

Katarameni and The Good Luck

We all live within the stories we tell, for these tales fashion a coherent direction and identity out of the discontinuities of our past, present and future.

-"Southern Stories" by Drew Gilpin Faust.

1. Exile

It would be simpler to paper my ache and fear with harmless anecdotes of family, peppered with quaint tales of life in a new land, but there seems no way to tidy remembrance in the mine field of memory. No way to staunch the pain. No anamnesis safe in congealed thought.

My fathers' family came from one of the many Greek islands flung about the Turkish coast like a necklace of odd shaped and rough-cut stones. The family, though large, as one would expect for those times, practiced a unique form of family planning. My grandfather would go to America for a time to work and make money, then return to the island. Nine months later there would be another addition to the family. His life was punctuated by long absences and the joy of inevitable new life upon his return. Always there was this leaving, exile and return. Sometimes to new life. Sometimes, as for me, to scrape dust from my own Greek myths.

My father, born in 1906, was one of nine children. One, a brother Stavros, died before my father's birth, another, after he was born. Medical assistance on the island was extremely rudimentary and death was a companion to most people's lives. There may appear some coincidence, I suppose, in the fact that my father's dead brother and I possess the same name, Stavros, but names for Greeks at that time were rolled over, according to a traditional formula, from generation to generation, along with the rest of the dross and bric-a-brac of family. Not even your own name belonged to you.

My father told me the story of how his brother died. The boy was about eight at the time and he died of what was probably a ruptured appendix. He had suffered excruciating stomach pains that left him doubled over in agony and my grandfather, moved by his son's despair, sat with him, stroking him, till it was no longer tolerable to accept the judgement of his own helplessness. He drew the child around his shoulders like a rolled swag, his arms grasping the burden of the child's weight and pain into his bowed back. Then he trudged the *skaliopatia*, the cobbled lanes and stairs that moved about the village, ascending and descending the labyrinthine paths, holding the child, sobbing into the crook of his neck, till he died. He sat by the path with the child cradled in his lap just holding him in the quiet sea white reflected light of the early morning. The only intrusion was the sound of distant cockerels and the bleating of goats. But no human sound.

No pain or hardship, though, contaminated my family's idealised view of the island and village life. They saw themselves as people of property and substance, owners of a patchwork quilt of pocket handkerchief sized plots - you couldn't call them fields - subdivided and subdivided, generation after generation. Today, returning families are thrown into hair tearing apoplexy trying to establish inheritance and ownership of these minuscule neglected plots. The only winners of these wrangles are Athenian lawyers and the cunning revenue conscious Greek government. Beware of Greeks who die leaving gifts! The truth, which I only discovered as an adult, was that their lives were built up with stoic shards of poverty like the ordered stone walls of the island. They were peasants locked to the land, though it was mainly the women who eked out an existence in the stony olive groves and terraced plots. The men fished the sea or exported their labour. Always this leaving, exile and return.

One way or another they all eventually left, part of the massive Greek diaspora. My father's brothers at the age of 12 and 13 left for America but were trapped in Ellis Island and only

escaped deportation by bribing an official with a coin or note they found. Or that, at least, is the doubtful form the story assumes in family legend. Like most family mythologies it contains a sequel, a tale of wondrous success spread in the red rumouring light of island sunsets, told in the *kafeneion* with ouzo lubricated pride by the returning exiles. And to mark their success, they donated a motorised ambulance to the community, to a village with one dock side road!

They never stayed. They always returned to their land of opportunity to build contrasts with origins that lay in the livelihood of olive and citrus groves, where the families would go together to tend the trees and sleep gently at noon in the huts spread among the groves. The groves nourished them, but the village gripping the hillside, riveted their lives. Viewed from the sea the whitewashed houses huddling together formed the contorted outline of a startled face, the shuttered windows and doors the pitted marks of gnawing decay.

Even when I was younger few navigable roads intruded; only tracks and the inevitable stairs and paths moving up and around the clustered houses, occupied for generation after generation till they settled like some nesting fowl into the bowl of the earth and stone. Here and there were untenanted homes, abandoned by families that had fled into exile, vacant, the roof ridging deformed like some ancient spine bowed under the weight of pipe clay tiles. In the *kafeneion*, the coffee shop and one room focus of village gossip, the men sat, dark and impassive, sipping a bitter syrup of *pikro* coffee. They drank from minute cups that seem absurd in their thickened hands, and played *tavli*, backgammon. Occasionally braying laughter melded with donkey hawing; in the distance the farting, coughing splutter of the three wheeled mini trucks.

Like a presence, religion accompanied their lives: miraculous ikons sheathed in silver *oklad*; rubbed sainted shrines along the roadsides; and the fervour of precious relics, the venerated grizzly fragments of skull, limb and bone exuding sweet odour. My childhood was saturated with stories of startling, unfathomable mystery, legends of astonishing cure and disaster averted. My mother described with awe, how, when her parents were young, the island was saved by the woven camels' hair Girdle of the Virgin, granted at the *Koimesis* to the Apostle Thomas, and brought from Vatopedi by special ship to cleanse the orange and lemon trees of the disease that threatened ruination to the island economy. Even the Sultan had requested the precious relic when Constantinople was racked by cholera some years earlier.

As I recede from my own time into the haloed images my parents conjured for me, I begin to see how they really lived, inextricably linked to their poverty and to one another. They moved so you could hardly tell their hard features apart. My father's family stare unsmiling from a curling photo, my grandmother in billowing *vrakes*, the Turkish pants the women wore; they balloon from beneath her looming breasts and gather in close to her ankles. She stands mute before me in her porcine frame. I know little of her except for her early death, obese and thirty-eight. And the adoption of my aunt, *thea* Kaliopi.

To her sterile sister my grandmother gave my father's younger sister, Kaliopi; not a male, only a spare female to fill the space of longing. They lived side by side in the same village, silent about this practical arrangement that satisfied the wants of both, till in a child's game of *kokala*, Knuckles, at the age of ten, the contemptuous rebuke was made that my aunt did not even know her real parents. She returned home immediately to confront her adopted mother

with the accusation. Possessed of the truth, she packed her few belongings, gathered her life and went to the home of her real mother, silently to where she belonged. Nothing was ever said. Places were shuffled, arrangements made, space provided for my returning aunt.

Like his older brothers, my father was driven by an economic imperative to leave the island. At 17 he left for Egypt. Then, for reasons that he never explained, he went from there by boat to Australia, along with other men from the village who were later to weave themselves through our lives. He arrived in 1923 with seven shillings and sixpence in his pocket and made his way to the home of a family originally from his village. They were among the earlier families that came to Australia and accepted responsibility for new arrivals. They lived like an echo of their home and roots, an island of familiarity in a sea of people they perceived as foreigners. They had always lived in the presence of foreigners, Turks whose Ottoman yoke still lay about my father's childhood till the war of 1912, but they had been hated and familiar. They had absorbed dress and language though this would be denied; drank coffee and ate food that was suspiciously familiar. They were linked by their hatred. But Australia was different. Here they were exiles among exiles whose crude attempts to recreate a British Motherland in barren scrub and eucalypts only heightened the alienation.

My father made no attempt to connect with local people. He was here to labour and save to buy a business. Each day he walked the unfamiliar streets to the rattle of trams and the clatter of language, past pubs with Penfold mirrored advertising, where men drank tall glasses of brown stench in crowded bars with all the tiled ambience of a pissoir. He concentrated within the confines of work, a dimension enlivened only by boats that brought the company of men and marriageable women from his island home. Eventually, in the early 1930s, he chose further exile into the arid interior of western Queensland, to a dusty town with no use for a name. There, with a little capital and a measure of confidence, he gradually acquired a store, picture theatre and service station.

He was joined there by my *thea* Kaliopi and her newly acquired husband, who tethered themselves to my father's business ventures. Restored to her place within family she had sailed to Australia to marry a man from our own village on the other side of the world. Like a coin slowly turned over ring and index fingers. Lives of contrasts and opposites that remained the same. Years later I heard the whispered intimations of scandal surrounding my aunt. Her clandestine village lover could hardly accept her as a wife, having as she had, so readily traded her virtue. There was no choice but to have her re-virgined, like Aphrodite, for export to the antipodean marriage market.

They laboured obsessively, accumulating within the acquisitive ring around their world. For my father, the only respite was the picture theatre. It was the technology that fascinated him most, not the bewildering outfall from Hollywood with its images of affluence and its suspect morality. Theatre is probably too generous a description. More accurately, it was a vast galvanised shed with banks of scalloped canvas deck chairs cunningly designed by some sexual sadist to encourage unimpeded exploration while making consummation impossible. Tales to the contrary are either booze boasts or apocryphal. On Saturday night it was crammed with a sweating gaggle of brilliantined young men with arms draped about young women in shapeless cotton shifts. My father disapproved and recoiled from the shamelessness of their behaviour. He concentrated instead on the leaden cans of bulky spool,

synchronising the movement from one projector to another, the dazzling beam shafting through spiralling cigarette smoke to form larger than life images on the screen. He sat within the troglodytic confines of the projection booth where the air hung like wet washing on a still day, while below him broiled the heat of hands held between warm wet crutch and cool canvas.

Sufficient now in his affluence it was time to seek a suitable wife packaged by boat and transported for convenience. Through the network of contacts, he found one, an attractive woman, suitable in every way except for the opinion of my aunt. She was a slut, my aunt had railed. She smoked. And while Greek, she not only didn't come from their village, she didn't even come from their island. My father caved into my aunt's taunts and badgering, quietly acquiesced, and waited for my mother, in 1939, to pass through the eye of the needle.

2.

My mother grew up in a world as artificial as dried flowers, the colour sucked out by the light. Her father, the church verger and cantor, granted himself the esteem of the village. For him, their table was to be set with the finest in food and wine. The toil in fields and groves, however, did not fit with the expansive vision of tasteful living that he felt he was owed as a right of high office. He coveted a grandiose region of refinement without the means to effect it. All the time he was accompanied by my silent suffering grandmother, a handkerchief folded neatly and placed precisely in my grandfather's top pocket. Or crumpled and discarded when my grandfather was overtaken by annoyance, which was frequently the case. And all the time he was accompanied by the judgement of the village. He was not a good provider, and there was no shame greater that my mother could think of, or what is worse, have to live with.

But on Sundays my grandfather would climb the wide whitewashed steps to the bleached church that squatted into the hillside and searched the sea from its one-eyed jutting steeple, the belltower cyclops. There, surrounded by the luminescent gold and iridescent colours of *ikons*, he would sing into the pungent incense that spiralled into air, a deep resonant Byzantine baritone scaling the stairs of ancient chants into the domed Pantocrator Christ. Monumental for a moment in the exquisite harmony and subtle vibration of marrow and domed plaster his lofty vision had some substance. My grandmother knelt in the resonating dust particles hovering in the light cascading through church windows, angelic, silent.

My mother would gather a rhythm and excitement in her voice when she spoke of her young life, of wonderful family picnics where laughter filtered through olive groves and settled round them like dust; of neighbours close and safe and friendly, encompassing her world. She came at a relatively late age to Australia. At thirty-two I could only imagine that the real truth was that the poverty she chose never to discuss had barred her from marriage by depriving her of any chance of a substantial dowry. In Australia the supply and demands of the marriage market meant one last great opportunity. She spoke proudly, wreathed in her father's bearing, of the many suitors that were brought before her for consideration in the parlour of the home where my father had stayed when he first came to Australia twenty years before. It was not surprising my father was on the roll of potential suitors and he must have seemed a very positive find. He was now the owner of a general store, restaurant, cinema, bakery and service station and seemed to represent every material desire.

What she did not realise was the profound exile of western Queensland. She did not see the way my father was shrivelling and cracking in the desiccating isolation. Nor did she appreciate the relentless pace of work, the constant, oppressive heat and the veiled resentment of the local people. The locals saw them as "dagos" and harboured a seething envy of their growing silent affluence. After all, it had not been that long since the 1924 Queensland Royal Commission had stated that Greeks were "socially and economically.....a menace to the community" and that "it would be for the benefit of the State if their entrance was altogether prohibited."

When she arrived at the outback home of her new husband, my mother quickly became aware of the gnawing worm of dissatisfaction and loathing that surrounded him. My aunt Kaliopi held sway with her harping discontent, flailing my father with her contempt and agitating him with her threats to leave. My father was trapped by his assets and his dependence on the close knot of family whose labour carried the businesses. Slowly, he twisted himself into a coil of silent tension, broken by brief outbursts of repressed irrationality.

"He's falling to bits!" my aunt hissed in my mother's ear. "Why should we all crumble with him? He has no right to take us with him. Leave him. Come with us. Leave him." It was a slow litany of whispered erosion delivered like some rote repeated incantation. In the background was my aunt's silent husband, small and thin, the skin sucked in beneath the ridge of cheek bone. He always found reason to be close to my mother, to brush up against her as they worked together, to breathe the smell of her body. But he held his fragile lust in check and quietly and loyally echoed my aunt's refrain rolled in his own unctuous concern.

Eventually my aunt, her husband and a cousin did leave. One night without a word, they left with all they could carry of value, including the flour bag containing the week's takings. Later they were replaced from within the narrow circle of village folk that continued to trickle into the country, but the weight of my aunt's leaving hollowed my father of feeling. My mother now took up where my aunt left off, a new refrain of nagging and discontent but with one difference - my mother held the triumph of her own steadfast loyalty above my father like a cleaver. There was no way he could resist further. He buckled under the weighted obligation of such hated goodness. And so, my father in 1945 sold his thriving business to some relative or another and moved south from the heat. Into the same house as my aunt! Crawling into the searing contempt like some comforting womb.

What is even more astonishing was that my father contemplated purchasing a house in common with my aunt; a magnificent rambling terrace, so I was told, overlooking a stately park, where my parents were to have the rear section, of course. But the presence of ants, large belligerent red pincered beasts that marched about like they owned the place and grasped my aunt's heart with terror, put paid to that purchase. Still, when a house opposite my aunt came on the market some time later, my father bought it and in so doing stayed within the circle. Why they continued to huddle together in this perverse animal terror of snarled relating still confounds me, though as I reflect on it now, I feel a gathering rage with my father, manacled by acquiescence to these women.

3. Katerameni and the 'Good Luck'

Plane trees lined the road on either side of the street where we lived opposite my aunt and each autumn, at leaf fall, an attack of municipal leprosy left each with gnarled knuckles on a wrist of trunk. I am still startled by the contrast of this with the plane trees on my parent's island home that stand in the village square rambling into light, offering their tender mottled shade.

The house itself was indistinguishable from countless other late Victorian terrace houses. A laced balcony and javelin studded front fence. A wrought iron gate that creaked up an octave upon opening and slammed shut with a clattering shudder, a sound so utterly ordinary and familiar that hearing it even now invokes a tremor of pleasure. It had a pocket plot of lawn at the front though it was poverty rather than taste that allowed my parents to avoid the contagion of Portland cement virus, the spreading, dismal ash-grey that infected their Greek contemporaries. Instead, I remember green and growing things, though, granted, if it wasn't edible then it was unlikely to be grown. Nevertheless, my childhood in urban congestion at least had vegetation.

For the first four years, our house was shared with tenants who came with the purchase and rent control laws. They lived upstairs, Mr and Mrs Connell and their two children, thrust by their own poverty into the first post war experiences of multiculturalism. Downstairs our family lived in two front rooms partitioned by a folding timber divider, enough to strain privacy as it was, without the added intrusion of our neighbours with whom we shared the downstairs toilet. And while our symbiotic existence seemed remarkably amicable, we moved like polite fragile shadows round one another.

Before my birth, my mother suffered through a pregnancy with complications that eventually forced her to have an abortion. The fetuses, twin boys, wrinkled dolls, haunted my mother into old age when she began a pilgrimage of Greek monasteries, shrines and sanctuaries to pray and light smouldering wax to the *ikons*, seeking the repose of their souls and the expiation of her own immense guilt and grief. After the termination she was faced with the choice of a hysterectomy or another conception and chose the latter.

I was born then, in the winter of 1946, though it was hardly an auspicious birth. During the time my mother carried me in her womb, her own mother died, leaving my mother depressed and desolate, utterly exiled and convinced she would never see her Greek home again. That conviction was stark and real during this period of post War civil conflict, when travel was difficult and usually reserved for men returning to acquire wives. For my mother, cocooned in an interior world of pregnancy, the meaning and mourning of this severed link made her world blacken and shrivel. She loved her mother with the same vehemence with which she disliked her father. She'd been cheated. She always felt cheated somehow.

It should have been an auspicious birth really. After all I had been born on the same day as my father. For Greeks, though, birthdays have less significance than Namedays, the day on the ecclesiastical calendar corresponding to the saintly personage after whom one is named. Nevertheless, the coincidence of our births may well have been seen as auspicious, except for the fact that my father also received a sizeable tax bill on the same day.

So, on my father's birthday he acquired a son and a hefty tax bill he couldn't pay.

I was named Stavros, which means "of the Cross", but for all the coincidences of time and place my mother facetiously called me "The Good Luck", in English not Greek, and thereafter reminded me of the blight of my coming.

I was fortunate though, in their choice of godparents for me. My godfather, my *nono*, was the brother of aunt Kaliopi's husband and my godmother, my *nona*, was my father's first cousin. Strictly speaking that made them cousins by marriage which within Church tradition was unacceptable, but the narrow marriage market allowed such niceties to be overlooked. My father had assisted my godmother out from Greece and had immediately set in motion the wheels of matchmaking, the succession of suitors paraded before my *nona* to assist in the selection of a sire. My father took his role of *proxenitis*, go-between, seriously, and cautioned my godfather that while he was favoured by my godmother, his own fulfilment was fundamental, and haste should not cloud his decision. After all, there were plenty more where she came from and the next boat would bring another batch of brides from which to choose. And anyway, he had an Australian mistress of long standing with which to make do while he deliberated over the selection of a proper wife. Given the nature of this inauspicious horse trading it was a wonder that their relationship blossomed as it did, into such a contented arrangement, one that for me, as I grew up, was to prove a refuge and source of unending pleasure.

Despite tax problems business prospered for my father in the Coronet Cafe, strategically ensconced in the centre of the city. The decor was of stark contrasts; angular ebony and mirrored surfaces, curved chrome and glass furnishings. Waitresses in straight black skirts with functionless white aprons the size of bibs. And the lettering, white on black, austere hollowed and honed in that decorative Broadway style unique to the 1930s. My father brought home my earliest memories from the cafe. Arnott's red and green toned tall tinned biscuits, with a rosella perched prominently on each side. And tubs of ice-cream, to be consumed immediately because, unlike those ubiquitous mean-minded ice-cream bricks in folded cardboard, these tubs would not fit conveniently into the ice tray slot of the Silent Knight fridge. These were brought home by my father from the magical Coronet Cafe, to a rush of pleasure in the house.

It was at this time also that my aunt, my father's youngest sister and my name sake, *thea* Stavroula came out from Greece. She had been educated at the expense and the combined efforts of brothers in America and Australia and her arrival was anticipated with some heightened expectation. She was ample, though not unattractive with an angular face and wide, generous mouth, with an element of odd dishevelment about her. It gradually became clear from tangled speech and odd and darkly intoned comments that my aunt was disturbed. She drew a thread of tension through our family and the responsibility weighed heavily on my father as well as a shame that prevented disclosure to foreign medical opinion. He had no idea what might happen or what she might do. Difficult though it might be, he knew he had to get her away from the family and back to Greece, though this would take tension laden months to organise.

Sensing the potential in closely embroidered family relationships for brooding malice, my aunt Stavroula whispered the imagined tale of how my brother Michali and I were not my father's children but those of my uncle, the husband of my aunt Kaliopi, living across the road. She gorged herself on the story. The children were a foul misbegotten indecency, a putrid offence. Once in a moment of chaotic delusion she took a knife and, screaming obscenities, lunged across the room at the throat of my brother Michali. My father wrestled with her, breathless, terrified and sobbing while my mother wailed in hysterical anguish. My older brother Stephanos ran across the road to fetch help from my aunt Kaliopi. With calm restored, my father sat crumpled and silent in the corner while my mother, sucking in little grunts of air, lay on the couch with an ouzo-soaked cloth on her brow. The atmosphere hung heavy with aniseed and *thea* Kaliopi stood guard over her mad sister now curled, foetal and temporarily catatonic.

These events, though, consciously impinged very little on my world of small pleasures and family gatherings. Sunday was the day we functioned as a family. My father worked five and a half days a week and on Saturday afternoon he would disappear to the Greek club in the city to play cards. Drink a little, gamble a little. Once he returned home at five in the morning to a tirade of abuse from my mother that roused the whole house. She loathed the independence his gambling bestowed on him and portrayed it as a weakness threatening imminent family penury even though in reality his gains and losses were minor.

But on Sunday I could crawl into bed with my father and play on mountainous knees that would collapse into a sea of laughter and bedclothes. Or be thrown high up to catch moments of exhilarating fear and fall back into enveloping assurance. From that height, hovering above him, I could search the contours of his face, his rounded features that squared off sharply at his jaw. And his eyes, an unexpected clear liquid turquoise in arrested contrast to his dark hair and olive skin. My eyes, my features.

These were the few remembered moments of affection even though I shared my parents' room until I was five.

I'd forgotten! I feel an inward churning rush of confused response to this remembrance. I'd forgotten. I'd forgotten the dim awareness of a furtive darkened current in the room, the short-flurried activity, the sighs and sounds, and my own fear and excitement. My cot like a bookend to their personal world, upright, correct and repressed. Though faint in my memory, this constrained, perfunctory intimacy between my parents would be revealed to me years later by my mother from her index of disappointments.

Most Sundays were spent in lethargy, my father in the back-yard dozing in a dull striped canvas and wooden deck chair near an inevitable olive tree he had planted. The children were condemned to bored silence in a sun-drenched corner of porch to watch intently the ordered lines of small black ants on the concrete path. Put sticks across to divert them or pour water down a discovered nest.

Sometimes, baskets and bathers in tow, we would catch a swaying, rollicking tram to the beach and spill out, laughing onto the concourse and sand. A swarm of family and relatives swathed in our own language, oblivious to surrounding people, we enjoyed white *feta* and

dark olives, soft fresh bread and crisp lettuce. Later in the afternoon, the heat sucked up energy and scattered the throng like pick-up-sticks across the small park nestling behind the beach. Men played poker or lazed, dozing in the lengthening shadows; women nattered, and children shrieked at games.

On one such Sunday my aunt Stavroula, cloistered with the children to facilitate supervision, took advantage of the afternoon dissipation and took me, a two year old, in hand along the promenade to the shops and tram stop, intent again on expunging the sin that she imagined hung over our family. Holding my hand to steady me, she let me clamber the high steps, up into the tram, then stood impassive as the carriage drew away.

As the truth of my disappearance sank in, panic gripped the group. Aunt Stavroula stood in the midst of fear and dismay, quiet, satisfied, exculpated. "I've sent him away," she said calmly, while my mother stood in the spreading orange haze and gathering hysteria screaming at her, "*Katarameni! katarameni!* Cursed one!" A curse to our family and a cause of all our woes, in my mother's view.

My father with my uncles and other male relatives scoured the beach and foreshore fearful of my drowning. Then, awkward, they turned to the police, who, taciturn and abrupt, were suspicious of such, to them, unnecessary emotion. Later I was retrieved from a local police station where I sat contented, lubricated by ice cream and cordial, and oblivious to the storm of pain caused by my disappearance.

My father was shamed and distraught, an anguish compounded by my mother's uncompromising judgement of his ultimate responsibility for what had happened. He presumed that in some way my aunt's repatriation to Greece and the support of the village would remedy her twisted view. Desperate, my father bribed a pilot of an overseas flight to take my aunt unaccompanied back to Greece. He shed her like some oppressive cloak. But when she did return to Greece it was soon apparent that not only was my aunt displaying increasing bouts of psychosis, but her older sister and carer was equally disturbed. Slowly, the stories began to trickle back describing scenes of my aunts wandering the village wearing rags and hurling abuse and pots of shit from the upstairs window on passers-by. My father was increasingly agitated by these events but incapable of acting. Eventually an uncle from America travelled back to Greece and made arrangements for the sisters to be locked away in an asylum on Leros, closing the door finally on my father's humiliation and shame.

When I think about my father and his sisters I am left on the rim of the dark bowl of their lives and no amount of thought will give up the secrets held beneath the surface.

My aunts, roaming their village, crazed and grotesque. Another aunt in America dying of Crohn's disease, shrinking within, thin and grey, anorexic like pencil lead, her uncontrolled bowels leaking and bleeding. And then there is my aunt Kaliopi, possessed of an awesome malevolence and now the only living member of my father's family. I grew up with *thea* Kaliopi's tyranny of my father, but more recently, I have unearthed fragments, tales of her visits back to Greece, and the bitter murmur of soured business dealings.

I can see her hand outstretched, fingers splayed in the traditional sign of fatal curse, a gesture steeped in malignant superstition. The whiff of darkly breathed words can be inhaled, "*Tin katara mou na ehi!* Wreath my curse about you!" And I can see now my aunt's triumphant satisfaction when a report to her some months later told of the death she had intended.

This malignancy and madness envelop me like some dark science, a perverted alchemy, without gnosis or redemption. And nowhere can I find reasons or meaning. Only the occasional fragment, a whisper like molecules rattling. Dark stories of my grandfather on the death of my grandmother, moving like a blanket round the lives of his daughters, wives to his misery, mistresses to his petulance and autocratic whim, their private lives closeted from the view of the rest of the village till they could escape to marriage or the protection of brothers in America or Australia. Or to no protection at all.

4. Theo Christophoros

After the departure of my aunt Stavroula, my father decided to sell the Coronet Cafe. He was exhausted and fragile. He had high blood pressure and needed to free himself from the demands of such a hectic business. He wanted something he could control with greater ease, which had solid equity and not just the ephemeral security of a leasehold enterprise. He bought a babywear and haberdashery shop, a double story late Victorian building tucked in among its fellows in a pledge of anonymity, one of a string of stores along a main road snaking out of the city. At the turn of the twentieth century these had been at the fringe of a burgeoning new suburbia. Now, of course these parts had been absorbed into the general fabric of the city. Abandoned by the poor and successive waves of migrants, the area has now become the fashionable address of the new middle class.

Above the shop was a flat which became a kind of half-way house for a detritus of island Greeks escaping the devastation of the War and the continuing havoc of civil war. The veil of family was so complete, however, that I was utterly unaware of this dark side of Greek society until I was well into my twenties, though I am puzzled now by my lack of curiosity and total indifference to clues that must have been about me at the time. The flat frequently became the first port of call for eligible young women sent to fuel a community predominated by men and preoccupied by marriage. My father acted as *proxenitis* or go-between for an interminable number of arranged marriages while my mother busied herself with wedding preparations. Bewildered new brides were whisked into Farmers to be outfitted and corseted for weddings and receptions machined to within fine tolerances and sensibilities. My poor sister, Katerina, was always conscripted for the supporting role of bridesmaid for these alliances of people she barely knew or cared about.

In this way my father sloughed the scales of his marriage and assumed a public profile, becoming a respected figure in the rapidly expanding Greek community and the influential island *paroikia*. The island association was a volatile brew of parochial village divisions, incendiary Greek politics and schisms in the local Orthodox Church. Through these my father ducked and veered with a skill matched only by his determination not to offend. My mother enjoyed the external focus of their lives and the community approbation my father conjured with his expansive generosity, but she lamented too the cost my father frequently bore out of his own pocket. As *Koubaros* or best man, he paid for the church service, the wedding crowns and the *bombonieres*, the bittersweet symbol of marriage, sugar coated almonds

wrapped in tulle with a Madonna or crucifix, tied on with ribbon. It was expected too, that he would be godfather to the first-born child and attached to this was an obligation both financial and otherwise, that continued indefinitely, an obligation considerably greater than that accorded the role in the non-Greek community.

The island community and its association became a central feature of our lives as I grew up. On my father's Nameday hundreds of people would turn up at our house filling rooms to sauna proportions. A laughing stream of people would wind their way through a packed mass of flesh seeking refuge on stairways and landings. Others huddled in conversation on the porch or spilled out into the back yard like a pocket of potatoes.

At regular intervals the community association would organise picnics out along the harbour away from the view of locals where, for one day, the world of eucalypts and bush smells was Greek. There was always a gaggle of other children to play with and prodigious amounts of food to eat. The taste hovered between tart and sweet, dark olives and *baklava*, *feta* and *melomakarona*, spread on the ground on white prandial cloths with round ladies in black dresses and dark hair, studded around the edges like large fat raisins. My mother's brother, uncle Christophoros would bring a wind-up record player and play Greek music that hissed and spat from corroded 78s. The sound always seemed hollow, without immediacy, so you had to reach down into the cone of the squat black box to touch it. I watched closely the way he and the other men joined in the *horos*, the dance. They would weave their arms around each other's shoulders for the *hasapiko*, the butchers dance, and, bodies in unison, slowly dance, lurch and twist, the tension teetering on imbalance. A curved line that swerved and lunged, though the circle never closed.

I was about three when *theo* Christophoros, "the carrier of Christ", entered my world. He was an iconographer, come to satisfy a community starved for rich tintured imagery from the crush of linseed. Thumbing through the family album, he reaches out to me, unsmiling, a flowing soot-black moustache creasing his square jaw. Dark, barbed-wire hair and set jaw, he stands aloof in winged collar, waistcoat and fob chain, his body listing to one side the same way my mother held herself. I can't remember ever seeing him in such Edwardian wear but for me the photo always seems to aggregate him accurately.

He stayed in the flat, of course, when he first arrived. For him it became simply a temporary home and studio, but for me each time I clumped in my insect gait up the stairs, I left behind the hum of merchandise and the chant of small change and entered a loft of thought and exploration. I would sit near him in his studio enveloped by the dusky scent of linseed oil and paint while he slowly crafted the austere figures of Christ, haloed images of Madonna and infant, and the shapes of thaumaturgic saints. As he worked, he chanted the Byzantine hymns and psalms, his voice wavering in that familiar eastern tonality learned from his father, verger and church cantor. For many years he was one of the few iconographers in the country, and he was responsible for creating many of the *ikons* in the scores of churches that sprang up in the wake and surge of post war Greeks.

Sometimes he worked on panels for an iconostasis, the tall screen separating the bema from the apse, priest from congregation, spiritual from material. Prominent on one side he would define an ascetic Christ, on the other, the *theotokos*, the Mother of God, her arms raised in

prayer in the antique *orans* gesture, her shawl, a *maphorion*, trimmed with gold lace and decorated with the three golden stars. Sometimes he meticulously crafted individual *ikons* of exquisite beauty, the flawless embroidered nimbus worked in silver and gold in delicate detail. The Byzantine features seemed to remain flat and two dimensional, but the aureole roused a vibrant three-dimensional luminosity moving into the depths of the surface and reflecting out breathing light and air. In the elongated faces of saints were dark eyes of charcoal and pitch, black wells of weeping. And hidden in the crumpled folds of garments were the shifting silken hues of olive green and vibrant ultramarine.

Eschewing the heterodox Iosaphaioi style he worked to the precise formulae of shape, form and place that the rigid Byzantine tradition of Panselenos and Theophanes had prescribed. Yet each form led into a richly personal realm of intimate and subtle variation. In the *ikons* of the Virgin I found myself drawn and repelled. In the *hodigitria* style, the Virgin, austere and remote, lightly balances a Christ manikin on her arm. There is no weight in the child-man figure, and there is something strange in what seems so oddly old, the features mature and the gestures precise and deliberate. But in the Virgin of the *eleousa* style the child becomes infant and innocent, one hand caressing his mother's *maphorion*, one hand slung lovingly round her neck, while his cheek gently melds with hers. There is a greedy longing in the generous features of the child, while in the mother's face there is a mourning and compassion that still grips me.

The prescription of form and style worked like an alchemy, a mysterious *Coniunctio* of transformation and union, fusing subject and image, mirroring the mystery and violating with the divine. And while these fragments of religiosity had a singular and secret glow, they blazed when they moved into the tapestry of the church. I would accompany my uncle as he worked each into its place within the greater *ikon* of the building itself, constructing a universe that swirled around and above me from the centre of the church. From the towering Logos, the Word and seed of Meaning, my child sight poured round the curve of dome over a nimety of archangels and apostles down to the pictorial upper walls embracing detailed scenes of Annunciation and Transfiguration, Crucifixion, *Anastasis* and the mourning of *Koimesis*. Below these a plethora of saints and martyrs, twisted and brutalised. And in the hermetic sanctuary of the altar, sealed by the iconostasis, the *ikon* of the Mother of God hovers over the Feast to which she gave birth, the appalling Eucharist of the Christ consumed. "A pure Virgin grasped and him did give to friends to eat forever." Words wreathed in the real, the divine anthropophagy ingested in the words of Avercius of Hieropolis in the second century.

My uncle Christophoros was a hallowed figure in my life, a religious man, talented and revered. In Greece, religion was treated with ambivalence, Orthodoxy being an established faith entwined with factional politics. Even among the more sceptical in Australia though, it was granted respect, a symbol of a unique Greek community with the potential to unify except for an equal potential to be an instrument of power. That was the Byzantine legacy which inevitably produced a monumental and emotional schism in the Australian Greek Orthodox Church, though probably that was just an acceptable way to have a civil war on foreign soil without spilling blood. Always it seems, there were these irreconcilable divisions, splits and fissures. A passion for absolute certainty and emphatic, unwavering commitment. Death was no price to pay for belief. Only the living was difficult.

But my uncle's craft, unique and rare in Australia, was needed by churches on both sides of the warring schismatic factions that emerged in the early 1950s in a flurry of excommunication. He took orders from both sides and pocketed the difference. He was a special person, special too because his work was so different. After all everyone else in my world worked in shops! It seems irreconcilable then, that when he came from Greece, he brought my mother a whip to discipline the children. The whip had a thick wire core plaited about with leather, with leather thongs, thin spurts of hide flailing from the tip. My mother always provided the discipline in our household, never my father.

