drive over.

10 It was the Tylers’ annual party, an occasion they celebrated as a purely family affair since it was Audley’s birthday. That it coincided with a larger occasion was of only minor significance—though Audley, when he was a boy, had thought it might not be, and had built his dreams on the auspicious conjunction. Later, when some of those dreams became reality, he mocked his youthful presumption as tommy-rot, but by then it had already served its purpose.

“No, no, Audley’s seventy-second,” Madge was shouting into the phone. “Just come along as usual if you’ve got nothing better on, it won’t be special. Oh no, Audley’s birthday, like we always do. The other thing’s too big. I couldn’t cater.”

15 When Audley came up the path he did have something: two black-fish, each the size of an Indian club.

20 “Oh la,” Madge said, “now what am I going to do with those?” She stood with her hefty arms folded, looking down at where he had laid them side by side on the bench, the eyes in their heads alive but stilled, a pulse still beating under the gills. “The freezer’s full of things for the party. Isn’t he the last word?”

Audley, meanwhile, in his jacket and tie and with his long legs crossed, was perched on a form, hoeing into tea and burnt toast.

Angie watched him. He chewed on the blackened wafer as if he were doing penance. He appeared to enjoy it. He wants people to think he’s humble, she thought.

25 She could never quite believe, despite the evidence, that in Audley she had come so close to power. He had none of the qualities you read about in books, but for thirty-seven years this odd, hunched figure, who was devoting himself at the moment to ingesting the last of a blackened crust, had been in charge, one after the other, of four government departments. Wasn’t that power? His signature had appeared on the
30 nation’s banknotes. He had, as he put it, “had tea with the sharks,” survived a dozen blood-lettings, dealt with thugs of every political persuasion. Six prime ministers at one time or another had slipped into his office, sometimes with a bottle of whisky, to steel their nerves before a vote or share a moment’s triumph or grief, and still turned up, those of them who were among the living, to check a detail in their memoirs or

clear up with him a matter of protocol or just talk over what was happening in the world—meaning Canberra.

He had disciples too. The oldest among them now ran departments of their own or were professors or the editors of journals. The youngest were alert, ambitious fellows who saw in him the proof that you could get to the top, and stay there too, yet maintain a kind of decency. He bit into the blackened crust, masticating slowly, while Madge, arms folded, regarded the fish.

“Well,” she said at last, “this won’t buy the baby a new blanket. Birthday or no birthday, I’ve got my words to do.”

10 She hefted the two fish into the sink, scratched about on the win-dowsill among the biros, testing one or two of them to see if they were still active, then, using her forearms to push back a pile of plates, made space for herself at the table among the unwashed tea mugs. She opened a child’s plastic-covered exercise book and began to write.

15 Angie wandered off. She ought by now to be used to Madge’s offhand discourtesies and Audley’s tendency to withdraw, but the truth was that she always felt, down here, like a child who had been dumped on them for a wet weekend and could find nothing to do.

20 She went down the steps and stood shading her eyes, looking to where the children would be hunting the slopes above the sea for spinach. Suddenly, as if from nowhere, an arm came round her waist, so awkwardly that they nearly went over, both of them, into a blackberry bush.

“Hullo,” Ralph said, “it’s me. Are you up to a bit of no good?” He kissed her roughly on the side of the neck. “Hope no one’s looking.” He kissed her again.

25 He was a big fair fellow who had never grown out of the schoolboy stage of being all arms and legs, a bluff, shy man who liked to fool about, but then, without warning, would go quiet, as if his intelligence had just caught up with some other, less developed side of him that was all antics, leaving him suddenly abashed.

He pulled her down in the grass.

30 “Mmm,” he mumbled into her mouth, “this is better than Mum’s toast.” He sat up. “Did Dad catch anything?”

She told him about the blackfish and he nodded his head, suddenly sober again.

“Oh, he’ll be pleased with that, that’s good,” he said. “What a terrific day it’s going to be.”

2

5 An hour later Jenny was shouting from the verandah rails. “Hey Ned, Mum, Fran’s here.” She ran down to the gravel turning-place to greet her.

“Where’s Clem?” she demanded when she saw that Fran was alone. “Angie said you were coming with Clem.”

Fran stuck her head out of the window to look behind and backed into a shady place under the trees.

10 “We came in separate cars,” she explained. “He’s closing the gates.”

Almost immediately they heard his engine on the slope.

15 Fran swung out of the car carrying the little deerskin slippers she liked to wear when she was driving, coral pink, and a soft leather shoulder bag. She was very slight and straight, and with her cropped hair looked childlike, girlish or boyish it was hard to say.

“So,” she demanded, glancing about, “what have you kids been up to?”

“When?”

“Since I last saw you, dope!” She gave Ned’s head an affectionate shove, then threw her arm around him. She was barely the taller.

20 He grinned and hunched into himself but did not pull away.

“Our football team won the premiership,” Jenny announced. “I got best and fairest.”

“Gee,” said Fran, “did you?”

Clem slammed the door of his car and came up beside her. Smiling, he took her hand. “Do we look like newly-weds?” he asked.

25 Jenny was suddenly suspicious. “Why?” she asked. “Why should you?”

“I don’t know. Do we?”

The two children glanced away.

Since his accident Clem said things, just whatever came into his head. They felt some impropriety now and cast quick glances at Fran to see what she thought of it, but she didn't appear to have heard. "I'm going to look for Angie," she said "I could do with a cuppa." She started off towards the house with her bouncy, flat-heeled stride. With the long scar across his brow, Clem was smiling.

At the step to the verandah Fran had turned and was waiting for him.

One night three years back, on a straight stretch between a patch of forest and the Waruna causeway, a child had leapt out suddenly on to the moonlit gravel. It was late, after ten. Clem was tired after a long drive. The boy, who was nine or ten years old, was playing chicken. He stood in the glare of the headlights, poised, ready to run, while his companions—who were all from the Camp, half a dozen skinny seven-or eight-year-olds—danced about on the sidelines yelling encouragement, and the little girls among them shrieked and covered their eyes.

Clem swung the wheel, narrowly avoiding the boy, and the whole continent—the whole three million square miles of rock, tree trunks, sand, fences, cities—came bursting through the windscreen into his skull. The remaining hours of the night had lasted for fourteen months. It had taken another year to locate the bit of him that retained the habit of speech.

Always the odd man out among them, the stocky dark one, he was a good-natured fellow, cheerful unless taunted, but slow, tongue-tied, aimless. Even at thirty he had been unable to see what sort of life he was to lead. It was as if something in him had understood that no decision was really required of him. The accident up ahead would settle that side of things.

When Fran first came to the house it was with one of the others. She had been Jonathon's girl. But in time the very qualities that had impressed her in Jonathon, the assurance he had of being so much cleverer than others, his sense of his own power and charm, appeared gross. They got on her nerves in a house where everyone was clever, and shouted and pushed for room.

An outsider herself, never quite sure that Madge approved of her and whether to Audley she was anything more than an angry mouse, she had seen Clem as a fellow sufferer among them and decided it was her role to save him. From Them. She would take him away, where he could shine with his own light. "There, you see," she wanted to tell them, "you have been harbouring a prince among you."

“You’re making a grave mistake,” Madge warned her once while they were in the kitchen washing up.

“Oh?” she had replied, furiously drying. “Am I?”

The marriage lasted two years.

5 After being at passionate cross-purposes for a year, they lived a cat and dog life for another, each struggling for supremacy, then separated. But when Fran got back from her year in Greece they had begun to see one another again, locked in an odd dependency. She was adventurous, what she wanted was experience, “affairs.” Clem was the element in her life that was stable. And after his accident, she became the one
10 person with whom he felt entirely whole.

“So,” she demanded now, “what do they say about me turning up like this?” “They” meant Madge and Audley.

She had her bare feet up on a chair, a straw hat over her eyes. She looked, Angie thought, wonderfully stylish and free.

15 “Nothing. They wouldn’t say anything to me.”

“Huh!”

Fran pushed the hat back, screwed her nose up, and squinted against the glare off the sea.

20 They were friends. When Fran first appeared all those years ago—Angie was already a young wife, Fran then just another of the hangers-on—they had been wary of one another; they were so unlike.

She thinks I’m bossy, like them, Fran had told herself. A know-all. A skite.

She thinks, Angie had thought, that I’m a dope.

25 But then they became sisters-in-law and found common cause. Angie, with Fran to lead her, discovered how much stronger her resentments were now that she had someone to share them. She admired Fran’s fierce sense of humour, was bemused by her assumption that being honest gave her the right to be cruel. Fran, when she wearied, as she often did, of her own intensity, was drawn to Angie’s stillness, her capacity to just sit among all that Tyler ebullience and remain self-contained.

