THE WATERS OF VANUATU
by Carmel Kelly

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KITES IN JAKARTA

> I read about the kites in a travel book. Kite flying is listed as a tourist attraction.
>
> From a distance I see them trailing high in the sky, above the city square. It looks cool up there, quiet and spacious.
>
> One afternoon, much later, I walk with Mi-Li past the backstreets. I don't remember where. Perhaps to a swimming pool. I look up and see kites, torn and scattered on electricity wires, flapping like fish in mud at low tide.

Late in 1975, writing in the Nation Review after the fall of the Whitlam government, Mungo McCallum said there were two choices left: to commit suicide or leave the country. I leave the country.

I fly to Jakarta to teach English. The flight is spent on getting out of Australia: an empty continuum below of yellow plains.

I fly from a desert and land in the tropics. Palm trees dot the surroundings of the tarmac; small groups of crouching figures in wide bamboo hats are working away at its surface.

*

The school's director and his wife are anxious to please. She asks about food. I mention steak, eggs but say I'll eat anything. There is usually a cold omelette on the lunch table and a brown substance representing steak. I never acquire the taste for chili. The sight of tofu at morning tea makes me sick.

At the request of the director, I cover the skin left bare by my sun-frock. I buy a kebaya and wear it underneath. One of my

students says, 'That is our traditional dress. It is called kebaya. But we usually wear it on top.'

My room is in the compound. It is light and airy, up high — four flights of stairs. I look across the city and see kites dancing above the central square. I can only imagine who or what holds fast their strings.

A saucepan and a forty-four gallon drum full of water sit in the bathroom. In the heat, the water is surprisingly cold. After morning classes, I head for a supermarket that sells cold milk. A canned and sweetened variety is mixed with hot coffee, in the street stalls at night, under oil lamps.

Or I might lie on my bed in a cool sarong to sleep before three, when I cross the city to more classes. I try to glide quickly through the deserted showgrounds, try to remain clear-headed against the weight of the heat and taunts of the idle labourers. They stand in thongs overgrown by the loose hems of dirty, flared pants, hollow brown chests showing through open shirts, their faces only dark profiles under low-brimmed hats. They stare. They laugh in my direction, and I imagine them making crude jokes. A woman brings them herbal remedies in an assortment of bottles; she is oblivious of all things except the weight of the mysteries she carries.

I arrive at my class lathered in sweat. The women sit before me, cool and inviting as peaches placed in bowls.

*

The Chinese woman seems to come from nowhere, like a kite falling to ground. 'I ask at office for native speaker. They tell me the Australian lady teacher still here. I so happy to meet with you. I need help with student-visa application.'

Students are streaming from classes. I have been heading to my room against this flow. We stand now, buffeted on all sides. I become aware of youth, prettiness, effervesence. I wish to convey my own need to rest. She persists: a few minutes, a short time.

A pale green shirt hugs her body down to her hips, where dark green pants take over down to platform shoes. She sits close and pulls out the forms.

'You come from Australia.'
'Yes, Sydney.'
'O Sydney,' as if chanting the name makes her familiar with the place. 'There is American lady teacher. I think about America. And Jay, he come from London. London is too cold. But Australia very close; is warm in Australia, like here.'
I am hot and weary. I stop short at the formality of the visa application.
'I very lazy to study,' she scolds herself, 'I learn English from conversation. We make a friendship. I show you Jakarta. You teach me English.'

*

I read about Ancol in a travel guide. Mi-Li is reluctant. It is not a place for Chinese. I am a tourist. I must see things. Having come from Sydney, I am made anxious by a place without easy access to the surf. We set a date for Sunday, the only free day. Students still meet for conversation. The young men ape the lessons of the week, embarrassing the young women: 'Are you engaged?' 'No, I am not engaged.'

Mi-Li arrives in a frock and high-heels. I am in shorts, appropriately dressed for Bondi Beach but no-where else. She takes my hand and leads me down to get a helichak.

She bargains with the driver over the fare to Ancol. The odds are against her. She is Chinese, with a white woman and Ancol is way across the city — there is a limit to how far the driver will lower his price.

The bay is crowded. The water is warm and muddy. I have white skin and wear a two-piece costume and feel like a lunar landing. Mi-Li goes swimming to be polite. She plays amidst the waves with an old black inner-tube an Indonesian man lends her. Rock and roll in Indonesian blasts out through loud speakers across

the bay. When the Indonesian man begins bothering Mi-Li, we leave.