I can remember once emerging from under the ancient settee, a large rolling sea swell of mournful black that dominated our lounge room. I had spent an aeon of child time entranced by the melded smells of horsehair, dust and people, and I stated in serious tones, to the horror of my mother, that it smelled like ladies' bottoms. She seized me in a fit of frenzy and swung the stripes of leather from the whip across my back and buttocks. She stood, legs propped apart like rigid scaffolding for her stout frame, her jutting jaw gritted in towering determination to perform the onerous but necessary task. I folded my body into a scrunched, foetal ball and hugged the floor, pleading, begging, in a thin hysterical whine that I would never ever again violate her unfathomable laws of right and wrong. Punctuated use throughout childhood saw the whip fray and decay. The vicious threads of wire from the twisted core emerging from the leather casing and the wisps of metal stung and sliced when wrapped about flesh. Eventually, in a quiet conspiracy of repressed outrage my older brother and sister took the whip and buried it in the garden at the end of the yard.

Like most, I suppose, I remember that fear and panic of childhood punishment but there are dark edges etched around the remembrance. Always with these punishments was a gush of crude invective from my mother. Once, as an older child returning from school, I stopped to play at the home of an Australian boy and returned home late. My mother's rage galloped, and her tongue seared me with insults that, to me, so young, meant nothing - *palio kerata!* dirty old cuckold! *roufiano!* slut's pimp! *tha sou ta kopso!* I'm going to cut them off!

Contact with outsiders was always accompanied in my mind with a dark thrill tinged with disquiet, for my mother had instilled about them, a subtle, nameless and sinister sexuality. They had lived under centuries of repressive Ottoman rule where a form of *paidomazoma* or Janissary levy was used to recruit attractive, intelligent young boys into the service of the Empire. The tradition though, had long since declined into a way of stocking the household of the local Turkish Pasha with the most beautiful boys from the villages, a demand which the local people were powerless to deny, forcing them to hide the truth of such practices in an unspoken pit of shame. For my mother contact with the household of any foreigner meant possible contact with some unspeakable obscenity. The Australian women who wore pants or smoked were sluts. And the men were capable of all manner of abomination.

It amuses me how my mother saw the locals, but not herself, as the foreigners, which in a way is true, but not in the way my mother sensed it. All things Greek were good and wholesome, proper and moral. There were no bad Greeks and one would always be safe and protected within the *paroikia*, the circle of the community. So powerful was this fiction that, in spite of being born in Australia and having older brothers and a sister at school who spoke English, I learned no English myself until I began attending school at five. Only Greek was ever

spoken in the cocoon of our Greek household. To be fair, it was not a simple bigoted xenophobia or peasant ignorance that drove my family in on itself and the Greek community. My father, on the contrary, was philoxenic and always hospitable to outsiders. And certainly not just for the sake of business.

The worship of *paroikia* though, reaches back into the traditions of the Greek diaspora. Communities were spawned from Odessa to Smyrna and Alexandria; and more recently, in America and Australia. Always, like the Jews, they retained their identity, and, like the Jews, they bound themselves to the community and threw themselves into commerce. Probably, like the Jews, if the Greek preoccupation with commerce hadn't been so intense, they would have also discovered psychotherapy, given the mix of ingredients.

For like the Jews they turned in on themselves. They too had no coherent homeland till recently, in spite of the War of Independence in 1821. Even that uniquely Greek mixture of revolution and civil war only produced a truncated geographical entity which inevitably gave rise to a Zionist style irredentism. It was *enosis*, the irredentist obsession with binding all Greek communities into one nation, that led to the succession of blundering encounters over the next hundred years with Ottomans and Slavs. For the Jews it was, "next year in Jerusalem". For the Greeks it was, "next year in Constantinople". Since the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the *meghali ithea*, the Grand Idea, possessed the Greek mind to retake the soul centre of Byzantium. Never ask a Greek to begin any new venture on a Tuesday, for that was the day, as everyone knows, the City fell to the Turks.

The irredentist obsession reached its height with the invasion of Smyrna and Anatolia in 1921. With the tacit approval of the allies, particularly Britain, the invasion by the ill prepared Greek army moved inland towards nothing in particular before the resurgent Turkish nationalists under Attaturk vented their fury on the Greek army and populace, literally driving them into the sea. Hordes of people crammed the wharves and beaches, seeking to escape, while the Turkish army pushed them forward to drown on their own corpses, piled beneath jetties. British warships stood silently offshore taking no action against the horror of drowning children. On some ships they even struck up the band to erase from their ears the screech of pitched terror straying from the corpses across the water.

I feel a need sometimes, to loosen the collar of family and community, push it into sociological perspective to dilute its emotional power. But the beast of people doesn't cease to twist inside, and no dry dissection can alter the veneration of family. And in amongst it all is my uncle Christophoros though he remained for me separate and unique. When he was working, I would play in the same room with him, distracted in play but at the same time acutely aware of his presence, the painstaking deliberation of his work and the reverberation of the dark baritone incantation. I could feel light from the tall curtainless window moving over his face and the surface of his work, rousing the earth ochres, russets and saffron disks glossed to a rotating shimmer. The bare boards I played on beneath his easel, dusty and smelling of earth, would clunk and echo when he stood, his chair scraping in protest, to walk back and review his work.

Sometimes when he broke from work, he would lie back on an old chaise lounge covered in black coarse leather stretched taut over the drummed frame. He would take me by the wrists

and, his instep under my buttocks, gently lift me into gathering fear and elation, my crutch gripping the bridge of his foot. We would play that way for what seemed ages, our faces wreathed in symbiotic delight. The pleasure was intense, my genitals pressing into my own flesh, I was absorbed into myself through the rhythmic swaying. The unyielding tension of being lifted rigid into space packed with air and pleasure then subsiding into satisfied calm.

His wife rarely emerged from their room and remained largely confined to bed. She only ever spoke of her ailments and for the most part remained withdrawn and unresponsive, so I had little to do with her and found entering her room oppressive and dank. Her total lack of interest in me upset and annoyed me. If I had to remain there for some reason it was he who would bathe me, soaping my body, the cream smooth gloss gliding over and under, softly invading me. Then he would dry me, rubbing me vigorously, laughing and teasing, tickling my genitals and sending through me a thrill of astonishment. I would laugh to the point of intense exhaustion where my breath caught and failed with the pleasure.

When my mother had to work alongside my father in the shop it was either my uncle Christophoros or my mother's sister, *thea* Argyro who would look after me, though the contrast with the two was substantial. With her there was conspiratorial air of intense femininity and softly shared secrets. It intrigued me the way she would dress her own son in soft flowing clothes and garland his long hair in ribbons and curls. But he remained remote and passive, blushing intensely and stammering when approached to play. My uncle Christophoros always argued with his sister, Argyro, and a strained contempt was exuded by their presence together when I was with them, though I enjoyed the slight thrill of their competitive and quiet rivalry.

In my mind my uncle always retained the aura and granite authority of his work that reached back into certainty and ordered antiquity. Years later though, after my uncles' funeral I sat with my uncle's cousin, blending fragments of recollection with protracted silence. He grew from birth with my uncle, inseparable, sharing their play and their labours, exploring in unison a world of crumbling ramparts, caves and beaches. Grew too in the shadow of my grandfather's intense religiosity and ritualistic duties as verger and church cantor, drawing my uncle inexorably to his precise craft. As young men they courted together the dark eyed girls of the village under the watchful gaze of wary and censorious relatives. And when the parental arrangements and dowry contracts were sealed it was natural that they would have a double wedding, crowned and led by the priest thrice round the altar in a shower of grain. Natural too, I suppose, that they would spend their nuptial night in adjoining rooms.

Then in an uncomfortable pause of pained remembrance my uncle's cousin drew out the thorned thought, unspoken till then, the lurid memory that had placed a silent gulf between him and my uncle thereafter. Of lying frozen beside his new bride listening to the sounds from the next room, the sharp screams, stifled cries, moans and weeping of my uncle's wife as he penetrated her again and again till the sound was muffled by the dawn.

5. *meghali ithea*

In the road outside my father's haberdashery, a clutter of electrical and telephone cables loped from pole to pole. The wires gathered like a ragged knot of twine at one post near the front door before swooping over awnings to the other side of the street, snatching at knobs

of porcelain under rusted guttering. In winter the gusting winds strummed the wires, churning the metallic molecules to a brooding sigh that breathed through my mother. She would bring the weather in with her as she entered the shop. Even closing the front door could not shut out the grey days. She was locked by necessity into wholesale and retail drudgery, in a business languishing in suburban indifference. My sister too, once she had completed her Intermediate at fifteen, went to work in the shop. She loathed and detested the job, serving little old ladies with thin claws who would scratch through boxes of embroidered handkerchiefs, each doiled scrap no bigger than a nostril, to select the one they desired.

Most Greek contemporaries of my father were possessed by their own *meghali ithea*, their Grand Scheme for material success - Greeks again conquering Constantinople. But it was primarily my mother's taunting contempt that drove my father to prove himself a worthy provider. In his desire for the success that eluded him, my father clung to Hope, the angelic voice that Sirens the ears and soothes despair. Like the voice that as the City fell, swelled the dome of the *Ayia Sophia* to comfort the weeping *Theotokos* - "Again with years, with time, again it is your own". Blended with a business slowly bleeding to death, his hopes became forlorn dreams of financial salvation. He planned and plotted but as his dreams bloated, judgment vanished. His ideas increasingly took on an air of almost comic desperation.

It was the Suez crisis of 1956, and with it came a surge of Egyptian Greeks from Alexandria, awash with ideas for making money. From connections in the Greek club emerged emigres claiming to be expert tailors and cutters prepared to make themselves available for a ground floor investment. The idea beckoned my father. After all, these were men with no experience of things Australian. He, on the other hand, was a seasoned veteran and stood to reap a profit from deft foresight. The truth was my father knew little, if anything, about the clothing and tailoring business. Yet in what was truly an awesome gamble, he guaranteed the new venture for a loan of ten thousand pounds, an enormous amount of money for those days. It was also the year of the fairy-tale marriage of Hollywood starlet Grace Kelly to Prince Rainier. Suddenly romance seized everyday conversation. Family magazines were saturated with photos of the startled bride and groom. Taste had no place. My father was snared by the mood and fossicked in the nostalgia locked away in the projection booth of his old cinema. The climate of Hollywood hope and the dream of recreating his Queensland prosperity, gave birth to Monte Carlo Fashion.

Twenty industrial sewing machines were lumbered into the now vacant rooms above the shop. Optimism swelled in my fathers' voice, and feverish activity bumped and scraped overhead. Laughter and conversation laced with excitement permeated the days leading up to the commencement of operations. The sense of bustling purpose was inescapable. I felt my father's overwhelming satisfaction soaring over the distinctive din and surging groan of machinery, the pause and guttural growl before the needle begins to clitter over the cloth. In the shop below, however, where my mother and sister still toiled, the sound shrank to a faded drone.

The central difficulty with the business, which my father did not realise, was that tailoring was a closed shop. The city was dominated by a network of craftsmen and entrepreneurs who in every sense had the business sewn up. It was made worse by the fact that the skills of his tailors were, to say the least, limited. Style, if recognisable at all, resembled the fine taste of

downtown Alexandria, sartorial elegance lost on a less than appreciative Australian audience. The business ground to a halt and my father's anxiety and agitation became pronounced. But as with most stories of business collapse, there is always one more round with the pernicious dream, the mocking hope, the idea that just might pluck fortune out of failure.

Enter the "dress designer", a lady whose credentials my father was assured, were second to none. So, with another loan, this time for four thousand pounds, my father entered the dress making business. After all, what do you do with twenty machines sitting around mouldering and gathering dust? Unfortunately, it became swiftly clear, the lady's design skills marked her out as little more than a fiendish creator of flannelette nighties, billowing shapeless tents all in the same paisley print. The pattern is still embossed on my retina. All eventually made their way into the haberdashery shop marked down for immediate but peculiarly prolonged sale.

For me the story has unbearable weight and sadness, yet as I tell it, it seems to twist into parody. A sprite escapes, mocks the pain and refuses to be taken seriously. It's as though poignancy drawn from real experience is condemned to assume the shape of banality. There is a terrible possibility that soap operas may mirror more real life than great literature though consider the truly awful prospect of being trapped in such a plot. Only the excessive absurdity allows me to toss the story off though in the tall grass of thought, are hidden seeds of melancholy. I was ten, in heathen adoration of my father and swathed in silent certainty of his undeniable power to influence events around us. I watched the swelling confidence and bold planning of his new ventures. Watched as he subsided into numbing sadness as failure seeped in around realisation. I walked beside him, my hand in his, slid under his skin, weighing the dismal shame and dark sadness as my own.

Later, as our financial predicament became more obvious, I can recall my mother and father seated across from one another, arguing, at our kitchen table. I remember the table. It was glacial Laminex with a red and white pattern of smudged jam and legs of sanitised curved chrome. They were arguing over a council demand to modify the overhanging shop awning which presented a danger to trucks and traffic. The council letter was poised between them half opened, keeling over like a paper boat. The amount was trivial, a hundred pounds or so, but my father simply couldn't afford it. I listened to the disquiet, to my mother's disdain filtering through the tumbling chaos of words. And I listened to the tightening tone of agitation in my father's voice. I felt his worth ebb in me and his fallibility flood my affection. I receded slowly from him, my betrayal curling through my skin like fishhooks.

6. Feud

Perversity always compounds moments of crisis and my father's financial woes were complicated by a feud that erupted between my mother and my aunt Kaliopi, an emotional upheaval that left my fathers' allegiance riven between despots. It also contributed, directly and indirectly, to the further erosion of my father in business.

My acquisitive aunt in her growing affluence had moved to a bigger house down the road from her terrace opposite that mirrored ours. Their old home became a warren of rented rooms with an Egyptian-Greek woman, alone with her son, as concierge. My mothers' cousin, my aunt Fotini, came out from Greece and moved into one of the rooms opposite with her husband and 16-year-old son Yeorgos. Three of them in a back room four meters by five that

served as scullery, lounge, dining and bedroom. Aunt Fotini was a stout stump of a woman who bulged front and back so that if you turned her over like an hourglass, bum and breast would interchange without any noticeable difference. As part of her baggage she brought with her the claustrophobic village life, its vicious morality, gossip and lives built back to back.

Despite being a deal older than me, Yeorgos' arrival raised the possibility of some companionship outside the cloistered confines of family. At least I might feed at the fringes of his activities. But despite being held by his mother in awesome regard bordering on cloying adulation, there was something hazardous about him. They had come to Australia to fulfil an overwhelming ambition to see the talented Yeorgos become a doctor. The problem was, however, that Yeorgos had embraced his culture shock with all the enthusiasm of fornication.

His dark hair was greased to a gleaming slick wetness that reflected light like a 1956 chromed domed hub cap. His "bodge" hair style was complemented by a tight pair of silver-flecked black pants, and the constant presence of chewing gum formed an elastic connection to his slackened lower jaw. Testosterone coursed tidal through his veins resulting in an obsessively priapic preoccupation and a face pitted with pimples. Far from realising his parents dream of respectability and status, the adored Yeorgos became a hopeless hoodlum, into petty theft, stolen goods and later, pimping and prostitution. But for now, he simply draped over everything - doorjambs, furniture and his prized set of rust encrusted "wheels", an especially packaged design that allowed his left wrist to slump over the gear lever, while his right wrist crooked over the top of the steering wheel. And the rest of him folded into the sagging seat as though he had been de-boned.

The feud began with an anonymous letter sent to my aunt Kaliopi detailing the liaison that was purportedly taking place between *thea* Kaliopi's husband and the Egyptian-Greek concierge when he came each week to collect the rent for the warren of rooms which now constituted their old house. Crude male jokes were whispered about whether he came to collect or make a deposit. Unweaving the tangled connections that form the basis of the story, though, would be as stultifying as a week of daytime serials, so a rattling of the skeleton will suffice.

It would appear that somebody's niece purportedly overheard a conversation on a telephone party line – they were common in those days – between my mother and aunt Fotini discussing the details of the anonymous letter, the *anonimo ghramma*, a traditional, if somewhat destructive way of righting village wrongs. This information was relayed with breathless speed to my aunt Kaliopi and in the criss-cross of accusation, the feud swelled and bulged into other lives and families. Aunt Kaliopi, herself no virgin at marriage (a stain whispered darkly within the family) was compelled to fiercely defend the honour of her husband. This was *philotimo*, the searing compulsion of all Greeks to save face and defend at any cost the reputation of themselves or members of their family (which is one and the same thing). So, my father too, was condemned to stand, fiercely partisan, behind my mother in the dispute.

My aunt Kaliopi became to my mother a thing of loathing. As a young girl of fifteen my aunt had contracted bubonic plague when it had swept through the village decimating families and leaving a muffled melancholy in its wake. There were few survivors from its thorough ravages, few left to mourn and those that were, were burdened beyond endurance by the weight of

corpses. My aunt sweated sweet death and her groin swelled with the distended buboes of plague till they burst and heaved pus from her thighs. My mother, bitter now that my aunt should have survived so miraculously, intoned with corrosive venom, "Not even Death wants her!"

In the small pool of Greek social interaction, we now moved with great caution, avoiding contact. There was risk in public contact, potential discomfort and embarrassment which was intolerable. Because my aunt Kaliopi's son, Strati, was one of the few childhood companions sanctioned by my mother (being acceptably Greek). I was now suddenly without any play mate nearby and had to rely more and more on the companionship of my godparents' children away from the city. The friendship with Strati was not strong but it was important because it was so singular, the only one outside the companionship of my brothers and sister. Separated by the turmoil of our family schism, I stood apart and watched him also writhe in the fierce pain of family expectation and emphatic resolution.

His family too planned for him a career in medicine, not, of course, out of some deep benevolent urge but for the monumental status it would give to them. There was always excited conversation about future success. My aunt Kaliopi would perform like a tour guide as you entered the house, giving an animated description of the parlour that would be transformed into a waiting room for the surgery that would be in the room opposite. Grandiose, absurd and comical in retrospect, the reality though, seemed to swell and take form when he gained entry into medicine and acquired a coveted Commonwealth Scholarship. In his second year, however, he attended anatomy lectures involving the dissection of a cadaver and he felt so violently repulsed that he immediately left university and drove taxis for a living. Later he rented a fish and chip shop, rendered down the family's corpulent expectations into a shimmering syrup of lard, cooked the slabs of shark flesh dripping with a glutinous porridge of batter and felt immensely satisfied and defiantly comfortable. I missed a lot when I lost his companionship.

Leaning quietly on the sterile Laminex table, my father and our visitor sipped thick coffee, toyed with the accompanying glasses of water and tentatively tasted the small talk that occasionally included mention of my despised aunt and uncle. My mother, her ears eager to suck up bile, was silent for once since this was male talk. She just hovered to one side of the conversation like a vulture coveting scraps of negation. Our guest had come to my parents knowing he would have an audience for his point of view. He had been in business with aunt Kaliopi's husband and had violently fallen out with him over a business venture, details of which inevitably crept into conversation.

The business was a cafeteria and coffee shop upstairs over an ornate Victorian railway station, a grime and dust shrouded stone edifice of imperial solidity and permanence, the hub of some other time and place. My father was so blinded by the absolute inflexibility of the quarrel with his sister that he was obliged to credit the idea of purchasing the business with more sense than it deserved, and what is worse, he was lured into considering his own participation though at least his background and experience lent some sense to his involvement. This

Sunday parlour meeting added a twist to the feud that would later assume unimagined financial consequences.

The business was owned by an ovoid oleaginous Greek with an anglicised name who later moved to the Queensland Gold Coast where white shoes were an entrepreneurial uniform and sun-bleached morality formed a faded backdrop in the scramble for opportunity. He touted the business as a goldmine, throwing round glistening figures like small change. My father properly asked for the books but was threatened by a towering indignation. He either believed or the deal was off. "Take it or leave it. Would a Greek lie to another Greek?" My father's new partners pleaded with him not to strangle the opportunity. With reluctance he acquiesced and borrowed his third share, the substantial figure of ten thousand pounds. In the same year a local radio station sold for the same price.

Within days of the purchase the mistake was realised. Aunt Kaliopi's husband had been right to reject the proposition! It was a declining business and the takings were far less than was claimed. The towering ceilings, lumps of solid wooden cubicles and dun coloured railway linoleum lent an air of decaying refinement. It was another era, aged and inappropriate. My father wanted to renovate and rejuvenate the business, but his new partners demurred. Initial energy descended into a drone of pointless activity, the spirit seeping away like spilled tea. My father's despair ossified. He curled foetal in his deathly solid sleep. My mother would cajole him into consciousness and send him off to work in the downtown decay, while she and my sister continued to work the haberdashery to supplement the family income. My father had attempted to persuade my mother to sell the shop to enter the new business, but my mother had remained adamant that their one remaining asset would not be sold to pursue another of my father's follies.

All of us were drawn into assisting one way or another. My brother Michali would spend whatever spare time he had from his university studies to assist in the cafe while I, excused by official note to the school, was required to go down to work each week when my school had afternoon sport. Even though outstanding scholastic attainment was an unquestioned goal, my schooling seemed only a necessary interruption to the pulse of the family and its driving needs. Even the first furtive stirring of sexual interest was smothered in its enthrall. Cheap anonymous grey books owned by my brother that I read with stealth. No illustrations, only the caress of words and the rearing excitement of masculinity, dynamic and detached from my own oppression.

The idolatrous worship of duty and filial obedience would have allowed the obligation to work at the cafe to slip unnoticed into the cracks of my life but for the annoyance I frequently felt when my father and his partners would take advantage of the opportunity to slink out the back and play poker or *prefa*. This resentment prevented me observing the degree to which the flaws of the business caused my father to squirm in discomfort, contributing to a variety of aches and pains that gripped his chest. His blood pressure elevated, and he was diagnosed diabetic, but it had little reality for me, preoccupied by school and locked into a feverish regimen of study and conscientious dedication. Nothing was ever said aloud about striving and succeeding. It infused the whole atmosphere of the house and took on a deeper intonation in the contrapuntal contrast with seeping failure and the breath of poverty. The

self-absorption of my adolescence made my father's illnesses remote and inconsequential and the assurance of medication and diet removed any remaining concern.

Illness and decay seemed to hang around the family at that time. My feuded aunt Kaliopi was given a medical sentence delivered with sufficient grim timbre to require her urgent hospitalisation. The possibility of cervical cancer arrested her total consciousness. She was assaulted by the arid desolation of her own mortality and the appalling loneliness of alienation from family. The immediacy of the matter forced her to look again at the twisted absurdity of the family schism.

One Sunday, just before lunch, two of my father's acquaintances squeezed their way along the narrow walk at the side of the house leading to the back yard. They crouched down alongside my father sprawled as usual on his deckchair like a heat absorbing lizard. The whispered conversation was brief and furtive but the effect on my father was immediate, winding him into distracted agitation. He scurried inside to find my mother and then went to his room to change.

As children we were not included in events of adult importance, though we instinctively huddled together in the hall in perplexed and dread anticipation. My brother Michali slumped against the wall, his black school shoes pushing crumpled waves into the carpet runner. I perched on the commode seat of the chunk of Victorian hall stand against which my sister Katerina leaned, her arm curved above me, her fingers quietly picking at scraps of my hair. The barely intimate touch stirred times lying huddled in her bed, enveloped in the blended sweet girl smell of her skin and the freshness of laundered pyjamas.

The pale shadows through the frosted glass panels of the front door brought a knock and immediate response from my father before we had time to gather ourselves to a focus of attention. He opened the door to *thea* Kaliopi flanked by the two visitors from earlier in the day who held my aunt on either side by the crook of the elbow like a reluctant initiate to a mysterious order. The air itched with unbearable tension. She stood on the porch, her squat body like a smudge, her pallid face carved in anguish. Then slowly she slumped to her knees. She spoke in the deep guttural drawl, the ponderous masculinity of tone that characterised the island dialect.

"*Sinchorese me adelphe mou!* Forgive me my brother!" Her grey face curdled in despair and flooded with tears.

Her kneeling form was framed by the light pouring from behind her into the darkened hall. It created a faint rainbowed gleam about her hands moving slowly to her words. She appeared like a fat black spider caught in a small box of woven light. An arachnid, from the family of beasts that weave a silken trap to make their home in.

My father clamped his arms about her weeping, and they endured, locked and swaying gently in the fragile light of the hall. The glacial green walls and tall ceiling added solemnity to the cadence of the occasion. My father still gripping his sister turned to us, his face creased, and his eyes stained, mustering us to share the torrent of emotion that flooded the space and left us torn between exhaustion and elation.

My aunt had craved expiation and an end to the futile opposition and conflict. She needed the comfort of her own family as she had once before in her childhood. My father now was humbled by the failure and turmoil crafted in no small measure from the compulsion to stand through those years in opposition to his sister. The unbearable fissure of despair within was now stitched by the familiar threads of symbiosis. The pain and pandemonium orchestrated from the bitterness of those years, struck me, in a sudden snap of adolescent lucidity as so abysmally unnecessary! So utterly futile! I wept in the tumbling confusion for myself alone.

I was fourteen, ingesting impressions, racked by my own chthonian chaos and trapped in the social warp of my parents. The black hole of sacred family sucked light and miscellaneous debris into its powerful focus. Nothing existed outside it.

7. Father's Death

Saturday morning sunlight smothered the back porch outside the doorway, and the shade sulked in the cool of the kitchen where I sat, hunched into the contour of the taut towel moulded round my shoulders and tucked into my collar. My father was cutting my hair. He loved cutting my hair with the same degree of enthusiasm as I loathed him doing it. I wanted to grow my hair long, in the fashion of the time but he wanted me to look neat and respectable. He loved the process, though unfortunately he possessed the finesse of a machete wielding explorer. He would shove his fingers into the dark mat, seize tufts, and attack with his scissors, leaving chunks of hair littered about the chair.

The climax of his exertions was always to stand back brimming with pleasure, exclaiming to my mother, "*Efharistithika!*", a sigh of untranslatable satisfaction. Such was the perverse pleasure that my suffering gave my father. I felt like the children I had seen in photos from Greece who every summer were completely shaved. It seemed so extreme and while, years later, I realised it was probably done because of lice, the excuse I always heard was that it helped their hair to grow back thicker and stronger. After he had whittled my scalp I would put on my horn-rimmed glasses and with trepidation, glimpse myself in the mirror. I looked like a gargoyle.

Early on my father had felt unwell and crept off to lie on the couch in the lounge room. He was frequently unwell and was often just in his pyjamas and dressing gown. While he slept, my sister and I descended with my mother into the city chaos of predatory shoppers to search for presents. My mother and sister fussed over a suitable gift for a christening while I scanned the store counters alone, looking for something precious for my young cousin, Athena. She was the daughter of my godparents and nearly seven years younger than me. I basked in her adoration and affection which she expressed by trailing about with me whenever I visited their country sanctuary, which was whatever weekend or school holiday time I could filch from family obligation. At a counter with a display strung with loops of beads, I peered at a pad of curio rings and feasted on an infant trove of sentimentality, a small gold heart ring with a tiny blood spot of ruby in the left-hand corner. I felt her heart jolt and sigh at the sight of it and knew it was absolutely right.

When we returned home it was only mid-morning and my father was still resting, but as the day dawdled towards lunch time, he felt better and declared his intention to cut my hair,

despite my frail protests. At fifteen adolescent opinion is of little consequence to parents and, anyway, since he had been unwell how could I deny him his pleasure? My aunt Argyro arrived with her husband in the middle of my ordeal, in a flurry of chatter that scattered my father's dedicated concentration. She was my mother's sister and the two quickly merged and began to chop and scrape in preparation for lunch. My uncle's pudding body loitered in the doorway, stranded in thought between the divergent activities of men and women. He was generally unsocial, but he admired my father and would frequently visit. He steered towards him and slumped onto a kitchen chair which creaked back on two of its chromed legs. He clasped his hands behind his head and began a desultory ramble with my father, a comfortable languor that meandered without the demands of thought.

In contrast, the lunch that followed, as with most gatherings of family and relatives, was an animated affair where mouths battled the conflicting demands of food and language. Each person expertly juggled the two claims, their faces contorting around food like intestines churning, while their voices lifted pitch to penetrate the chaos of simultaneous conversation. But with conversation and hunger satiated, the meal was over, and everyone scattered and settled again like bush flies brushed from the table by the wave of a hand. My older brother, Stephanos disappeared into his room to concentrate on his university studies and my mother and aunt Argyro sat propped at the kitchen table on a gantry of elbows, their cups of tea gripped in mid-air, steaming their eyebrows.

My uncle and my father poured themselves into overstuffed chairs in the lounge, keeping a loose linked line of sight with the women in the kitchen. I sat with them of course, quietly rehearsing adult ways while diligently polishing a pair of shoes. The shoes were extremely attractive; black, military style boots, so scuffed they looked like suede. They had been handed down to me from one of my aunt Kaliopi's sons so I could go to school in shoes that did not have holes. I polished away, listening to the men. Tea relaxed in cups held on their laps while pieces of thought ventured into words then stalled and settled feather light on silence. Quietly, the teacup slid from my father's hands. Snared in that lull between thought and speech, he slumped back, mouth agape. My mother screeched in fury as the cup clunked to the floor unbroken, spilling the contents on her polished floor.

I sat up, stiff with fright. Clenched knuckles of thought pounded alarm, but a leaden impotence weighed upon a frantic compulsion to act. I lunged forward and, gathering him up, drew his body to me. I was hunched over, my body crumpled into him, as I attempted resuscitation. My lips smothered his dry and unresponsive mouth, heaving my breath and longing into his pallid features in a blend of passion and panic. I had never kissed him on the mouth before. The scene caught me poised in towering theatricality. I wanted to lean my back against the weight of ebbing might and create some flourish of magic that only I could perform, to conjure life and breath. Then, as now in my adult world, I manoeuvred death to nurture life in me, to prod the coiled comatosed actuality.

My mother, realising the potential for crisis, lurched into panic and hysterical shrieking. She surged to histrionic apogee then drifted in a sigh to the floor. My brother, Stephanos, alarmed by the cacophony, rushed from his room. The sweep of scene before him flowed from my mother spilled upon the floor, to me crouched over my father's body, and my aunt and uncle roaring at one another in futile consternation. He hauled my mother wheezing and clutching

shallow rasps of air, to the couch in the lounge room, while my aunt, twittering in agitation, brought soothing cloths doused in eau-de-Cologne for her forehead. My mother drew the focus to her, while my father in repose, remained suitably quiet so as not to upstage those about him.

Stephanos rang for an ambulance and when it eventually arrived, the attendants moved swiftly and silently like stagehands. They hoisted my father onto the stretcher and tucked a blanket under his square chin. They strapped an oxygen mask on his face and whisked him down the narrow hall and through the front door to the ambulance. No siren wailed as they left. A perfunctory exit without drama.

We were left to wait in a knot of silent weighted tension, my mother supine on the couch moaning gently. I rummaged randomly through what had happened and confronted the sudden shock that I may have edged to the brink of my father's death. The realisation gripped like fingers behind my eyes and pierced the slow stilted succession of frozen images now being replayed in my mind. His comatosed form was trapped in a *camera obscura*, a darkened space penetrated by a pin hole of slithered thought, the image inverted on the wall of my skull. In adolescence you secretly toy with the death of those you love, a guilty game of untried emotions, a slow and measured dance through the intricate steps of dying. In that furtive visualisation, there is a wonderful symmetry between dying and the imagined phases of appropriate grieving and response, each with a stoic intensity.

But the shrivelled eye upon the rehearsal of the drawling dance, the sorrowful *zeibekiko* of dying, had chanced upon the real. The body had slowly wheeled and dipped unexpectedly into the shock of actuality. Events had veered out of control. The script had been tampered with and robbed of props and sets. It was so terribly wrong. It deserved to be done again, properly. Nobody in the family had ever been able to act with such outrageous independence before. My father had taken himself with silent dignity to the side of the vortex, the spiralling agitation of the living.

The house rapidly gathered a circle of people attracted to the deathly light like mourning moths. They moved softly, their scant words barely touching. We waited for the return of my aunt Kaliopi's husband who had gone to the hospital on behalf of the family to find out what was happening with my father. I heard the clunk of the front door as he returned and felt the pause as he moved like iced silence down the hall to the lounge. The atmosphere prickled with static anticipation. He entered the room expressionless and walked directly across to my mother on the couch. Her eyes frantically searched his face for some glimmer of comfort, but he just stretched out his hand to shake hers and said, "*Zoi se sas* - Life to you". No explanation. No attempt to console. Just a callous parroting of words traditionally uttered at a funeral. I had never heard the expression before, but the effect was instantaneous. My mother crumpled as though she had been punched, groaning with the brutality of the hurt, then, after a momentary lull, she launched into a high-pitched shriek of anguish and a torrent of pleas and supplications.

"Dear God, let this not be true! Let him not be dead! How could this happen to me? Why has he done this? How could he leave me like this? Dear God! why! why! why! have You done this to me?" Blocks of hysteria crammed together in a wall of anguish that shut out my sympathy

and desire both to comfort her and be comforted. There was no room for any other need in the intensely small space of her immense grief.

Drained by the enveloping emotion my brother, Michali and I decided to walk in the night air. It was late winter, cooled now by a melancholy self-absorption. I wore a light cotton shirt in heroic indifference to the elements and my loss. The chilled air manoeuvred through the fabric, moving over my skin like a tide of iced water. Numb and bared of response, I scratched at the parchment shell of my hollow senses to get inside some authentic gesture to make my loss real. We walked the slate stained and muffled night, down to the edge of the harbour slaked by the wetness of moonlight puddled on its surface. The barren light outlined the oaks stripped of foliage and the stout gums, ghostly littered with the tattered strips of bark slapping gently like loose rigging.