When they were alone together Fran made a game of her rage, doing imitations of Audley's voice and manner and little turns of phrase that kept them in a state of exhausted hilarity. But Angie could never quite free herself of a feeling of discomfort, of something like impiety, when Fran took her flair for mockery too far.

5 The fact was that for all his peculiarities, Audley was without doubt the most remarkable person she had ever known. On this point she agreed with Ralph. Then, too, there was something in him, a side of his odd, contradictory nature, that Fran had no feeling for and for which she had coined the "Doctor Creeps." But it was just this quality in him that Angie felt most connected to, since she recognised in it
10 something of herself. When Fran mocked it she felt the opening between them of a dispiriting gap, a failure of sympathy on Fran's part that must include herself as well.

Angie's darkness was inherited. The Depression was already a decade past when she was born, but she had grown up with it just the same. In her parents' house it had never ended; they were still waiting for the axe to fall. She had married to break free
15 of that cramped and fearful world and had been surprised, when her father-in-law engaged her with a sorrowful look that said, Ah, we know, don't we, that even among the Tylers there was this pocket of the darkly familiar.

Audley had ways of disguising his moodiness with bitter jokes and a form of politeness that at times had an edge of the murderous. "Your glass is empty," he
20 would say to some unsuspecting guest, leaning close and whispering, full of hospitable concern, and Angie would shudder and turn away.

"So," Fran said, "what's the cast list at this wake? As if I didn't know! Jonathon, Rupe and Di, the Rainbow Serpent—"

Angie laughed.

25 "God, why did I come? Am I really such a masochist? Well, you'd better not answer that."

Clem, meanwhile, was with his mother at the pinewood bench in the house, sipping tea from a chipped mug while she chopped and prepared spinach. Madge looked up briefly, then away. The scar across his brow was so marked that all other signs of age
30 seemed smoothed away in him.

"Tell me when I was six, Mum," he was saying, and he gave a cheery laugh as at an old joke between them. Madge paused, then chopped.

It was a thing he used to say when he was a little lad of nine or so: "Tell me when I was six," he would say, "when I was four, when I was just born." It was an obsession

with him. But no detail you gave was ever enough to convince him that he really belonged among them.

Madge had had no time for the game then. Too many other questions to answer. And the house, and their homework, and Audley's many visitors. Now she made time.

5 Clem's questions were the same ones he had been asking for nearly thirty years, but these days they had a different edge. Ashamed to reveal how much of his life was a blank, he had become skilful at trapping others into providing the facts he was after. Starting up a conversation or argument with Audley and his brothers, he would turn his head eagerly from one to another of them like a child catching at clues that the
10 grown-ups would give away only by default; or he would begin stories that the others, with their passion for exactitude, would immediately leap to correct.

"You should ask Audley," Madge told him now, turning her eyes from his glowing face. "He's the archive."

"But I want you to tell me."

15 She paused, looked at the worn handle of her knife. "You were a strange little lad," she began after a moment.

He laughed. "How was I strange?"

"You had this knitted beanie you liked to wear."

"What colour?"

20 "Red. It was a snow cap, in fact, though we never went near the snow. It looked like a tea-cosy. It was too big for you, but you wouldn't go anywhere without it. It made you look like a sort of mad elf. If I said no, you'd rage at me."

"What would I say?"

"I can't remember what you'd say. Just the look of you."

25 "Was this when I was six?"

"Five, six, something like that."

"Go on."

"Ralph used to refuse to go out with you. My God, what a pair you were! People will look, he'd tell me, they'll think he's a dill."

“Was I?”

“No, of course you weren’t. You were just a funny little boy.” She paused and looked at him. “Don’t you remember any of this, Clem?”

“No,” he said happily. “It’s all news to me.”

5 He wasn’t a dill. He had, in fact, been an intense, old-fashioned little fellow, but with a form of intelligence that wasn’t quick like the others— a sign, perhaps, an early one, of a relationship to the world that was to be obscure and difficult and a life that was not to shoot forward in a straight line but would move by missteps and
10 indirections through all those crazes taken up and dropped again that had filled a cupboard with abandoned roller-skates, a saxophone, a microscope and slides, all the gear for scuba diving. He looked down now, embarrassed by what he had to ask, but hitched his shoulders and plunged in.

“Did you and Dad love me?”

15 His voice was painfully urgent, but what struck her, as she clutched the knife to her breast, was his odd, dislocated cheerfulness. She closed her eyes.

There were times, years back, when they were all shouting and clutching at her skirt, when she would, for just a second, close her eyes like this and pretend they were not there, that they had succumbed to lockjaw or whooping-cough, or had never found the way through her to their voices and demanding little fists. It was restful. She
20 could rest in the emptiness of herself, but only for a second. Immediately struck with guilt, she would catch up the littlest of them and smother him with kisses, till he felt the excessiveness of it and fought her off.

“What’s it like,” some silly young woman had once asked her, one of the hangers-on, “to live in a house full of boys?”

25 She had given one of her straight answers: “The lavatory seat is always up.”

Now, opening her eyes again, she looked at Clem, at the darkness of his brow, and said, “Of course we did. Do. How could we help it?” He stared at her with his blue eyes, so clear that they could see right through you. “You were Audley’s favourite—
30 always. You know that. If he was hard on you sometimes it was because he was afraid of his own feelings, you know how he is. Of being swept away.”

“I thought I was a disappointment to him.”

“Maybe. Maybe that too. Things get mixed up. Nothing’s just one thing. You know that.”

5 He nodded, fixing his eyes on her, very intent, an alert seven-year-old, as if there was something more to what she was saying than the words themselves expressed, some secret about Life, the way the world is, that he would some day catch and make use of.

“Ah, here’s your father,” she said, relieved at the promise of rescue. Audley was coming up the track between the banksias.

10 Clem immediately leapt to his feet. Hurling himself through the wire-screen door and down the steps, he flung his arms around his father, clasping him so tight that Audley, with his head thrown back and his arms immobilised, had the look of a black-suited peg-doll. “Clem,” he said, clutching at his glasses, but allowing himself to be danced about as Clem hung on and shouted: “It’s me, Dad, I’m so glad to see you!”

3

15 MOSEYING about on the slope beyond the house in swimming trunks, sneakers, and a green tennis-shade, Ned glimpsed through the trees a party of interlopers. Stopped on the stony track, among blackboys and leopard gums that had been blackened the summer before by a bushfire, they were gathered in a half-circle round a charred stump.

20 Slipping from tree to tree like a native, Ned began to stalk them. There were six adults and some children.

The men, who were young, wore jeans and T-shirts, except for one with hair longer than the others and tied with a sweatband, who wore a singlet and had tattoos. They carried sleeping bags, an esky, and the man with the tattoos had a ghetto-blaster.
25 Two of the women carried babies.

Ned manoeuvred himself into a better position to see what it was that had stopped them.

An echidna, startled by their footfalls on the track, had turned in towards the foot of the stump and, with its spines raised, was burrowing into the ashes and soft earth,
30 showing a challenge, but pretending, since it could not see them, that it was invisible.

“What is it?” one of the women was asking.

“Porcupine,” one of the men told her, and the man with the tattoos corrected him: “Echidna.”

“Gary, come away,” the other woman said, and she hauled out a boy of five or six who was dressed as a space invader and carried a plastic ray-gun.

- 5 Ned, very quietly, squatted, took a handful of ashes, and smeared them over his cheeks, forehead, and neck, then took another and smeared his chest.

If I was really a native, he thought, and had a spear, I could drive them off. They don’t even know I’m here.

- 10 It pleased him that while they had their eyes on the echidna, which was only pretending to be invisible, he had his eye on them and really was invisible, camouflaged with earth and ashes and moving from one to another of the grey and grey-black trunks like a spirit of the place. He was filled with the superior sense of belonging here, of knowing every rock and stump on this hillside as if they were parts of his own body. These others were tourists.

- 15 They were on their way to the beach. You could not legally stop them—the land along the shore was public, it belonged to everyone— but this headland and the next as well belonged to Audley and would one day be Ralph’s, then his. He felt proprietorial, but responsible too. As soon as the party had moved on, he went and checked on the echidna, which was still burrowing. When he stepped out on to the
20 track again he was surprised to find the space invader there, a sturdy, dark-headed kid with freckles.

“Hi,” the boy said cheerfully. “We’re gunna have a bonfire, you can come if you like. My name’s Gary, I’m six.”

- 25 Ned was furious. It hurt his pride that he had been crept up on and surprised. He was disarmed for a moment by the boy’s friendliness and lack of guile, but affronted by his presumption. It wasn’t his place to offer invitations here.