At a Chinese shopping complex, Glodok, we eat Chinese noodles. Mi-Li is in familiar surroundings. We are out of the heat and at rest. The noodles float in a clear liquid alongside a few meatballs.

She tells me about her life in Indonesia and asks about Australia. I find it impossible to communicate adequately, across cultures, a childhood developed in Australian suburbia. Mine is a landscape of the mind, hers is inevitably physical: the small rooms of her house, the crowded streets, the prevalence of poverty and dirt.

I offer her assistance if she ever comes to Australia but not financial assistance. I keep my money for my own travels ahead.

I grow frustrated, not living in a tropical manner appropriate to my idea of Indonesia. She hires a boat and two men to row to an island in Jakarta harbour. I bare my skin for a tan, while she languishes in the open boat for want of protection. I flitter among the rock pools on the island in search of coral as a souvenir, while she keeps protected in the shade of the trees.

We take a holiday for the cool in the mountains of Punchak. Water flowing down the mountain lulls us to sleep at night in the Vihara. Waterfalls tinkle at corners when we take a turn in the garden path.

Mi-Li complains that she is doing all the cooking. She tosses joss sticks in the temple and burns incense. I have her arrange for a monk to talk to me about meditation, but I cannot cross my legs. We wander up the side of the mountain and the green of the vegetation deepens in contrast to the over-hanging grey mists. I sing pop tunes and she is interested to hear, but I only remember half the lyrics.

She meets a young Chinese man who is taking refuge in the Vihara from police in Jakarta. In walks in the Botanic Gardens,

they separate off from me. Once Mi-Li comes running back in tears. He does not believe she can get herself to Australia. He sneers at a white woman's promises of support. I am not to tell him her address in Jakarta. She is leaving Indonesia and he should not risk capture.

Back in the city we must see her father. I am curious. She is reluctant to do something necessary but distasteful.

In the crowded streets her father's house has signs of wealth — a fence, a car and a padlocked gate. A young male servant opens the gate and leads us to the front door. He never lifts his eyes to ours but seems supercilious throughout.

Bales of paper sit around as signs of the father's business function. Women flit from room to room, poke in their heads and giggle. The father appears in balding head and pajamas.

Mi-Li rebukes him. He smokes nervously. He cries, but nevertheless his logic is mainstream. She is a woman; her destiny lies in home and children. Pouring money into her now is no investment for the future. He has legitimate children. After them, in line for money, comes Mi-Li's younger brother.

She takes up with the skinny English hippy at the school, in exchange for money.

*

I adopt an off-hand manner before the female embassy official, expecting without good reason, to fly in the face of red tape. 'Student visas are highly competitive,' she says, 'what's her English like?'

I say, laughing lightly like it was some kind of in-joke we shared, that she wishes to remain in Australia. The official panics. She pulls out a current newspaper article on the 'brain drain' from Indonesia to Australia.

I am invited to an embassy party. The hostess fears the peasants who fill the streets of Jakarta. She is driven everywhere in an

enclosed Mercedes. She moves through the warm Indonesian air like an alien with pale skin and long yellow hair. The man she lives with goes sailing on the weekends in Jakarta harbour with an eski full of Australian beer. She is left alone with the silence of the servants. On the night of the party she wears a long white halter-neck dress, the bottom of which, during the course of the night, becomes black with dirt.

*

Late at night I am taken way out of the city, on a motor-bike, by a student. It is unbelievably dark, and the air is actually cold.

An Australian who has travelled down from Bangkok tells me of the Thai woman who stabbed him when he left her. I begin to pray. I think of how long it will take my family to hear about my death. I imagine a ditch by the side of the road and inexplicably, not fighting back, but surrendering almost willingly.

We pull up at a small hut. The man and woman inside feed us on rice and tiny salted fish. We sleep elsewhere. He holds my throat for most of the night, in tears and threatening if I leave him.

But in the morning, the vegetation is the lush green of heat and high rainfall. There is a white goat, the soil is orange-brown and the papaya from the plantation the sweetest ever: cordial poured into the hollow centre of one half.

He wants me to see the country before I leave. But he takes me around like an extension he has just grown on his body, explaining to the old men of the village the Western phenomenon of free love, free sex. I lie on the floor of a bungalow during the heat of the day, and he talks to the men on the verandah just outside the window above my head.

He accompanies himself on guitar with a popular song: 'Feelings, all my life is feelings. How I wish I'd never met you girl, you'll never come again.'

It is the first time I have seen Mi-Li in some weeks. She looks betrayed. I see it on her face when I spot her through the crowd

at the airport. But she relents a little in sadness at the departure of a friend. She says of herself, 'Soon I go to Australia.'