We sat together silent, shivering on the dew damp grass, locked in our own grief. I struggled to bring some definable sense of my father to mind but already his outline had begun to fade and recede from me. I tensed my concentration on his different features - his eyes, his skin, the way he walked...I owned his eyes. As I had breathed above him in his death, I had seen the naked blue of his sightless eyes reflected in mine. But my brother had his skin. I looked across at him and even in the ashen light I could recognise the mocha of my father's skin. When my mother was angry with Michali she would lash him with a particularly mephitic epithet, "*mavri soupia!* Black cuttlefish!" It may seem unimportant, quaint even, but the intention to humiliate belies the innocence of the words. The local bleached Anglo-Saxons may have had a fascination for baked skin shades, but the Greek islanders had a grave aversion to the ominously "African" stain of black skin. I thought about the emphatic way my mother made her preference felt. My brother and I were the loved and the loathed, though the distinction seemed hopelessly confused. Largely ignored in my mother's considerations he was at least allowed to clamber into adulthood relatively unscathed.

I felt a sudden tremor of mistrust for all emotions. They seemed false, or to be violated by some ulterior design. Months before, the trauma of surgery had untethered my certainties and the turmoil of that experience, still fresh with me, now confronted my father's death. I had been experiencing pain in the lower right side of my abdomen which caused me considerable anxiety and the decision was made to remove my appendix. As I was wheeled into theatre, I could not shake the terrible sense of foreboding. In the previous year my cousin had suffered peritonitis from a blockage of his small bowel. A large part of his bowel had been resected and though he made an uneventful recovery, at the time he had been close to death. I was terrified of a similar fate. In the theatre a needle was inserted in my vein and the next I knew, I was back in bed in considerable pain. I was deeply shaken. It had not been like sleep. There had been nothing. No dreams, no thoughts, no feelings, and worse, no sense of time. Nothing. And then the most fearsome thought of all. This is what it's like, this is what death is. Annihilation. Total erasure. The thoughts jostled my beliefs. At fifteen I had been profoundly religious. I believed strongly in salvation and in life after death. I now possessed a truth that exposed this deceit. I felt angry and betrayed and at the same time appalled by the truth.

And these thoughts tumbled through me again that evening as I sat with my brother. The thought of my father plunged into oblivion tore me with unbearable sorrow. My thoughts had

robbed him of Paradise. There was no way to leave the winter on the grass; it had seeped in around me.

That day and in the days that followed I moved across the stage of my grief like a visitor to myself. I recall vividly, going that same evening to where my sister was staying, to tell her of our father's death. I remember a rush of satisfaction, seeing her fold into distress and weeping. When I visited friends and relatives to tell them the news a quiet surge tingled as I basked in their attention and enveloping sympathy. It was a feeling I fondled in my mind as I ran through my card indexed emotions and staged gestures - the lowered eyes, the shrug of my shoulders and slope of my back. My father's death commanded an attention that I was now able to possess, and which released me into a vicarious actuality that generated pleasure and shame.

Beneath it was a weighted oppression, an anhedonia that I began to realise had always been there, standing torpid between myself and feeling, leaving me rent between the mute observer and the animated and affected pose. I longed for touch that gripped me, for breathed odours that filled my face. I wanted to taste sweat, pungent like a tongue licking sweet metal. But my feelings were becalmed, etiolated. The world and I were becoming sense-less.

8. Funeral

"Euloyitos se Kyrie didaxon me ta dikeomata sou... Blessed is the Lord teaching us as is his right"

Before us in the church were three priests crowned in conical headdress and embalmed in ebony vestments, black as a magpie's eye. Not opulent ceremonial robes threaded with gold and silver with blemishes of gemstones, rather, the austere and utterly severe. Three priests in black as a measure of how much we cared, how much we mourned. Three priests to repeat the service thrice over, elongating the funeral into a mechanical, lurching ordeal of horrific echoes and repetition.

My mother and my brother Stephanos were in the front row with aunt Argyro and aunt Kaliopi. My mother was heavily laced with Valium and my brother Stephanos held smelling salts to her nose whenever she swooned or moaned. I sat behind in the next row with my sister Katerina and my other brother Michali, deluged by anxiety and drowning in the enormity of the proceedings. In front of the iconostasis, encrusted with a gallery of tenebrous scenes, rested my father's coffin, a burnished box the colour of parched blood. On the sides were silver handles that flicked light onto the walls and on top of the casket stood a small *ikon* and an Orthodox crucifix. Affixed to the lid was a small splash of silver, a plaque inscribed with my father's name and his date of death.

Before the funeral we had gone as a family to the funeral parlour to view the body. We had walked to the viewing area through a small chapel of panelling and plaster, varnish and glazed marzipan, twinkling with chromed fixtures and regimented by ornate pews never intended for use. In the viewing area the light was suppressed to a luminal degree above gloom. The open coffin rested in a chromed cradle surrounded by a picket of candelabra that wreathed my father's still form in a halo of waxed light. He was cocooned in satin wool, his face a clay

grey with a smudge of pale rouge chalked on his cheeks and his lips stained an obscene vermilion. He looked like a tart and the surge of humiliation I felt for him screwed up inside, escaping as a tense whine of suppressed sobbing.

My mother crumpled against Stephanos' arm. Her face was wearied, and she emitted short thudding sobs as she approached my father's coffin. She reached forward with one hand and gently stroked his fingers, then leaned towards him and kissed his stillness. We were each to follow suit in the obligatory gesture of farewell. I reached out to touch his hands folded across his chest and was jolted by the chilled texture. I couldn't kiss him. I was awash with dismay, yet each movement seem contrived, fuelling shame that erupted into weeping, itself robbed of authenticity. I wheeled and fled the suffocating solemnity, through air towards the light of black pavements and the grime of city traffic, the tang of piss and fumes of unburnt gasoline.

"*Makarios, i odos...*Blessed be the path you take today..." The droned repetition of liturgy continued in a taut silence that faltered only for the occasional muffled sob. My eyes strayed a furtive curve as far to the left and right as propriety would allow, running along the rows of starched pawns propped in pews in the black uniform of mourning. Not here the usual Orthodox gathering where the congregation mingled, instead there was the Calvinistic constraint of pews, a legacy of those first Australian services established in the cast-off churches of declining Protestantism.

Cloaked in oppression, I huddled into the familiar scent of my sister. Events seemed so utterly out of my control, orchestrated by concealed forces, indifferent except for an obligatory adherence to the intricate patterns of customary mourning. But then, through the liturgical monotone soared the resonant voice of my uncle Christophoros, iconographer and cantor staining the air with psalmed pain as his chanting shifted the odd eastern semitone. It produced a quickening of assurance in the midst of the words of appalling meaning....."*Defte lavete ton teleftaeo aspasmu.....*Come and take the final kiss...."

A piercing scream suddenly shattered the poignancy. My aunt Agryo commenced a shrieking that rose to oscillating hysteria. I shrank back in terror, trapped by the sound, then recoiled and blared at my aunt in a hoarse whisper, "Why are you doing this! Why?"

She turned to look at me, puzzled by my alarm and said with emphatic certainty, "But this is the time for the lament!" And as that part of the service was repeated, she again launched into a strange chthonian wail that hammered home to me the inescapable power of peasant origins. I was mortified and burrowed deeper into my sister's embrace shielding myself from the appalling ordeal that made me want to disappear through the floor.

Softly weeping, my mother slowly rose from her pew, but as she approached the coffin her body began to jerk and sway to a rhythm of lamentation that built to a tirade of public accusation.

"Why have you left us! How could you close your eyes and leave me! What are we to do without you! Why can I not go with you! How could you do this to us!"

On and on she wailed in concert with the shrieks and ululation of my aunt, which together pierced the strains of my uncle's chanting. It shaped a sound collage, a bizarre cacophony that

clouded my senses. The performance was consummated when my mother leaned over the coffin, kissed it, then slumped over the casket. She grasped the oaken body and continued, with muffled sobbing, the chiding lament and remonstrance. We were then ushered towards the coffin, our steps stilted, our movements robotic. As we passed by, we crossed ourselves thrice then kissed the coffin and the small *ikon*. All the while the piercing lamentation of my aunt screwed down the portals of thought and clouded the hearing.

The family huddled on the front pew, while a stream of people filed past the casket to perform the rituals of crossing themselves and kissing the coffin and the *ikon*. The black ant procession of mourners then threaded their way past the family, to shake the hand of each of us and utter the traditional words of consolation, an incantation like the crackle and drone of cicadas "Zoi se sas.....Zoi se logos Zoi se sas Life to youLife to the Word and Meaning Life to you...."

My father was a revered member of the *paroikia*, which meant the congregation was unusually large and the rituals of consolation, interminable. For a fifteen-year-old it was quite unbearable. I yearned to escape and conspired with my sister to excuse ourselves and flee the suffocation. We moved, linked in purpose out into the daylight, but once outside the feeling was of displaced discomfort rather than liberation and we walked instead to the official car and sat together in silence.

When the rituals of respect had been paid, the coffin was lifted from its cradle and hoisted upon the shoulders of the pall bearers, older male members of the family, and taken from the church to the hearse. There the casket disappeared into the rear of the vehicle, consumed along chromed tracks.

The cortege began the journey to the cemetery. I was sandwiched between my mother and my sister in the car, caught between the heave of sobbing and the appalling realisation that this was to be my father's last journey. He would never speak again. Never sew his fingers through my hair. The shiver of his death melted tears down my face. I wished with all my heart that he was in some heaven, spilling down tenderness upon me. But I knew there was only a worthless and absolute annihilation from which he would not awake. Utterly final. I would often dream of him coming back. Every few nights for years after his death. He would knock on the front door, dressed in his pyjamas and dressing gown and I would open the door and be flooded with the joy of his return. Even thirty years later I would still have that dream. Not very often but it was still there.

The cavalcade of mottled vehicles entered the cemetery and snaked along lanes past rows of sanitary headstones, towards the Greek section. Living or dead we clutch together in the soil. We stood in ranks around the neatly hewn hole with the coffin poised on three planks in readiness for the final descent. The priest continued the service.

"*Pater-imon*.....Our Father...." The coffin was lowered slowly into the grave as my mother's keening rose to a plaintive wail and plea to cleave in my father's clay while aunt Agyro chorused with high pitched shrieking. The priest pored the small bottle of oil and wine on the coffin then smashed it on the coffin lid, a shattering exclamation and final, violent farewell.

"*Diefhon ton aghion patera imon, kyrie isou Christe o theos, eleison kai soston imas. Amen*".... The Dismissal. At every liturgy as a child I waited, shuffling my feet in bored anticipation, for the words of the Dismissal. Now they were dismissing my father. And all I was given was the soil gripped in my fist to throw on the coffin, scatological crumbs to void the swerving rage within me upon my father's grave.

I moved in a blur of weeping back to our house. It was crowded, reminding me of my father's Nameday parties. The people milled about subdued but not mournful. An occasional ripple of laughter even, as they drank coffee and brandy and nibbled *paksimathia*, the traditional funeral fare where nothing sweet is consumed. My mind rattled with the rage of sod thumping on my father's stillness. The intrusion of people with their prattle and chatter, indifferent to the enormity of my feelings, only increased my anger by underlining my powerlessness to alter the occasion. I left the throng in disgust, moving through the crowd to the kitchen and the back porch. Along the path at the back door was a strip of garden, nurtured by my mother, with the first swelling bulbs hinting of spring standing in precise rows of dark reeded leaves and the occasional bowed head. I crouched down and picked one of the blooms and the milky sap oozed from the stem onto my fingers. I propped myself against the brick wall, morose and resentful, my back bowed into my grief. I was immersed in the daffodil held in my hand and twirled the nodding trumpet with its corona reddened like faded blood.

My uncle Christophoros saw me leave and moved through the milling conversation out into the yard. He squatted down beside me, more to acknowledge my presence and draw me back into the circle than necessarily to provide comfort.

"You will miss the *makaritis*."

The deceased were always referred to as the *makaritis*, the "Blessed one" or *sinchorimenos*, the "Forgiven". It seemed that already my father, who had decidedly shed his presence now shed his name and become an amorphism, a "blessed one". I remained sullen and unresponsive, my eyes downcast. He moved quickly to enfold the awkward space.

"That's appropriate, I suppose," he added, shifting ground and motioning with his eyes in the direction of the flower turning a pirouette in my hand. "Always inseparable, love and death."

I looked up distracted, puzzled and slightly annoyed at his fumbling attempts to talk of death. Seeing my confusion, he quickly added, "The flower is one of the Narcissus family. You've heard that story?"

I hadn't and my mumbled negative only encouraged a lather of words to cover his own embarrassment for having invaded my solitude. There was a fascination in the Greek community with stories of ancient mythology, part of the pride and pretence of some unbroken connection with an Attic past that even wove itself into a passionate national debate over what constituted "correct" spoken Greek.

He told me the story of Narcissus, of his radiant beauty that captivated all who knew him, but which left him incapable of returning affection except to the hopeless reflection of himself

mirrored in the mountain pool. Pained by unrequited love, he stabbed himself and from his spilled plasma sprung a corm of blood centred bloom absorbed into his own nature, the Narcissus flower. Only the woodland Echo sounded his mourning in the rocks and glades.

I have read the story again as an adult searching the archetypal clefts for meaning. I shudder at the prophecy of the androgynous Tiresias, blinded by sight, who left the Thespian Narcissus with the cursed choice between a long life of ignorance, or death if he ever knew himself. And of Echo with no voice of her own, who loved him with simplicity, rejected for her voice of stagy theatricality that mocked his own insubstantial being. Numbed by reflected adoration and exiled from intimacy, despair inexorably carved his death.

But the story was just a story filling the need for contact. I excused myself from my uncle's company with a plea of exhaustion and fled to my room to throw myself like a sky diver into ten thousand metres of enveloping eiderdown. My father's death had bared the awful solitude that stalked the family in its coven of certainty, the tribal gaggle that denied even a particle of intimacy. It had gripped like a clenched fist but in the palm of the spreading fingers there was the curse of emancipation, atoms of air more liberating in their sheer vacuity than the enclosing vice of family.

9. Hinterland

The train pulled out of the station to the groan and muscular creaking of metal, out past the sheds and shunting yards sealed in gun-metal grime and past the engines, seething and wheezing steam from beneath their wheeled skirts. The carriages lurched to the rhythmic clickety-clack of wheels on track as the train threaded past a serrated skyline of factory roofs, through industrial suburbs enveloped in the same mist of depressive grey. The gathering speed compressed the view through the window of confined terraces, the narrow hovels shoulder to shoulder contemptuously baring their working-class bums to the track.

The oppression gradually lifted through the leafier suburbs that tumbled into semi-rural bush and pasture, where, in later years, the spilled suburbs suffocated the landscape. I journeyed out of the pall of my father's death into the hinterland memories of childhood spent with my godparents. I embraced every opportunity to see them now. In their firmament, I escaped my mother's melancholy and the household sorrow. My godparents had recreated their agricultural roots outside the city on a few acres of bush, scrub and pasture nestling in the hills that erupted out of the monotonous flat coastal plain.

The township station was a single platform that stretched away in either direction from the waiting room and ticket office abandoned in the middle. The awning with its dainty scrolled barge boards jutted out over the platform like a peaked cap with lace trim. As the train steamed into view, I could see their forms dwarfed by distance, searching for my face leaning from the carriage. I always leapt to the platform before the train ground its teeth to a halt and my godmother, my *nona*, would scold me with a concern that made me feel brash and bold. Vaulting from the carriage I grabbed them both, closing my eyes to breathe them in, swaying in an uncomfortable tangle of limbs and breasts. My godfather stepped back to take my bag, allowing me to embrace my *nona*, to snuggle and burrow into her, seeking an opening under her skin. We walked towards their car, my arm tucked round her like a familiar lover, and my godfather beside us trailing my suitcase and my two cousins, Grigori and Athena.

Nothing was said about my father's death though it dangled over small talk about my mother and various relatives. It was an awkward conversation that threatened to catapult me into a display of theatricality which I wanted desperately to avoid with them.

In the car however, my godfather broached the unmentionable. "It was just as well your father's funeral was not this week," he said. (Thank God he didn't say *makaritis!*) He was referring to a grave digger's strike which was causing disruption to burials and considerable anguish to relatives. There was an uncomfortable moment as my *nona* shot him an anxious sideways glance, but he continued to ramble on about the dispute in a way that, surprisingly, dispelled the darkened mood beneath the surface. My godfather was the only member of our family circle who ever spoke to me about social or political issues and there was a familiar quickening in his tone as he described the intricate threads of the dispute that had arisen over the dismissal of a grave digger who had been found growing tomatoes in an remote part of the lawn cemetery. Part of the man's job was to fulfil the wishes of the deceased to have their ashes scattered, which usually meant being sprinkled on the rose beds. But the keen gardener whose product was in enthusiastic demand about the local pubs, took it upon himself to fork the cremated remains in around his prized tomatoes. I suppose today he would be praised for an environmentally friendly exercise in recycling and sustained agriculture, but those were not such times.

"These Australians! They're crazy!" was my godfather's conclusion and the absurdity of the story immediately stripped away the burden of my father's death and even made it seem vaguely natural and normal.

When we arrived at their home, we gathered in the lounge room and curled like cats in the armchairs clustered round their open fireplace with its carved timber mantel. On our laps we cradled hot bowls of *fasolatha*, bean soup swimming with olive oil floating like a slick on the surface. It felt so unbelievably good to be sitting there again with my godparents and my cousins, with the fire curling flames round the logs heaped in the hearth. Conversation warmed and flowed and belled with occasional laughter while the flamed light shuddered on the walls and pranced across the ceiling.

I took from my pocket the tiny heart ring I had bought for Athena on the morning of my father's death and held it out to her. It was mixed with such striking significance I could not risk my words straying from the unremarkable, "I didn't forget your birthday". In the rufescent light her face glowed with tingling delight as she cupped her hands and cradled the ring like a precious pebble. At fifteen you flood with embarrassment when an eight-year-old braids her arms about you but at that moment her touch melted me away and left me awash with feeling, smoothed and rounded whole like stone rubbed by a stream.

The times with my godparents were lyrical with pleasure. I felt a profound sense of place there, of locus and belonging. Their home was strewn with affection and at the time of my father's death I needed to breathe that more than air. Their calm certainty had always stood in contrast to my own family with its tense threat of panic. There was a solidity in their manner, a resistance to weathering elements. Their ideas and ideals were rigid and correct infused with an unshakeable universal certainty. We never spoke English in their hearing, always clambered into bed at precisely seven o'clock and knew disobedience was

unthinkable, but their loving was special and dependable. Their affection invades my recollection and generates memories that are muscular and satisfying.

My godparents had come, of course from the same town on the same island as my parents. My father had acted as *proxenitis*, go between, and they were married by sensible village arrangement. My godfather lived with an Australian woman for a number of years but like most traditional Greeks, when it came to having a family he sought some unsoiled Greek goods. This attitude, however, didn't impress his Australian lady who was understandably piqued and ensured he understood her views on the matter. Thus, in every sense it was a traditional arranged marriage that surprisingly grew beyond those bounds into genuine affection. Their lives were wedded to acquiescence and a tessellated pattern of tribal fragments, precisely aligned to a hidden template of endlessly repeatable and certain orderliness. Even their suffering had a stoic resignation about it.

My godmother, my *nona*, whose straw blonde hair contrasted with the usual pitch blended tresses of other Greek women, had had a number of late term miscarriages. Despair fomented in the ache of her womb and to bring to term their two cherished offspring she had endured a confinement elongated by inactivity. Such a gestation should have produced a suffocating, inward family but there was always an easy flow from each to each, an unambiguous affection, balanced by firm but far from autocratic loving.

I remember, as a child the first shock of her enveloping embrace. I subsided into the generous curve and soft blancmange of my godmother's breasts pressed against my cheek and was smothered by the delicious whispered blend of cooking, fabric, faint sweat and scent. It was a delight to sift each lush fragrance as I nuzzled into her in a festival of temporary possession. And with my godfather, my *nono*, I remembered squirming on his lap in a tangle of children, giggling and laughter. I recalled his musty, dank sweat after a day's work, the slightly sour but not unpleasant smell of his breath and the definite feel through his trousers of his penis against his leg, comfortable and reassuring.

Before the coming of their own children I had a special place in their nurturing. It was my godmother who first put underwear on me when I once came to stay at the age of four. When their own children arrived, I became the older brother in a home where all life was desired like thirst. There was no shade of rivalry in my relationship with my cousins. I was five years older than Grigori and seven years older than Athena and I basked in their admiration. From their rural perspective, my urban demeanour lent me an air of certainty and enviable self-assurance. Yet from my point of view it was their lives which opened for me a world of solidity and certainty, where things were seen by looking, sounds were intended to be heard and actions were performed within the known boundaries.

Their home was a late Victorian farmhouse that rambled from one additional structural afterthought to another, sundry rooms and meandering corridors, lofted ceilings and dado panelling that reached up the wall for a metre or so before blossoming into floral wallpaper. The place was surrounded by a verandah that disappeared around corners into secret secluded spaces, shielded by unkempt bushes and a smorgasbord of scents. The kitchen, the cavernous hub of the household was dominated by a fuel stove crowded with a simmering cluster of cast iron pots. The breath of cooking seemed to drift like spiced talc about the

house, wafting out through the screen door that screeched and banged every time someone ran in or out.

In the lounge room with its open fireplace, stood a pianola. Each roll with its indecipherable perforated hieroglyphics was a collection of themes looted from the garbage bins of Tin Pan Alley. It always seemed odd to be propped about the pianola singing banal American melodies when English was forbidden to be spoken in general conversation. But there were a few Greek music rolls, mainly *kalamatiani* dance music, simple, elegant tunes, though certainly not *rebetika*, the vibrant, carnal music of the Greek waterfront taverns.

The roof of the house was sheathed in iron that rattled and banged when torrential rain hammered its fists into the corrugations of conversation, but when the rain subsided into light chatter, I slept stuffed and spiced, like delicious *ghemista* in the marrow of my eiderdowned drowned sleep. The first time I slept there though, I awoke in terror to a heavy foot fall on the roof, humanoid and menacing. My *nona* swaddled me in reassurance but nothing could convince me that it was only a possum and not an axe murderer. Nothing so small could produce such clubbed clumping on the roof. And it was the possums that provided my *nono*, my godfather, with a single-minded focused foe. Bold as a gang load of thugs they would swagger about at nightfall raiding garbage pails and fruit trees, vegetables from the garden and even roses from the bushes. They knew no fear and broiled my godfather in exasperation. We would watch them at night from the verandah, strolling along, feline, with bristling whiskers, coal agate eyes and dark, bushy tails that to my youthful mind, at least faintly conscious of the current craze, would have made excellent appendages on Davey Crockett hats.

Once my godfather cloaked the orchard fruit trees in netting to protect the ripening fruit from their pillaging. Fixed in their determination though, they just ripped a hole in the netting anyway. But once inside they were unable to find their way out again and next morning they were found curled into furred orbs, slumbering with their backsides jammed into the crook of the flared limbs. They were gorged to the gills and unmoved by the approach of my fulminating godfather. The full weight of pleading children and an amused wife was required to prevent him from carrying out his consuming urge to annihilate them all in a fusillade of gunfire.

One autumn, after the first lick of iced morning, we collected the windfall from the orchard, the fruit which had not been poached by possums or preserved and bottled, and threw buckets of the bruised flesh into a 200 litre drum propped conveniently near the pig sty for addition to the slop and swill that they seemed to live both in and on. The smell of rotting and fermenting apples mingled with the stench and nasal grip of cider scented urine and conjured the pungent picture and strange comic sway of pissed pigs. It was an utterly astonishing sight that at first stirred real concern for their welfare. Guttural grunts and alarmed squeals accompanied their staggered steps. Their refined, *pointework* trotters were crossed delicately like a dancer about to execute an *entrechat*, but instead they just toppled into a heap, watched through the rails of the sty by a laughing, convulsive mound of children.

The fertile world of animated and novel experience made the contrast with my urban life complete. Here, were practical tasks to master, and the sigh and satisfaction of completion.

Here were skills I came to value more profoundly than talents prized in a pecuniary sense. I can milk a goat! I can roll my fingers over the teat to make the milk flow in a thin stream that screeches down the side of a tinned milk bucket. An odd sound really, and while the analogy is not comfortable, I could make exactly the same sound when I pissed in a prune tin out the back. But the sound changed as the pail filled. The rabid milk bucket frothed and foamed and sucked in the mumbled murmur of spurting milk.

I learned there about growing things, ordered rows of corn and peas, and tomatoes on cockeyed stilts, garden stakes stuck at odd angles into the black loam with its edible smell of leaf mould, sweat and skin. Summer days crouched among rows with my cousins, scratching about the plants, laughing and flicking weeds at one another. If the heat was too much, we would scramble into the curved concrete stock trough and splash and drench one another in laughter till the ground around the tank became a squirming quagmire of mud oozing between toes. Or we threw ourselves on our bikes and sped through the air, our shirts bulging and billowing so that we all looked like mounted hunchbacks, hair plastered to our scalps by the woosh of wind. I learned to ride a bike there, a rusted Malvern Star with an ineffective back pedal brake that taught me about fear as well. I was forced to stand precipitously erect with my heel jammed down on the pedal as I careered, palpitating, down the steep lane heading straight for the garage heaped with a tangle of tools and junk.

Once I helped my godfather build a stone wall. We toiled together gathering stones in barrows and buckets, heaping them near the site of the wall to be built on the rim of the garden to staunch the flow of cold southerly air. We had heaped the stones while my godfather methodically selected each gem for precise size and shape, smeared each with a daub of cement and squeezed it into place. I sat in the shimmering summer haze on the baked hoard of rubble, watching his painstaking progress and playing with thoughts. What came first, the rubble or the wall? Perhaps I sat in the centre of a strewn accident? On the ruin of plans that had long since crumbled. I felt decay around me like a soft murmur. Later I would help him espalier fruit trees and vines along the wall. We twisted the gnarled boughs and branches along wire trellises till they all crouched crucified along its stone length.

Each time I visited my godparent's trove, the train racketed through the unkempt ruderal margins of track-side vegetation into the strangled imagination of the new suburbia, the unbounded fields of post-war vitality. In the vanguard of a proliferation of prams and Hill's hoists was a blitzkrieg of victorious Victas - the spluttering triumph of Sunday morning motor mowers. The womb of the city was slowly leaking into the Khaki interior and *lebensraum* scrub where the homes erupted like pestilential sores scabbed with Fibro, the ubiquitous shroud which years later disclosed lurking asbestos rotting at the lungs of that infant post-war optimism. This relentless tramp of tawdriness slowly marred the journey into the hinterland. Any recognition skirted the threshold of awareness, shielded by endless naivete and the mark of mammon on the age, but eventually the inescapable vulgarity made passage through the landscape oppressive.

In those vapid post-war years Fibro suburbia was not the sole example of vulgarity. It had to compete with Laminex plastic and Hoover washing machines that twisted clothes into sailor's knots. And television. I remember the wonder, on inspecting the latest Motorola purchased by some distant cousin, to find its screen severed in three. The top third of the screen was

bleach blue, the middle, peach pink and the bottom, a rich grass green. A film of coloured plastic pressed to the screen, they said. To create the effect of colour on the black and white set, they added, with enthusiasm. I silently watched the news with a reporter rendered in an odd trinity of blue rinsed eyebrows, lurid peach nose and Martian green suit.

Despite the spread of years and suburbia that has distanced me from my childhood and my godparents, each visit returns to me crammed with pneumatic pleasure. Each experience was a soaring adventure where the tumbling disjointed details were surreptitiously embellished in the retelling. I was puzzled, though, by the muted antipathy of my parents to my enthusiastic descriptions. My mother would sigh and say with a faint smile and flicker of resentment, "That's where they must have cut your belly button", suggesting an umbilical affinity with my godparents that denied my birth. Her underlying antipathy came out after the tragic death of my godmother's nephew who had come out from Greece at the age of nineteen to live with my godparents. He liked to hunt and fish and on one of these expeditions he drowned, and this created a torrent of accusation. The belief was that the family of the Australian mistress that my godfather had shed to marry my godmother must be to blame and thus it was all my godfather's fault. The boy's father in Greece pronounced a threat of vengeance so potent it dissuaded my godfather from visiting Greece until the father died.

My mother of course made it clear she concurred with the view, despite its utter peasant absurdity, and always vaguely warned of possible danger in my visits though she never prevented me going. My father, on the other hand, maintained a stony silence and never commented on my stays. I became silent about my pleasure in the presence of my parents. My life with my godparents became secret, the beginning of numerous closed corners that I came to inhabit like a thief.

10. Flesh

After my father's death our home shrank into a muffled melancholy where even the sprinkling of words that passed between us seemed to intrude. My mother lived in a prostrate fugue, slumped on the couch clutching ouzo-soaked cloths to her brow. They became a fixture, her forehead furniture. She was racked with a terror of death glimpsed around the corner of every ache and ailment. My sister had married and was living interstate and my brothers were immersed in their university studies, so it fell to me to assume responsibility for the household. What meagre assistance they offered was constrained by an attitude imbued since birth, that household tasks for men were inappropriate. I didn't mind the quiet repetition of housework and even felt some satisfaction in revealing order. I learned to cook and prepare meals, meticulously acquiring mastery of cutting and dicing, and the quirks of preparation that made the difference between food and a meal.

My mother's fearful withdrawal was to some extent understandable, for in the wake of the new reality of life without my father, came a cold wave of financial uncertainty, icy hostility and subtle desertion. The anxiety was intensified by Federal and State Death Duties amounting to thousands of pounds. The obvious solution was to sell out of the failing cafe. From the time of my father's death, his anxious partners had squirmed between hostility and patronising concern. The offer to my mother for my father's share of the partnership was scandalously low, less than a third of his original purchase price. They wrung their hands and pleaded understanding in the light of the performance of the business, crediting themselves

with profound generosity in the face of such difficulties. But they also understood the pressing need for money to finalise my father's affairs. And in the midst of all this emerged a further dilemma to amplify the agitation - the bank was demanding immediate repayment of a loan. My father had guaranteed a loan for a man he barely knew from his home village. He was always prepared to help others in need, but not always sensible in his choice of people. Now the business was failing and the bank, acting within its legal rights, was insisting my father make good his guarantee.

I went with my mother to the interview, to plead with them to withdraw their demand now my father was dead. We sat in the mahogany opulence and Anglo-Saxon solidity of the bank manager's office before a vast tract of desk and a manager of similar dimension. He sat in solemnity, his fingers interlocked on the desk, the contour of his arms and hands forming a pool of blank blotter in front of him. I translated for my mother, negotiating as best I could, but his passionless, patronising indifference and thinly concealed aversion to our ethnic dissimilarity, left me in wordless rage. The respect and significance of my father seemed to evaporate. The cold certainty was that he was dead. Fact.

There were moments though, inconsequential twists in time and space, when he became real again to me. I was walking through a city arcade, cavernous and Victorian, the tiers of diminutive shops tucked behind ornate facades and bathed in the light that filtered down like mustard dust from the glazed copula in the centre. A waitress from the cafe noticed me and began to walk alongside, uninvited. She had the plain, permanently consumptive look of many English featured women, her angular profile drawn by a thin pencil line. But she was warm too and disarmingly open. She began to tell me, unbidden, of her admiration for my father. She lamented the absence of his warmth from the cafe and talked of his gentle kindness, his generosity and understanding. I was deeply shaken by her sincerity and grateful for the genuine affection she had for my father. Close to tears, I garbled an excuse and fled, trailing my grief through the crowd to a bench beneath the dome suffused with light. I sat arched within sorrow, the yearning aching into loss. I missed him so terribly, missed his *pantocrator* presence.

His amiable generosity had always attracted people to his orbit and their galactic regard kindled within him an innocent delight. While he was alive our house teemed with people. The opening and closing of the front door defined the entrance or exit of yet another haul of humanity. Now the house was barricaded in silence, sealed to preserve the vacuity. Each afternoon when I entered the front door I almost hoped for sound, the mumble of a radio or the clatter of kitchen sounds, but the most that I could expect was the ticking of the mantle clock and the singular sound of my own hollow footfall. I longed for those times crammed with people.

My father was the quintessential Greek host imbued with *philoxenia*, the Greek tradition of hospitality. As children we frequently had to give up our beds for guests. We didn't mind. The stream of people that entered and left created a constant flurry of interest and activity in our lives. There were Greek neighbours, Greeks from Greece and Greeks exiled in country towns, usually from my father's island home, of course. It provided us, as children, with an *entree* to a wider world of exotic difference, though in reality it was a world as narrow as our own.

These gatherings furnished my father with an opportunity to be expansive, to offer advice on life in the new world and to pretend we were prosperous and had arrived in life.

Some guests, though, were less welcome than others. Once we had a country couple come to stay. The wife, a suety lump of a woman who griped continuously, had needed to consult a city medical specialist. They had their meals with us, but often, when my parents were not about, the doting husband, some twenty-five years older than his wife, would go out and buy special treats for her. Never once did he share with us, though we naturally hovered when sweets were about, and never once did he contribute to the household.

One day he came downstairs and demanded that the radio be turned down. He stood, wizened and sallow like a gaunt reed, at the bottom of the stairs with his little toe peeking slyly through a hole in the side of his leather slipper. Stephanos and I were dancing with my sister to the latest rollicking radio tunes, scandalous rock 'n roll bellowing from the veneered curves and valves. His wife could not sleep. It was only 5:30 pm but she was trying to sleep. We resented the censorious interruption and Stephanos showed his contempt by only pretending to comply. Down he came again, this time to complain to my father about the noise. My father fused into monstrous fury. He grabbed Stephanos and hurled him across the lounge room table, which he then pitched over to one side so he could grab him again. Clutching a knot of his shirt, he struck him across the face with the back of his hand, then swung round and twisted the switch of the radio and chopped off the sound. I was utterly staggered! I had never seen my father enraged and stood transfixed in terror.