The boy meanwhile was regarding him with a frown. “You know what?” he said at last, “you’ve got stuff all over your face.”

- 30 “I know,” Ned told him sharply, “I don’t need you to tell me,” and he began to walk away. The space invader followed.

“Don’t go,” he shouted, as Ned, arms stiffly at his side, his body pitched forward at an odd, old-mannish angle, began to stride away downhill. “We got sausages. D’you like sausages? We got plenty.”

Ned walked faster.

“We got watermelon, we got cherry cheesecake. Hey, boy,” he shouted, “don’t go away. My name’s Gary, I already told you. What’s yours?”

5 He was trotting after Ned on his plump little legs. “Hey,” he panted, when he finally caught up, “why are we walking so fast?”

Ned swivelled. “You piss off,” he said from a height.

The boy looked at him as if he might be about to burst into tears, and when Ned turned and started off again, did not follow.

10 “Ralph!” Ned shouted as soon as he was in sight of the house, “there’s a whole heap of people up there going to make a bonfire. Can they?”

Ralph, hearing the note of hysteria in his voice, was tempted to laugh, but Ned was quick to take offence and Ralph was touched, as he often was, by the boy’s intense concern about things. He was always in a blaze about something—the Americans in Nicaragua, what the Libs were up to in the Senate. Keeping his own voice even, he
15 said: “Well, it’s a free country, Ned. They can have a bonfire if they want. So long as they’re careful.”

Ned huffed. He had hoped his father might be more passionate. “Well, I’m going to tell Audley,” he announced. He stalked off.

20 Audley was on the phone in the sitting room. All morning he had been receiving congratulatory messages, most of them from people who would later be at the party. He stood hunched and with his head bowed, murmuring politenesses into the mouthpiece while, with his eyes screwed up in acute distress, he did a little stamping dance on the carpet and tugged with his free hand at a button on his vest.

25 Ned waited impatiently; then, when the call went on longer than he had expected, sprawled in an armchair and took up a magazine. At last Audley replaced the receiver. He stood a moment, looking gravely down. Ned, who was still all eagerness and anger, held back.

He was impressed by this grandfather of his, and not only by his reputation; also by the sense he gave, with his deep reserve, of being worthy of it.

30 Audley was on all occasions formal. Ned liked that. He had a hunger for order that the circumstances of his life frustrated. He wished that Angie and Ralph, whom he otherwise approved of in every way, would insist a little more on the rules. He would

have liked to call “sir,” as kids did on TV. But everything around them was very free and easy—maybe because Ralph, when he was younger, had been a hippie.

5 “How are you, Ned?” Audley said at last, but went on standing, deep in thought. He might have been out in a paddock somewhere, having got there, Ned thought, without even noticing, on one of his walks.

“Audley,” he began, very quietly, but Audley was startled just the same.

“Ah,” he said, “Ned!”

Ned went on bravely: “Do you know there are people on the headland? They want to make a bonfire.”

10 He watched for Audley’s reaction, which did not come, and was surprised how the urgency had gone out of the question, not just out of his voice, which he lowered out of consideration for Audley, but out of what he felt. He had taken on, without being aware of it, some of Audley’s subdued gravity.

15 Audley seemed not to have heard the question. Putting his hand on Ned’s head in a gentle, affectionate way, he stood looking down at the boy. “So what do you think of today, eh, Ned?”

20 Ned was confused. He knew what Audley thought because it was what Ralph thought as well. They were to be non-participants in the national celebrations. “Not wet-blankets,” Ralph had insisted. “If these fellers want an excuse for a good do, I’m not the one to deny them, but it’s just another day like any other really, when we’ve got to get along with one another and keep an eye on the shop.”

It was a view that did not appeal to Ned. It was unheroic. He would, if it could be done with honour, have gone out and waved a flag. He wanted time to have precise turning-points that could be marked and remembered.

25 “Well,” Audley said now, and turned aside. Ned slumped in his chair. Dissatisfied on that question as on the one he himself had put.

This is how it always is, he raged to himself. They like things left up in the air. They never want anything settled.

30 Later that morning, and again in the afternoon, he went back to the headland to see what those people were up to.

The first time, the four men, stripped to their bathers, were playing football on the wet beach, making long rugby passes and shouting, tackling, scuffling up sand.

Three of them were hefty fellows with thickened shoulders and thighs. The fourth, the long-haired one who had previously worn a singlet, was slimmer and fast. They were all very white as if they never saw the sun, except that the slim one with the tattoos had a work-tan on his neck and arms that made him look as if he was still wearing the singlet, only now it was cleaner.

The boy was down at the shoreline dragging a wet stick. The two women, lying head to toe opposite one another in the shade, were waving off flies from the babies, who were asleep. They were talking, and every now and then one of them gave a throaty laugh. Ned sat for a long time watching.

When he went back the second time the men were dressed and their hair was wet. They had been surfing and were busy now constructing a bonfire, shouting to one another across great stretches of air and energetically competing to see who could drag out the longest branch and heave it crosswise on to the pile. They laughed a lot and every second word “fuck.”

The two women, each with a child on her hip, were walking along the edge of the tide, almost in silhouette at this hour against the wet sand, which was lit with rays of sunlight that shot out from under the clouds. Oyster-catchers were running away fast from their feet.

Once again he sat for a long time and watched. He wondered how high the bonfire would go before the men tired of hauling dead trees and brush out of the sandhills, and how far, once it was alight, it would be visible out at sea. He admitted now that what he really regretted was that the bonfire was not theirs. It ought to be theirs. The idea of a bonfire on every beach and the whole map of Australia outlined with fire was powerfully exciting to him. The image of it blazed in his head.

He got up and began to walk away, and almost immediately stumbled on the boy, who had been squatting on the slope behind him.

“Hi,” Ned said briskly, and walked on—a kind of reconciliation. It was too late for anything more.

4

UNDER the influence of his birthday mood, which was sober but good-humoured, and in honour as well of the larger occasion, Audley decided on a walk to town.

He often took such a walk in the afternoon. It helped him think. He could, while strolling along, turn over in his mind the headings of a report he had to write, or prepare one of the speeches that since his retirement were his chief contribution to public life, polishing and repolishing as he walked phrases that would appear on the late-night news bulletins, to be mulled over the morning after by politicians, economists, friends, rivals, and his successors in the various public-service departments he had once had at his command. It was an old trick, this recovery of the harmony between walking pace, our natural andante as he liked to call it, and the rhythms of the mind. “I think best with my kneecaps,” he would tell young reporters, who looked puzzled but scribbled it down just the same. “I recommend it.”

If he didn’t feel like walking back he could get a boy from the garage to drive him, or there was always some local, a farmer with his wife and kids or a tradesman with a ute full of barbed wire or paint tins, who would offer him a lift. He was a familiar figure in these parts, traipsing along with his head down, his boots scuffing the dust.

His object was not, as gossip sometimes suggested, the Waruna pub, though he did sometimes drop in there for an hour or so to hear what the locals had to say, but the museum just beyond, the Waruna Folk and History Museum as it was rather grandly called, which was housed in a four-roomed workman’s cottage next to the defunct bank.

It had been founded by his grandfather in the early Thirties, with furniture and other knick-knacks from the house and a rare collection of moths and beetles.

Other families over the years had added their own cast-offs and unfashionable bric-a-brac: superannuated washboards and mangles, butter-churns, a hip-bath, tools, toys, photographs. Holiday-makers on their way to the beach resorts further south would stop off to stretch their legs among its familiar but surprising exhibits. It was educational. They would point to a pair of curling-tongs or a shaving-dish that looked as if someone had taken a good-sized bite out of it, a ginger-beer bottle with a glass stopper, a furball as big as a fist that had been found in the stomach of a cat.

But the main body of the collection had come from the Tylers, so that stepping into the dark little rooms where everything was so cramped and crowded was for Audley like re-entering one of the abandoned spaces of his childhood, which had miraculously survived or been resurrected, but with different dimensions now and with all its furnishings rearranged.

The cedar table and twelve dining chairs, for example, that filled the front room, had once stood in the larger dining room at the house, whose windows looked down to the sea, and when Audley seated himself—as he liked to do, though a notice expressly forbade it—in one of the stiff-backed carvers by the wall, and gazed out across the

glazed table top, he was disconcerted, startled even, when that view failed to materialize. He could not imagine mealtimes at this table in any other light.

He recalled such occasions vividly. The big people seated round the extended cedar table, he and the other children—his brother, various cousins—at side-tables by the wall.