*

I have asked the Australian at the school, how do you know if you're in love. He replied, if you were, you wouldn't have to ask.

I told Mi-Li to come to Australia when I was back there myself, but she wasn't listening.

One of my students remarked that all foreign tourists got to stay in Indonesian homes, but it never happened the other way round.

I am in tears on the plane. A man walks past and I'm sure it is obvious. But later he sits next to me. He brings up the question of accommodation. I have lined up some cheap place via a travel guide. He offers his expense account hotel room. I refuse until we clear customs at K.L., where I am tired and confused. He has a taxi at hand. It is easier. In the hotel room I can say I am full of sadness, having just left close friends. I stay at the YWCA the next night, then fly to Penang.

In Penang the lime juices are exquisite. I stay at the YWCA again, and meet a Danish woman who has lank hair because her mother said if she washed it too often, it would strip the natural oils.

I take a train to Bangkok and a woman invites me to share the same seat. We meet up with two men, English and American. The Englishman is recovering from hepatitis, but the guard won't allow him to sleep in the luggage racks of the train. They know Bangkok well and choose a hotel, warning me off one I had settled for in my travel guide — too much dope and they frisk your room in your absence.

From there I fly to Katmandu to join a truck-load of tourists.

*

How are you? I think you are being free now and much enjoying your travelling. Because you are lucky. You can travelling as far as you wanted to go. Any place.

I had already receiving your letters three times. I am pleasure to get letter from you. You still remember me if you far away from me. I think about you.

I told you when I send you letter it come back my house because you already gone to other place.

I miss you. Send me a letter as far as you go.

Love Mi-Li.

'It is strange . . . '

It is strange to be on a bus mid-week with only old men, women and small children. I cross the city and my self-esteem falters in contact with the powerful edifices of pin-stripes striding from the law courts and medical centres.

In the early morning Tim is sitting on the sweet-shop steps with money stolen from his mother's purse.

Later, Pam is assembling breakfast. She locks the kids out. She lies on the bed, the blanket pulled over her.

Lunchtime. The kids are leaning heavily against the kitchen door. They scuff its surface with bare toes. They shout to her. Sandwiches get shoved out past the door.

They litter the yard with strips of bread. They knock over empty glasses. I hear hysteria, the splintering of glass, and imagine the sharp slithers glinting in the sun.

They are railing anarchically round clothes lines: pulling at dangling shirt sleeves and tails, sheets, in a tidal circle.

They stand naked, screaming, while the hottest water flows over the bath rim. Large puddles steam on floor tiles. I lean through heat to place my hand on scalding metal.

Tim forces a garden tap, in a hot summer of drought and water restrictions. Water is running away at high speed, spilling into the streets. I watch, distracted from pencil over white paper. It hurts me to see it, wasted like a memento. The gushing is so loud, the ticking of the metre gone beserk, the flood so obviously staining the dry concrete footway.

I scratch out words and lose the train of thought within one sentence. I type, and the black and white characters lay bare the structure like a skeleton. I thread the pen in and out like the text had a second dimension. An old man comes out too early to check for mail. The sweet-shop closes for lunch, to re-open mid-afternoon. The air brakes of a bus puff in breaking and accelerating at a nearby stop. Pam is at the door, asking for garbage bags to carry clothes to the laundromat.

Tim sidles up to half a dozen houses, opens the letter boxes. My letter is on the pavement: torn in haste and discarded, the serrated edge flapping open.

The father appears for a day or two and buys guinea pigs, like he's some kind of Santa Claus.

There is a random banging at the back door. Potatoes are scattered on concrete spattered with black paint. Onions roll from orange net bags. Eggs lie smashed against the floor, the yellow running thickly like oil on canvas. Toilet paper is wildly unravelled. I scold the kids. Hostility rears like a periscope between us. I close the door on the twilight filling their kitchen.

Pam reaches out, draws a man's face down to hers.

I sit at my desk, following a thought through in my head. The paper is scribble and scratch outs. In between, the hours change. Lunch, checking the newspaper, concentrating on the radio's message, a phone call. From downstairs the kids are screaming, the patter of their feet loud on the lino to the back of the flat.

I am ringing the owner about a leaking pipe; I hear myself mention the incident with the mail and the water tap left running.

I am walking past their kitchen door. Tim yells out that they don't like the place anyway. He is slamming the door in my face.

LIFE AND CASUALTY (for Lorraine)

A REPORT BY THE V.D.U. OPERATORS ON THE MANAGEMENT OF THE TEMPORARY CODING SECTION.