"They're pigs!" Stephanos screamed with tears torn between rage and humiliation. "Pigs! And they don't care about us! What do we owe them?"

My father was apoplectic. "They are guests! Guests!" as if that were absolutely all the explanation that was ever required. The towering Colossus of Obligation to which all Rhodes led.

His death though erased any reciprocity of obligation and so began a subtle abandonment by erstwhile companions, compatriots and relatives, though all mouthed concern and condolences and were anxious to offer all manner of advice to my mother. The theme was generally the same. Send the children out to work. "You can't expect to educate them all, you know. You must expect your new life will require sacrifice."

It was difficult not to detect in their suggestions, envy and resentment at the determination of my parents to educate all their children, all that is except for my sister, of course. I can still hear their voices and see the furrowed concern on their brows, even as they strode off towards their own deaths. Only once was there ever any financial support. An old friend of my father loaned my mother seven hundred pounds to help pay for the death duties.

It was different a few years later though, when these same people heard that my brother Stephanos had graduated from university. In their minds he was now marriageable, so they brought round their plump inhibited daughters for an airing and a viewing. These gauche young girls posed mute in twisted tension, like pretzels, while their mothers gushed. Afterwards Stephanos would flail my mother with a torrent of abuse, "*Putana!* whore! They're

only toting their cunts about to find pricks to fill them!" My brother's extreme obscenity was awesome when directed towards my mother. I quietly relished these hysterical tirades which usually terminated with my mother heaped on the couch, exhausted. I quietly envied what I would never dare.

Stephanos' disdain and defiance of my mother began well before my father's death, when he was adolescent and testing his independence. I was only about ten at that time and was clearly impressed. I began to emulate Stephanos' coarse invective but Michali bluntly questioned my knowledge of what I was saying. I of course was blissfully ignorant though I grasped clearly the association with forthright masculinity. Michali explained in explicit detail the meaning of my new vocabulary. I was horrified, embarrassed and disgusted by the unambiguous anatomical connection. Men did what to women? In my mind women were far too nice to willingly allow such a thing and I certainly could never do anything to a woman like that. My flirtation with vulgarity evaporated instantly.

Within my new knowledge acquired from Stephanos' bouts of vulgarity were areas of ignorance and umbral void. I had known absolutely nothing about sexuality before then. I had never even seen anyone in our family naked, so it was hardly surprising that, around eight, I became abysmally self-conscious of my genitals. I remember sitting on the toilet looking down at my erect penis, aware unquestionably that I should not touch. I was ashamed, imagining that I alone was afflicted with such an attachment, one that seemed impossible to conceal. A walk down the street was spent in furtive examination of male groins seeking reassurance in tell-tale bulges. I lived in total confusion. As far as I could ascertain babies were fertilised by the wine shared by a married couple at their nuptials. After an appropriate interval the baby simply emerged through the woman's umbilicus.

The sudden, inexplicable rigidity of my hidden appendage caused me intense humiliation. When I awoke in the morning, it stood stubborn and inflexible forcing me to scuttle down the hall to the toilet to avoid the embarrassment of being observed. There, in order to achieve a suitable angle for urination, I was forced to bend and wrestle with it to the point where it threatened to snap like a carrot. When I was older riding on the school bus became equally hazardous. The vibration seemed to stir its firm resolve and I had to hold my school bag in front of me as I filed out of the bus, hoping fervently that no one noticed. In my last year at primary school, the young boy on the bench next to me raised the lid of his desk to hide the whispered disclosure of an erection and an invitation to feel his admirable achievement. I was only about eleven and his request caused a wave of confused, intense shame. Needless to say, I declined his generous offer.

When I began to enter puberty Michali hinted that "something different was about to happen" to me though he resisted my attempts to have him elaborate on his cryptic prophesy. Sex seemed something shared in discussion with other men, though. I was certain nice women would find intercourse disgusting and, out of consideration to their sensibilities, I relegated them to a necessary though perfunctory role in the increasingly insistent fantasies that plagued me. My most constant fantasy was conjured in the pungent attar and diaphanous silks of an eastern harem where, as potentate, I indulged myself in prodigious penetration. I would elaborate my fantasy to the gentle stroking of my member, each separate stroke representing the penetration of yet another passive though always receptive

odalisque. One evening nestling in the bath with the door bolted and my attention riveted, I was arrested by a sudden quickening of arousal and the shock of semen settling in the bath water like phlegm. My astonishment was momentarily overtaken by a sadness that leaked into dull enervation and unease, but I quickly shunted aside such qualms hoping to renew this novel experience.

I realised I had discovered what my brother meant by "something different about to happen" though it was not without equivocation. Part of me galloped wildly into pleasure mounted on my fantasies, whereas another censorious part worried about the consequences. While under the rod of righteous opinion I would swear never to repeat the shame but as the enormity waned and arousal beckoned, I would sink again into the tingling fusion of odium and pleasure. Once again, I would find myself pierced with guilt and once more, I would resolve never again to transgress. My subterranean existence seemed to infuse my public actions with pretence. How could my manner and actions be taken seriously when I was committing such indecencies in private? If I could inter my shame in good works and generosity, then possibly I could begin to atone. If I could tempt goodness and with my personal charm ensnare admiration, I could possibly deflect the view of others, skew their notion of me and begin to erase the stain.

11. Commerce & Matchmaking

The intricacies of duty and obligation provided a palate to colour my choices and responses. With both brothers at university and my sister married, the logical option was for me to leave school and take a job to ease the family finances. Back into the bowels of commerce. It was a sensible and sober choice, working in a department store with an opportunity to take up a management traineeship after a satisfactory period of probation. But I did not neglect my education. Three evenings a week, after work and a rushed meal, I went to the technical college for evening matriculation classes.

I began work in one of the emerging commercial leviathans of the 1960s, the suburban department store, vast bunkers designed like nuclear fallout shelters. At the core was the principal business, the Logos of the mercantile maze of sundry speciality shops, the camp followers of commerce that clung to the surrounding concourse. Automatic doors hermetically sealed in shoppers as they entered the building, focusing their minds on the business of buying. And from concealed speakers came the constant mumble of Muzak, a bland phonic treacle intended to leave a smear of quiet well-being on the souls of shoppers. Beneath, in the bowels of the complex was a vast parking area, a concrete tomb reverberating with the eructations of cars constantly streaming in and out leaving a noxious haze of foul flatulence.

During daylight hours a coven of deformed and female forms haunt department stores. Shop worn and perennially middle aged, they navigate their way through islands of wares and tagged mounds of merchandise. Thin, ectomorphic bodies with nicotine creased faces or bloated bales of flesh with elephantine bums encased in elasticised pants to deliberately accentuate their deformity. I was assigned initially to the paint department and spent my days discussing colour with housewives decorating doll houses devoid of taste. Conversation was frequently disrupted by the constant tugging and grizzling of dysgenic offspring with freckled faces and mouths smudged with a black and yellow mix of Vegemite and egg.

My supervisor was Claude, a mass of man with tight wavy grey hair rippling across his scalp. He was brusque and taciturn with a protruding paunch that made the grey dusk coat he always wore, hang from his midriff like a stage curtain. He only showed any animation when describing his war service in the Middle East where he served as a motorcycle dispatch rider. He had been wounded there or had damaged his knee badly in a fall, the story varied with the retelling. He could not seem to disguise his resentment of the wave of Mediterranean migrants that flooded Australia after the war. He hadn't served to make Australia safe for them. Now his reward was to foster an offspring of the oily tide and prepare me for a managerial job that was his by rights. But he loathed work and was preoccupied with how he could turn his disability into a Service Pension and leave work.

I came to dread the late afternoon when he closed the till to reconcile the register. There was always some discrepancy. He would ramble on darkly about carelessness in making change or warn of the consequences of stealing. He never directly accused me though I had no doubts as to what he meant. I was inordinately conscientious and anxious to please. To even suggest that I could steal, wounded me beyond belief. I found over time, the constant niggling became intolerable and I reluctantly approached the floor manager, Mr Green. He had always been extremely solicitous and immediately transferred me to Hardware.

While my transfer removed the depressive shroud I shared with Claude, the new arrangement offered little better. I worked the counter with George, a whining stoat shaped Englishman. Every morning as he set up the till he would sing, off key, exactly the same fragment of refrain - "When I grow too old to dream, I will have to surrender!" This recurring, tortured distortion became a feature of daily suffering. The other assistant was a woman, Mrs Hannah. She was in her early forties and anxious to confide in me her dark disappointment. Her husband...."He's only 48".... had ceased to furnish her sexual needs which left her with a level of frustration I had the uncomfortable feeling she felt I could possibly fulfil.

The edges of these experiences became frayed and bizarre. I was occasionally ambushed by momentary dissociation where the alignment of space and objects seemed to warp and stretch, and my voice receded from me. After such an attack, the day would meander without much point and nothing seemed to quite fit. It was difficult to know whether I had entered the real adult world, or a Hogarth Bedlam of people trapped naked by monotony and ennui. There seemed no respite from the awful sense of disjunction and I moved in a narcoleptic pall from work to home and my mother sprawled depressive on the couch.

I retreated into the refuge of my studies, devouring learning and information. It opened a blaze of discovery, illuminating a way from the shadow of my present torpor. I immersed myself in preparation for the university entrance exams, though that still meant I would have to endure the Christmas rush while awaiting my results.

The store bulged with Christmas shoppers. And the shoppers bulged with parcels. The perennially optimistic Muzak swung into a medley of tinkling Christmas carols as the flurry of small change chased concocted "specials" around the store. The building itself, like some prodigious lung inhaled gossip and breathed it into the air conditioning. Claude was dead. The news dropped like a wall across conversation and Christmas cheer, though it took little time

for details to emerge. He had been caught stealing from the till and the humiliation had propelled him into despair. He went home, took out a service revolver and shot himself. In my mind I tasted the metallic sherbet in his mouth and saw the crown of his head explode leaving a plume of blood and viscera on the lounge room wall. What could I feel? I loathed the man and resented the way he had obviously tried to blame me. At the same time, I quietly respected his decision. It at least had more courage than the living.

The incident hardened my resolve to escape into higher education. The decision was sealed by my results and enhanced by a Commonwealth Scholarship which removed some of the financial burden from the family. I toyed with different areas of study but felt drawn to fields of observable substance. I chose science, the dark side of alchemy where I could dabble in the empirical.

The beginning of my university studies coincided with the return of my sister. She moved with her husband and small son, back into the family home. The transformation of my mother was complete, metamorphosed from a chrysalid coma into a consuming grandmother gobbling the child with attention. It was the prodigal return of animation. The absence of my sister from the household had hollowed me of affection. I was unable to shed the feeling that the family had harried her from the house with their fetish for matchmaking. There had been few eligible Greek men in my sister's age group which had induced inordinate concern. Her 21st birthday party, which took place some eighteen months before my father's death, was seen as almost the last opportunity to bring together all of the potentially appropriate connections.

The rituals of courtship though, were extremely constrained and circumspect. Any offender of the arcane mating rules was likely to be beaten to death by wagging tongues. At my sister's 21st party for example, one young man spent most of the evening perched on the stairs smiling and laughing, enjoying animated conversation with a young woman. She was innocently content to spend the evening talking to him, but this was too much for the censorious Greek chorus of older women, the black shags that clung to the lives of everyone. They sat stacked with their backs along the wall in their bleak widow-weed black, gripping the rim of joy and hissing venom...."The slut is throwing herself at him!"....."What brazen behaviour!"..."He's too good for her!"....."He wouldn't marry a girl like that!" The little barges of blubber heeled from side to side, tilting from one conspiratorial ear lobe to the next, on a surging tide of reproof. They condemned what they saw as her serious violation of the rules of propriety, though nothing was said against him nor was there any mention of his well-known improprieties.

His name was Panayoti and his mother was a close friend and ally of my aunt Kaliopi, which, in a circuitous way, explains the connection with my sister, though he was no more than a minor acquaintance. There were whispered rumours of his affairs, and the gossip was that he had left one Greek girl pregnant. He had refused to marry her, and she was forced to seek an abortion which was difficult and dangerous at that time, as well as extraordinarily shameful, though less so than illegitimacy. Despite this undercurrent, the consensus emerging from the party was that Panayoti was an appropriate match for my sister. After all, his family were prosperous and respected. The mothers agreed and worked feverishly to seal the deal.

Katerina, however, was entirely unimpressed and had no real interest in Panayoti. Instead she was deeply taken by a university friend of Stephanos, Bob Aylett, whose mother was Greek but whose father was Australian. My brother's view, despite their friendship, was that Bob was unsuitable to be the husband of his sister. He forcefully discouraged her interest and severed the friendship with Bob. He regarded Bob's family as psychologically suspect because his mother had had a nervous breakdown after Bob's brother was killed when he stumbled from a tram under a car. In any case the family had no status within the Greek community and only existed on the fringes. My sister was pained by his attitude but would not act contrary to Stephanos's wishes. She had been well drilled in the chauvinistic trappings of Greek life.

The pressure on Katerina to marry the desirable Panayoti was so intense that she arranged to go away on a holiday to Queensland - to visit relatives, of course. There she met a Greek man untainted by the misfortune of misplaced birth. What is more, he came from the same village as my parents. She forged a marriage with almost indecent haste and with it made her escape from and into the tangled web of Greek family.

The illusion of choice. Like a lucky dip from your own pocket! The men in particular were so emphatic about choices being their own. I watched Stephanos, like most Australian born Greek men, aggressively reject attempts at "arranged" marriage. Nevertheless, it was accepted without question that a marriage should always be "appropriate" and within accepted community boundaries, which leaves me to wonder whether real choice, on this or any other matter, was ever possible.

My sister's choice, after the attempted matchmaking, left Panayoti now with all the choice in the world. His father, however, was suddenly crippled by a severe stroke and from his hospital bed begged his son to bring to him the woman he would marry, for him to approve before his death. Panayoti, driven by duty sought out the Siren of the Stairs, the woman with whom he had spent the evening of my sister's 21st locked in delighted conversation before the shocked view of all. They were only ever friends and she expressed surprise at his offer of marriage. She guessed the reason and when he confirmed his intense sense of filial obligation, she had the uncommon good sense to turn him down. Only momentarily diverted however, from his driven task, Panayoti now approached the family of his cuffed ex-lover. Not to be reconciled with her, but to seek the hand of the virginal younger sister! The younger sister, however, was infatuated by a young Australian whose father was Greek. She had gathered her trousseau and sewn a magnificent wedding dress of intricate lace and satin in anticipation of her union, but her fiancé was conscripted for military service and this forced a postponement of plans.

This respite however, provided the family with an opportunity to organise a match with Panayoti which was, frankly, more acceptable and advantageous. The young woman was boxed in by a family siege, prodded and pressured until she eventually surrendered. I watched her at the wedding, her face like cold clay, impassive above the laced and elaborate satin gown intended for another place and person. All to satisfy the ambitions of family and the autocratic despotism of a dying father.....who managed to go on living for another thirty years.

The vision of events recedes with age but grants a pernicious sight to compensate for dimming detail. A purgatorial wake of people afflicted with atrophied affection and withered maturation, where feeling is weighed in grams of stony emotion and action is imbued with stunning meanness and insensitivity, the heart severed from the soul and the feeble pulse wired to the throb of tribal valuation.

I am riddled with memory and skinflint emotion, propped between the rage of remembering and the sorrow of seeing too much.

I am six, holding my sister's hand at the island association Christmas party. There are streamers of coloured paper and flickering tinsel. The presents, toys purchased by the island association committee from my father's shop, are being given out. I am given a small gleaming black car and I hold it close to my eye. My sight is siphoned into the crevices of Lilliputian detail stamped into the casting, drawing me into a world of intimacy and gentle Gulliverian power. After the party I cradle my treasured car in my lap all the way home. When we arrive, my mother asks for my toy and I am shocked when she tells me I can no longer have it. We cannot afford to be generous with ourselves, she emphasises. It will have to be returned to the shop to be resold. That night I crawled under the covers with my sister and she held my tears till I fell asleep smothered in her skin, musty like bruised grass.

12. Science and Medicine

The campus was a gathering of loathing, squat concrete outhouses and blank brick towers garnished with plastic and aluminium, cuboid cow pats voided from the excremental imagination of public service architects - the 60s legacy of bloated growth in Australian universities. Only at the centre was there respite - the old quadrangle, a humourless cluster of sandstone clones cloaked in a gown of Victorian gravity. Despite this dissonance, university for me offered escape from the ordinary; from the crush of tribal torpor. It proffered the prospect of Vocation with all the texture of piety - I, the acolyte, ready to receive the Host of knowledge. But inside the scrubbed attire and the cheeks polished till you could see your own reflection, doubt rattled about with awe and apprehension in those first days of newly minted truth.

I joined the throng of earnest first year students strolling past the various stalls erected by enthusiastic student groups to tout their wares during student orientation week. Committed groups of the Left with downy facial scurf and muffled duffle coats. And from the Right crisp young men and tidy young women looking as though they were about to have a spiffing good time at the ball on the Titanic. I shunned the possibilities and attached myself to the Greek student's association, joining Greek classes because I had only ever learned the rudiments of script and grammar. Dutiful and dull, I was a minutely detailed good Greek boy. I moved only in their circle - the sum of my social activity at university apart from the family's moveable feasts rotated among the relatives.

At the first-year student's ball, I bundled along with the group though I was paired with a friend's sister. The tangle of anxiety and heightened anticipation leading up to the day toppled each action of the evening into gauche, miscued response and unintended mishap. She was not particularly fetching and the cloying sweet scent masking her dank sweat did not enhance the appeal but each time I brushed against her I was assaulted by an instantaneous erection.

She must have been deeply puzzled by my awkward, continually shifting stance and peculiar need to sit and cross my legs. The evening was an interminable and embarrassing debacle. The connection with the Greek association, however, provided useful contacts with older students further into their studies, who were able to furnish a perspective on the drift of the courses and the pitfalls to be avoided. After all, it was my studies that absorbed and obsessed me.

I had enrolled in pure science; pure, uncontaminated and unsullied by uncertainty. For me it was an Eden of knowledge, reeking of curiosity, touched by the forbidden and demanding exploration. Evanthia, a Greek student doing Honours in Zoology, seized my interest in learning and absorbed me under her tutelage. She had straight black hair that ended in a slash below her ear line, and global features that radiated guileless enthusiasm and subtle hunger. She conducted her research in a laboratory housing banks of aquaria stocked with fish of all shapes, sizes and lurid colours. I helped scouring tanks and organising filters, aeration apparatus, thermometers and heating elements. It introduced me to a realm of what I imagined was real science though I really wasn't particularly interested in fish. They were unpleasant to handle with their slip and gelid slime. And their startled eyes and astonished mouths seemed to gape bewildered at the world.

In a separate corner though, were tanks furnished with a mass of seagrass weed and a herd of small seahorses. I had heard of them of course but seeing them at such close quarters fascinated me. I was truly astonished that such extraordinary creatures existed. Like unicorns, they were fragments of mythology. It's not surprising that to the ancient Greeks, the tiny corpses thrown onto storm fraught shores were the drowned young of Poseidon's mares that hauled his chariot through the waves. I was enamoured of these creatures, teetering on their prehensile tails gripping their seagrass homes. I was drawn by their comic sadness - their doleful eyes and shy Pinocchio noses resting coyly on their portly bellies.

In adjoining tanks were Leafy Sea dragons, extraordinary creatures of the same family. They seemed suspended between plant and animal, floating lyrically in a vegetative disguise of weedy tresses and flowing emerald foliage. But while they were quite spectacular to observe they did not have the anthropomorphic appeal of the seahorses whose averted bashful gaze made them always appear defenceless and apprehensive. Their crested dorsal armour, their crimped metallic shell, in no way diminished their look of vulnerability.

I would stand bowed before the tank, my hands braced against my knees watching through the gentle sway of aeration bubbles, the seahorses, little taupe refugees from the harbour silt and seagrass beds. Their sculptured chess knight shapes would glide, then swiftly dart and veer with astonishing speed, steering with their extraordinary ear-like pectoral fins. In the early morning they would ritually greet their paired mate, blushing a rainbow of hues in the presence of one another while their eyes, ink dots ringed by burnished silver, swivelled about quite independently of one another.

I noticed one day, wrapped around a thread of weed, tiny baby seahorses with stumpy trumpet snouts and huge eyes like stunned saucers. I drew Evanthia's attention to the find and she remarked excitedly, "Looks like father's finished giving birth!"

I knew they were difficult to raise in captivity so I could appreciate her elation but the nauseating, and apparently mistaken, sentiment demanded correction.

She laughed, "No mistake! The male bears the young. He's been thrashing about for the last couple of days off loading the young! He looks truly exhausted!"

"How can you be so certain! That's an extraordinarily definite statement!"

"It's a fundamental distinction really. Males produce vast amounts of mobile sperm and females produce a relatively small number of nutrient crammed eggs. It just so happens in the case of seahorses that the female deposits eggs in the male belly pouch. The sperm is released into the pouch and the fertilised eggs nidate on the wall."

Her remarks which were an affront to conventional expectation, induced a reaction out of all proportion to her revelation. An icy flush wintered my fascination though I was perplexed by my level of perturbation. Discussion of sexuality always produced discomfort in me though I enthusiastically adopted the contemporary liberal mores of the 60s and its Aquarian fantasy of liberation....did premarital sex matter, for example, if people really loved each other?...along with other terribly audacious views. Beneath the facile pose though, was a havoc of uncertainty that innocent disclosure of the seahorse's sexual inversion, compounded irrationally. In retrospect it was absurd to have been so unsettled by such reversed polarity of roles and images, though it was an awesome reversal.

It seemed an extraordinarily obscene caricature; the male thrashing about in the throes of labour, apparently squirting little seahorses out through the umbilicus of its bloated belly. It was as though my childish misconceptions of human genesis had come back to parody me in an even more warped and absurd way. But I learned that the male pouch of the sea horse really does act like a uterus. The egg implants and is nourished with oxygen through a myriad of blood vessels in the epithelial tissue and the embryo is bathed in a placental fluid secreted with the release of prolactin. The analogy was almost complete. And completely obscene! The whole matter pivoted on definition, threatening ingrained notions. The concrete science I had naively seen as literal and immutable was largely stitched together by definitional distinctions. And the assault this made on my assumptions about masculinity represented fundamental intimidation.

By the time I was fifteen or sixteen I was buffeted by confused adolescent fantasies adding a tremulant surge to a familiar shame. I felt so utterly alien and drawn by the grotesque. In a biology text I would return regularly to a section on the breeding habits of amphibians with a mixture of awe and distaste. In one species, the female frog would squeeze eggs onto her back and the male would ejaculate a spew of semen over her, forming a tough plastic skin to protect the fertilised embryos. The baby frogs would emerge fully formed like scabies from under the skin.

There was no one in whom I dared confide and there was no literature that seemed appropriate or really informative. There were, of course, dog eared daring tales retrieved from my brother's bottom draw, of plantation owners boldly bedding the ravishing black beauty, the tempestuous and defiant slave girl. She, from torrid hatred, turned to seething

passion, against the background of his polite marriage to the sweet white bride unsullied by violent passion. On the cover the master loomed over the lusting beauty, her back curved into him, breasts bursting from her bodice, hair cascading and lips parted in orgiastic passion. I would always borrow with stealth and return them in exactly the same position in the pile, at exactly the same angle.

Once I found a plain Kraft covered paperback in his collection which was immediately conspicuous by its pedestrian appearance. But the cover concealed a content that suffused and seduced me. The story was of a young man of wealth and power able to indulge every taste. There was a touch of cruelty and indifference, contempt and dismissive disregard for the feelings of others. It pumped a mood of mastery. One scene is embossed on my mind. A young man lying in a satined boudoir, his body bathed in a tattooed swirl of harlequin colours, an imprinted Basilisk with its serpent's tail curling round his neck and tortuously wending a languid trail over his torso, terminating with its head and black eyes resting on his penis, its forked tongue lapping his foreskin. I read with rabid pleasure, circling my own untried emotions which now included a subtle lust for young men as well. The book's drab appearance and seedy print cloaked a depth of secrets.

The thirst for explanation drew one other work from Stephano's pile of forbidden treasures, a serious volume with the suitably austere title of "An Encyclopaedia of Sexual Knowledge". The clinical descriptions and serious, avuncular style were remarkably arousing. I could settle into turpitude while posed in righteous moral guise. It was extremely candid for its time, though conventional, nonetheless. It advocated positive sexuality yet urged restraint and "saving oneself" for marriage, a moral injunction to which my less furtive other half, aspired. Of greater importance though, were explicit explanations of sexual activity which helped allay my secret fear that practices like masturbation were disgusting and abnormal. It treated such behaviour as unremarkable and even provided anecdotes that made my furtive practices appear positively dull in comparison. It described one man, who in order to add stimulation and interest to his solitary pass time, stationed a dinner plate against his penis, and rattled an eggbeater against the surface of the plate to create rowdy erotic vibrations. I was intrigued by the method though I doubted its efficacy and certainly felt no urge to juggle such paraphernalia.

To the cursory observer, my life then was entirely prosaic though it shielded a subterranean turbulence, a cerebral vortex of loathing, of magnified hurts and obsessive apprehension, all of which was utterly unnecessary. For the common culture of the 1960s around me there was a new exploration but from my ethnic cage there was nothing but a dark pattern of shared shame along with an extraordinary simplicity of thinking and monumental naivete.

I locked myself in study, drained text book chapters and dredged information from the bindings though I was ruffled by the frailty of science and the importance doubt played in understanding. Though I passed well that year I opted to transfer to medicine in the year following. Somehow it seemed that eventually I would get around to something like medicine. The family obsession with career made the change comfortable and the deluge of approval that accompanied the announcement confirmed the choice. In science I had tried to sidle up to certainty now I had the opportunity to flirt with cure.

The switch to medicine made little difference to the flow of my existence. The only real difficulty occurred in my second and third year courses in anatomy. There was no attempt to prepare any of the students for their first observation of human dissection, even less to prepare them psychologically for their first experience of slicing a corpse. They insisted though, on the methods of meticulously paring skin to expose organs and muscles, the ritual means of opening people to examine the entrails for signs of the future medical practitioner. These rites of dissection as laid down in Cunningham's Anatomy, however, seemed as much about cultivating mental distance and detachment, as with precise and proper methodology.

The anatomy hall, a vast vaulted auditorium from the last century, could hold over two hundred students gathered in groups of eight about their designated corpse. Our pygmy vision was absorbed into the towering echoes and distant cosmos of the ceiling, while immense windows drew in drafts of light through a meticulous pattern of panes. Around the whitewashed walls was a gallery of framed paintings, early luminaries like Hereophilus and Galen along with grave scenes of Versalius and Harvey engrossed in anatomical dissection. The dissection tables were arranged in ordered rows and we were each assigned to a table and a body, a dark plasticine-grey corpse reeking of formaldehyde. The ubiquitous stench permeated everything; hands, texts and dissection coats. It seemed to have even penetrated and preserved the building since life, apparently had fled from it long ago. Unless disease had damaged the organs in some way the same body would be a constant silent companion over the following five terms.

The response of most students was macabre and a little crass, such as naming the cadaver.... "Pat.... because we have to learn our anatomy off pat". Some responses though were quaint. A young female student expressed surprise when dissecting the penis that it did not have a skeletal structure, thus nurturing endless speculation. How anyone would consider willing their body to the university for dissection by students is incomprehensible.

Beyond a few jokes to ease the tension, we worked quietly through the procedures and exercises. Most felt aversion to the task, so primary dissection fell to me by default and probably some perverse fascination. The others called me "Fingers" in recognition of my role, working fumed in formaldehyde, my fingers coated with body fat. Yet attendance at each dissection was a personal torment for me, provoking profound disjunction. I envisaged myself comatosed, split open with my entrails spilled from my torso, watched by the hovering eye of horror and imagination. It was ghastly to confront the body of someone that recently had been alive and conversing with others. There before me was the sweep of birth and family, school and growing up, marriage and affection, children, work, pain, shame, wonder and experience, joy and understanding, all suddenly summarised on a dissection slab. It was as though after the painstaking dissection one simply rearranged the parts to prop them up ready to go home.

I was left severed from myself, moving in fragments. There was a slow, slough of feeling and retreat from reaction each time I entered the anatomy hall to the mosquito whine of the dissection mantra and the pungency of anomie. Ennui. Enemy.

I wondered at the capacity of others to weather the experience with apparent disinterest. And they must have wondered the same of me. The attendant whose daily duties focused on

the slabs of flesh, particularly intrigued me. He was one of the scavengers feeding at the fringes of the medical world, grateful for a few crumbs of the revered light of reflected glory, but he had immunised himself against emotion and remained aloof. He had a muscular bantam build, capped with tangled curly hair and accentuated by a nose as thin as a cock's comb. He even modelled for classes to demonstrate various parts of the anatomy. On command, he would swivel on his pedestal and flex a particular muscle like a programmed android. And he admitted once, in one of his rare conversations that he had left his body to the university and so, deferential even in death, he would continue to educate another crop of medical students.

What was touted as usual became bizarre and repulsive, along with the flow of stories that seemed to emanate from such macabre settings, though most were probably apocryphal. It was said of our attendant that he habitually used to keep his lunch cool in one of the body cabinets of the mortuary where bodies were held prior to being pickled in vats of formaldehyde. A student purportedly unwrapped the lunch one day, took one bite from a sandwich and carefully replaced it in the cabinet near the mouth of a cadaver. This stab at macabre wit certainly does not imply the medical faculty was crammed with humourists. Most were simply anxious like me to pass the rigours of gruelling exams concocted by fiends schooled in Social Darwinism. Most stories were simply a way of battening down emotions and proffering a bold front, though of course there was always the rich vein of other's mistakes and situational disasters.

In my junior year of residency, I flocked with the other posed and earnest interns on ward rounds. The Registrar on one particular morning, had an elderly patient with an enlarged prostate which necessitated, to his obvious displeasure, a rectal examination. With eyes averted he inserted a finger but as he turned to address the students, he realised from the tug at his throat that he had also inserted his tie. He was swept by revulsion and dismay and called to the nurse, "Cut it off for God's sake! Cut it off!" Alarm seized the patient who, propelled by panic, motored up the bed accompanied by fear, a finger and a tie.

Despite these rare illustrations to the contrary, university was unexceptional, though I shuffle events, to avoid drawing thought to dwell on Nia or the spectre of McConaghy.

13. Ourania

We were all invited - Stephanos, Michali and me. A party guaranteed to be an impressive, it was to be held at a home in one of the leafier suburbs though it was hardly a house that nestled discreetly against the foliage. It reared up on the block before a horseshoe pebble drive that curved to a yawning colonnaded orifice opening into a vestibule with a sweeping staircase that curled like smoke into space. It was owned by a Greek entrepreneur with an aesthetic sense nurtured in poverty and leavened by wealth and a compulsive urge to flaunt it - tall urns in the foyer crowned with sprays of pampas grass and dried podded branches, sentinels to Aphrodite poised coyly in a shell shaped pond of coloured lights.

Barren of sons, he had only daughters and a longing to ensure that they all married well. Like many Greeks in business he had anglicised his name to cloud his ethnic origin, but without question his daughters would marry Greeks. The invention of these elegant soirees was an opportunity to display the wares and scrutinise the prospects.

Michali and I dressed in our tuxedos and preened ourselves to leave but Stephanos railed and fumed. He despised the predatory aspect of these social affairs, where our testes would be weighed in the balance to see if they might be found wanting. He screamed at my mother's attempts to badger him into going and stormed off to his room. To Stephanos it was all a conspiracy to marry him off but to Michali and I it was just an opportunity to absorb the social scenery and enjoy ourselves.

We arrived formally dressed in cherubic faces beaming over winged bow ties and bibs of dazzling white purity. There was an air of restrained propriety among the sprinkling of early guests as though everyone was practicing for middle age. We stood around posed in shy discomfort in a cavernous room off the main vestibule where the polished floors glistened, and the casement windows loomed up the walls. Against one wall, arrayed in regimental order and livery of starched ivory linen, were trestles crowded with food. Against another, balancing the Janus-faced preoccupations of youth - food and pulchritude - was a gaggle of young women herding together for sanctuary and locked in animated conversation to deflect the groping eyes of sweating tuxedos.

It was impossible to avoid noticing her. She had a doll-like beauty and fragility. Her hair, a poured black Kytherian honey, folded round her coffee cream face. She had raven eyes, coal targeted and intense, aglow above a small crisp line of mouth, budded and buttonholed. Her petite, subtle shaped body, like her breasts, suggested rather than declared a soft curve and roundness. She was obviously still in high school and her flawless appearance reflected facets of virginal reserve, triggering an enticing tension for the unattainable. Each glance, each greedy glimpse, required a sharp intake of dizzying breath.

I remember when we first spoke. We were in one of the side rooms with a number of others crowded about a baby grand piano vying with one another to produce variations on banal melodies. These efforts were rapidly exhausted by lack of talent and limited repertoire and people began to slip away. But the piano, an elegant hub to knit the drift and flow of people, had provided an excuse to absorb the rush of scent from the delicate press of bodies.

She was a school friend of one of the daughters being exhibited in the matrimonial stud ring. When I asked, she told me her name was Nia though she confessed, with a laugh, that her real name was Daphni, which in Greek has the sweet sound, "dthufni". In English it conjures crumbling matriarchs with names like Flora, Iris or Primrose, horticultural as dried flowers crushed in an old family Bible. In classical mythology, Daphni was the perennial virgin, a nymph renowned for her exquisite, liquid beauty. She was ardently pursued by Apollo, mentor of medicos and musicians, but at the moment of capture and copulation she pleaded with Earth to enclose her. Her hair became leaves, her skin tender bark, as she began her arboreal metamorphosis, becoming a Daphni, a Laurel tree, and preserving her virginity, her fine-grained sensibilities and her shy wooden manner. Apollo, caught between mourning and rekindled possession, laced the laurel leaves into a victorious crown of evergreen denial.