The table, minus its extensions, was set now with dinner plates from some other household and just the sort of engraved glasses that his grandmother, who was a snob, would have relegated to the back of a cupboard. He could imagine the well-dressed ghosts coming in through the door (and one or two of them, uncles, through the windows) and seating themselves in their accustomed places, a bit surprised by some of the details, as if one of the long string of maids his grandmother found and then let go had made an error, but happy just the same to find themselves back, and taking up immediately the never-ending arguments his grandmother wished they would refrain from—"Not at the table, Gerry, please!"—and which as a boy he had longed to join.

Above the table hung a lamp. It was of an old-fashioned kind that was all the rage again, in coloured glass. He remembered climbing on to his father's shoulders to light it, and from that height seeing the room, as the flame took, spring into a new shape. It had looked foreshortened from up there, as if he had been seeing it as it was now, nearly seventy years later.

What he had failed to notice, on that occasion, was the old fellow in the suit seated on a chair against the wall.

His father's contribution to the museum was a collection of rock specimens and rare fossils, set out now in display-cases in the hallway, each piece labelled in neat copperplate, his father's hand, and the ink so faded it could barely be read. The shell fossils were of exquisite engineering, little spiral staircases in perfect section, the ferns indelible prints.

He had loved these objects as a child. As a young fellow of sixteen or seventeen he had often come here with his father to examine them and been led so deep by his awed contemplation of their age, and all his father had to tell, that he had thought that his fate, his duty, was to become a geologist and solve the mysteries of their land.

They still moved him, these dusty objects, but that particular fate had never been taken up, though it still hovered in his excited imagination, as if the dedication of his life to stones and minerals were still an option of his secretly enduring youth. Would the distinguished geologist he might have become—he had no doubt of the distinction—have been all that different? He doubted it.

Other people saw him, he knew, as if what he was now had been fixed and inevitable, a matter of character. He wished sometimes that he could introduce them to some of his favourites among those other lives he had been drawn to and had abandoned or let go. Like the jazz pianist who, for two or three summers, along with a saxophonist and
5 drummer, had rattled round the countryside in an old Ford, using his left hand to vamp while he reached with the other for a glass—already on the way to an established drunkenness and sore-headed despair that he actually felt on occasion. As if that other self had never quite been dismissed. The museum was full of such loose threads that if he touched them would jerk and lead him back.

10 On a wall of the little ex-bedroom out the back were three photographs. One of them was of a class from the one-teacher school where he and old Tommy Molloy the headman out at the Camp, had started school together more than sixty years ago, singing the alphabet and their times-tables together at the same desk. If he poked his head out the window he could see the little verandahed schoolhouse under a pepper tree, in the
15 grounds now of Waruna High.

The photograph had been taken two years before he and Tommy arrived there, in his brother Ralph's year.

He studied the faces. Sitting cross-legged in the front row, holding a slate on which Miss Curry, whose first name was Esme, had chalked Waruna One Teacher School,
20 1922, was Tommy's sister Lorraine.

She had been the best fisherman among them: that is what Audley recalled. Once, when the trevally were running, she had caught forty-three at a single go. The sea had been so thick with them that you could have walked on their backs from one side of the cove to the other, and he believed sometimes that they had done just that. It
25 was one of the great occasions of his life.

Lorraine had gone off a year later to be a domestic somewhere. Her eyes in the photograph looked right through you. So alive and black you might think they were beyond defeat. Well, time had known better.

He set his fingertip to the glass—also forbidden, of course. The print it left was a mist
30 of infinitesimal ghostly drops that in a moment faded without trace.

But it was something other than this old photograph, however moving he found it, that drew him to this room. In a display of children's toys—a jigsaw puzzle that some local handyman had cut with a fine jigsaw, a pipe for blowing bubbles, some articulated animals from a Noah's Ark—was a set of knucklebones. He had won them
35 more than sixty years ago from a boy called Arden Robinson who, the year he was nine, had come to stay with neighbours for the Christmas holidays and for whom he

had formed an affection that for five whole weeks had kept him in eager and painful expectation.

5 He had not meant to win. He had meant to give the knucklebones up as a token of the softness he felt, the lapse in him of the belief that he was the only one in the world who mattered. As a hostage to what he had already begun to think of as The Future. A sacrifice flung down to nameless but powerful gods.

10 But he had won after all. The holidays came to an end, he had never seen Arden Robinson again. He had kept the knucklebones by him as a reminder, then five years ago had given them over, his bones as he called them, into public custody, which was in some ways the most hidden, the most private place of all. It would be nice, he sometimes thought, if he could give himself as well.

15 Occasionally, sitting in a chair in one of the rooms, he would doze off, and had woken once to find a little girl preparing to poke a finger into him as if, propped up there in his old-fashioned collar and tie, he was a particularly convincing model of ancient, outmoded man. When he jerked awake and blinked at her she had screamed.

“I’d quite enjoy it, I think,” he told them at home, “if instead of shoving me into a hole somewhere you had me stuffed and sat there. No need for a card. No need for anyone to know it was me.”

5

20 At half past seven the first of the guests arrived. Jenny was the lookout. Hanging from one of the verandah posts, she could see headlamps swinging through the dusk and stopping at the first of their gates. Two cars. There would be two more gates to open and close before they reached the gravel slope.

She leapt down and darted into the house.

25 “Madge, Angie,” she called, “they’re on the way. Somebody’s here.”

Madge, in shoes now and a frock that emphasized the width of her hips, was standing at the sink, contemplating the two fish she had earlier found a place for at the bottom of the fridge but had now taken out again to make room for her dips.

30 Her whole life, she felt, had been a matter of finding room. For unhappy children, stray cats, pieces of furniture passed on by distant aunts, unexpected arrivals at mealtimes, visitors who stayed too long talking to Audley and had to have beds made up for them on the lounge-room sofa, gifts she did not want and could find no use for but did not have the courage to throw out. Now these fish.

“They’re almost here,” Jenny was shrieking.

Fortunately it was only her son Jonathon with one of his girls, though he did warn her that Lily Barnes was in the car behind.

5 “Oh Lord,” she said. “Jenny, love, go and tell Audley Lily Barnes is here. Oh, and Jonathon.” Only then did she embrace her son.

She took the flowers he had brought and dumped them absent-mindedly into the sink. Then, not to appear rude, she turned and kissed his girl, in case she had been here before. All Jonathon’s girls were of striking appearance—more appearance than reality, she had once quipped—but she could never tell one of them from the next.

10 “How is he?” Jonathon asked, taking a handful of nuts from one of the bowls she had laid out and tossing them, one by one, into his mouth. “What’s been going on? What have I missed?”

15 “Nothing,” she told him, moving the bowl out of his reach. “You haven’t missed a thing. Now, if you’re hungry, Jonathon, I’ll give you some soup. I thought you’d have eaten on the way.”

“We did. We had this terrific meal, didn’t we, Susie? At Moreton.” He reached behind her and took another handful of nuts. But immediately there was the sound of Lily’s voice and Audley’s greeting her.

“Well,” said Madge, “that’s the end of that.”

20 She strode out to the stone verandah.

“Is she always like that?” the girl whispered to Jonathon.

He looked at her with his mouth full. “Oh,” he said, “I thought you’d been here before.”

“No,” she said, coldly, “I have not.”

25 Lily Barnes was an old flame of Audley’s—that was Madge’s claim, though he always denied it.

“Lily Barnes,” he would say, “is a remarkable woman, but she’s more than I could have handled.”

“La, hark at the man!” Madge would tell the boys, who, when they were young, had been all ears for these interesting revelations. “That means he thinks he can handle me.”

“Can you, Dad?” one of them would pipe up. “Can you?”

5 When Lily Barnes and Audley were at university they had been rivals for various medals and scholarships, which she had mostly won. But after they left, Audley had gone on to high public office; Lily had been, over the years, private secretary to a string of ministers, admired, feared, warily consulted, but a shadowy presence, unknown outside a narrow circle. Then when she retired three years ago she had
10 published a book that upstaged them all, Audley included, and had become a celebrity. At seventy she was very plain and petite, twisted now with arthritis but always very formally and finely dressed.

Madge, years ago, had dubbed her the Rainbow Serpent, partly because of her sharp tongue but also because of a passion she had for coloured silks. She had meant it
15 unkindly then, but in the years since the name had come to have a benign, overarching significance. It was an affectionate tribute.

She entered now wearing a russet-coloured skirt and a caf-au-lait blouse, leaning as always on a stick, but making an impression, for all her crooked stance and diminutive size, of elegance and charm. She had with her a young fellow, the son of
20 some people she knew, called Barney Shannon, who had been in trouble with drugs and was now employed to drive her about. Since he wanted to bring his surfboard and was also shifting house, they had come in his ute, the back of which was piled high with his futon, several bits of old iron from which he hoped to make lampstands, a Fifties cocktail cabinet, and his library of paperbacks, all in cartons and covered with
25 a loose tarpaulin.