And after all, once the crowd drifted away from the piano did I not, the budding medico, slide onto the piano stool and with a dab of Hollywood behind each ear, play from my student repertoire Schumans' *Von fremden Landern und Menschen*, the slow lyrical romance drawn

from "Scenes from Childhood"? Enfolded by her role, she leaned on the lid, chin propped on her knuckles, arms tucked against her breasts, in a photic flare of unfledged rapture.

The name seemed entirely appropriate, but she was vehement in its rejection. "You didn't go to a country school and risk 'skip' nicknames like 'Daffy Duck'! Greek names are a pest. But I loved the name of my mother's sister in Greece, *thea* Ourania. So, I chose 'Nia' for myself. Its mine, my name."

She seemed so definite, harbouring a courage that attracted me. We talked, burbling at one another in breathless speech until her brother came looking for her. He abruptly demanded to know who I was and what I was doing talking to his sister. His words cuffed us with mistrust, making our innocence lurid and illicit. We shied momentarily then sought each other in the next room where, like the other disconnected couples, we danced without touching, our bodies moving with the wind sway of wheat, circling the anonymous axis between us. And when, streaming rivulets of exhaustion, we retreated to the sofa to catch our breath, the reprieve was only till another surge of words overtook our need for respite. I was smitten with elation, crammed to the seams with the emotion of every moment. Breathing became a wonderfully conscious effort, a squall of air gusting off the autumnal burden of leaves. I was reborn, naked to feeling and colour and yearning to endure in incandescent sensibility.

We parted that night breathlessly bolstered by rapidly concocted arrangements to meet at another party arranged for the following weekend. But as the week wore on, I drifted from the inclination and didn't go as arranged though it still puzzles me why. My cousins, my godparents' children, were coming to visit but I could have altered that. I wasn't conscious of fear or apprehension. I simply stood her up and didn't see her again for some nine months. When we did meet again it was at the same house at another party for the same eligible daughters and it was as though we hadn't missed an intervening beat. Intoxicated by proximity, our skin tingled, and words teased the air between us. And though we danced under the censorious gaze of her brother, we merged in a tangle of limbed longing, urged by the tectonic thud of rock music, the dysphonic growling of *The Animals* lurking from speakers in the corner.

Our relationship began in unfeigned earnestness that evening. The difficulty, however, was to contrive encounters. Unchaperoned meetings were impossible, so we conspired to attend Greek classes and Church together, conducting ourselves with the constrained intensity of pure passion, clutching at pieces of one another's presence. The incestuous nature of an ethnic community though, often presents opportunities for contact. There is always someone who is related or connected in some way and our continued meeting was facilitated by a mutual acquaintance with sufficient excuse to visit her at her home.

A further fortuity was presented by the genuine difficulty Nia was having in biology. Our ignited affection had commenced several months before the matriculation exams and I was seriously anxious that she succeed. I offered to coach her and was allowed to come to the house for this purpose. Her father insisted that we sit at opposite ends of a long dining table stretching to the horizon of the room, which meant conversation had to be conducted by semaphore over an epergne clustered with fruit. Eventually her mother intervened and allowed us to sit opposite one another though her frequent flying visits ensured proper

supervision. I took my teaching duties seriously though. It would not have occurred to me to violate the conditions of our meeting to conduct some carnal subterfuge even if the opportunity afforded itself.

These were my first visits to her home which was in a favoured suburb that could afford the luxury of vegetation. It was set among avenues of regimented foliage, from a time when taste meant stately English and where a second story was a mandatory indication of class and status. It was an unusual house and added a tinselled touch to our infatuation. It had been built in the nineteen thirties by a theatrical celebrity of the time who was enamoured with the sparkle and animation of celluloid and determined to stamp Hollywood style and affluence on her creation.

It had the turn and sweep of Art Deco, an era captivated by line and the austerity of the curve, a mannered elegance suggesting diaphanous silks and poised wintry femininity. An epoch where genteel idleness signified sophistication and chic was the preferred adjective. It was a home designed for elegant entertaining and fostering impressions. From the entry vestibule a staircase of sanitary marble ascended to a second floor, shifting the gaze to take in the crystal splash of a suspended tear drop chandelier.

French doors leading off the foyer ushered into a formal lounge area furnished with an astringency denoting detached refinement; several armchairs and a lounge, atolls on an ocean of alabaster carpet. More French doors, with bevelled panes that cast faint crystal rainbows, opened onto a wide paved porch curbed with trimmed hedges and sculptured topiary. And yet another doublet of glass doors, the wood trim painted a medicinal white, led from the lounge to a dining area and the table that witnessed the coaching. Peeled open, the entirety revealed a spacious entertaining area of subdued opulence and studied restraint. The house invoked in me a quiet delight. The amount of renovation conducted had been negligible and the character of the era had been paralysed in time which lent a peculiar pictorial warp to a simple stroll about the place. This was particularly true of the upstairs bathroom, revealed to me much later when safely embalmed in marriage.

The bathroom exuded the fervour of flesh, with ardent pink tiles on the floor and walls complete with goose bumps of water beads. Along the lip were featured tiles of woven ruby roses in contrasting crimson and shades of vermilion. Entering the bath involved stepping through a roseate arch and wallowing beneath a swirling mosaic captured on the ceiling in permutations of pink. It was all salmon and sherbet reflected in scallop shell shaped mirrors, glazed waves of glass, along the wall.

Memory comes complete with harmony and dissonance, and the house for me, resonates with preludes, movements and codas, the adagio of debuts and departures. In the clamour of incident within the mind though, are some moments at the margin, without fanfare, which remain seminal.

I decided, after we had been together for nearly twelve months, to approach her father and formalise the engagement, though I discussed it briefly with her mother some months before in order to ease the way. It was the June wintering of the soil, yet her father was out in the garden at the back of the house in the sparse heat nurturing the last of the cauliflowers and

cabbages and preparing the spring. I walked through the back door pausing at Nia's caged pink and grey galah, before moving out from the shadow and into the pool of winter watery light.

The parrot linked us in a way. From childhood, Nia had told me, she had treated the galah, Yeorgos, as a kind of confidant. And as a child, particularly at times when I sensed an unaccountable tension, I remember seeing my *nona* retreat to the back verandah to coo and croon to her parrot. I had seen flocks of galahs, when I was young, on dusty country roads rising from the verge, plumped up with grain spilled by the granary trucks, so it seemed faintly absurd to see these distinctively Australian birds bearing Greek names and speaking Greek phrases. This comic incongruity was lost on the birds of course, who were only echoes of their master's voice.

I rummaged around these thoughts, standing beside the galah's cage, dabbling my finger through the bars and tempting mutilation, while I mustered courage to approach her father. He had an unusual appearance. His almond eyes and level features lent a vague oriental aspect to his face. Not stereotyped Greek features at all, but vestiges of some obscure Mongol legacy. He was short and lean, proud, with a stern gentleness to him. He hunched on the edge of the path, bidding me likewise to crouch opposite him, inviting me into the casual congress of men.

"I would like your permission to marry Nia," I said, moving directly to the point to avoid being overwhelmed by encroaching agitation. "You probably know we want to marry. I've already discussed it with Nia's mother. But we don't want to get married right away. Not till I've graduated. But we would like to become engaged now."

He drew me in with his gentle grey eyes and spoke slowly. "I wasn't aware, no. My wife didn't mention it, but you seem suitable anyway. You'll look after her well, I know. You're serious. Sensible. I like that. I think you will be successful. A good doctor. And when you come to marry, I will see how I can help you get started."

The detail of dowry hadn't particularly occupied my thoughts. In such a modern marriage I expected no formal dowry - that was peasant and undignified - though his vague promise served to magnify a sense of assent and sanction. I was puzzled that Nia's mother had not mentioned our intention but that was swept aside by the blush of her father's acceptance and the overwhelming power of his approval. To disappoint or disillusion him was now utterly unthinkable. He fixed me in a calm resolution and certainty like the cool light dusting my skin with winter warmth. In that backyard mixture of turned soil, damp grass, winter sun and chalky concrete - complete with a trail of black ants - I felt suddenly entirely content. A marathon of time from the memory of iced light and damp earth of my father's winter grave.

We delayed the announcement, however, till late August, because of the consternation the engagement created in my family. My brother Stephanos was irked by the prospect. As eldest brother it was his traditional right to marry first. Further, since we did not intend marrying till the following year, he could see himself prevented from marrying for possibly a further eighteen months because, again by tradition, only one member of the family could marry in any one year. He was, at the time, conducting a relationship leading nowhere with the

youngest daughter of the local priest. My mother approved the match which had social advantages but Stephanos was, as usual, not all that impressed. Even the young woman was not particularly enthused, blowing hot and cold by degrees. I cannot remember how it all happened but sometime in August, Stephanos suddenly turned up with an appropriate young woman from a suitable family, and by December they were married. It was absolutely neat. He had realised his right as first born to be first married and had managed to conclude matters before the year was out so as to present no obstacle to my marriage to Nia in the following year.

But it never quite seemed to quite gel with his outspoken repudiation of traditional mores. It was he who had frequently disparaged the obsessional matchmaking, contrived arrangements and deals of convenience yet in juggling the possibilities, he had reverted to the known patterns using just sufficient personal input to claim ownership. If it was the Jesuit claim that a child at seven was theirs for life, what chance had we, steeped in such aromatic values. Our tribal customs were elastic though, allowing the innocent to stray into a deluded belief in their own individuality before springing back into the bosom of known values when certainty and self-confidence evaporated.

In the year following Nia's matriculation, her father relented slightly and allowed our occasional attendance at the cinema, though under strict curfew and only in the company of others. After our formal engagement however, I was allowed to take her out alone, even, strangely enough in her fathers' car which he occasionally lent us on such occasions. We would occasionally park, like other couples, at the edge of a park or near a beach and in those moments, she would ignite me with affection and absorb me in caress. She was comfortable, compliant, fitting easily into me like a piece of a puzzle. Yet there was a hunger too in the way she entered my skin, a greed in the way she could form me with her lips into a morsel to consume, though I wanted to journey like Jonah into the foaming belly of her devouring. It felt satisfying to be loved so intensely, to be the utter centre of a person, but disquieting too to feel myself slipping and fading.

When I pressed against her affection, I could feel the vague curve of her breasts. I even permitted myself occasionally to ease my hand under her blouse along the grained lace of her bra, tracing the satin boundary of her small breasts and allowing the lip of my finger to trail about the hard kernel of her nipple, penile and erect. My pulse soared and the rush of blood swelled me to bursting, but in these moments of intensity I found myself chill and retreat. I never allowed our loving to go further and felt profoundly responsible for protecting her innocence. Propriety hung between us like a warning, constraining behaviour. More often than not when we parked, we talked ourselves into married tones of stern concern about career and future. It was as though we were smothering our infatuation with familiarity.

When I turn the eye inward now on the rapture of that early infatuation, I see nothing but my own pale reflection, the mirrored image that blends the you and me. The miracle of radiant love fades to the familiar. The ordinary. And I feel numbed by the ordinary, robbed of the avarice of actuality. When I piss, I want to feel the fluid ebb in a wave of relief and when I touch, I want to feel the pores grate like emery paper! I want to bite into the cockles of the heart and feel the mussels alive! alive oh!

Even so I cannot escape the fact, that for those first moments of infatuation the taste was exceptional and the loss of it makes me mourn. Once after an evening out when we had grappled and petted to exhaustion I dreamed vividly. I have always had dreams, Joseph dreams, many coloured dreams, with plagues of toads and Sphinx impenetrability. I suppose it may have been prompted by having read the expression "mackerel sky" earlier that day in a book. Curiosity made me look it up. Like the stripes on an ocean mackerel, it said, referring to a striated cloud pattern, thin bars of cloud jailing the sky. And that night after our riot of passion I dreamed of clouds, not striated clouds but robust amoeboid clouds, swirling, bloating and condensing, then pausing momentarily before twisting into a raging hunger, encircling and devouring and in turn being consumed. I awoke to an emptiness, a hollow yearning and hunger. It was mine, my familiar, hunting the greed that haunted and hunted me.

I was simultaneously aroused and repelled by Nia's enveloping passion. It was a confusion taunted by my own unresolved ambivalence and before I could possibly consider marriage, I felt compelled to confess my quandary. I gathered up my courage one evening on an excursion to the cinema before our engagement. We had gone by public transport, seated at the back of a tram rattling the macadam and slicing the traffic into opposing streams. I professed my deep attraction to her and my wish to marry, reciting a rote list of reasons and drifting into trivia to avoid the inevitability of my confession, which, when it came, was diffuse and unclear. It seemed suddenly incongruous in such a cauldron of affection to confess a confused attraction to young men as well as women; everything beckoned. It was a ridiculous confusion, though within the paroxysm of puberty, and in retrospect, not outside the realms of normal adolescent possibility. But it was mine to solve not hers to share however within my pious realm of elevated honour there was this absurd need to confess as though it purified the impulse. She was obviously nonplussed and darkly confused. She gently threaded her fingers through mine and averting her gaze softly murmured, "I have to think about it. To be certain. I need to be sure. If we marry."

I tried to offer assurance, to gather the threads of affection lying unravelled on the sudden silence. I would seek help. I would try to erase any obstacles to our union. The confession came as a moult of wintered weight and responsibility. I knew she would not reject me. I had snared her with knowledge and with it, shed the onus and responsibility for whatever might happen.

14. Wedding

On the day of my wedding I struggled into consciousness, the summer heat steaming me from stupor as the first light of morning detoured the dawn and hurled itself into the day. It flared over the bed covers and squinted into my eyes, urging the day on me.

But it was the dreaming that crushed my sleep as much as the stifling heat. Ridiculous dreaming. I'm a child again though within an adult consciousness and form even. I am incensed that my mother is shrieking and threatening to burn me on the buttocks with lighted matches for having soiled my pants once again. I am shocked and shamed by the realisation I am squatting without any pants on. Squatting and scribbling it all down for the record on a pad teetering on the peaks of my knees with my father peripheral and unseen, threatening to burn me with a cigarette if I continue to write with my left rather than my right hand. Flakes

of childhood memory fused for the occasion. But why these dreams of punishment on my wedding day?

There was barely pause for thought. There was a bustle of dawn light and morning birds, the gargle and coo of pigeons on the roof and the mutter of city traffic in the distance even at this hour. Already I could hear my mother rattling about the house stirring the sleep from the dust and issuing instructions to the furnishings. I ventured out to perform my morning rituals, to duel into the water closet and skirmish with the faucets against the day. Rituals performed before braving my mother at the breakfast table, genuflecting over my cereal before her, spooning in flakes of golden wafer as she fed me the catechism for the day, defining directions and preparations for the wedding - another Cecil B. de Mum production.

She had vied with Nia's father over details of the occasion and pitted their respective island customs against one another. Till then I had lived with the view that my family habits were universally Greek. Now I was set before a raft of conflicting procedural details sourced in insular peculiarity. They had argued for instance about the bridal veil, which according to custom from our island, had to be supplied by the best man, the *koubaros*. In this Nia's father eventually, if reluctantly, relented. What they all agreed though, was that this was to be a big wedding. Nia's father wanted to invite all his relatives as well as people who had helped him in the past and my mother had a swag of relatives and others to impress. The numbers blew out of proportion till, prompted by the expense, some form of sanity prevailed. Nevertheless, eventually over two hundred and fifty were invited, only about twenty-five of whom were our personal friends.

Each element was monumental, each detail elaborate. Nia had wanted to make her own trousseau and the bridesmaid's frocks. It intrigued me to watch her sew, engrossed in minute stitches instructed by her hands and observed critically by a concentrated gaze contained in reading glasses with severe frames. She had a deft skill and confidence that kept me at a respectful distance and bestowed a maturation beyond her elfin years. Her father, however, insisted they should be made for her. We were bystanders at our own wedding, required only to follow the instructions issued by a pride of relatives.

My aunt Kaliopi arrived during breakfast and my mother's litany of instruction. She detested the heat and had come over early to avoid it. Nevertheless, she rested her round form against the door frame, like a soccer ball against a goal post, her head tilted back to air the goose bumps of beaded perspiration. "*Houhlaaaaaaxa!* - simmerrrr!" she drawled, the ponderous dialect moving like the enervating heat. It was her summer refrain. But she had come over to help my mother organise our side of the family. Weddings were a serious business, an attitude she stamped on her own family. When her son Strati had wanted to marry a girl, whose mother was a nurse, *thea* Kaliopi had switched into predatory mode. After all nurses were women of indifferent morals given that they handled the torsos of men who belonged to other women. Sluts. And her daughter would be little better. Strati was besotted and the only explanation must be bewitchment, a drip of menstrual blood that the girl or her mother had concealed in his drink, or so aunt Kaliopi proclaimed to anyone who would listen. Strati wisely surrendered the relationship.

Marriage required the intended to weave through a slalom of relatives to appropriate approval. Before our engagement I had brought Nia round to meet my mother. She met us at the front door and her eyes immediately seized and consumed Nia with a glance. She had passed the taste test. She was a nice girl. Very beautiful. By which she meant socially acceptable and malleable too. When I told Stephanos I intended to marry Nia he immediately insisted he appraise and approve her too. The opportunity arose at an island association ball to which we had all been invited. He didn't actually attempt to engage her in any way. He just studied her from across the floor but that was sufficient to offer approval. She looked alright, and he knew enough about her family. When I reflect now, I am taken aback to realise that if he hadn't approved, I would have reconsidered the marriage.

The morning wandered a household teeming with chattering. Instructions looped over conversation like grenades, scattering people in frantic pursuit of ingredients to garnish the day. It came as a relief to leave for the church after an eternity dressing and being tugged at like a store dummy. I stowed away in one of the armada of hire cars piloted by chauffeurs bored torpid by the simmering hysteria. At the church I waited at the door with my cousin who was my *koubaros*. A foray of guests and relatives crammed the Greek cathedral, an Anglican cast off still harbouring the dour ghost of Cranmer. I wasn't nervous. I was more concerned about having it over and finished, than with fright and trepidation. I stood solemnly on the threshold with the flowers I was to hand to Nia as she entered the Church. A spray of orchids pouring from my hands, a hummingbird tongue of red spilling from the throat of each ivory bloom. She stepped from the car shielded in white filigreed lace and flecked sequined light. Veiled from view, she was escorted by her father up the steps to the red carpeted aisle hewed through the pews to the altar where the priest chanted the liturgy in an acrid haze of incense and Attic Koine.

We stood detached and together, sentinels to ourselves before the altar, focused in crowded isolation. The drone of liturgy formed round our silence and the rituals shackled the void.

Three times the rings were crossed over and placed on our hands.

Three times the *Stephana*. Wedding crowns, wax *coronals*, garlands and wreathes to our life, were placed on our heads, exchanged and changed again. "*Stefete o doulos tou Theou....The worker of God is crowned to.....*"

Three times we trailed the priest and the shadow of his censer about the altar in "Isaiah's dance", the wedding dance.

But no Greek ceremony is complete without the rituals of recognition and acknowledgment. The bridal party clustered near the altar as the stream of guests offered parents, *koubaros*, attendants and bride and groom, the appropriate salutation.... "*Na sas zisoun....Panda axios....Sta dikasas*".... After listening to..."*Na zisite eftihismene...may you live happily*"... two hundred and fifty times, I needed to escape. I grabbed Nia's hand and hauled her from the church. But we were freed only seconds before we were captured for the official photographs, formal framed evidence for relatives in Greece and interstate. It was then to the reception for starched speeches, bland food and an obligatory good time.

The reception itself was torment. I endured being drawn into a dribbling huddle by aged, inebriated male relatives eager to congratulate me with salacious innuendo and nudging smirks. My brand-new brother-in-law was convinced there was deception by the management and grumbled about the cost of the liquor. And my father-in-law became utterly depressed because he feared the reception would not be seen by everyone as sufficiently impressive. We had to lead in endless rounds of Greek dancing as well, so by the time we were eventually able to leave I was thoroughly exhausted. I accompanied Nia to the private suite where she was to change into her going away outfit. It is traditional for the groom to assist in removing the bridal gown and though the company of bridesmaids erased the erotic, nevertheless drawing the fastener down her back to reveal milky satin tingled my fingertips.

We squeezed through the crush and embrace of relatives to escape on our honeymoon. I had been emphatic that no charivari of tin cans tied to the bumper accompany our departure; nor that any scrawled, puerile graffiti on the car announce our union. So, we managed a dignified exit and sighed our way from the curb into the evening together. We had her father's car and two weeks alone in a seaside resort where the pygmy breakers slumped on the shore exhausted by the heat and the effort of having travelled miles of ocean.

We stayed that first evening though, in the penthouse suite of a city hotel. It exuded a discerning, muffled elegance where even the elevators murmured between floors and carpets tip toed down the corridor. The bridal suite craned over splinters of city light and Lego land tall buildings moth eaten by glow-worms of office lights. We sat on the balcony sipping the soured effervescence of complimentary champagne, saying very little, absorbing the night height and distance, feeling below city lights our aging together, familiar and comfortable. I was exhausted by the chaos of the day so the decision to retire to bed seemed natural enough, not obvious or hurried, no words crackling with the static of anticipation. We changed in the bathroom separately, silent and outwardly unselfconscious, absorbed in our own preparations. I wore my sensible boxer type pyjamas and waited in bed for her to appear. I could begin to feel an insistent pulse pummelling my scalp as she emerged demure in a white diaphanous nightie of laced temptation over a shimmer of pink satin.

Her body coyly curled under the covers and her face turned to me in the subdued glow of bedside lamps, their shell gaze averted to the wall. I folded myself into her, tangling our limbs. I was breathless, without boundaries, bewildered and ungoverned, astonished and entirely exhilarated. I kissed her neat mouth and fine glazed chin, racing my pulse to her throat and breasts, small and tidy, her pecan nipples erect and tasting sun dried. I brushed my lips over the pilose down of her belly and nuzzled the faint scent of her pubes.

The rushing confusion and her eagerness to please only confused me further, my penis baffled as to whether to stand or sit for the occasion. With flaccid indecision I squeezed between her thighs, burrowed into her vagina and promptly ejaculated, though the faint reddening on the sheets indicated to my relief that the marriage was officially consummated. This less than splendid beginning was hardly unique in marital annals but what followed were two weeks of unaffected pleasure together with humour to uncrease the folds of experience. We made love with unbridled frequency, displacing the necessity for food or air. I erased doubt with discovery, revelling in delicious repetition as she writhed about my Laocoon fears with urgent warmth and tenderness.

But there is always reunion with the mundane. Returning from our honeymoon, we made our way through a stalled shoal of vehicles trafficking in wares and work. Back among the motorised caskets sealed from the flatulent pall. Back to our new apartment, tidying our lives within its four walls, ordering our thoughts to its boundaries.

The apartment was an unanticipated addition to our marriage. Nia's father had taken my arm one day before the wedding and voiced in a conspiratorial whisper, "I want to show you something". We drove to an apartment block near the hospital and barely two blocks from my mother's home. It was a modern mid 60s shoe box in featureless red brick. I followed him as he climbed the stairs to the second floor, turned the key and ushered me in. It was a small apartment with two bedrooms, a lounge and dining area, but it looked out on a park across the road. The park was a small mottled patch of trees with a brick-brown seam, pebble worn by children, meandering round swings and past a slippery-dip. There was a merry-go-round too, looking like a straw rowing boater twirled on a finger. Later I would often watch the children grip the rail and drag the lumbering box round its central spindle. They would leap on the running board and crouch against the vertigo of scenery swirling off into sky.

"You'll have to furnish it of course," he said, as I turned, somewhat surprised, to face him. "It's yours. My present to you both," he said and smiled benignly. "Is it satisfactory? There are a few others we could look at, but I think this is the best."

The apartment was sensible solid brick and render that sucked up sound, but it was neat and cosy, modest and entirely appropriate. I stuttered my thanks as I realised that this was, in effect, the marriage dowry, though I had not expected such a generous introduction to the family. When I returned to tell Nia what had happened, my excitement was dampened by her muted response. "I would have liked to have had some say in it too," she said, "but if you like it, that's fine."

It was the mix of resentment and compliance that ruffled my composure and left me uneasy, as though I had done wrong. It was the same with all her family, the way significance was suffocated by bland response. I had always been inquisitive about my family history and would ask Nia about hers, but she was vague and diffident. I began to ask her mother and father and was given the same evasive response. I could not understand the reticence and frequently persisted, which, in her mother in particular, would trigger a thrumming agitation. Each particle of information had to be removed surgically. Nothing unpleasant was ever allowed to enter the household. Nothing that would disturb the reign of compulsory equanimity and emotional neutrality.

I had heard enough to know the War had been hard on the Greek civilian population caught in the crossfire of successive invasions, but Nia's mother spoke of it with no hint of reaction. When she could be coerced into talking, she would drop luring slithers of information like small tastes, but they never contained a morsel of emotion. Her close Jewish friends had been picked up by the Germans and were never seen again, but this aroused no particular response. Nor was there any comment about the fact that her family was forced to forage the wasteland areas for dandelions and wild herbage to avert starvation. There was little said about the danger or the relentless bombing except to mention that she had become so used

to it that she had calmly continued with a school exam paper during a bombing raid. There was never a hint of despair. Just curious little tales of scouring refuse heaps and the wharves of Piraeus looking for Hessian bags and old sweaters to unravel and knit into coarse clothes. She viewed everything with a measured neutrality though there always seemed a touch of muted resentment that never got above a slumber. Events were absorbed into events and rarely reared into significance. It took time to piece together even the barest outline of her life.

Nia's mother grew up in poverty in the port of Piraeus. Her mother died when she was thirteen and it was she who cared for the family even after her father's new companion entered the household some three years later. Her father was an alcoholic who brooded on his slice of life and on his treatment by his family. When he left the family's island home for the mainland to work, his kin contrived to fleece him of his patrimony. They froze him out. Disowned him. Left him to scrounge the ports for a living. He lived stalked by disappointment, one step ahead of feeling cheated. Always fending off regret, always looking for the letdown, the catch to any beneficence.

The war of course, screwed down their poverty and even today Nia's mother hoards the unnecessary, that peculiar habit of people who have experienced deprivation. With her it is Gladwrap. She will save the used film carefully, wiping the thin plastic and folding it away neatly for later re-use and re-use. Her diffidence and restraint were legacies of enduring, a form of living where emotions shrivel to the focus of the moment. She would comment that emotionality was a waste of energy, better applied to survival. Expending emotion was a luxury. It wasn't even re-useable.

She preferred to endure. It helped batten down the feelings. Occasionally, examples of that capacity to endure would escape into conversation. Just after the war, for instance, her brother contracted tetanus, classic "lock jaw", and for about a month the family lived through the eerie quiet of the grave. She sat beside his body, stiffened to attention in the darkened room, feeding him through a straw threaded between his clenched teeth. She bunched her feelings together in the shrouded room, muffled against light and sound, hermetically sealed against movement or emotion to ward off a sudden nervous spasm, a choking gargle that could plunge him into asphyxiation and death. But his diaphragm remained unaffected and he slowly recovered as his body relaxed into calm.

She was about nineteen at the time and shortly after she left the family to work in her uncle's shop in Athens. There was no wage. Just a guarantee of food, a place to sleep, occasional pocket money and, of course one less mouth to feed at home. It was her uncle who introduced her to Nia's father. It was 1948 and the height of the Greek Civil War. Nia's father had returned to visit his aging and demented mother and to court a bride, two birds to be demolished with the one stone, but he had little time for either. Greek men were being conscripted for military service and to remain too long risked the draft. He was introduced to Nia's mother at a little gathering of family. She was a strikingly attractive woman with a regal reserve that was really an extreme reticence. He was immediately persuaded by what he saw and when the opportunity arose that evening, where they could talk with some privacy, he asked if she would marry him. He was some twenty years older than her and relatively well off. She had nothing. No remote possibility of a dowry. Her only possession was her extreme

good looks and hips that made the thin cotton dresses she wore sea-sway when she walked. She had a stoic maturity and her coal dark eyes radiated intelligence. What more was required?

He set conditions on the match, though. He expected her to look after him and perform her wifely duties. In return he would always treat her with respect and ensure her financial security. He also insisted that she respect his brothers who were his business partners. She must never argue with them or be the cause of any discord in his family. She saw his attitude as direct and honest, and probably as her best opportunity to escape the cycle of poverty. They were married within two weeks and spent their honeymoon in Egypt before sailing for Australia.

!5. The Echo of her own voice

NIA

I remember his insisting very especially.....upon the idea that the principal source of error in all human investigations, lay in the liability of understanding to under-rate or to under-value the importance of an object, through mere mis-admeasurement of its propinquity.

- "The Sphinx" Edgar Allen Poe

The phone rang, a chirr of cicada chirrups that halted her thoughts. With a deft thrust of her index finger, Nia slipped her reading glasses from the bridge of her nose to her forehead and reached for the handpiece, swivelling her body to confront the sound.

She stared through the segmented panes and odd prisms of lead lighting. From the window she could eye the sprawl of the town below her, the rows of buildings clustered in anticipation of order and purpose, constrained, like the panes of glass by the leaden strips of asphalt. Her gaze shifted over the occasional fragment of frosted glass distorting the scene like tears over the town, a town shaped by the moods of weather, the trickle of rain or cotton wool fog. Or the afternoon puddle of peach light on the river reflected in the Victorian red brick post office with its clock tower that chimed the order of hours about the town.

She would always be in sight of the town but never a part of it. Just as she would never be a part of her own children. She was merely the instrument of their making, sprung from her womb onto an anxious world for some other purpose than ties of origin. Their father had been the weathervane of their lives turning with whatever gust of interest swung their attention. For all the declarations of modern femininity they were still women, she reflected with some bitterness, destined for the expectations of others. This was no conspiracy of gender. Even her brazenly feminine daughters, who insisted on their rights, held equally adamant attitudes about how she should be, behave and respond. Resist as you might, serve it you will, she mused.

She had tried to enter the confidence of modern feminine intention. Even her children had remonstrated with her to take charge of her life when Stavros left. "If you don't like your life, change it!" she was told by a petulant daughter, filled with youthful omnipotence and irritated by Nia's caution. The girls had chosen to live with their father, to revel in his generosity and freedom to come and go as they pleased, so she resolved to take her life and loneliness elsewhere, interstate if necessary, and begin again. They were shocked and annoyed by such a thoughtless display of independence, but she knew if she stayed, she

would be used and if she left, abused. It made no difference, so she decided to be no longer their convenience. Still for all that she continued to encourage their presence, silent, without commentary and it was always the seaside that offered to best opportunity for connection.

Waves of curling sea foam slumped on the shore then like young girls, tucked up their skirts and hems and tip-toed from the beach. From the balcony, Nia's gaze drifted over the shoreline, remembering how she would watch her young children, insect shadows in the glare - Christina ripening in the sun, soothing the contour of sand, and the other children, splashing the shallows, rousing the indifferent water with faint chirps of laughter. She would watch Andonia with her pencil stub body and olive skin, her black eyes darting like minnows and her smile that shattered her face in a craze of laughter. And Anastasia, thin stemmed and mindful of the movement of air about her like the rustle of dry grass. Her startled eyes filled her face and swallowed the incoming light. The same startled look Nia had often seen in Stavros.

So much lost and mourned, with only memories to touch. The years had subsided into ache but in the first months of desolation after Stavros left, Nia had often taken the children on weekends to the beach house and the sea. They would scatter among their own thoughts, leaving her the quiet to feel beyond the rind of skin, to befriend her solitude along the shoreline, tracing steps among the rocks huddled like chunks of night in the bleached sea-light.

In her ruminations she had come to realise, how, over the years of her marriage she had become used to living drowsed of response, forgetting to live in events. She tried, in those months after separation, to recover moments of her marriage from the forgetting. The force and coincidence of events puzzled her. The way his mother's death had unleashed Stavros's confessions, venting the disgust he stowed in concealed moments. And the way her father's death seemed to sever Stavros from obligation to her. Death, it seemed, had cleared the obstacles to departure. Funerals punctuated the syntax of living, ordering gestures, thought and language to compliment the occasion.

The death of Stavros's mother was a blur in Nia's memory but what endured in her mind about her daily visits to the hospital was his mother's eternal talk of her dead husband, speaking about him with maudlin affection, yearning for union with him in the grave. His mother had even insisted she be buried in her engagement dress, her sentimentality failing to take account of the spreading years. That memory remained, along with the promise to press a handkerchief and silver coin in the old lady's palm when she died. His mother's death had unshackled the darkness in Stavros. He had remained inaccessible for weeks, souring within nightmares torn from sleep yet in his work he drove himself even more relentlessly allowing it to invade what little there was left of their home life.

He bared himself to the immense emotional needs of his patients, making their telephone freely available, an umbilical thread that tied his patients to their home. He even brought home the troubled four-year-old son of a patient, without consulting Nia, and expected her to care for him. Nia had gradually come to see that his sweep of generosity often fell on others to fulfil, and if she demurred, he became pained by disappointment. She felt she had been cast as the family nay-sayer as though his pursuit of nurture and sainthood needed someone there to say no.

The turmoil of outward devotion to his work and private darkening became unendurable and Nia had begged him to confide in her. His chaos spilled over a succession of late nights with sleep crowded out by his talk of death. They would lie in bed shrouded in the mourning of night silence while he obsessively detailed the means, buckling under despair and sobbing into her body, exhausted. She lay powerless to intervene in the fragile cluster of hurt, beyond a resolve to love him more determinedly.

She had been perplexed by his profound depression. It made no sense, but slowly he buried the pieces before her. She had always known of his attraction to men, but she had felt that their relationship had eclipsed that need. Gradually he confessed the realm furtive deception. The rubble of words razed her marriage, leaving her in her desolation. She felt left holding little more than a handful of years, betrayed and besmirched.

The barren, disconnected emptiness would continue until he was driven once more to despair. Nia would again hazard late nights hunched over the unusual quiet of the kitchen table, hearing confessions of his self-loathing and disgust. Sobbing to shed the shame, the unbearable regret, he would plead to be forgiven the immense hurt he had caused. What, she thought, could she do but forgive? She had been trapped by his pain. His confessions made her an accomplice. It frustrated her to see how he seemed able to always twist events to advantage, to cozen and conceal, but she could never quite see how he did it. He would hammer against her confusion until she was exhausted by the attempt to decipher the riddle and found it safer to drift with the consequences. Even the recollection of their first meeting seemed mixed and marred.

16. Paragon Cafe

She was still in high school at the time her father decided to defect from country to city. She had basked in a childhood of becalmed days in provincial comfort, a muted ease that came from the certainty that nowhere else on earth mattered. Nia's brother, Andreas, earned a university scholarship and there was an implicit obligation on the family to cluster about his achievement. And though it was remote from anyone's intention, the change aired Nia's life and quickly quelled the mourning of loss and alteration. She was allowed to accompany her brother to functions organised by the Greek students' association at the university. With Andreas installed as Doberman protector of her innocence, it was a restricted social exposure, but she was fortunate to be allowed out at all.

That was how she first met Stavros and though she couldn't remember much detail of their first evening together she could recall the feelings; the melting boundaries, the elation and limpet attraction. He was tall, nearly six feet, and to her, rock steady and unruffled. His square face had a soft sadness that pooled in the moist turquoise of his eyes. Such unusual eyes, a cerulean blue resting incongruously against his black hair and the cervine shadow of his skin. While he didn't actually stoop, his shoulders seemed to fold round him, inclining his body slightly and leaving the impression of infant awkward vulnerability.

He spoke with a soft cadence, a sway of words delivered with a quiet assurance harbouring a shy reserve. She was entranced by his voice. It rippled and shone only for her. Viewed from the timidity of sixteen his twenty years radiated sophistication - a medical student bound for

success and stability. She tripped headlong over the clichés of adolescent attraction. That evening she went home brimming with rapture and slept curled in foetal pleasure. They agreed to meet again the following weekend at a gathering of Greek students which made the following week an interminable agony of expectation. She reworked conversations and embroidered their affection. She struggled to recall details of his features, frustrated and teased by misted glimpses. All week she marked the days on the wall of her prison, anticipating release.

The day they were to meet again dawdled and dragged. She prepared herself from breakfast, calculating each step of preparation and dress towards the moment they would meet. But he never arrived at the party and she spent the evening slowly seeping into sadness, hoping at every new face. The sadness faded with memory over the months, flickered then waned till he was nearly forgotten. Then he turned up again, quite unexpectedly at another party. Just walked up and said, "Remember me?". Caught up in the shudder of suppressed feeling, the excitement of meeting again, she forgot to ask why he had failed to show.

She half expected him to disappear again, but he slipped in alongside a friend of the family and she was surprised to find herself beginning to tread the rituals towards marriage. It had an odd familiarity, a comfortable, tidy order, providing instant transition from childhood to maturity, permitting a self not defined by the expectations of others. She wanted to burst out! They would often park for a whisper of passion after their engagement and she would feel herself surge with his presence as she mingled herself with him. But they never did anything. Whenever she felt a riot of sensation overtaking her sensibilities, Stavros would always brake and assume a sober pose. He would talk about doing things properly and she would agree though part of her would have gladly roused her skirts and hoarded him into her without a moment's hesitation.

The sudden resurrection of emotion made Nia shift uncomfortably. She straightened and stepped back from the balcony railing, turned and walked over slowly to a round redwood table with chairs arrayed around. She fingered the catch on the limp sun umbrella and opened it to shade her from the glare then sat within the circle of umbral protection. The wave of longing remembered in her body ached for a time before innocence. For Sundays, in a country town where the day and the dog on the pub porch dozed, then uncurled and stretched in preparation for further atrophy. She saw herself leaning forward, chin cupped in fingers cradling her cheeks, elbows anchored to the counter of the cafe. Her thoughts emptied through her anthracite eyes, drifting with the day into the main street, a vast tract of pavement that stretched to a heat shimmering horizon of shops on the other side. Another Sunday alongside her father in the Paragon cafe, the only milkbar, cafe and diner in the town. The Paragon Cafe, elbowing the Patty Pan Cake Shop on one side and Saunder's Shoes on the other, just up from Green's Hardware and across from the pub garrisoned on the corner.

Paragon Cafe always seemed so impressive to her as a child once she learned its meaning. It was not possible to have a Paragon Hardware. Hardware stores traded in family names, but cafes were for swapping hopes, prattle and stately dreams in country towns where the lolly paper days scuttle along the gutters in gusts of sultry heat.

All the shops in the town were relics of the 1920s and 30s, when country towns were the commercial hives of pastoral activity, a time when visions were built with confidence and brash optimism. Comatosed over the years by an excess of sunshine and boredom, the town boasted little then but a surfeit of the ordinary. And despite pretentious titles, one cafe was much like any other, something that shocked Nia as she grew older and discovered other country towns with cafes exactly like their own. And often owned by Greeks as an ethnic commercial fortress. She, however, had been convinced theirs was special in the universe, unique, a Paragon, not something as common as meat pies and a diet of chips and sauce. She could never become accustomed to the misplaced hyperbole of Australia, a country it seemed, not blooded by Gallipoli, but by Fountain Brand Rich Red Tomato Sauce.

The cafe had a long series of high-backed cubicles, discreet cafe carrels where women would meet and dissect the entrails of gossip over buckets of tea. And when spring heralded the school yard rutting season, adolescent loves were consummated over milkshakes concocted from chromed mechanical whisks that flailed milk to a rabid lather of malt and flavouring. The rippling chrome counter was cluttered with lolly jars and packets of sweets and Allsorts. Along the wall behind it were mirrored shelves with a display of Black Magic and Old Gold chocolates, bordered by neat rows of Capstan, Ardeth and Craven "A" Corked Tips.

The cafe defined her family in but not of the town. They were Greek, among the few Greeks in the area and they lived cloistered and contained within the monastery of race and family. Foreigners among foreigners and exiled Allsorts. The cafe was owned by her father and his brothers, but it was her father who bore the brunt of the enterprise so each weekend and school holidays she worked in the cafe, unpaid, serving and accommodating the needs of customers. Occasionally a knot of her school friends would drift past and pry at her shyly. There was rarely more than an uncomfortable "Hello" before they moved on. Even if they came into the cafe to buy sweets or a milkshake their conversation was awed and inhibited not the usual schoolyard clatter of laughter. The counter severed Nia from her friends. Duty and ethnic origin sealed the distinction.

She was marooned within duty, working alongside her father, though they shared little of themselves and worked in a private maze of their own thoughts. She knew almost nothing about her father and never attempted to test the pattern of living about her. Things shaped themselves to the place intended for them. Complete, satisfied. Her father was then in his late fifties, short, his hair receding with a shiver of grey at the temples. Most of her school friends had fathers younger and more robust than her own, fathers that tumbled the family into the car and descended on the lakes for weekends in tents, among picnic tables and striped deck chairs under a shower of Casuarinas.

But there was always the cafe seven days a week and it was rare for them to go away as a family. She remembered once going to the lakes with her father in the cauldron of summer and seeing him for the first time in short pants. His legs were such thin sticks, blanched like the celery he carefully grew in his garden shielded in red clay pipes. He shed his dignity as he strutted down the edge of the lake, the wash from speed boats rolling with mirth against the shore. She smiled and treasured his vulnerability to herself.

She knew so little about him because he would never say. Once an uncle told her how her father, before he married, would jump on the train Saturday night to rattle his way to the city dance halls. "Ah! And what a master of grace, your father was!" Whirling women round a dance hall scattered with stardust and waxed shavings, the flowing skirts of the women blossoming under the effortless ease of his waltz and pirouette. And so, he would dance till dawn, then hop on the morning milk train to be on time to open the cafe. She wished she had known him then. She would have thrilled to the bravura, entranced by his dash and flair.

There was so little she knew beyond her love for him. She would glimpse him in the office at the back of the cafe when his gaggle of Greek and Australian acquaintances came to yarn or play poker. She was abashed to hear the scraps of bawdy tales and her father's crudity like another language, undecipherable except for the unambiguous tone of the forbidden. The tone altered abruptly, however when the Belbin sisters came to shuffle the cards and play poker. They were aging spinsters with crisp manners and white gloves. They were both tall with sun dried features that disclosed nothing. They would often come into the cafe during the week to have tea after shopping, closet themselves in one of the cafe carrels and talk softly and earnestly in their Sunday morning chapel tones. Her father treated them with great reverence and respect and while it seemed odd that he would allow women, particularly dried English spinsters to play, this was serious poker involving sizeable wagers. Gender did not figure in the currency at stake.

Nia would study them when she brought tea and buttered toast during the game. There was little conversation and they held their cards fanned like a hymnal opened to a psalm of Kings or harmony of Hearts in praise of mammon. They always thanked her politely and returned immediately to the business at hand. They were serious and they were good which was what earned her father's respect.

For Nia, the cafe was an observation post on a world governed by the rhythm of ordinary people in for their brackish tea and fingers of raisin toast. For those with a craving for cholesterol, there were chips to dunk in eggs haemorrhaging on toast and bacon. Some of the local customers assumed that being foreign made them blind to boorish behaviour and deaf to hostility, but whatever the demands, her father told her to draw the curtain on feeling and never to show any hint of rudeness or exasperation. Once or twice local toughs, disgorged at closing time from the nearby pub, smirked beerily and refused to pay. "What ya gunna do 'bout it?" they would declare with defiance, then guffaw and giggle with their mates. They never acted alone. Her father was never provoked though. He could handle himself. In the years before he married, he had sweated in the Police Citizens Club each week, pounding the speed ball with pugnacious monotony. He was a well-regarded amateur Featherweight respected by the local police who detoured to the cafe on their rounds, for a free feed and a chat.

But he never called on their assistance or on his pugilist skills. "Vardtha," he would say quietly and the German Shepherd who made his home in an office at the rear of the shop would respond instantly to his command. The dog would sidle up and sit, alert, next to him. "Show them your teeth, Vardtha," he would murmur *sotto voce*, and the dog would peel back his gums, with quiet menace, to expose a neat array of needle-sharp fangs accompanied by a guttural growl.

17. Home and Country

The dog had been a wonderful childhood companion. Patient and protective, he would allow Nia to clamber on his back when she was little, clutch his mane and gallop into the fray of her imagination. Actually, he stubbornly refused to move when she clung like a papoose to his back though he secured his own reward for his patient suffering later by slurping her ice cream with his enormous paddle tongue. But apart from the dog, Nia's childhood had been centred at home, far from the life of the cafe.

It was a sturdy, sensible house built by humourless Caledonian settlers whose wealth was revealed in solidity; a sober wealth built upon the rock and not upon the sand. It had an open verandah at the front on stern stone foundations supporting trunks that branched into the eaves under the curved canopy of iron. French windows led from the verandah directly into the lounge room on one side of the central hallway and spine of the house. Across the hall from the lounge was the master bedroom, again with a pair of doors leading directly onto the verandah.

The house furnished moments of tender memory that nourished Nia's thoughts. She remembered fresh bread on the kitchen table wrapped by the baker in clean bleached towels kept especially by her mother to hold the bread fresh and warm. When the children arrived from school, they would ravage the bread, biting into a blend of crumbling crusts and suety dough spread with chunks of butter. It was almost inhaled, wolfed down in a tide of devouring. The crumbs were always carefully swept up after the orgy of consumption to avoid mother's wrath. That was important, like gathering all the toys together after playing in the parlour and stacking them neatly away in the cupboard. They never played in their rooms which were solely for sleeping. Their play and studies always took place in the family room and were never violated by individual aspiration or the crime of privacy.

Their behaviour was always proper, their manners perfect and their dress neat and tidy. Nia and her sister were never allowed to tempt shame by wearing trousers. Being girls, they lived under restraint. Her brother was allowed to have his Australian friends around to play cricket and football, but she and her sister were supposed to remain within the confines of the home. The tomboy in Nia was determined to join in and the frequent need for extra players for whatever game meant that her brother contrary to inclination and upbringing, had to allow her to participate.

The backyard where games were played was more of a paddock than a yard. It was studded with the staggered ranks and remnants of an old orchard - gnarled cherries, a few dishevelled apples and a mulberry tree. There were times she would hazard the black drift of molasses fruit that squeezed its way between the toes, to hide in the mulberry. She would sit in the crotch of a limb, suck fruit through liquorice stained lips and become the unseen seer peering through the jigsaw pattern of leaves at the world over the fences and far away.

They played cricket with a tennis ball which bounced erratically on a pitch subtly cratered to deflect the ball 90 degrees from the line of flight. The wicket was an up-turned garbage tin which bonged and tolled for thee when someone was bowled out, though that did little to minimise disputes. Games were always conducted in a state of siege and bickering.

Squabbling huddles formed and reformed over the nuances of no-balls, run-outs and leg-befores as well as, of course, whether over the fence was classed as out or six runs. And always the chorus of "It's not fair!" the anthem of all childhood games. She would sit out the disputes propped against a stump or trunk, picking the shafts of grass and sucking her thumb knuckle - she was forbidden to suck her thumb - or knitting chains of dandelions. And when the dandelions turned into gossamer balls of down, she would blow away time - "one o'clock, two o'clock ..."

When the arguing was over and play commenced in earnest, the boys would always listen out for father's car returning from the cafe for lunch with the family. There would be a flurry of anxiety and a howl of "Quick!" and Nia would drop out of the game and sit primly on the back step, watching the boys play. The world was undoubtedly male, and she was simply a cipher, a fact she learned very early on. She grew up in a world where even the women were misogynists.

She remembered as a child her brother being lifted onto a chair so the little princeling could stand tall and recite his cleverness and be proclaimed and prophesied in the midst of approving laughter as the first Greek prime minister of Australia. She would seethe. She became familiar with the surge of secret indignation. It was the same when their school reports arrived home. Her brother would receive rapturous praise but her father's comment to her was always, "You can do better, Nia". Her marks were never poor, but she never excelled and bruised where the praise should have been. The feeling of muted resentment seemed her personal possession till as she grew older, she glimpsed it in her siblings and was even startled by the flicker of it in her parents.

Only once could she remember the bristling resentment spilling into overt ferocity. She couldn't remember the reasons, just the inerasable image of herself with a hockey stick and massacre on her mind, attacking her brother who was defending himself with a tennis racket. There were times though she did not recall, when she left her brother's arms and even his face scratched and scrawled by her fingernails.

Ladylike demeanour usually prevailed, though. She was startlingly attractive, with rich dark skin and black hair that spilled round her face, an unusual beauty that arrested attention when she entered a room. But she sensed it as simply being "different". As a small child, she was patted on the head and admired like a porcelain doll till she came to shy from her appearance. "Just like your mother!" they would exclaim with delight, and she would creep coyly round her mother's hem and recede into the floral design of her dress. By the time she was fifteen, her looks seemed to her to be the puny sum of her worth for most and even then, her beauty was often viewed as flawed. Nia's godfather would laugh boisterously and called her "*Mavraki*" - little 'darkie'. But she could understand enough Greek to know black was not beautiful.

Her godfather, one of her father's companions, had missed out on the first born and was promised the second but he was disappointed, she found out much later, by the fact that she turned out female. On her Nameday he would turn up with her present along with another, sometimes larger, for her brother. Attractive or not, she was not male. She rarely scrutinised herself in a mirror or glanced furtively at the glazed warp of shop windows as she passed. She

knew it was a conceit to revel in her own likeness. Worse, being attractive drew attention which the family carefully avoided. She had been taught to be outstanding but not to stand out.

Their lives were dedicated to perfecting themselves and though a whisper of doubt soured the quest, there were moments when the irreconcilable tension of perfection and imperfection found stasis. When the decision was made to move to the city, Nia was enrolled in a convent school which took seriously the role of refining young women. Her art teacher, whose English eccentricity her students took for Bohemian disposition, would drag them each fortnight through the art gallery hoping to instil aesthetic sense by a combination of enthusiastic commentary and sensory osmosis. But all Nia remembered was the Japanese pottery, exquisite plates and cups, utilitarian yet innocent and unaffected, each imbued with a subtle individual flaw, spidery fissures or a single tear of glaze splashed on the surface, a harmony of accidents, a melancholy of fault and perfection.

In their perfected family roles however, there was always something wanting, a hollowed absence echoed in empty country mornings and days moving fitfully towards evening. Confined to the horizon of a back yard populated by a parrot, a leashed sheep and a brood of hens, tethered her universe to the narrows of her visual field and a few scraps of imagination.

The parrot was her companion. He was called Yeorgos and lived in a large wire cage with a frayed and whittled perch. He was a galah, pink and grey with a scimitar beak and screech that made the story book connection between pirates and parrots understandable. But if she was sad and needed to talk, he would cock his head to one side and tread gently to the edge of the bars and listen without a sound.

The Australian family next door had older boys, and parrots too, Major Mitchell parrots with silvery pink feathers and scarlet crests. They bred dogs as well, and when they were let out of their confined cages to romp, they would bark and throw themselves at the parrots' cage. The parrots understood the game and with crests flared one would shriek "G'arn, get out of it! G'arn, get out of it!" at the errant dogs, while the other screeched "Mum! Marm! Marm!" in imitation of the whining insistence and shrill shriek of children. On other occasions one of the boys would drag out a battered guitar and strum tunelessly in front of the cage. One of the birds would rock and throw himself enthusiastically from side to side on his perch to the rhythm of the dysphonic dirge and the boys would rock themselves with laughter at what they saw as the bird's stupidity.

There was always noise, the smell of dog shit and feathers and an air of impending anarchy next door, a wonderful chaos which she observed through a crack in the paling fence or from her perch in the mulberry tree. Needless to say, her family had little to do with their neighbours and were relieved when they eventually moved.

From that time cockatoos and galahs became a rich puzzle to her. Allies and companions in her sombre moments, they held too, the promise of wry rebellion, the tantalising edge of disorder. She retained a love and fascination for their distinctive character and quaint behaviour. She remembered with clarity, travelling south on holidays with the family just before they moved to the city. They stopped for a picnic in a city park and sat at a bench

spread with a bleached cloth and ordered bowls of food, while she secretly bathed in the adolescent light. It spilled through the coral trees bared out of leaves and circled the scarlet and clitoral tongues of bloom licking the light.

Dotted along the outstretched limbs were a colony of Sulphur Crested Cockatoos, bleached and pearly pure with a citrine wash seeping through their flight and tail feathers and a butter tuft of unkempt crest jutting from the nape. Like raucous sentries they shrieked and dragged their fanned crests over the brow of their scalps. Like splayed fingers looking for a nose as a pivot for a coarse gesture. The birds watched intently a tall thick set man with an unruly and greying beard ambling into their territory. He wore navy blue drill pants and shouldered a haversack complete with improvised perches wired into the frame and half a dozen cockatoos clutching precariously and occasionally fluttering for balance.

He carefully removed the pack as he was joined by the throng of jabbering, screeching birds swooping down from their refuge. He took bags of bread and seed from his pack and scattered them on the ground before the feathered heads, jack hammer jabbing, gorging and filling. At the end of the ritual meal he cooed to his retinue who had joined the mob to feed on the ground or had perched in the trees nearby. She watched him as he collected his companions and set off through the park with birds hanging off his back and gobs of silver cockatoo shit down his shoulder and back.

A local told them the man was known to all for his eccentric habits, coming regularly to the park with his retinue to feed the wild cockatoos. Nia was overwhelmed by his care and from that moment she loved him sadly for his love of them.

18. Therapy

The sea line separated sky blue and sea blue, an horizon of barely discernible emotions and memories. Time past, bleeding into the present. She roused herself to the need for contrast, stood and moved from the balcony to the kitchen to stumble among plates and pans searching for cups and coffee, a tang of smell and warmth gathered in the hands.

Nia returned to her place in the circle of verandah furniture clutching her cup, the steam misting her sadness. She stared out across the ripples of thought, remembering the desolation of those first months of separation, the longing for renewal, to become some new-made Aphrodite rising naked from the sea, a coy wave of hair coiled about filamental fingers, spilling about her shy pudendum. But all she saw was the web of connection and function, things she was attached to, things she had to do. Nothing that was her. She had stood alone in the desolate continent of herself waiting for rescue or discovery. Waiting. She had to stop waiting.

Yet to begin the tentative steps of her own life, she had to untangle the pictures of the mind and the imprisoned certainties. But separating her love from Stavros was difficult. He had been such an enigmatic person - generous, kind, vulnerable and sensitive - yet in the pattern of events Nia began to see she had always emerged short changed while his needs had been invariably satisfied. When the children were born Stavros would frequently wake at night to attend their needs before she roused herself, and family and friends would comment on how lucky she was to have such a considerate husband. It made her wither with inadequacy. She

could not compete with his generosity and yet when the real drudgery of caring for the children began, he was rarely about. He only stayed for the main performance, she suspected. And the applause.

It had never been any different, even from the beginning among the pained events before the birth of their first child, children were for her a source of loss, taken from her before her love could intercede. Nia had been having dinner with Athena and Stavro's mother when she felt suddenly uncomfortable, assailed by increasingly frequent cramps, but she had said nothing. She drew back her chair, excused herself and retreated to the bathroom. The heavy knot she felt in her lower abdomen warned her she was bleeding heavily. She lifted her skirt and examined the florid stain on her underwear and smear of blood on her leg. She was frightened. She quickly padded herself and returned to the lounge. She waited for a pause in the babble of conversation. Her voice was controlled.

"We should leave, Athena. It's late, Mama. You should rest." Stavro's mother protested but Nia quietly insisted. "No, Mama we have to be up early tomorrow."

She had walked side by side with Athena silently through the chill of night air to the apartment. She began to panic but checked herself, gripping the nerves around her fear. When she went again to the bathroom, there were pieces. Clumps. Blubbery bits of rouged flesh. She was aborting and she thought to herself - it's male. Stavros had told her most fetuses aborted early in term were male. She told the unsuspecting Athena but pretended there was no reason for concern. "I'm sorry about this," she said and kept on apologising for troubling her. She was seized with concern for Athena, Stavro's cousin, who was only sixteen, though she was only nineteen herself. She called Stavros at the hospital to tell him what was happening, but he sounded busy, distracted. He arrived eventually and drove her back to the hospital. He ensured she was comfortable and returned to work, promising to see her in the morning. To see if she would be able to attend his graduation ceremony next day.

Left alone in a darkened ward subdued by night quiet she had turned over each aspect in her mind as desolation stole over her thoughts. She had been about ten weeks pregnant and everyone in the family knew and had formed their conversation into a stream of excited, cooing queries. She had enthused with them. Concentration on the child allowed her to bury the raw memory of those evenings wired to Stavro's treatment about the dining room table, though she had only discovered she was pregnant some days after. Now in a single stroke she felt she had deprived Stavros of his son and his graduation, the apogee of his life's striving and his family's ambition. Her fault. But she was constrained from dwelling on the gulf of her own sadness and grief. Everyone insisted later that she shouldn't. "Forget it. It happens all the time. Get pregnant again. Put it out of your mind." She learned to defer her feelings, anxious not to burden Stavros, not to deflect him from the importance of his work.

Now as she sat on the balcony sipping memory from the edge of brittle porcelain, her cup crooked in her hand, she looked into the dark legacy of those years and realised it was Stavros who filled the emotional space and breathed the air of their lives. She had been there to orbit his needs and react to his eccentric oscillations. Relegated to the sideline, she had stood in the wake of other lives, immune to volition. Never once had she glimpsed any sign of herself in the featureless terrain of feeling.

It had felt different through the first exciting months of marriage. She had breathed an air she had never experienced, an ownership of everything about her. Her descent from the heights of herself had been sudden however, when Stavros revealed his continuing ambivalent attraction to men. She had been crushed. She had failed to hoard him with loving enough to deflect his inclination. A weight of tears mourned her and there appeared no way for her to express the turmoil - words seemed crippled things to pit against such feeling. It had been different when he had confessed ambivalence before their marriage. Then she had been baffled more than anything. She had felt the conspiratorial closeness of girls at school and she assumed, from observing boisterous schoolboy scuffles that men had a similar familiarity with their own gender but beyond that she found it difficult to fathom.

She had known about sex and marriage though its exact nature was extremely vague. Her mother had never explained and even the onset of menstruation had come as a shock to Nia - a flood of fear; punishment for some unspecified wrong. Nothing remotely sexual had entered the house. When she was thirteen, she had returned from a party and declared, "I'm stuffed!" and her father had burst into rage. She was shocked. "What have I said wrong, *Baba*?" But her father just repeated, "I forbid you to use that word. I forbid it!" And it would be years before she learned what it meant. Of course, she had heard whispered references, but it had had an altogether alien quality of bizarre, forbidden depravity. It was inconceivable to connect that in any way with Stavros. It had been difficult for her to comprehend but she had been immediately inflated by the conviction she was facing something of such importance that only a heroic love like theirs could cure it. One part of her had been exalted by the prospect, another had been confused and uneasy about what it was exactly her love was meant to remedy.

But Nia had brushed aside any hesitation. She planned their wedding to be special, something to fuse them in glorious unity, though arrangements had been quickly whisked out of her hands by a maelstrom of family arrangements which had left Nia feeling her wedding had been thieved from her. At the time though, she took pride in the fact that people saw her as "No trouble at all!" It felt satisfying to tidy away the resentments, tack along and concentrate on Stavros. She came to love him with fierce loyalty that only intensified her resolve to move whatever mountains on his behalf. It was a determination that erased doubt even when Stavros returned from Dr McConaghy with the small box trailing electrodes like spiders' legs and the good doctor's instructions and the procedure she was to follow with him.

She had been unprepared, however for the horror that followed. He had read things that revolted her to the core, things not physically imaginable to her. She had been perplexed by such revulsion disgorged from the person who formed the centre of her loving. The pulse of current through his fingers had forced his arm to jerk and clunk in little shudders on the table, punishment that caused such unendurable consternation, part of her had retreated beyond herself forever. At the end of that first evening, she had shut herself in the bathroom before going to bed. She stood under the rush of water with her face to the flow, drowning her tears and drenching her skin. She stood there for ages. She did not want to leave till she was cleansed.

Thereafter a growing silence stole into their marriage and magnified each sensation. Stalked by what seemed grotesque aberration Nia retreated into utter convention. She distanced herself into staid and unexciting sex that froze near the margins. Abnormality encroached unseen and she yearned for children, a family to mend their normality. She barricaded herself in survival, contained where no weakness could be fashioned against her. And wove her womb about the child that would spill from her tears too soon.

The chaos of emotions on the evening she lost the child elongated time into despair. The evening wore on alone into day and she lay awake, confined to the mutter of life straying from the wards and hospital corridors muted by early morning. Her sadness yearned for the halcyon memories of country living, for days that dozed in the shade of trees that sheltered her knowing. She imagined herself again crouched under Scribbly Gums staring at the filamental lines twitching up their trunks, arcane riddles scrawled on their skin by hermetic calligraphers. And she saw in the rhythm of heat, the isolation that seemed an explanation for all the things she found wanting and the parts that seemed missing.

The scrubbed air of hospital sterility mingled with memory and she remembered when she was six, a holiday to the inland country property of some distant cousins. The cousin's young sons invited her father to go duck shooting in the moonlight but as the tremor of birds scuttled from the ash mist of reeds and water a shotgun was jerked up and discharged against her father's leg shattering his hip. He was rushed from the local hospital to the city hundreds of miles from the blood and the rising mist of birds. He was some six months in hospital and while the trauma must have been extreme it barely seemed to cause a surface ripple. Her mother told the children nothing of the incident for days, leaving them weighted with unease amidst the restrained but discernible anxiety and activity. Her mother subdued the importance in herself, though a *myroloyia* mourning seeped from her and a keening echoed away in her head.

She endured with stoic control even though Nia found out later from close relatives that her mother feared not only her husband's death but the consequences that would flow. Her mother knew if he died, she might be left penniless, paid off by the brothers and shunted out of the way as an inconvenience. One way or the other she would have been at their mercy and been forced to accept the crumbs of dependency. But as children they never saw it. Never felt it. Never even saw a stray tear. They had lived within themselves, surrounded by their mother, adamant and resolute with Canute defiance of the tide of concern. She saw her mother preserved in a granite equanimity, ordering everything in their home around routine responsibilities and the burdens of wife and mother. Her mother's disposition scarcely varied, though a vague tension simmered beneath the repose, surfacing in occasional spasms of anger with the children. She saw them as homunculi, miniature adults that had sprung fully formed from her head, complete with obligations and duties, unsullied by gestation or the warmth of a womb.

Nothing seemed unusual. Even when her mother told Nia how, when she was a baby, she had expressed her milk into a cup and fed her with a teaspoon rather than experience her animal nuzzling, it seemed entirely unremarkable. There were reasons, though her mother was always vague about it. Feeding difficulties or something of a kind. But what wormed in Nia's mind years later, was a confused converse responsibility. She felt badly that she had caused

her mother difficulty, a wretched ache that urged her to retreat into her mother's hand-me-down shroud of muted feeling.

Nia had always felt awkward in entering the presence of her mother. Even in the kitchen she was only an observer. She was never allowed to use the sacred implements that invoked the sacrament of family needs. She felt always unable to satisfy her mother and the rare occasions her mother erupted in fury were memorable only for the churning remorse Nia felt for once again causing her mother disappointment. She would grab Nia's arm and drag her to her Singer sewing machine with its cast iron spokes and scrolled treadle. There she would snatch up a dress pin, clench Nia's wrist, and pummel the back of her hand with the pin in a frenzied staccato. The stinging scorched, and the back of Nia's hand would rise like a scone sprinkled with little pimples of blood, yet even these outbursts menaced her with what seemed to Nia, a frightening restraint. She tried desperately to understand the pattern bequeathed to her by her mother, but it lured then slammed shut when she approached.

19. Rebirth and Dissolution

From her eyrie over sea Nia listened to the waves thud on the shore but it was not the sound of waves she heard but the pause of cold silence between breaks, endless anticipation, soundless waiting. A season of time from seaside memory. A seaside in Greece. Neapolis on the southern Peloponnesus, an undistinguished port town with a pile of dishevelled homes and shops and a modest population. It plied the ferries that favoured Crete and some of the outer islands but was washed by no other aspect of importance. Nia had taken the girls in tow to her father's aunt. It was Easter, Orthodox Easter, which was late that year.

Stavros was to join them later when he could get away from the hospital and she expected him down from Athens by late Friday afternoon, Holy Friday. To fill the time while she waited, Nia climbed with the children to the church on the promontory for the afternoon service, the *Apokathilosis*, where the *Epitaphios* is decorated with flowers and the shroud of Christ is taken in procession and placed within the flowered bier. When they returned Stavros had not arrived and as evening wore on Nia felt increasing apprehension. He eventually arrived near midnight, subdued and a little ashen and he remained incommunicative all the next day though the fill of family and friends smoothed the seam between them.

Scaling the chill of air and thought to the church, they went together to the midnight service. They stood soundless as the church descended into dark, swayed by the anthracite silence into unearthly emptiness. One note of light out of the void flickered into life and a dark voice stirred the flame..."*Defte lavete fos...come and receive the light.*" Then from candle to candle a contagion of viral light spread the church and glittered the faces as the voice of the priest announced, "*Christos Anesti!....Christ is Risen!*"

"Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life."

As they returned home cradling candles of new life in their hands, the light shivering behind cupped fingers and dappling shadows on their faces, he told her quietly about his journey down from Athens. Rounding a curve, he felt the car lose traction and, overcorrecting, he had slammed it into the rock face before slewing towards the plunging edge of certain death. She

knew exactly where he meant. The road writhed through the hills before descending to the port and dotted along the brim of pavement teetering over stony gorges were rows of rubbed shrines marking the demise of motorists unable to negotiate the hairpin curves, macabre reminders gilded by garlands of rotting flowers. The words weathered a chill in her as they trudged along, the air from the water drifting the scent of salt and harbour jetsam, combing the occasional little gusts of hair. A wave of love for him crested and drew his vulnerability into her heart. She threaded her arm through his and crushed herself into the scent of his shoulder and the musty smell of his worn jacket. They talked of renewal and renaissance, the precious life they owned through themselves and the wonder of their children, the Easter brush with death and resurrection moulding words and thoughts.

"I would like another child", he had said simply, his eyes whetting the flame with his concentration. "For our renewal. For the gift of life. Anastasi ...Or Anastasia, if it's a girl...again," he added with a smile.

In a way it had been their first free choice. Their first daughter, Christina, had been named for Stavro's mother and Andonia for Nia's mother, in accord with custom. It seemed appropriate that he or she should be their Anastasis, their Resurrection. The moment had been precious and had lifted Nia out of the shadow of their years overseas. She had lived within the eye of Stavro's discontent, circled by his unending disquiet, a restlessness that dismissed pleasure from moments alone.

Until the moment of their Easter resolution, Greece had done little to repair her disposition. Even among Nia's own relatives it was to Stavros they deferred and he they indulged. She was congratulated on her "catch" as though that were the summation of her capacity. It did not help that her Greek was fairly rudimentary whereas Stavros spoke elegant urbane Greek. He had a flair for languages and a love of words that always delighted her. He would roll words around the tongue of conversation savouring the ease and flavour of vowels and consonants.

As they walked from the Easter service along the harbour esplanade of Neapolis rimmed by the dark, Nia startled with pleasure at the thought that they would soon be returning to Australia. They seemed to breathe easier together and she looked forward to having another child, a sign of their new beginning. The savour of their renewal remained with Nia through the excitement of her homecoming and knowledge of the life swelling within her.