“Sorry, Madge,” she called, “are we the first? It’s Barney. He drives like a bat out of Hades. I think that ute of his may have cured my back by redistributing the vertebrae.” She looked about and gave one of her winning smiles. “But how lovely to be here.”

30 An hour later the room was full. Little noisy groups had formed, mostly of men, all vigorously arguing. Lily, moving from one group to another and leaning on her stick, would linger just long enough to shift the discussion sideways with a single interjection, then move on. She did not join the other women, young and old, who sat on the sidelines.

Fran had been hovering at the edge of these groups. She too moved from one to another of them, growing more and more irritated by what she heard and angrier with herself for having come.

5 She knew these people. They were the same relations and old friends and nervous hangers-on that she had been seeing for the past fifteen years, people for whom disagreement was the spice of any gathering. She felt out of place. Not because her opinions were all that different from theirs, but from temperament, and because, as everyone knew, she was a backslider. She had married one of them, been taken to the heart of the clan, then bolted. Well, that was their version. Drink in hand, looking
10 sad-eyed and defenceless, but also spikily vigilant, she kept on the move.

Clem watched her from cover. He had mastered the art of pretending that his attention was elsewhere while all his movements about the room, along the verandah, past the open windows, had as their single object her appearance in a mirror or between the shifting heads.

15 He watched. Not to monitor or restrict her freedom but to centre himself. Otherwise the occasion might have become chaotic. All that din of voices. All those faces, however familiar. The fear that someone without warning might open their mouth and expect an answer from him.

Once, briefly, she had come up beside him. Her head came only to his shoulder.

20 “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” he told her, “I’m doing fine. What about you?”

She cast a fierce glance about the room. “I’ll survive.”

He loved this house. He had grown up on holidays here. It was where he could let go and be free. All its routines, from the dinning of Madge’s early-morning spoon to the
25 pieces Audley liked to play on the piano last thing at night, were fixed, known. Objects too.

He liked to run his fingertips along the edge of the coffee-table and feel the sand under its varnish. His brother Rupe had made that table at Woodwork when he was fifteen. Clem loved it. It was one of the objects he had clung to when he was floating
30 out there in the absolute dark, finding his way back by clinging to anything, however unlikely, that came to hand. Rupe’s table had played no special part in his life till then, but he had clung to it, it had shored him up, and squatted now, an ugly, four-legged angel, right there in the centre of the room, very solid and low to the floor, bearing glasses and a lumpy dish full of cashews. He would have knelt down and

stroked it, except that he had learned to be wary of these sudden impulses of affection in himself, towards people as well as objects, that were not always welcome or understood.

5 He had moments of panic still when he looked up and had no idea where he had got to. It was important then that something should come floating by that he recognised and could fling his arms around. The house was full of such things. Rupe's table, Audley's upright, the jamb of the verandah door where a dozen notches showed how inch by inch he and his brothers had grown up and out into the world—Ralph always the tallest. He had never caught up with Ralph.

10 And the books! Old leather-bound classics that their grandfather had collected, Fenimore Cooper and Stevenson and Kipling, and magazines no one would ever look at again, except maybe him; tomes on economics and the lives of the great, Beethoven and Metternich, and the children's books he had loved when he was little. The Tale of
15 the Tail of the Little Red Fox one of them was called. It contained a question that had deeply puzzled him then, and still did: how many beans make five? It sounded simple but there was a trick in it, that's what he had always thought, which was intended to catch quick-thinkers and save slow ones. But from what?

He could move among these familiar things and feel easy. But when Fran was here the course he followed, the line he clung to, was determined by her. He liked the way
20 she led him without knowing it, the form she gave to his turning this way and that, and how she held him while herself moving free.

She came to the edge of a group where Jonathon, his new girl leaning on his shoulder and pushing segments of sliced apple between her perfect teeth, was listening to a story Audley's cousin, Jack Wild, was telling. Jack Wild was a judge.

25 Most of the group had heard the story before and were waiting, carefully preparing their faces, for the punchline. Catching her eye, Jonathon gave her one of his bachelor winks.

They had a compact, she and Jonathon. They steered clear of each other on these family occasions, but meeting as they sometimes did on neutral ground, at openings
30 or at one of the places in town where they liked to eat, could be sociable, even affectionate, for twenty minutes or so, teasing, reliving the times before Clem, before the wars, when they had been like brother and sister, best mates. He wasn't hostile to her or sternly unforgiving, like Rupe and Di.

She winked back, and saw with satisfaction that the girl had seen it. A little crease
35 appeared between her perfect brows.

A moment later she had moved to another group and was half listening, half inattentively looking about, when she caught the eye of someone she had never seen before, a boy—man—who was lounging against the wall and observing her over the rim of his glass.

5 She looked down, then away, and almost immediately he came up to her.

He was called Cedric Pohl and rather pedantically, a bit too sure of himself she thought, spelled it out for her: P-O-H-L. He already knew who she was. Oh yes, she thought, I'll bet you do! He was an admirer of Audley's, but his time with the clan had been in one of her periods away. He had been away himself. He was just back from
10 the States.

She listened, looking into her glass, wondering why he had picked her out and searching for something she could hold against him, and settled at last on his expensive haircut. Her mouth made a line of silent mockery.

Because, his gathered attention said, the powerful energy he was directing at her—
15 because you looked so lost standing like that. Alone and with your eyes going everywhere.

He was attracted, she saw, by her desperation. It attracted people. Men, that is. They felt the need to relieve her of it. To bring her home, as only they could, to the land of deep content. She had been through all this before.

20 She lifted her chin in sceptical defiance, but had already caught the note of vibrancy, of quickening engagement in his voice that stirred something in her. Expectancy. Of the new, the possible. Hope, hope. And why not? Again, the excitement and mystery of a new man.

Moments later, she was outside, taking breaths of the clear night air. On the grass
25 below the new deck, some young people, children mostly, were dancing. A single high-powered bulb cast its brightness upwards into the night, but so short a distance that it only made you aware how much further there was to go. The stars were so close in the clear night that she felt the coolness of them on her skin.

She had moved out here to get away from the feeling, suddenly, that too much might
30 be happening too fast. Glass in hand, she looked down at the dancers.

Ned was there. So was Jen, along with three or four of their cousins, one of them a little lad of no more than five or six, Rupe and Di's youngest. They were moving barefoot to the ghetto-blaster's tatty disco, looking so comically serious as they

rotated their hips and rolled their shoulders in a sexiness that was all imitation—of sinuosity in the girls, of swagger in even the tiniest boys—that she wanted to laugh.

Jen glanced up and waved. Fran raised her hand to wave back and was suddenly a little girl again at the lonely fence-rails, waving at a passing train.

5 She had always been an outsider here; in the clan, among these people who believed so deeply in their own rightness and goodwill. They had meant to pass those excellent qualities on to her, having them, they believed, in their gift. But for some reason she was resistant and had remained, even after her marriage, one of the hangers-on, one of those girls in lumpish skirts and T-shirts (though in fact she had never worn
10 clothes like that, even at nineteen) who'd got hooked on the Tylers, not just on whichever one of the boys had first brought them in but on Aud-ley's soft attentions, Madge's soups, the privilege of being allowed to do the drying-up after a meal, the illusion of belonging, however briefly, to the world of rare affinities and stern, unfettered views they represented. Girls, but young men too, odd, lonely, clever
15 young people in search of their real family, were caught and spent years, their whole lives sometimes, waiting to be recognised at last as one of them.

She had told herself from the beginning that she could resist them, that she would not, in either sense, be taken in.

In the early days, on visits like this, she had spent half her time behind locked doors, sitting on the lowered lavatory seat or cross-legged on her bed, filling page after page
20 of a Spirex notebook with evidence against them: the terrible food they ate, their tribal arrogance and exclusivity, the jokes, everything they stood for—all the things she had railed against in grim-jawed silence when she was forced to sit among them and which, as soon as she was alone, she let out in her flowing, copybook hand in
25 reports so wild in their comedy that she had to stuff her fist into her mouth so that they would not hear, gathered in solemn session out there, her outrageous laughter, and come bursting in to expose her as God's spy among them. At last, in an attempt to rid herself of all memory of her humiliations and secret triumphs, she had torn up every page of those notebooks and flushed them down the loo in a hotel in Singapore,
30 on her way to Italy and a new life.

Remembering it now, she was tempted to laugh and free herself a second time, and was startled by Audley's appearance, out of nowhere it might have been, right beside her.

35 "Let me get you something," he said very softly, relieving her of her glass. Setting his sorrowful eyes upon her he gave her one of those looks that said: We know, don't we? You and I.

Do we? she asked herself, and felt, once again, the old wish to succumb, then the old repulsion and the rising in her of a still unextinguished anger.

5 These cryptic utterances were a habit with him, part of his armoury of teasing enticements and withdrawals. They were intended, she had decided long ago, in their suggestion of a special intimacy, to puzzle, but also to intimidate.

“You don’t understand him,” Clem would tell her; “you’re being unfair.” But the truth was, there was something phony in these tremendous statements. A challenge perhaps for you to call his bluff and unmask him. Crooked jokes.

10 He paused now and, after a silence that was calculated, she thought, to the last heartbeat, went off bearing her glass.

Once again she felt the need to escape. I’ll find Angie, she thought. She’ll get me out of this. The last thing she wanted now was to get caught in an exchange of soul-talk with Audley

15 She saw Angie standing alone in a corner, in a dream as usual, wearing that dark, faraway look that kept people off. How beautiful she is, Fran thought.

She was in black—an old-fashioned dress that might have belonged to her mother, with long sleeves and a high neck that emphasized her tallness. Fran was about to push between shoulders towards her when she felt a hand at her skirt. It was Tommy Molloy’s wife, Ellie.

20 “Hi, Fran,” she said. “You lookin’ good.”

“Hi, El,” Fran said, and, settling on the form beside her, stretched out her legs and sat a moment looking at her shoes.

“Wasser matter?” the older woman asked, but humourously, not to presume. She was Tommy’s second wife, a shy, flat-voiced woman. “You in the dumps too?”

25 “No,” Fran said. “Not really.”

In fact, she added to herself, not at all. I’m holding myself still, that’s all, so that it won’t happen too quickly. So that I won’t go spinning too fast into whatever it is that may be—just may be, beginning.

30 She let these thoughts sweep over her to the point where, suddenly ashamed of her self-absorption, she drew back. “What about you, El?” she asked. “Why are you in the dumps?”

“Oh, I dunno. Things. You know. It gets yer down.”

Fran looked at her, smiled weakly, and really did want to know, but Ellie of course would not tell. Not just out of pride, but because she did not believe that Fran, even if her interest was genuine and not just the usual politeness, would understand.

5 I would, Fran wanted to say. Honestly, I would. Try me! But Ellie only smiled back and looked away.

Fran knew Ellie from the days before Audley’s retirement, when, from the Camp, which was less than a mile away, she had kept an eye on the house and a key for visitors. Sitting beside her now, Fran felt a weight of darkness descend that for once
10 had nothing to do with herself.

Occasionally, driving out to collect the keys, she had had a cup of tea in Ellie’s kitchen, had sat at the rickety table telling herself, in a self-conscious way: I’m having a cup of tea in the house of a black person.

What she felt now, with a kind of queasiness, was how slight and self-dramatising her
15 own turmoils were, how she exaggerated all her feelings, took offence, got angry, wept too easily, and all about what?

“See you, El,” she said, very lightly touching the woman’s hand. She pushed through to where Angie stood.

“Listen,” she said, “can we get out of here? I’m being pursued.”

20 Angie looked interested. “Who by?”

“You know who,” she said. “He’s got that look. He keeps—hovering.” She frowned. This was only half the truth.

Angie laughed. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s go down to the beach.”

When Audley returned to the deck, a moment later, Fran was nowhere to be found.
25 He was disappointed. There were things he wanted to ask—things he wanted to say to her.

He set the glass of wine on the rails, an offering, and sat on a chair beside it.

He would have liked to consult her about one or two things. About Clem. About his own life. About Death: would she know anything about that? About love as well,
30 carnal love. Which he thought sometimes he had failed to experience or understand.

Absent-mindedly, he took the glass he had brought for her — forbidden, of course — and sipped, then sipped again. Just as well, he thought, that Madge wasn't around!

6

5 From the headland above, the sea was flat moonlight all the way to the horizon, but
down in the cove among the rocks, almost below sea-level, it rose up white out of the
close dark, heaped itself in the narrow opening, then came at them with a rush. Fran
leapt back at first, up the shelving sand. "I don't want to get wet!" She had to yell
against the sea as well as get out of the way of it. But when she saw how Angie just let
the light wash in around her ankles, then higher, darkening all the lower part of her
10 skirt, she laughed and gave in, but did tuck her dress up. It was grey silk and came to
her calves. She did not want it spoiled.

They walked together, Angie half a head taller, along the wet beach, their heels
leaving phosphorescent prints, and laughed, talked, regaled one another with stories.

15 It was a secret place down here. With the sea on one side and the cliffs on the other,
you were walled in, but the clouds were so high tonight and the air so good in your
lungs that you didn't feel its narrowness, only a deep privacy.

"Do you know this Cedric What's-his-name?" Fran asked after a time. "Pohl—Cedric
Pohl. Isn't that a hoot?"

20 She disguised the spurt of excitement, of danger she felt at saying the name twice
over. "He's a good-looking boy, isn't he?"

"He isn't a boy," Angie said. "He's thirty-three."

"He asked if he could drive back with me."

"I thought you were staying."

"No. That was a mistake. I can't stay."

25 They walked on in silence.

"Actually," Angie said at last, "he's a bit of a shit."

"Who is?"

"Your Cedric Pohl."

“He isn’t mine,” Fran said, but it exhilarated her to be speaking of him in these terms.

“So,” she said when a decent interval had elapsed, “what do you know about him? He’s married, I suppose.”

5 “Was.”

“Well, that’s nothing against him.”

“She left him and took the kids. He was two-timing her.”

Fran gave a little laugh, then thought better of it. “Well,” she said, “I haven’t committed myself. He can go back with the Bergs.”

10 They came round the edge of the knoll and once again the sea was before them.

A slope, low dunes held together by pigface and spiky grass, led down to the beach. On any other occasion they would have hauled up their skirts at this point and sprinted, but the beach was already occupied. There was a party down there round a leaping fire. They made a face at one another, lifted their skirts like little girls
15 preparing to pee in the open (was that what gave the moment an air of the deliciously forbidden and set them giggling?) and sat plump down in the cool sand to spy.

The fire had been built in the most prodigal way, a great unsteady pyramid of flames. A man with a sleeping bag round his shoulders was tending it, occasionally tossing on a branch but otherwise simply contemplating it, watching the sparks fly up and the
20 nest of heat at its centre breathe and glow. Something in his actions suggested a trancelike meditation, as if the pyre had drawn his mind out of him and he were living now as the fire did, subdued to its being but also feeding his and the fire’s needs. Watching him you too felt subdued yet invigorated, taken out of yourself into its overwhelming presence.

25 They sat with their arms round their knees, unspeaking, and the silence between them deepened. Drawn in by the slow gestures of the man as he tossed branch after branch on to the pyre—and, like him, by the pulse of the fire itself, which was responding in waves to the breeze that came in from the sea, and which they felt on the hairs of their arms—they might have stepped out of time entirely.

30 The others—there were three little groups of them—lay away from the fire but still in the light of its glow.

One couple was curled spoon-fashion on the sand. In the curve of the woman's body, a child, its plump limbs rosy with firelight.

A little distance away another woman sat on a pile of blankets with a baby at her breast and a boy of six or seven beside her. He had his thumb in his mouth.

- 5 Further off, where the darkness began, two men sat cross-legged and facing one another so that their brows almost touched.

One, his long hair over his eyes, his head bent, was playing a mouth-organ, some Country and Western tune, very sad and whining, to which the second man beat a rhythm on his thigh.

- 10 All around them, scattered without thought in the sand, were bottles, paper plates, cartons, the remains of their meal.

The group of the man, woman, and baby shifted a little. The man's arm had gone numb. He eased it, and the woman's body moved with his into a new position. She drew the baby in.

- 15 The man with the sleeping bag threw another branch on to the fire.

I could sit here for ever, Fran thought. If the fire went on burning and the man fed it and the others slept like that, and those two men kept on playing that same bit of a tune, I could sit here till I understood at last what it all means: why the sea, why the stars, why this lump in my throat.

- 20 Still seated in the sand with her skirt tucked between her knees and her spine straight, she saw herself get up and walk slowly to where the man with the sleeping bag stood. He turned, and without surprise, watched her come in out of the dark. She stood before him for a moment, then, as if granted permission, went and lay down on the sand among the others, between the group of the man, woman, and baby and the
25 woman with the small boy, feeling the fire's warmth on one side and the breath of the sea on the other. The tune went on. She slept. And in her dream saw a thin, tight-lipped woman with big eyes like a bush-baby's, sitting far off in the dark of the dunes. Gently she beckoned to her, and the woman got up and came into the circle of light.