To Nia's immense relief, the birth of Anastasia proved uneventful and the tiny limbs tangled her loving and the black eyes drank her in.

In contrast, the dissolution of marriage had stirred Nia from a deeper slumber and affective hibernation, but it had not been her choice to have her life thrust upon her, to be Rip Van Winkled from unconsciousness, prised open by other people's lives. She had been wakened to a wasteland of despair, frustrated by unknowing and teased by glimpses of understanding. Slowly, ugly notions, tasting bitter, crept into mind. Far from benign and beneficent, she saw Stavros moving with stealth through her life taking, thieving. With most people, she thought bitterly, he would hammer their shields and swords into ploughshares to turn his own furrow.

And yet he was always so inordinately considerate of others, anything else was unexpected. There were times, however, when he could be extraordinarily insensitive. Once at a restaurant celebration, after a christening, he had picked up the adored child and, turning it over in his hands like a half kilo of prime steak, performed a minutely detailed medical examination to the horror of the doting parents. Despite the embarrassment, such actions had an endearing eccentricity, she realised, though in less appealing moments it was simply an infuriating self-centredness.

Even the death of her father seemed snatched from her. Stavros was the specialist, certainly, and his care for her father was exceptional, yet she felt shunted aside, displaced as Stavros moved in to fill the need about her father. Her father's death shaped a confused climax in her mind. His death left her desolate, without a place for her childhood to curl in his lap. It marked the unravelling of lives, the last linchpin of connection. In her heart Nia knew Stavros loved her father and that he had remained because he could never have faced her father's judgement and disappointment. His death now made her utterly irrelevant. He tucked her father comfortably in his grave and left not long after. She had done her duty. Remained steadfast and loyal. Now she felt shrugged off like a wet dog shedding the indifference of water.

She held gently to the rail of the balcony that defined the difference between herself and sea. She had seen the same waves repeat their journey to shore year after year, heard the same slump and sign and interlude of silence before it began again. She questioned the uneasiness the comparison revealed in her. It could be, she thought, an inescapable, numbing repetition or merely the rhythm of recurrence, a familiar connection with light and land. She dwelt on the thought for a moment, then distracted, watched the gulls hover and their wings tilt the breeze, buoyed by the dazzle of light on water. She turned her face to the sky, breathed a smile, and dismissed the need to trouble the reasons.

20. STAVROS

The rapport I had with Nia's father contrasted with the impenetrable reticence of her mother. He had always wanted to be a doctor so for him I became the son of success in the profession he had always desired. And for me, of course, there were particles of a misplaced father along with the natural empathy. He was willing to share his life with me and to hand down the past of family stories though there were still areas of reluctance. He came from the islands where skin breathed fish nets and sea and the tide in their veins surged with citrus and olive oil. Men were seafarers or lighthouse keepers, forever fleeing the grasp of the women who clawed at the hide of land to produce a living. There was no future there for men and an aphid madness infested the groves of women. Though veiled with dark shame, it was understood that they would drift into dementia in their later middle age, to go wild and unshackle themselves in the hills, pastured to madness as a reward for years of dutiful care.

His mother began in her early fifties to dissociate from her family and wander the groves quietly singing to herself. There was a song on the island that honoured an orange tree that bore a torrent of fruit. It actually existed and grew gnarled and rachitic in one of the family groves beside a spring that tumbled from the earth near its fecund roots. That's what she sang about and no one interfered, though Nia's cousin as a child was often sent to keep an eye on her and bring her home for meals, which often meant weathering a deluge of abuse.

When she was younger however, his mother scraped the family together and drove them on to a vision of success, away from flinty poverty and contained living. Nia's father was one of nine and the youngest, most coddled of the males. His mother wanted him to go to high school and become a doctor - the disease of Greek aspiration. But when he found that his mother had secretly gone to work cleaning homes and taking in washing to pay for it, he was ashamed and immediately walked out of the school and declared his intention to work to further his education.

Years before his brothers had left for Australia along with hundreds of others. There are now more from the island in Australia than on the island itself which had dwindled to a summer refuge for the diaspora spread through North America and Australia. Go in the summer and you are sure to meet the cousins and relatives from the next suburb that haven't been seen all year. But in the winter, it just settles back into dust. The creepers grow again over the outside toilet and the spiders home in the vacant plumbing.

He arrived in Australia in 1928 and immediately fell ill with pneumonia which brought him close to death. His brothers nursed and cared for him over the weeks it took him to recover and although he was grateful for his life and for their help, he was proud and unwilling to accept their largesse. He felt obligated to return their aid and support by helping them in their business and so he stayed and never returned for the education he planned or to become the doctor he had hoped to be. He went to work in the cafe they owned and with his brothers, brought up properties about the town. They would lease or run the businesses - another milkbar, a newsagency, an office area - accumulating a clutch of property and living on very little. Buying and paying off, always with caution and care. He found their obsessive caution a bitter burden to his own ambitions and his frustration eventually led to a violent schism that was never really healed even when he lay close to death.

He was a proud gentle man, quiet but fiercely confident of his own capacities. He was short with spidery legs adapted to clambering the rubbled slopes of the island. His pale grey eyes had an odd almond cast that rounded into his moon formed features, his remote Cybelene sadness. He immersed himself in the tedium of work, pacing a stolid path for twenty years before returning to Greece to find the wife, though before he left, he spent inordinate time systematically searching for a suitable home to house his expected new circumstances. When he returned, he installed his new wife, who had demonstrated her fecundity by falling instantly pregnant, and then went back to the way it had been before.

The relationship was clearly defined with known points of trespass. It had an odd air of diffidence which was probably due to the twenty years difference in their age but there was unquestioned loyalty, mutual respect and consideration; never demonstrative or affectionate yet caring, nevertheless. Their sexual life was not one of the highlights as Nia learned from her mother after our marriage. It was a duty, one of the requirements. Her mother built the marriage and family structure to an exact plan, working feverishly beneath the exterior reserve to keep each piece precisely in place. She trod round her husband with inordinate care to avoid offence or distress, treating him like some quaking giant that should never be roused. Yet despite her deference, the house and the family were hers, territory which her husband entered like a visitor.

But I had no consciousness of these currents and flows in relationships when Nia and I began our married life. We planned a perfection together and began to furnish our lives with order. The kitchen sprouted white goods and gadgets - wedding presents from the incorrigibly domestic - and the dining area was patterned with dinner party precision while the rest of the apartment was carefully decorated from the gifts of money pressed upon us by relatives at the wedding.

Nia was still studying and since I was a junior resident medical officer, I often brought work home as well, so our time together was frequently spent in muted cohabitation, sitting before one another at the dining room table with our necks arched over books and pads of scrawled notes. Most evenings though, I would have supper at my mother's home where Nia would be waiting for me. It seemed sensible. It was only a few blocks from both the hospital and our flat. I was working odd hours at the hospital and could not anticipate when I would be free. So, each evening I would regress through the front door and eat my meal with my wife and mother propped like bookends on either side of my life. It seems in all my living I have never moved more than a dog's nose tucked up in its tail, never far from my mother, sister or brothers, nor from Nia's parents and family, as though that held things in unflinching orbit. I was a person of patterns, so neatly stitched you could barely detect the seams in the fabric of thinking, dress and behaviour.

There were moments though that caused me inexplicable consternation. I recall a trifling incident in my final year of Medicine which caused me extreme discomfort. It was not because I bore the brunt but rather, when I reflect on it now, because it ridiculed the orderly self-seriousness within me and bared me to that particular vulnerability of men. We were receiving instruction in public health, which entailed among other things, a visit to the municipal sullage disposal area. Even at that time, the city had numerous unsewered outlying areas still serviced by night soil carts collecting dunny cans. The area was set among low eucalypts and weeping Mallee, in a neat network of precisely aligned mounds and disposal ditches, an ordered and labelled grid of ley lines marking the forces of excrement. It was a sublime manifestation of costive government thinking.

The site was supervised by a weather-ravaged foreman with lean limbs and a gaunt expression who took his work seriously and his role of instructing medical students even more seriously. I cannot remember his surname, but he was less than respectfully known by the students as Tim the Tipper because of his ability to toss dunny cans about without spilling a drop, or worse, splashing himself. He stood on one of the mounds, elevating himself a little above the students and began quietly to expound on the detailed precautions against pestilence and cholera that would surely engulf us all if his ordered trenches strayed from their exact compass bearing. As guardian of the public health it was his sober responsibility to contain the effluent within precise boundaries and ensure no overlap or overflow. He seemed oblivious to the barely suppressed amusement among the students listening to his discourse, and his earnest, gentle dignity only accentuated the comic absurdity. I squirmed with embarrassment, recognising well enough the symptoms in myself of faintly absurd orderliness and literality, and felt overwhelmed with sadness and responsibility for him.

As a student, the orderly convention of my life and intoxication of affection for Nia, seemed irreconcilable with the turbid attraction I sensed for young men and other women. I worried

about it incessantly. I was not really sure of the true nature of those buried feelings except they continually invaded waking moments and assaulted dreams. They became the subject of adolescent night emissions and excursions into bathroom onanism. Even walking down the street became a never-ending examination of the livestock.

These speculations scuttled about, continually dancing before me in possibility, glancing at me as I sat in a train or tram, in a queue or in a cafeteria. They were so constant, so much a part of the mental furniture, that I didn't even notice them most of the time. Everyday activity and thought just flowed round them. It was like an endless hum in the mind, a mental tinnitus. It was a possession without respite, a lecherous gargoyle with a Le Mans mind crouched on my neck, driving the brain. I've talked to men who feel dedicated attraction to men or women and their experience is surprisingly similar. A walk down the street involves constantly turning over breasts in the brain and examining clitoral crevices or, alternatively, observing the strain of bulging groins. It just becomes part of you, like a limp, or a colostomy bag.

The first opportunity I had to explore the issue arose in psychiatry lectures at university on sexuality and sexual ambivalence. The lecturer argued that sexual orientation was a matter of choice and our role was merely to steer our patients towards a resolved homosexual or heterosexual lifestyle according to the patient's preference. It was all straightforward but, in those times, it was not only illegal it was a defined depravity and degeneracy, pathologized in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM), until 1973, as a mental illness.

That was at the heart of my dilemma. How could I, embedded so deeply in convention, be party to such depravity and mental illness? As practitioners, of course, we were anchored in normality, detached from the seething mass of inadequacy, and dispensing formulas for cure. It was a simple matter of defining choices which lent certainty and the perverse satisfaction by applying a tidy tag. I was attracted to the ease of a label and illusion of choice - and the urging of my affection for Nia, made the need to resolve my ambivalence unavoidable. That had been my assurance to her when I asked her to marry me and I kept my promise to seek help.

I had retained a loose connection with Evanthia from my first year at university and I knew, because her father lectured in medicine, that she would have connections that could guide me in the right direction. We met in the refectory over catering coffee and soggy sandwiches melting in the sudden dose of summer sun. I hinted that I was experiencing some psychological problems though I had no intention of revealing their nature. Her dark eyes and face, creased with concern, explored my face, extracting information from each line and furrow. It was odd to notice again the same curious hunger behind her concern, as though she were about to consume my pain and smother my feelings. I receded from her probing and took with me the name of a psychiatrist with the off-campus student clinic and a promise to organise an appointment with her father for a referral.

The decision to see the psychiatrist was monumental as though a whole subterranean swirl was finally surfacing in calm determination. I sat in his office hunched over as the words tumbled, purged in a torrential confession. At the conclusion he leaned forward and, as he quietly turned a pencil over and over in his hands, talked in a passive monotone of apparent

disinterest. It wasn't his field really and anyway he was about to move interstate and would be unable to assume any program of treatment. He suggested that I see Dr McConaghy, a behavioural psychologist, whose expertise was aversion therapy and its application in the treatment of compulsive behaviour and, in particular, of sexual deviancy. I was floored by his clinical indifference. I felt like a distortion, a freakish growth. But I had chanced too much to be deterred. I actually wanted to enter some form of psychoanalysis but it was McConaghy's treatment that was urged on me and so I made the appointment to see him. I was convinced I needed help and I was convinced their expertise was built round a core of cure.

21. Aversion Therapy

Neil McConaghy had a round gnome face crowned with a knotted mound of curly hair. I had been assured of his considerable reputation, but his fey features discouraged such an assumption. There was an emphatic certainty and insistence when he spoke, evoking divine totalitarian tones. His office was unexceptional. Sensible carpet, functional furniture and reliable prints that wouldn't tax taste. The desk where he sat was devoid of clutter. A few pencils and pens assembled neatly on one side of an unblemished blotter and a photo of his wife and daughters on the other.

I told him of the depth of my feelings for Nia as well as my irreconcilable regard for men. I was deeply disturbed by the opinion expressed by my lecturer that gay men should not marry in order to avoid the reality of their orientation. I was profoundly concerned and wanted to be clear about what I should do. I wanted desperately to be normal, do the right thing and hurt no one. He leaned forward opening his view to me. "Have you ever experienced a homosexual relationship?"

I assured him my sexual experience, either heterosexual or homosexual, was non-existent. "Well then!" he concluded, swaying back on his chair, smiling and sweeping his arms expansively across his desk. "You have little to fear. You are in my opinion psychologically normal. You function adequately. You're handling your studies well and you have a relationship with a young woman who appears to love you and for whom you express considerable affection. You are extremely fortunate. Far from having such morbid apprehensions you should be happy to have such a favourable future before you."

I felt as though I was being scolded for inventing concerns. I began momentarily to question whether they were exaggerated, and a product only of my need to align my life to some idealised paradigm. He paused to compose his brow into lines of concern. "I'm not dismissing the reality of the conflict you're experiencing nor the extent of the drive. I simply feel you place too much importance on it. The program I can offer you though, should allow you to exclude these worries."

He then outlined a program of behaviour modification employing Aversion Therapy which he regarded as successful beyond question in modifying homosexual orientation - scientific and effective. I was impressed with his professional certainty and clutched the solution. It wasn't that my fantasies were not pleasurable. Quite the contrary. It was simply that toying with such emotions conflicted with more firmly held intentions. I desired the relationship with Nia. She was special as well as especially beautiful and she readily fitted into the orderly life I saw before me. Contradictory emotions jeopardised the future I envisaged. There was a risk of

finding myself out of control. And treatment assured control. It emanated from professional expertise with the force of authority. And authority was something I understood. It permeated my upbringing - parents, relatives, tram conductors and policemen. It was a world of authority stamped with naivete, trust and fear in equal proportion. I saw it in the faces of parents and relatives, the deferential chill when they confronted the spectre of outside and civil authority. Awe, faith and fear rolled into one.

Like a scene from an Eisenstein film I once saw at a university film society screening. It was just a short sequence of documentary film demonstrating a hand operated cream separator. The handle was rapidly wound round and the milk miraculously split into a thin stream of skim milk and a thread of cream. As it emerged from the narrow spouts, the suspicious peasant gaze gave way to dawning astonishment, rising to elation as they thrust their laughing hands into the splashing liquid. The scene stunned me. It may have been simply a triumph of technology, the sensation of the new before it became common place, but within the *ikon* of technology rested an awesome authority I recognised, a silent off-camera divinity, unseen yet utterly compelling. I saw it in my parents' lives, a peasant awe. The parochial ignorance grating against modernity had warped their world leaving them trapped between unreasonable suspicion and unjustified trust. It engendered in me an extraordinary naivete and blind faith in the sort of authority that McConaghy, with his impressive credentials, fitted well.

I attended the clinic the following Monday. My end of year exams were behind me so there were no pressing studies to deflect my attention from taking the Cure, dipping into the healing waters from which springs adjustment. The clinic building was designed in sensible austerity, a concrete pill box with the surface embossed with a pattern of steel rod. Asphalt-grey carpet and nude, achromatic walls enclosed the foyer, furnishing the receptionist with medicinally sterile quarters. The conversation at reception was similarly unadorned and I was directed to an anonymous cubicle leading off a corridor that disappeared into a fluorescent dusk. It was difficult to discern whether my mood or the decor provoked such a furtive feel though it seemed entirely in character - furtive therapy for furtive clients.

I sat in the cubicle thumbing through magazines outdated by an obligatory twelve months, until a face curled round the door and beckoned me into an office. Dr Bertram, McConaghy's clinical assistant, was wearing the mandatory white coat to ward off the afflictions of patients and clearly distinguish him from any passing deviants. He explained that he would supervise my treatment and sketched an outline of the procedure, endeavouring to allay any apprehension by littering his explanation with soothing reassurances. He then ushered me politely into a small ante room. It was about three metres square, with the windows darkened and draped. In the centre was a comfortable and sensibly serviceable chair in front of a large silver flecked slide screen. Cables and cords festooned the chair and nearby equipment, then snaked along, taped to the floor, before disappearing into another room at the rear with a hole in the wall to allow slide projection. I smirked reassuringly to myself as the obvious thought flickered, "...The electric chair..." as he fastened Elastoplast over the pulse monitoring pads on my hand.

The central apparatus was a plethysmograph attached to the penis to gauge arousal response. The plethysmograph, far from being a highly sophisticated piece of technology, was in fact a

tin can with a condom pulled over it. The tip of the condom was cut off and stretched over the open end of the can leaving the ring in the centre to insert the penis. The closed end of the can had a small hole drilled in it with a tube leading to a machine which graphed changes in pressure. It was undignified and demeaning to sit with my pants down, pushing my penis into a tin can till it poked through the condom ring. It was made worse by having someone watching, even if he was supposed to be an objective clinician disguised in a white coat.

Seated as comfortably as was possible in such circumstances, the assistant darkened the room then disappeared into the projection alcove while I faced the screen. What then commenced was a stilted collage of pornographic images, beginning with what were obviously slides of photographs from familiar enough soft porn magazines. There was even a lurid hint of page numbers from time to time. Sensuous legs gripped the lens to expose dark glimpses of pubes connected to bodies arched in anticipation of rapidly advancing orgasm. There were cantaloupe breasts and galloping thighs, languid looks and ecstatic glances, baskets of breasts and nipples like lightning rods. Then came a series of slides of male nudity and far more explicit sexual activity. These were actual photographs not simply slides from pornographic magazines. There was no attempt at artistic sensitivity though some were shot in naturalistic bushland settings, and the subjects were ordinary looking men, even bald and ugly, but certainly not models. I continued to wonder long after, where did they get these pictures?

There were pictures of naked men, athletic and husky, with buttocks or erections turned sensuously to the lens and young boys looking coy and uncomfortable with their prepubescent genitals exposed and their shorts spilled round their ankles. There were a couple of men mutually masturbating and another pair engaged in fellatio. Then, to my stunned amazement, there was a picture of a young man with his penis entering the anus of a man kneeling with his buttocks arched in the air. As a complete sexual innocent, this represented an unbelievable education for me. I had never seen another naked male in my life and certainly not with bodies engaged in such incredible callisthenics. I now had an inkling of what was supposed to be my condition. My response was somewhat ambivalent though at least I now knew there were others like me, and I felt less isolated and alone.

This initial assessment session obviously made a powerful impression on me though I was to return for a further ten sessions in which the same material was shown. Male and female items were interleaved alternatively but because there were about twenty male and only about five female slides, the women recurred with monotonous regularity. There was one further feature in the sessions following that first visit. Along with the canned penis, an electrode was wired to my right hand and I was given electric shocks of varying intensity according to my original reaction to the particular slide. I tried desperately to cooperate, to be aroused by the heterosexual material and to feel genuine abhorrence towards the other. On several occasions I was sure I had no particular response to the male slide, yet I received a vicious burst of electricity. When I protested, he quietly insisted I had initially responded positively, and that he was only acting in accordance with the particular formula of treatment.

I was desperately anxious to perfect a complete transformation and on one occasion concentrated so intensely on the breasts, torrid thighs and wanton femininity that my arousal leapt into ejaculation. I was totally embarrassed and had to ask for something to wipe myself with. A scrunched heap of Kleenex was silently dropped in my lap, but before I could clean up, dress and compose myself, the session was concluded, and the next client entered while

I was still mopping the slime from my groin. I was totally humiliated though the young man quietly turned and averted his gaze to allow me the pretence of privacy. I felt deeply debased, but the sterile bastion of professional authority and granite certainty seemed unquestionable, so I quietly burdened myself with the weight of my humiliation. The desperate need to conform to expectation was both so ludicrous and pathetic that I feel mortified now when I begin to describe it, though I realise my experience is probably not unique. A part of my mind still suspends belief and refuses to accept what happened.

The experience cruelled innocence and bequeathed a scoria of shame and humiliation that has birthed in me a rage against such ignorance dressed as respectable medical science - nostrums pedalled by insensitive professionals with purulent doxies. It is difficult to repress recurring fantasies that twist the humiliation into a search for vengeance. But I am left with the unbearable sorrow of my own naivete and conforming compliance, coupled with a gnawing suspicion that some perverse subterranean part of me revelled in my professional punishment, paying penance for the disgust and self-loathing.

22. Treatment

After the first heady months of marriage, my relationship with Nia roused itself into torpor, a routine of living and love making that lapsed into familiarity and repetition. We were shadows of one another merged on the umbral verges. Clocked in her habits, even in her bathing and toilet, she was made for routine. She seemed fused to a pattern, unknown and unquestioned and when she sat huddled over her sewing machine, her glasses poked back on the bridge of her nose, her mouth bristling with dress pins, she seemed formidable in her determination to remain that way. I grew restless with the sense of something truant. My senses strayed into areas I thought closed, corners where the dusty scent of men filled fantasies that became more strident and more insistent.

The first indication of this feeling occurred some six months after the wedding, at the time my mother announced a pilgrimage to shrines and iconographic wonders in Greece. She insisted I look in at the house frequently to ensure everything was in order while she was away. It was odd moving through the house empty now of the people and events that had crowded my life till recently, each room silent, entombing the thoughts and silent clamour of memory. I walked into Stephano's room and there, walled up in his cupboard were still the books and magazines I had ferreted through in my adolescence. I curled on his bed leafing through his anonymous works of stallion masculinity, feeling the surge of forbidden thought taking shape, buttocks and balls not buttons and bows. It didn't cause me concern. After all I was cured of such inclinations. This was simply memory for old time sake.

But it became increasingly difficult to sense other men with neutrality. As a resident medical officer at the hospital I worked odd shifts and hours of odious length. The Saturday night slaughter and carnage of casualty contrasted with long passages of unbelievable inactivity; early mornings in the subdued gloom of hospital corridors, the faint tinkle of laughter at nurses' stations and the silence fractured by paroxysms of coughing in the wards. A shiver of fantasy would often steal through the seams of silence, though even when I was busy, they often emerged whenever a gap in concentration loomed, a moment of inactivity. It became unbearable to continue with such gnawing possibility. The lechery raked my mind and each

thought menaced Nia from my consideration and betrayed her over and over. I was compelled to tell her, spill the shame. She was my only safe conduit for confession.

I waited for a rare evening at home together, taking that pause in the drift of activity after dinner, the clatter of cutlery on plates and the ting of glasses, to draw her into me. I talked quietly and deliberately, words awash with contamination and the gravity of my remorse. She sat opposite me across our dining room table, ovate and oak, darkened by ageing, sullen shellac. I watched, fascinated as her large black eyes hoarded tears till they toppled down her face. Watched as her shoulders withered into her spine and she shrank into despair. I was shocked by how profoundly wounded she was by my confession and ashamed too at the ease with which I could cause her such catastrophic anguish.

There had to be an end to this dilemma. I once again made an appointment with McConaghy and attended the sanitised bunker housing his practice. Sitting across from him formed like a mere pause in our earlier conversations. I told him about my continuing attraction to men and the way this was eroding my relationship with my wife. I had felt that the original program had enabled me to detach myself from the problem, though the treatment, while serving as a barrier to acting out, had done little to diminish the urges. He questioned me closely about the sexual adequacy of my relationship with Nia. I assured him of the warmth and satisfaction, though aspects did perturb me. I often had to use my hand to guide my erect penis into the vagina and this caused me inordinate worry. He was unconcerned and indicated that I should eventually be able to do it "naturally". What did this mean? Inexpert and inadequate, was I failing the goal of "natural" performance and the triumphant claim of "Look Ma! No hands!"? For years after, this absurd preoccupation, part of my obsessive need to "get it right", nettled my thoughts.

His attention now focused on other activity. "You have had some kind of homosexual encounter?" he asked, showing no particular level of concern. I assured him I had not. I would not have even known where to begin to satisfy such an urge. It was just the constant preoccupation that troubled me, more so now I actually knew – from him - what was involved. He slumped back in an office chair that gripped his body like a catcher's mitt. He lowered his chin to his chest, gazed intently over the top of his wire rimmed glasses, severe and thin, and intoned slowly, "If you ever have sex with a man, let me warn you, you will never be able to stop. Once you start, that's it."

I was shocked. It seemed so absolute and what was worse, it rose like a dare that demanded defiance. My mind shuttled between extremes of impulse, between "Why not!" and repulsion, furtive peccancy shadowed by loathing.

McConaghy maintained an unwavering confidence and certainty about the situation. There was in his mind no undue cause for concern. He felt that my treatment really only needed a boost, some minor reinforcement which should dissipate my problem. He said that he thought a "home" treatment would be appropriate and produced a small brown wooden box, trailing a filamentous maze of coated wires. He placed it on the table between us and began to describe how each of the wires was connected to a small metal contact which I was to tape to the tips of my fingers. The box he told me contained a battery sufficient to deliver a severe shock.

"I am encouraged by the support your wife obviously feels for you and it is appropriate that you both work on the solution to your problem." He then instructed me to take 10 index cards and describe on each a different aspect of my fantasy. "You should read out each card aloud, and after each one your wife should operate this button to deliver the charge to the fingertips."

That evening I sat with Nia at the dining room table and discussed my session with McConaghy and the treatment and procedure he had recommended. She seemed agitated and apprehensive. "You really feel this is right?" she said, her voice furrowed with alarm.

My assurance was categorical. I was always swayed by the confidence of others and at the time, the desire to be free of vexation was such that McConaghy's authority appeared absolute and doubt was unthinkable.

The following evening, we sat resolutely at the dining table seeking to ease the tension of ordeal with humour. We called the device Pandora's box. It squatted before Nia with its metallic tendrils twined across the table towards me. I taped the tabs to my fingertips with Sellotape and began to read from the tidy stack of index cards I had carefully prepared earlier in the day. It had not seemed particularly strange in the preparation, alone and within the company of my own thoughts, writing details of fantasies that were entirely familiar to me, but as I read aloud, the resonance of another voice sounded scabrous and vile, yawning into festering obscenity.

Another stab of current spears the tips of my fingers and wrenches my wrist, rippling pain through my tendons!

I look across at her, silently weeping, mourning, rocking herself gently, tears wreathing her cheeks as she dutifully follows instructions. *Pieta. Eleousa.* Such despair. She's doing it. She's hurting me and I see her torment too.

We stop. The session is concluded. She is utterly mute, voiceless. She appears numb and confused. I think to myself; how can we see this through nine more sessions? I don't know what to do or what I'm doing. Should we make love now? Should I hold her? She stands, her body drained from the chair, and slowly drifts in laboured steps around the table to bury her head in my chest, the taut sobbing retching sound from her lungs.

Only the stretch of time allows me to even begin to recount it all and examine the emotions evinced. I am engulfed by shame and self-reproach. How could I allow someone to grant me the means to twist my confusion into such destruction, to take the person I love and give them the means to cause me pain?

I convulse with rage and humiliation when I contemplate the eyeless vision of McConaghy buttressed by professional delusion, untroubled even by common sense. It was the perfectly malign paradigm, my dearth of valuation aligned with his inability to value. The most basic understanding would have bared my inadequacy and conferred on me some stilted

assurance. Instead I staggered on through this lunacy as the loving receded and the time grew past repair.

23. Experience

Our first child was born two years after we were married. A daughter, crystal eyes and dark down with skin the rich stain of bruised fruit. So utterly beautiful, so fragile I could enclose her within my eye's gape, cradled in the capsule of my arms, crooked to her shape and needs. I took to her care, reeling from my sleep in the early hours, hungry for her needs, clouded by ammonia rising from stained cloth, swaddling her in new scents and safety.

Yet it was my work that absorbed me. In the continuing training and experience of medicine, shifting hospitals became constant. I was some four years out of medicine and in my late twenties when I began work as a Registrar at a hospital on the other side of the city. It required travelling some distance, often through shambling traffic, as well as the usual odd hours of return and going. I would often return home along the bay front through the succession of suburbs that hugged the shore where retired waves slumped on the sand and arthritic deck chairs from decades of decaying summers scanned the horizon. I would slow, though, as I drove past the ancient baths, its facade pock pocked, and its rear netted against sharks. There always seemed to be a quiet flow of young men moving into and around the baths luring my thoughts, but consideration of such a notion choked my breathing.

It seemed one day, however, that the fear and indecision suddenly coalesced in calm detachment, despite attenuated breathing and a racing pulse. I parked away from the pool entrance and began a stroll in studied disinterest along the grass verge towards the seawall and sand. Each movement seemed choreographed in fear and fleshed to some anonymous companion, the vision turning slowly to the ochre shadows of dusk rippling across the sand and the water tugging at the tresses of glare on the shoreline.

I watched another young man walking awkward with the same agitated lack of purpose. His dishevelled blond hair spilled down one side of his face, tilting his gait and unbalancing his tangle of limbs. His feet stabbed the crust of sand, sinking to his ankles as he faltered up the beach. We circled each other's cramped breathing like prey, averting our gaze to some point of sky. I paused on a beach-side bench, waiting timeless till he slid himself onto the opposite end. The silence stretched to breaking before a stray innocuous comment provided the opening nexus. There was little substance to the conversation, just words building on signals, tentative indications and hesitant gestures that ended in a scramble for connection. We retreated hurriedly to the beach and the protection of the seawall, entangled in gauche groping, grappling with the rods of iron that ruled our lives. No words, just a single focus on fulfilment, swift and urgent, racing our breathing to individual satisfaction. Afterwards we talked briefly about ourselves. Both married with young children. And shy laughter as we both realised it was the first time for both of us, an uncommon coincidence, and satisfying for each to be favoured to launch the other into furtive masculinity.

I drove from the beach elated, shunning the puddle of deceit within. My emotions divided naturally into compartments housing my activities, allowing me to inhabit my contradictions. I drove around delaying my return home till late, savouring the aria of my secret, re-enacting the taste of the moment. I remembered McConaghy's warning that I should never tempt such

experience and scoffed the thought. He was wrong. I was confident I had no need of repetition. I stole through the door into the silence of the house, undressed and climbed in beside Nia manoeuvring myself into arousal on her comatosed form, invading her sleep.

Despite my rejection of McConaghy's caution that was the beginning of an evolving flirtation, though it was some months before I attempted another furtive encounter, cruising the harbourside parks in search of that gulp of fear inhaled before stalking pleasure. Infantile fear, sex in short pants, like scrambling in the cool dark of a pantry after forbidden biscuits from a tin. I became Janus-faced, rent by warring factions of reckless obsession on one side and loathing and disgust on the other. I would be repelled for some months, then the creeping urgency would once more overwhelm apprehension sufficiently to begin again. I learned the looks and glances, the signals of interest and entered a subterranean world, a thriving industry so vast it seems only the exceptionally blind could not be aware of its existence, one coexisting with the conventional world but entered by a code and script that had to be adhered to if the shutters were not to suddenly descend.

I avoided the urinal erotica, the "tea-room" trade and ammonia moaning in closed closets. Only once did I chance on lavatory land. A young man parked a short distance from a toilet, leaving his girlfriend in the car. No blundering innocent, it was clear what he sought. When he took longer than expected, however his girlfriend searched anxiously for his re-emergence, calling to him inside, "Are you alright?". When he emerged, he rebuked her, added scathing insult and ordering her back to the car. It drained my heart and filled me with immense sadness and despair.

Whether it was the loathing misogyny, or the self-loathing, such pain was unendurable. In a bathhouse billow of vapour, I watched a young man move, intent on finding desire, and decision made, saw him turn and curled his back to allow his anointed to enter while he stroked himself to climax. Satiated, he quickly straightened, violently shoved his partner aside, and stormed from the room. He showered and dressed rapidly. I watched him, knotting his tie precisely, neatly combing his hair, adjusting his suit and aligning his creases before returning to the ordered office of trade and commerce. He alarmed me with his mixture of rage and revulsion, a balance teetering on the edge of havoc. It felt familiar.

Gradually, indulgence slid into haunted chaos and obsession possessed thinking, tainting pleasure. What compelled was the predatory skirr and the only restraints were hazards of refusal, police entrapment or violent assault. It was the thrill of anticipation, drawing me light years away from the present. All animals it seems, are possessed by an evolutionary imperative to escape the moment. There is always something to fear in the moment - slow strangulation by the present or suffocation by the ordinary. All invoke the code of Colditz, a dedication to escape.

And in the company of Nia, the urge to escape was compelling. Our marriage became a parody of convention, a finely fashioned propriety safe from the taint of vulgarity, safe within its numbing repetition. And though her loving was difficult to fault, I held her at bay with the demands of work and family. She was never less than willing to make me feel within need and wanting. She stalked my needs, so sacrificed I could barely detect traces of her in the Sphinx riddle behind the stone. Yet it induced in me an ardent desire to flee the scrutiny.

She Echoed me in a voice tuned to a Levantine edge, that piping tone unique to Mediterranean women which they use to pierce the walls of male thought. She had an awesome command of trivia and seemed to cram words into conversation to crowd out content. I would listen for the shrill clipped pitch reaching for me through the crowd of medical social gatherings that formed a social plain that overshadowed the desert of time when we were together. I would shrink with embarrassment from the vacuity of tone, hearing the oracle of my emptiness. Our lives became public and our privacy became uninhabited and uninhabitable.

But she plodded on beside me, making the sheets smooth and the pattern ordered. I began to loath her willingness to please, though I would have fought her bitterly had she challenged my self-absorption in any way. Our connection became a living liquid, an easy seiche that flowed into corners and responded to the rhythm of demand, but plunge into it and it parted from contact, resisted intellect and offered no substance.