- 30 Long minutes had passed. They had grown cold. Angie wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. She got to her feet and began to walk on. Fran took up her shoes and followed.

The track led to the crest of the hill. From there a second track would take them down to the horse-paddocks, then the long way round to the house. But as they climbed there was a brighter glow in the sky.

“What is it?” Fran asked. “More bonfires?”

5 Then they came to the top and saw it. Great shoots of flame over the town.

7

From the house a fleet of cars had already set off, their progress slowed by the many gates that had to be opened. They were barely out of sight when the telephone rang.

10 “Poor Audley,” Madge said when Milly Gates from the Post Office gave her the news. She sat down in her black frock, closed her eyes and, worn out with all the preparations and the talk and because it was the only way she had of dealing with things, immediately fell asleep, her head back, snoring.

15 The half-dozen guests who had stayed behind with her were embarrassed, but felt free now to step out on to the deck and watch from a distance the play of flames across the inlet and the reflected glow in the sky.

In the cars they were still in doubt, as they came along the edge of the Lake, what it was that was making such a show.

“Looks like the police station,” Rupe ventured.

20 “No,” Ralph told him gloomily, having a good idea what it must be, “it’s not the cop shop.”

Tommy Molloy, sitting in the back seat between them, said nothing. He knew what it was. So did Audley. A vision of it had appeared spontaneously in Audley’s head, the four rooms and all their objects in glowing outline, in a red essence of themselves, a final intensity of their being in the world before they collapsed into ash.

25 He sat very still in the front seat beside Jonathon, wearing a look, behind the startled eyes, of practised stoicism.

The first one away had been Barney Shannon in his ute, with Lily in the cabin beside him. When they came to the gates it was Barney who leapt out and ran forward in the headlamps’ beam to open them.

30 In procession they crossed the causeway into town.

The street was jammed with cars. On the roofs of some of them young fellows in boardshorts were standing as if at a football match, with beer cans in their fists. Girls were being hauled up beside them, slipping and shrieking. Further on was the inner circle of those who had pushed in as close as the heat would allow.

- 5 Abandoning the cars, they began to ease their way through the crowd, Ralph staying as close as he could to his father's side. People turned to protest, but, when they saw who it was, made way, and Audley finding himself the object of so much attention, felt his heart flutter.

A young fireman came hurrying up. He was in uniform but without his helmet.

- 10 "Sorry about this, Mr. Tyler," he shouted, "she's pretty far gone. Old stuff. That's what done it. Went up like a haystack."

- He was a fresh-faced fellow of twenty-two or -three, recently married. The firebell must have got him out of bed. His hair was wild, his face aglow. There was something hectic and unreliable in his looks. He shouted as if afraid his rather high voice might
15 not carry across the distance he felt between himself and a world that was entirely occupied now by the blaze; all the time casting quick little glances over his shoulder, anxious that if he took his eyes off it for even a second, this conflagration, this star-blaze whose heat he felt between his shoulder blades, and which sent runnels of sweat down his sides under the heavy uniform, might die on him before he had time to
20 savour the excitement it had set off in him. Suddenly, unable to resist any longer the attraction of the thing, he swung round and took the full blast of it on his cheeks. He had, Audley saw, a proprietorial look.

Beautiful! His look said. She's a real beauty! It was his first big do.

If I were a policeman, thought Audley, I'd arrest that boy on the spot.

- 25 Surprised by his own excitement, which he had caught from the young fireman and which he felt too in the silent concentration and glow of the crowd, he approached the flames.

Don Wheelwright, the local policeman, materialized. "Don't worry, Mr. Tyler," he shouted, "we'll get 'em soon enough, the bastards that done it."

- 30 Audley did not respond. He knew who the fellow was referring to. And Don Wheelwright, feeling snubbed, put another mark in his book of grievances. He had had go-ins with Audley before. His promise of action was a challenge. Well, what about it, Mr. Tyler? Now it's something of yours the bastards have touched. As if, Audley thought, in Clem, he had not been touched already.

All these unofficial reports were an embarrassment to him, he did not want them. He had no doubt Don Wheelwright and his people would come up with a culprit—several, perhaps. There might even be among them the one who had struck the match. But standing here in the crowd was like being in the fire itself, there was such an affinity between the two, such a surge of intensity. It stilled the mind, sucked up attention and subdued the individual spirit in such a general heightening of crowd-spirit, of primitive joy in the play of wind and flame, that he found himself saying, with grim humour, out of the centre of it: “So we got our bonfire after all—want it or not.”

10 He felt, against all sense or reason, exhilarated, released. He could have shaken his palms in the air and danced.

Looking about quickly to see if anyone, Lily for instance, had noticed, he was struck again by the intensity of the faces. They were like sleepwalkers who had come out, some of them still in their night-wear, to gaze on something deeply dreamed.

15 What we dare not do ourselves, he found himself thinking, they do for us, the housebreakers, the muggers, the smashers, the grab merchants. When we punish them it is to hide our secret guilt. There is ancient and irreconcilable argument in us between settlement and the spirit of the nomad, between the makers of order and our need to give ourselves over at moments to the imps and demons, to the dervish dance
20 of what is in the last resort dust. We are in love with what we most fear and hide from, death. And there came into his head some lines of a poem he had read, composed of course by one of the unsettled:

And yet, there is only

one great thing,

25 the only thing:

to live to see, in huts and on journeys,

the great day that dawns,

the light that fills the world.

30 As for the objects in there, brilliantly alive for a moment in the last of what had been their structure and about to fall into themselves as ash— the dining table with its set and empty places, each occupied now by an eddy of flame, the writhings on the double bed, the glass cases exploding and tossing their rocks back into the furnace of

time—what was that but a final sacrifice, like his bones, to the future and its angels, whose vivid faces are turned towards us but with sealed lips?

He glanced sideways, feeling an eye upon him.

5 It was Lily. Tilted at a precarious angle on her stick, her silks all flame, her twist of a smile saying: Don't think I can't see right through you, Audley Tyler, you sorrowful old hypocrite.

He too must have been smiling. She pitched a little and, using her stick to right herself, dipped her shoulder in acknowledgement and turned away.

10 There is no hope, he told himself, that's what the old know, that's our secret. It is also our hope, our salvation.

It was then that he remembered Tommy. Searching among the nearby crowd, he found him standing a little way off to the left, his face gleaming with sweat. He was watching along with the rest, and as always seeing the thing, the fire in this case, out of another history.

15 Audley, touched, went across and laid a hand on his old friend's shoulder. They had been through so much together, he and this old man, over the years. Battles won and lost; the night, which might so easily have divided them, of Clem's accident. They looked at one another, but only briefly, then stood side by side without speaking and went on gazing into the fire.

20 8

"LISTEN," Clem said, "listen, everybody. I want to say something."

25 They were a small group now, seated on the coarse-bladed lawn with just the lights from the house falling on them through the open windows, only one or two among them, Audley, Lily, in deck chairs; Barney Shannon lay full-length with his hands folded on his chest, but not sleeping. Subdued, each one, by the recent event, which no one referred to, but also by the overwhelming presence, at this hour, now that the music had packed up and they had run out of talk, of the moon, running full-tilt against a bank of fast-moving clouds, and by the bush, so dense and alive with sound, and down in the cove, the sea breaking. Clem could not have said which of these
30 things moved him most. They were all connected.

The day was over, past, if what you meant by that was time strictly measured—it was past midnight. But what he meant by it was the occasion, though that too might end if one of them now made the move, got up and said: "Well, I'm off," "Let's call it

a day,” “Me for the blanket show.” The group would break up then, and these last ones, the survivors, would go to join those who were already curled up in bunks and sleeping bags on their way to the next thing. Tomorrow. He wanted to forestall that. Something more was needed. Something had to be said. And if no one else was ready
5 to say it, then it was up to him. He felt their eyes upon him, and saw Audley’s look of disquiet and shook his head, meaning to reassure him: Don’t worry, Dad, I know what I’m doing. It’s all right.

He felt confident. The words were there, he still had hold of them. And these were friends, people he loved, who would understand if what he said went astray and did
10 not come out the way he meant. Their faces, which just a moment ago had seemed weary and at an end, were expectant. A light of alertness and curiosity was in them, a rekindling.

“Listen,” he said, “this is what I want to say.