24. Loathing

Nia and I became the disembodied faces of everyone's perfectly presentable couple, a symmetry of attractive wife and child, husband and respectable career. And career absorbed me from the grip of their presence and lent me regard beyond what I could muster from within. The imperative of respectability in medicine is specialisation and I was drawn, without conscious intent, towards oncology, a means of delving into death and observing futures wither. The radiating claws of cancer link family and physician and I became absorbed by the intensities of feeling and connection. Most practitioners distance themselves from the recurring tragedy but I was impelled to the centre of suffering.

I became familiar with women hollowed from their bodies and saw in the eyes of their children, the stark panic and fear. And in the eyes of husbands, infant confusion and betrayal. But it was the suffering of children that bared my heart, always their drawings and paintings singing of their death and the sorrow of so much life un-lived. I held at bay the beast of grief, the tearing intestinal pain. I inhabited so much death, orchestrating it as though it were negotiable yet touched no actuality. At best it was a companion.

Specialisation inevitably demanded post-graduate study overseas and I eventually escaped Australia to spend several years in London. Afterwards I worked in Greece, longer than I intended and certainly longer than Nia wanted. It was as if a reluctance to return to Australia hid among my thoughts and intruded on intention. I was charmed by Greece and the origins of my family despite the grime and shoddiness that covered nearly every aspect of living in what was, in truth, then, still a third world country. That was a truth slow to dawn though, so potent was my parent's idealisation of their homeland.

I saw a play in Athens while I was there that crystallised my view of Greece. The play turned about a family caught in the ferocity of the military junta in the time of the Colonels; the protean emotions, patterns of avoidance and denial, betrayal and common cowardice, the compromises needed to live. The culmination saw the central character turn on the audience and ask, "Where were you when the tanks rolled through the streets. Where are they now so you can hurl the stones and abuse you didn't then?" Then he walked the aisles of audience

and asked individually, "And what did you do? And, where were you?" as the audience began to tear itself with a melancholy and funereal wail. Such a venal society! Caught between its base behaviour and self-reproach, both equally emphatic. And extreme.

Eventually the hideous incompetence of the Greek health service drove me to distraction and ultimately, to the airport. I returned to Australia and became attached to a city teaching hospital, a stage on which to perform the conjurings of reputation required to later tether a profitable private practice. Part of me was glad to be home, though the descent once more into the mediocrity and corporate narcosis of Australian institutional medicine made me long for the vibrancy of the years in London.

My mother of course, wept like a gale to see me at the airport, her black bundled body pitching and reeling on waves of lament. Her limpet clutch was only released long enough to gape at me as though I were some revenant apparition. Her virtuoso performance faded into the clamour of other Mediterranean reunions, gathered in the reception lounge of the international terminal. According to my mother, my return restored life to the desert of her affection, lifting the longing that wore down body and soul. Her dark hints of suffering dragged through the days after our return, endured while we waited for tenants to vacate our apartment. She had an instinct for the moment of vulnerability so I knew the intimation would settle into confession when I least needed it, when I was tired or frayed from work.

I arrived at her home late from the hospital. Nia was with the children. They had eaten long before and dozed in dressing gowns and pyjamas before the television, so it was my mother who placed my meal before me at the kitchen table. She drew herself alongside, resting her arm on my sleeve. It was quiet except for the distant prattle of the TV screen but her conspiratorial whisper penetrated the savour of silence. "I have to tell you. The doctor has confirmed it. He says I have diabetes. It is caused by worry, you know, but you should not blame yourself, of course. You had to go away to study."

A bruised wrath rose from the fume of softly spoken words. There was never much point in correcting her misconceptions or arguing her intent to bind my sympathy with responsibility, the nameless shame I felt for all her disappointments, but I was less prepared now to respond by rote impassivity to her expectation of tenderness and comfort. "Don't put that bullshit on me *Mama*. It's a concern but you will just have to control your diet." I answered in a monotone of muted fury.

It was possibly the portent in her tone, its almost forgotten familiarity cowering me between apprehension and rage. Or possibly it was the perspective now, of time and absence that allowed me to see clearly, for the first time, her infernal orchestration. It was difficult to avoid my mother's demands which she seemed to package for convenience. She was always ready to care for the children and she would entice Nia to leave them with her while she shopped. Nia always obliged by shopping for my mother as well and would wait in the afternoon or evening at my mother's for me to drop in as I usually did each day. We often had meals all together. It was convenient. With barely a syllable spoken a whole pattern of living simply appeared. The ease of it unnerved me.

She rarely asked openly for anything though her wishes compelled. Or enraged, especially when carried by her selective refusal to understand. The fact that I was a doctor was all that really mattered, and she steadfastly ignored my medical specialisation. She would slip symptoms into a conversation like lures. It was always some friend or relation that troubled her, and I knew I was supposed to immediately and wondrously heal. She saw me righting her world's wrongs, an expectation of me that never failed to engender anxiety and inadequacy. My response was always curt - tell them to see their own physician! But it didn't matter how often we repeated this farce or how blunt or rude I was, she continued to persist.

She had a naive determination that defied logic. When Nia announced she was expecting another child, my mother was utterly delighted, but immediately insisted it was going to be a boy and planned through the pregnancy for this eventuality. It defied her demands, of course, and pronounced itself adamantly female - Anastasia, the resurrection and the light. Dark eyes and long lashes, curled cobwebs of ebony adoration. She dismissed the disappointment with a wrist wafted through air, "God skimped and forgot the extra piece."

And so, with all things, determination and demand, but she would never ask for anything, just leave a trail of hints intended to confer a wave of original generosity on those who voluntarily attended to her concerns. It infuriated me, but Nia would shrug when I remonstrated with her for being manipulated once again. "She's your mother," she would say. "And anyway, it doesn't hurt you to do what she wants."

The logic was irrefutable and yet poisonous. Despite my mother's beneficence there seemed always an ulterior intention. And despite her kindness and generosity she harboured a staggering compendium of prejudices. Her catalogue encompassed Asians, Aborigines and any blacks of whatever origin; Turks (of course) and Lebanese; assertive women and pornography (both considered synonymous); and gays, communists and atheists (which also grouped naturally together).

In the midst of this profanity stood the burning beacon of purity, the *ikon* of all that was Greek. And the Greek myth seemed the greatest deception of all. I seethed to see the young, particularly young women, bludgeoned by expectation, dragooned into relationships and repressed out of their own entity. It was frustrating to encounter colleagues of Anglo-Saxon liberality genuflecting before the altar of multi-culturalism as though the customs of any culture were sacrosanct. They would mourn the isolation of the 'nuclear family' as though pining for lost innocence, then praise the Greek, or whatever, 'extended family', without recognising the rigid conformity and overwhelming obligation smothering individual aspiration. About the only welcome benefit of the post war cultural influx I could see was to rid Australia of the boredom of English cooking.

It was not only my mother's intolerance that aggravated me; her superstitions and traditional irrationality incensed me. The embarrassment as a young man was extreme when each month, the secret stain of menstruation became public knowledge as my mother relegated herself to the back of the church and refused communion. And she judged others with immense cruelty - vicious little throw away lines that cut about a person's character like razors. I can remember her telling me about my godfather's brother, an unpleasant, taciturn individual who, it was said, had been smuggled into Australia in a sea chest or something

equally strange. He was a notorious philanderer with a gentle, compliant wife. They had a Downs Syndrome child with profound intellectual retardation and my mother suggested darkly that it was God's punishment for his philandering. No matter how much I protested this absurdity, my mother was adamant and unmoved. Why God would choose to also punish his long-suffering wife and the child as well was irrelevant. It was undoubtedly deserved.

Our lives formed a maze of arrangements for family congregation with my mother always lurking somewhere in the labyrinth. The swarm moved from one family location to the next in an ordered pattern of social migration. It required little input from me which in one sense freed me to act as I pleased and come and go as I wanted. My work, since hours were frequently erratic, added further freedom of movement and offered opportunities to indulge a taste for the prurient, the pygal parade of steamy priapism. I would alternate between delicious relish and an extreme repugnance sufficient to ward off relapse for several months. This vacillation induced a profound misery that accelerated the pursuit to outrun the despair, tearing headlong into loathing.

I turned too, in my execration, to Nia. She made love to me now with such little response, I conjured her as a boy to arouse myself, twisting her into this or that loathing. Once I awoke from a turbid sleep, copulating and enmeshed in her and, punched by waking, was violently repulsed by a melding with my mother in her. I increasingly saw what I didn't like. Her unassured voice straining into a thin thread of tone when she was among strangers, twisted me into profound embarrassment. She seemed foetal and unformed, childish and without poise, naive and without intellectual stamina. She had nothing to offer. When she was petulant, I saw only a child. When she became angry, she loomed as savage and destructive.

I began to saturate my thoughts with ways of ending my life, killing off the teratoid menagerie of mind. The way of death took on a dismal fascination that sometimes drew on inhabitants of my memory. I mulled over the death of Claude in my first job but found the violence of shattering parts of my body with a bullet, quite terrifying and what is more, unacceptably melodramatic.

And the death of my godfather's friend swallowed my time for days after its telling. I had met him when I was barely four on a visit with my godfather to his nursery. He struck me as odd and unusual. He was not like other Greeks, having a touch of the outsider, possibly the result of marrying an Australian woman, but there were other things too. The music in his house was cerebral and austere, bare of eastern tonality, and he grew orchids, not the useful edible things I expected. But what was infinitely more interesting and exciting was his car. It was an enormous Packard, custom built after the War for a millionaire from South African. What was astounding was not just the luxury and its size but the presence of two "dicky" seats that tucked in behind the driver and front passenger seat, allowing the car to comfortably cram a host of people. It was an astonishing treat but over the years it's the orchids that seep into memory. I remember standing inside the shade house before the ordered raised rows of ochre pots, the sprays of labial blooms, their warm throats drinking in an aria of air, cascading colour into view.

He provided the flowers for our wedding, but I drifted from contact over the years and only stumbled on the fate of him when curiosity prompted me to ask my godfather. I saw the man

clearly, tall with a thatch of grey hair and an ever-gentle smile. His finality shuddered me. He had gone to the shade house one morning and, standing among the clusters of colour, the spill of flowers and cereous buds, showered himself with petrol and fired himself into bloom, a riot of crimson and cardinal, cerise and wine red, springing from the coals of his heart.

Yet as it moved me, I looked to the opportunities of my profession which afforded less dramatic means, and planned in detail the sequence of events, a drip of Thiopentone to a vein, under the burr of overhead fluorescents. The details plunged me into preoccupation but despite the constant preoccupation, strangely, the energy of my work gained an odd calm and harmony.

25. *Echasa tin hygeia mou*

Pewter skies fouled the winter and corroded weather filled my days and thoughts. It was almost twenty years since my father died leaving a trail of longing in dreams that dwelt like a familiar. Now my mother eased herself into a pattern of illness and frailty. I saw her nearly every day and was inured to her complaints and infirmities endured with a stoic resolve no one was allowed to ignore. Her health was failing but she could not see why I refused to treat her and insisted on her own physician. His examination and subsequent tests confirmed what I would have rather have not known, that the chest pains and angina marked a deterioration in her heart function. The family fussed and conferred, drawn by the theatrics of malady and crisis and, on cue, she yielded to a serious infarct and was rushed to hospital. She remained there for three weeks before returning home to recuperate with my sister, Katerina, though even with the care she lavished on my ailing mother, it was taken for granted I would drop in home each morning before work to check on her progress and ensure her medication was organised.

It was the family home, of course, though my sister had lived there since her marriage and return from Queensland. It's odd, when I think about it, the way all of us to this day continue to see it as the family focus. Even Stephanos still has his own key, and at some time during the day, even if my sister is out, he will let himself in and sit in the kitchen by himself drinking coffee.

Several days after my mother's return from hospital, I dropped in one lunch hour to see her. She was grey, wheezing and spluttering beads of froth. Part of me strived to deny the inevitability of her condition as I calmly organised her hospital admission and helped her to the car rather than wait for an ambulance. I shielded an arm about her shoulders, stooped and shawled, shepherding her as she ponderously shuffled towards the car. I opened the passenger door and cradled her into the front seat, where she sat bent forward like a plump black beetle. We sat saying nothing as I negotiated the traffic, but as we paused at the lights in a bank of cars straining to be unleashed, she said the only words of our journey. Quietly, for once, without effect, "*Echasa tin hygeia mou*I've lost my health."

That night I awoke bolt upright in the black, my chest heaving and strangled, gasping for breath and consciousness. The dark engulfed me in melancholy, and I felt sad beyond words. The following morning, I went early to the hospital and when I arrived found her breathing shallow and laboured. She lay with her pallid appearance in a halo of starched white linen, a few grey tendrils of hair whispering about her face. Her jutting jaw softened into the folds of

her features, receding from severity. I sat beside her cradling her hands, my fingers reading the Braille of veins tracing the back of her hands and looping round knobs of knuckle. With my thumbs I gently kneaded the mottled wax of her skin which glistened to touch.

"Tell everyone who wants to see me, to see me now," she said quietly, and then as a summary to her thoughts, "I have been happy with my life. I have seen all my children *taktopoiemena*... in their place."

We had achieved our place, conformed to our appointed social station. It saddened me to see how incapable she was to see beyond those ideals. She lay grave grey and silent, her clenched breathing rattling from her lungs and as I sat by her, longing into her face, she stirred into consciousness and talked slowly. "In the drawer beside my bed. At home. There is a book. I have written everything down. My life. In the back, the arrangements for my burial."

Her breathing was becoming more laboured and I buttressed myself against her on the bed, propping her against my side to ease her breathing. I drew my fingers through the breaths of hair and the cloud of thinning scalp. Her vanity had been affronted by her loss of hair, now it hardly mattered. Her breathing withered into my side and I held her suffering in the sweep and comfort of my arm. There was only a scatter of words as she slipped in and out of awareness, then the syllables hushed from well within, "These are my last breaths," on a final inward rasp of air before her eyes turned up to me, holding in sclera and iris the light and dark of her frozen pupil. Her gaze fettered my grief and pinioned me to her. In *Pieta*, sculpted in protracted silence.

The moment was shattered by the arrival of Stephanos who flailed the medical staff with demands that they attempt to resuscitate my mother. I withdrew while they scurried about, sorrowed by the uselessness of it all and grieved by the violation of my mother's death. The others had all arrived and I yearned to leave. I drove round to the house in a leaden daze, but I remembered about the book. It was where she said, in the drawer beside her bed. A school exercise book with multiplication tables on the back. Each page was filled with her spider script Greek. Her life. The island home and her mother and father. My father expressed in adoration. Her messages to us all. And in the back details of how she wished to be buried.

I was filled with such sadness. Not for her death or for her talking to me from the page. It was the text itself, the way she glossed in such simple happy words the span of her living. It was such a sad untruth. Instructing us in the way it was to be remembered. I noted my mother's death was exactly twenty-one years and one day from when my father died. The stray notion slipped into thought, unbidden and edged with black humour, that after twenty-one years maybe this is the moment I come of age. And I began to cry, sobbing inconsolably, dissolving into a torrential sorrow and mourning.

The notebook detailed my mother's wishes, in particular her wish to be covered by a holy shroud bought and blessed in Greece on one of her pilgrimages. It was a plain, finely woven linen cerement on which each of us wrote our name before it was drawn over her face in the casket. In her still fingers she held a white handkerchief and silver coin. To pay the ferryman. We travelled once more to my father's grave, open now to receive my mother, lowered on to him as she had in life.

Each night for weeks after, I would awake heaving and dredging tears. There seemed no finality to grief. And as at other moments when I declined into despair, I turned to Nia. I began to reveal to her the ugly skin of my obsessions, at first just my morbid preoccupation with suicide and then, almost by stealth, I gradually unfurled the extent of my nether life, the prowling and priapic obsession. I linked them like a grip. There was no escaping forgiveness for the tears of my shame. She had known from the beginning the doubts and struggles that possessed me, but through the clutter of years she had tidied the knowing to one side. I had never admitted to having actually succumbed to my inclinations and this new revelation now grappled with her desire to protect me, leaving her disarmed and omitted, confined to an ache.

Part of her shrank from me now, possessed of a fear of feeling, sobbing into herself. Yet she clutched me desperately in a sacrificing love. I was alone in dilemma; aware I had wasted the connection and severed the affection.

I knew my living was out of control and needed events to intervene.

Despite my unhappiness I was convinced resolution lay within acceptance of my orientation. This was after all, the era of miraculous transformations into the clear and liberating light of day; out of the closets, out from under the furniture and from behind the family portraits. I even attended a gay and married men's group where, reminiscent of AA meetings, men who had escaped false marriages, stood to confess the happiness they now enjoyed. It felt synthetic and evangelical.

The dream of liberation and authenticity eluded me. Even the fact that my pain could be described as "gay" seemed a grotesque misnomer. Between the Evangelical Gays and the Homophobes-for-Christ, tambourine tapping their fervent conviction was a gap that engulfed me. I envied them their certainty, but I felt repelled by such true belief. However I tried, the new conformity I sought would not fit comfortably, yet eliminating urge with ease was illusory and the attempt to dissuade disposition only provoked a determination to thwart the intention. Like giving up cigarettes, the appetite wriggles round resolve every time. It was a demonic insistence that feasted on its satisfaction and reached for more.

The want of respite plunged me into further bouts of suicidal morbidity. I was shadowed by fears of impending death in the family and visited by dreams of catastrophe, black phantoms stirring my sleep and waking. My activity became frenetic and indiscriminate. Part of me didn't care if I got Aids and didn't care if I infected Nia. I could get rid of myself and her at the same time. I wanted her out of the way to do as I pleased without her presence constraining me. It was total absorption in indifference.

At work my nursing assistant asked if her brother with Aids could be admitted to our unit for treatment. Our work had drawn us together and her plea was impossible to deny though she knew with clarity the forlorn prognosis of Kaposi Sarcoma. I grew familiar with them both over the period of his admission, learned their pain, but as his body withered into the terminal stages of disease, he chose to return north to his home. His death when it came convulsed his sister with despair and I drove her, in silent leaden mourning, to the airport and the plane

that would carry her to the funeral. The weight of his death, linked inextricably with his homosexuality, was naked to my mind, yet when she left, instead of returning to the hospital immediately, I went straight to the bath house. This defiance of consequences profoundly frightened me. Only the obsessive repetition contained the sense of being out of control.

Despite McConaghy's view that my past history was "normal" I read whatever I could about homosexuality, studies and surveys both sociological and ideological, seeking a key to understanding. In searching for causes I stumbled on theories about remote fathers and dominating mothers and found myself caught in another cliché, as I saw my family parody the pattern. Even the fact I was left-handed was causal according to some views! But theories struck out theories and none surfaced in certainty beyond the knowledge that I was not alone. Not even the first tentative suggestions of a genetic link proposed more than a propensity that still left the choice for each to make alone. Many men sample homosexuality at some time in their lives. More than a few persist into adult life. I've seen them, respectable businessmen, lawyers and politicians, at formal functions to bore money out of people for medical research and good causes. And have seen them later, cruising in the plush family car or creeping down for a taste of torrid in the bars and bath houses, away from their neat refined wives.

I would anguish over why I was not like other men, but we are really all of a kind - marooned in infancy and engulfed by occasional gusts of infatuation and schoolyard attraction. But it's just meat not affection. Philandering is a coin continually turned, whether it is men with men or men fleeing wives for other women.

26. *Baba*

I positioned children or work between Nia and me and took refuge in my relationship with her father, a convenient connection allowing me to avoid her while she was with me. I slid in among the children's visits to their *Yiayia* and *Papou*, but for me he was *Baba*. I felt well in his presence. He was inordinately proud of me and always introduced me as "doctor". It was entirely patriarchal, but I had no hesitation in accepting his admiration in whatever amount he was prepared to offer.

Shortly after my mother died, he became enervated and unwell, unable to tend his garden which remained his passion. He continued in indifferent health but a substantial change in his white cell count indicated the onset of leukaemia. He sat up in bed propped and padded by pillows while we discussed his condition using words as though they held no hint of consequence. The room reached towards a balcony through French doors that glimpsed a mottled collage of leaf and light through the crowded limbs of trees in the street and adjacent park. He talked quietly to me, calm within the menace of disease and with a settled faith in my judgement that I found disconcerting. "If it is possible to treat, then fine. I will trust your judgement. But if I am going to die anyway, then I would rather die than linger."

I thought chemotherapy, primitive then and still primitive, was worth exploring and described a subcutaneous pump which I believed offered the least traumatic treatment. He accepted the suggestion with a calm that left me wordless with respect. The matter resolved, we sat together with the February heat shimmering through the gauze of glass vibrating the outline of foliage. There was very little to say that our presence together didn't articulate. The silence

settled between us and the bronzed light sealed the shape of our thoughts. His eyes appraised me, and his worth flowed to me. I liked his love and his company.

The decision to use a pump made it possible to conduct the treatment at home rather than in hospital and I would call in each day to see him. I admired his courage. He spoke fondly of his life and felt grateful that he had lived to see his children grow and enter their own lives and professions. During the treatment his white cell count declined, however after the treatment ceased, it climbed again. Together with the treating specialist we discussed various strategies, but his voice moved to command the decision. He raised his hand to stem the flow of words. He was adamant. "Allow me to die. This is what I choose." He spoke without fear and with a simple courage that brushed aside any darkness in the decision and settled about him in unaffected order.

It was early April, just before non-Orthodox Easter. There was only a crisp, early morning hint of autumn air but it turned to rust the leaves about his home, the tinsel tower with its celluloid dreams made unkind by ebbing life. The disease spread rapidly but the Easter break made it possible for me to remain beside him, as he lay nestled in pillows, becoming breathless.

Good Friday. I wanted to lift his spirits, so I bought him the seafood I knew he loved; sweet, pungent king prawns from Queensland and astringent Pacific oysters; fresh bay scallops, tumid bladders of flesh and a curve of red roe fried lightly in butter. The blend of smells stained my fingers as I prepared the platter to take to him. We grinned together with childish delight, *fruit de mer*, a cache of forbidden fruit. He smiled softly and savoured each taste.

Each morning I watched my mother-in-law bring a basin, soap, razor and cloth to bathe him and shave his face. He was inordinately modest, and she would sponge him down with a towel drawn across his groin, then wash his feet and legs before handing him the cloth to wash his genitals beneath the towel. On the day before his death even that was beyond his strength and she washed him entirely, drawing the cloth over his drooping sex and the sparse wild wire strands of pubic hair. She bathed him with all the respect she could muster, sensing in his emaciated response, the indignity he felt.

By the Monday evening he lay enfolded in whey linen, fragile and innocent. The room was laden with solemnity; each kiss, wet with a tincture of tears, and each tender farewell, torn with grief and loss, gathered each into wordless stifled sorrow. Nia was pale and exhausted, and I told her to go home. Her mother wanted to remain with him, but I advised her to rest as well, on the understanding that I would tell her of any change. I sat with Nia's sister beside his bed reading and listening to his shallow clutches of breathing. A book of short stories by an Australian Greek - a funeral scene replete with theatrical lamentation flared a rage in me and as I slammed the book shut in my grip, I glanced over to him. His features faded to the grey shade of sheets and his eyes drifted up. Nia's sister quickly woke her mother and as she entered the room, a final exhalation of breath sighed from his lips and she reached to clasp his hand, grateful to have been with him at the last, to make her sorrow logical and complete.

It was that depth of morning that smothers time and muffles emotion. I waited in the sobbing silence beside his hushed form till the dawn flooded the balcony and I stumbled downstairs to call the family physician to come and certify the death. I called Nia and those people I felt

ought to know and waited on the tearful trickle of people to enter the silence. After death was certified, I called the undertaker and watched feebly as they placed him on a trolley and took him down the stairs and out through the front door. The last time through that door. I was drained and exhausted having slept little in days. I distanced myself from the murmur of people to lie on Nia's bed in her old room and curled into a fathomless sleep, dreaming darkly. I saw his dead body covered with spiders webbing his face and hands with fine threads and defending his corpse with threat and menace. I have dreams of him often, fathering my sleep. I ache for him.

27. Finality

After the death of Nia's father, the points of connection seemed to fall away. I was home more rarely than ever, and the anxiety of my absence wore down Nia and trailed onto the children. She became more anxious and shrewish, whining her concern when opportunity offered itself. I drew my daughters as allies to my side, comrades in my arms, in conspired dismissal of their mother, bearer of my unworth.

But like a family sibyl Anastasia performed the rituals of distress and despair. She had outbursts of fearful concern for my safety. Where was I going? When would I be home? Screaming hysterically, too, that she wanted to die. She wrote a poem one evening and left it on my pillow for when I returned. Neatly printed and scrolled with a painted border and florid script.

The fog is still.
Doing nothing.
Suddenly it pounces on nothing at all
And rubs against the trees
Scratching
To get inside.

The distress was inescapable and to deal with her disquiet I organised counselling for her. These sessions lead inevitably to family conferences and in a private discussion after one such consultation, the therapist prompted comments that drove into me the gravity of my own condition. She folded one leg over the other and tugged her skirt over her knee. "Anastasia is your family barometer. There is an air of impending calamity that revolves round your welfare. You have asked me to explore the problem and to be blunt, it rests with you. It is difficult to progress if you are not prepared to contribute to a solution."

The obstacle of my thought and behaviour broke from me and I began to spill the pain and confusion, the obsessive suicidal thoughts, but she reached forward after a time and held my knee. "It may seem uncaring to stop you, but this is not within my area. I can listen but I must urge you to seek competent advice. I can, if you wish, suggest suitable people."

I was appalled at the unequivocal extent of my culpability and the havoc I had wrought. I had to leave. Flee. The relationship with Nia had become contorted and tensioned beyond resolution, beyond the capacity of either of us to change.

I escaped to the only refuge I knew, the home of my *nono* and *nona*, but a breach had opened in my way of seeing them that, to my sorrow, had eroded my regard. Their love for me was stalwart and unquestionable but solidly within the confines of Greek conformity. To me, their words and gestures now seemed to recede from them packaged and appropriate, devoid of the remarkable strength I remembered as a child. It was not helped by the ethnic expectation I saw engulfing their daughter, Athena, who was engaged to an Australian born Greek. The two of them would visit relatives together, always accompanied by his mother who would remain outside in the car the entire time, waiting. I was unsure what disturbed me most; his indifference to his mother's presence or her determination to haunt his life.

The connection with my godparents had become stale. It was no fault of theirs, simply a barrier that had crept between us, an obstacle that confined conversation on the evening I arrived, to the small world of family concerns. I could not begin to confide my confusion and, wearied, excused myself to retire early to sleep, to slip into a dungeon of dreams.

I rose next morning in the early dawn and stole through the winking sunlight into the fabric of bushland shadows. The bush had held me as a child and still offered no judgement with its gift of space. Black cockatoos rasped their warning of weather as I left the farmhouse and climbed the slopes into a faint fall of thin drizzle that shrouded my face in the scent of leaf mould. Fists of frosted air gripped the spindle limbs, unclenching fingers of vapour to dart among the branches but as the weather cleared, sunlight parted the mist, splashing light on the valley. The smell of sun rose from the damp and sinews of rough bark tapped Morse on the tree trunks. A sleet of golden Blackwood blossom showered the surface of a pocket of water trapped in a stream edged with ferns dripping green. I paused and cupped my hands to drink. Tears dripped from my fingers.

I wandered the hillside all that day till dusk deepened and a monstrously swollen moon barrelled up over the horizon before absorbing its size and true proportion. It sparked memory of a dream from the night before. I dreamed I was in the midst of civil conflict, a black and white war on newsreel celluloid. I stepped into a doorway away from the strife of the street. She was there, with oriental moon face and gaze averted in cold light. I trust her and she takes me to a theatre, an Opera House of nineteenth century grandeur. The aisle seats had hooded lamps that puddle light on the floor to guide late comers. We sit together observing the stage which is lit but bare. Slowly the proscenium, ornate and grand begins to collapse, cascading plaster into clouds of dust. It is utterly spectacular, and I am overcome by awe and mourning, grief and relief.

As I crouched cold on the darkened hillside, in the shadows of the moon, I listened to the chilled air of my dream and the melancholy bared before me. Leaving Nia and the children seemed unthinkable but the onus of so much pain claimed my right to stay. Yet I chanced my hope on the alchemy of change and resolved to return home linked in purpose to this new end. But what seemed clear and obvious to me alone on the hillside became chaotic in conversation with Nia, leaving her scarified by the emotionality and asphyxiating scrutiny of my mental disarray.

Fortunately for us both, respite occurred with the departure of Nia's mother. She was travelling interstate to visit relatives and I immediately offered to mind her house. It was

strange moving through the house, teeming with reminiscence and bare of life. The resonance and hollow footfall on polished parquetry drifted, untamed by hearing, from room to room; the dining room where I courted Nia over schoolbooks; the room where her father died. I lingered there where he died, balanced on the edge of his bed, my sight tracing each feature of the room before settling on a photo propped on the dressing table. A photo of his children. It had been taken when Nia was about three or four, sitting in a neat row with her sister and brother. She appeared so utterly beautiful. Perfect. Her face shone through the cream sepia, angelic, with wild sable eyes and astonishing black hair cascading in ringlets about her face. I had laughed when I first saw the photo years ago. It seemed so contrived. "A Shirley Temple look-alike! You must have slaved to create those curls!" But her mother responded gravely. "Her hair was naturally that way when she was a child. You could not straighten it."

What was it with my life? Even the entirely authentic appeared artificial. A staged banality, with props contrived for the occasion. Exiled in one dimensional despair, vacuity bellowing to be filled. I pored over the photo - such appalling prettiness, a child frozen in perfection. Hammering against the sense of desolation, I fled the house, clattering down the stairs to my car parked at the curb. I drove, sealed in thought, not towards the city centre, but in one final burst of banality, towards the family church.

I paused in the vestibule among guttering candles and *oklad* ikons. The church had been remodelled since I was a child. A new church, a monolith in pallid cream brick sheltering a vast cavity. On the wall towering behind the iconostasis were scenes from the life of Christ, painted in a modern style loosely modelled on Stalinist Realism, massive forms and figures in primary colours. Ersatz art and grandeur. I wondered how long it would be before there were *ikons* in Neon. Relegated to the side walls were *ikons* on panels painted by Uncle Christophoros for the old church and installed in the new. What I remembered had gone. There would be no peace of belonging.

Weighed with despondency, I grappled again with solutions. The experience of McConaghy had cast a dread over psychiatric mechanics but I was prepared to try one further avenue of antidote, though I hesitated on the edge and enormity of the decision - to begin clawing the rind and reason of all I have described.

It is impossible not to dwell on these last few years of labyrinthine descent and the experience of McConaghy. There is something evil about the medical resort to torture, however couched in the jargon of science. And made worse by the whispered knowledge that McConaghy himself was bisexual, parodying his science, and punishing others for his own perceived 'deviancy', a terminology that justified whatever methodology in pursuit of 'normality'.

When he died in 2005 his obituary spoke of his intellect and his love of Shakespeare, which obviously could not have made him all bad. He saw himself as a Marxist Progressive on the cutting edge of science and making a new humanity. I was all illusion, but it consumed his career, elevating him into professional regard at the cost of his clients. Now a whole new band of Christian madness has taken up the cudgels of Aversion or Conversion Therapy. It is still the same towering certainty that turns their own confusion into the punishment of others. In the name of the long-suffering Jesus.

My story reaches into the reality of this respected public figure, but he left a wake of pain and punishment that only added to the bewilderment of the many anonymous subjects of his 'treatment', that cured no one and damaged many. It was an entirely useless methodology cloaked in white coats and meaningless scientific jargon, gathered about a device with an unpronounceable name, a plethysmograph, which was no more than a tin can and a condom. It would be absurdly funny if the consequences had not been so serious.

The decision in 1973 for the DSM to lift the pall of 'deviancy' from homosexual inclination had lifted from me the need to wrestle with the deep shame of a pathologized label, leaving my choices uncontaminated. My journey now has more respect for my human face than my mechanical inclinations, but I cannot unsettle the thought that much of McConaghy was an unholy collusion of our distorted selves - vacuity lured by superficiality. Manipulation of surface symptoms had more appeal than my own humanity. It frees a raging humiliation in me still.

All this senseless punishment, personal, family and medical. It even presents as central to our national story: Australia was invaded by convicts sent for enslaved punishment, some 164,000 of them, an uncomfortable tale of national foundation. And between 1920 and 1970 some 130,00 children were deported from Britain to Australia for their 'own betterment' and subject to sexual and physical punishment. Add to that some 100,000 children of the Stolen Generation, torn from their Aboriginal origins and again for their 'own good', subject to sexual and physical abuse. Add 60 odd thousand pacific islanders black-birded into sugar cane slavery. And add again thousands of refugees seeking a better life in Australia punished by indefinite and cruel incarceration and you have almost a national narrative of penal punishment. Mine is puny in comparison.

I have left behind the kith and connection of Nia. When I began to thread my way through these skeins of flesh and thought, I left to live alone. The sadness still floods me on occasions, along with the shame, yet the more I recede from her, she seems unrecognisable for the years of living. Love squandered in obsession. And obsession still stands like an edge over uncontrolled space. There is no right and wrong of it, the useless categories of moral judgement. The dread keeps me from exploration, the knowledge of the desolation in wait for me. Nothing goes away and time doesn't heal anything. Freud conjectured that the purpose of understanding was to turn despair into ordinary human unhappiness. In that much I have succeeded.

I no longer expect transformation into the freed flight of winged air. There is cure within the wound for others but not for me. I still inhabit the blighted Good Luck of living under the cursed hand of family. I wait now in what I am, though I'm beginning to forgive myself.



Neil McConaghy (McConaghy Papers) Courtesy Kate Davison