“Out there—out there in space, I mean—there’s a kind of receiver. Very precise it is,
15 very subtle—refined. What it picks up, it’s made that way, is heartbeats, just that. Every heartbeat on the planet, it doesn’t miss a single one, not one is missed. Even the faintest, it picks it up. Even some old person left behind on the track, too weak to go on, just at their last breath. Even a baby in its humidicrib.” He took a breath, growing excited now. He had to control the spit in his mouth as well as the sentences.
20 But he had their attention, it did not matter that one or two of them were frowning and might wonder if he was all there.

“Once upon a time, all this bit of the planet, all this—land mass, this continent—was silent, there was no sound at all, you wouldn’t have known it was here. Silence. Then suddenly a blip, a few little signs of life. Not many. Insects, maybe, then frogs, but it
25 was registering their presence. The receiver was turned towards it and tuned in and picked them up. Just those few heartbeats. What a weak little sound it must have been, compared with India for instance or China, or Belgium even—that’s the most crowded spot. How could anyone know how big it was with so few heartbeats scattered across it? But slowly others started to arrive, just a few at first, rough ones,
30 rough—hearts—then a rush, till now there are millions. Us, I mean, the ones who are here tonight. Now. There’s a great wave of sound moving out towards it, a single hum, and the receiver can pick up each one, each individual beat in it, this one, that one—that’s how it’s been constructed, that’s what it’s fixed to do. Only it takes such a long time for the sound to travel across all that space that the receiver doesn’t even
35 know as yet that we’ve arrived—us whites, I mean. Our heartbeats haven’t even got there yet.

But that doesn't matter—" he laughed, it was going "—because we are here, aren't we? Others were here, now they're gone. But their heartbeats are still travelling out. Even though they stopped ages ago, they're still travelling. It doesn't matter one way or the other, which people, the living or the dead, it's all the same. Or whether
5 they're gone now or still here like us. The birds too. You can feel the way their hearts beat when you pick one up, even when it's still in the shell. And rabbits. What I think is—" he prepared now for his "—is this. If we imagined ourselves out there and concentrated hard enough, really concentrated, we could hear it too, all of it, the whole sound coming towards us, all of it. It's possible. Anything is possible. Nothing
10 is lost. Nothing ever gets lost"

He looked about, their attention was on him. And suddenly there was nothing more to say.

"That's all," he said abruptly, "that's all I wanted to say. Because of what day it is. You know, because of that. Because no one had said anything. So I did."

15 He smiled nervously but felt pleased with himself. He felt good about things. He grinned, gave a little laugh, then sat on the grass and saw that they were all smiling, except for Audley, who always had a few tears on these occasions. But that was all right. It was good. Only he wished that Fran had still been here. She had left half an hour ago and that put a damper on his heart, but not so much of a one. That was all
20 right too. They could go to bed now. He could. They all could. The day was over.

But not yet, not quite yet. They would sit for a bit, letting the moon, the dark surrounding bush with its medley of night sounds, hold them in its single mood, which his speech had not broken.

25 Fran had left in a group of a dozen or so, including Cedric Pohl, who did go with the Bergs. The cars made a procession down the rutted slope and through the three gates to the main road.

In the flurry of farewells, in the leaping torchlight as people stumbled over clods and picked their way among bushes to find their cars, she had had no chance to explain to Clem, simply to say what he already understood, that she felt out of things and would
30 rather drive back tonight than in the heat of the day. He nodded, smiling. She kissed him quickly and climbed into her car.

The procession got under way and she closed her mind to everything but the drive ahead: her mind, not her body. The excitement she felt at the prospect of something new, a romance even, had settled now to a slow but regular ticking in her. Like a
35 bomb, she thought, that was timed to explode somewhere up ahead. Well, she'd deal with that when she came to it.

As they swung down past the horse-paddocks and began to climb the moonslope, two figures appeared in the light of the headlamps and had to move away to the side of the road.

5 It was Ralph and Angie out walking—bailed up now by the line of cars. She would have stopped and spoken, but there were two more cars behind her and before she could wave even, they had been left standing, looking blanched and ghostlike, stunned by the blaze of lights. Still, the image of them together, isolated in the dark, Ralph in his white shirt, Angie in black, pleased her.

10 Ralph and Angie walked, as they often did at the end of the day, even at home in the city. Sharing a half-hour together after so many in which they had gone their separate ways.

15 Down here in the open they walked in whatever light there was from the moon, since they knew this place like the back of their hands. At home it was under humming streetlights, past fences behind which dogs leapt or growled and walls scribbled with graffiti—Yuppies Fuck Off or Eve Was Framed—stepping over rubbish spilled out of doorways, old-fashioned hearts drawn in chalk on the pavement and roughly initialled, through streets where the inhabitants were already sleeping; pausing sometimes before a lighted window to catch a couple of moments from a late-night movie. Ralph, who knew every movie ever made, would identify it for her. “That’s
20 Jack Palance, the rat! In Panic in the Streets” Or, “That’s Marilyn in Bus Stop.”

They seldom talked, or if they did it was to pass on bits and pieces of the day’s news, none of it important. It was the walking together that held them close. Now, as they came up the hill in the dark, they could hear Audley at the piano. He liked to play quietly to himself when the rest of the household had gone to bed: simple things that
25 he had learned when he was a boy. Tonight it was “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring.” The flowing accompaniment brought them right up to the kitchen steps and they stood a moment in the dark to let him finish.

30 The piano was an old Bechstein upright, its black enamel finish chipped in places, worn in others. He played without music but with his eyes fixed ahead, as if the pages stood open on their rest; very straight on the stool, still hearing in his head that first voice telling him: Keep your shoulders back, Aud, sit up straight, and don’t drop your wrists. Being stern with himself, as he was in everything.

When he came to a conclusion he sat with his hands on his knees, till Ralph called: “That was great, Dad. We just dropped in to say goodnight.”

Angie had gone to the tap over the sink to get a glass of water. Nothing had been cleared. In the sink, still in its wrapping, was a big bunch of flowers—tuberoses, the air was drenched with their scent—and under them, Audley's blackfish.

"You go on," she told Ralph quietly. "I'll just clear up a bit."

5 Ralph kissed her on the back of the neck while she stood and sipped her glass of water, then went to say goodnight to his father. She unwrapped the flowers, found a pail to put them in, and ran cold water over the fish to freshen them up, then made room for them in the bottom of the fridge. When she looked up Ralph was gone and Audley was standing in the doorway behind her.

10 She turned and ran the tap to rinse her hands.

"Would you like me to make some tea?" she asked.

They were the night owls of the household. They often found themselves alone like this, last thing.

15 He did not like to go to bed, she knew that. He was scared, she suspected, that if he took his clothes off and lay down to sleep he would slip so far into the dark, into the night that becomes greater night, that he might never get back. He had never said any of this, he was too proud, but she had seen the same thing, the year before he died, in her father. Without waiting for an answer now she filled the electric jug and he sat down like a patient child on one of the forms.

20 The throbbing of the jug filled the silence. When it stopped she was aware, as she had not been before, of the odd little sounds that came from the house itself, its joists and uprights creaking as they shifted and settled like sleepers—or it was the sleepers themselves in their several rooms and out on the deck where the young were sleeping. She thought she could hear Ned, who was inclined to mutter in his sleep.

25 Taking her cup, she stepped to the window and looked down on half a dozen forms all huddled in their sleeping bags, and made out Ned's fair head, then Jenny's darker one. All safe as houses.

She came back and sat by Audley at the bench.

30 "What I've always admired about you, Angie," he said after a moment, "is the gift you have for attending—for attention. People never mention it among the virtues, but it might be the greatest of them all. It's the beginning of everything. Malebranche, you know, called it the natural prayer of the soul. I think it's what Clem's speech meant to say. You didn't hear it, did you?"

She shook her head, took a sip from her cup.

5 “I wish you had. It would have meant something to you. I was deeply moved. By the boy’s intense—happiness. He spoke from a full heart—I think he was trying to say something to me. You know, about the fire— as well as all the rest. What a day we’ve had!” He sipped his tea. “Thank you,” he said in his formal way.

They sat a little longer, saying nothing now.

Outside, a breeze had sprung up; it stirred the faded chintz at the windows, touched with freshness the stale air of the room. On the edge of town, the charred ashes of the museum glowed a moment so that here and there a flame appeared and wetly hissed.

10 Down in the cove, the bonfire, which had collapsed on itself, a shimmering mass, revived, threw up flames that cast a flickering redness over the sand, and one of the men, conscious perhaps of the renewed heat, sat up for a moment out of sleep and regarded it, then burrowed back into the dark. Till here, as on other beaches, in coves
15 all round the continent, round the vast outline of it, the heat struck of a new day coming, the light that fills the world.