As we walk along the street Chris looks up at the neon sign atop the tall office block to which we have been assigned: LIFE AND CASUALTY. 'God, could you get anything more bizarre!' she says. We're the casualty. The walking wounded. The pound of flesh. Some days we look and feel sick. Fear sends toxins through our bodies. 'No-one should have to do this just to earn a wage.'

Maria is married to a factory manager who keeps her on a strict budget. They're buying their first house. She does the housework and looks after a baby without his help. Before this job she worked for a dentist who exploited her. She overcompensates with a schoolgirlish goodness at her work, keeping her smiles for her bosses. They can do no wrong. It's her defence. She has to believe that.

Dianne worked at a garage for long hours and no overtime pay. When she discovered she had been consistently underpaid, she toldthe boss off and left the job. Her husband drives for one of the bus firms in the Western suburbs. He is personally abused by his boss when anyone makes a complaint about the service.

The professionals who work in operating and programming all earn well over $15,000. One woman owns a flat which she wouldn't think of living in herself: it's such a hole. She rents it out for $64 a week. Her brother manages a coffee plantation in New Guinea. Does the plot thicken? Another woman is looking for a unit. Her limit is $120,000. The real estate agent asks about finance. From the family, she replies, my father's a doctor. A manager says that the more interesting jobs in the Public Service are at the lower levels. But he'd have to take a drop in salary. About $30,000.

HOUSING THE CODING SECTION: PART OF A FLOOR OF AN OFFICE BUILDING WAS RENTED. IT PROVED TOTALLY INADEQUATE: (1) BROKEN BLINDS LET IN DIRECT GLARE FROM THE SUN ONTO THE SCREENS. (2) SEATING CONSISTED OF ORDINARY CHAIRS WITHOUT CASTERS OR MECHANISMS FOR ADJUSTING HEIGHT. (3) NO COPY HOLDERS. (4) EXTENSION CORDS AND DOUBLE ADAPTORS HELD BY TAPE. (5) NO WORK BREAKS – RESEARCH RECOMMENDS APPROX. 10 MINS. REST EVERY 2 HOURS, OR A 4 HOUR SHIFT. THE CODERS WERE WORKING A 7 HOUR DAY PLUS OVERTIME.

Our male supervisor refers to 'getting it up' when we commence work with the system each morning. I feel sick and useless. There's no strategy that springs to mind that I can use immediately.

I think about getting him on sexual harrassment. But it's all muddy, especially when we think he is a gay misogynist. Moreover, he doesn't obviously offend all the women. Sharon leads him naively into innuendos. There's feminist theory for female masochism. She goes to the doctor with her husband about her pregnancy. She is too embarrassed to ask intimate questions about sexual practice. Her husband isn't. She is shocked at what she hasn't even dared to think about.

Dianne suggests that Sharon is attracted to the supervisor. We can't believe this, and if we do, it still leaves us mystified because we cannot account for it.

IT WAS CLEAR THAT MANAGEMENT WAS NOT CONCERNED WITH THE OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH, SAFETY AND COMFORT OF THE V.D.U. OPERATORS. THEIR CONCERN WAS FOR THE HARDWARE OF COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY, BUT NOT FOR THE PEOPLE WHO OPERATED THE TECHNOLOGY. THEY SPENT THOUSANDS TO SEE THAT THE COMPUTER OPERATED IN CORRECT TEMPERATURES, YET THE V.D.U. OPERATORS WORKED IN THE HEAT GENERATED BY MACHINES PLACED IN CLOSE PROXIMITY TO EACH OTHER, WITH AN INADEQUATE AIR-CONDITIONING SYSTEM. ONE CODER WORE SUNGLASSES. THERE WERE INTERMITTENT COMPLAINTS OF

SORE EYES, HEADACHES, STIFF NECKS, RESTLESS SLEEP, TIREDNESS AND STRESS. THE TEA ROOM WAS ENTIRELY INADEQUATE FOR ALL THE CODERS TO BE PLACED COMFORTABLY AWAY FROM THE MACHINES. THERE WERE NO SICK ROOM FACILITIES. WAGES, INCLUDING OVERTIME AND TEA MONEY, WERE CONSISTENTLY WRONG TILL MID-WAY THROUGH THE JOB. TEA MONEY WAS NOT PAID UNTIL IT WAS DISCOVERED BY CHANCE THAT IT WAS DUE TO THE CODERS.

Dianne believes that if you are being paid you are bound to work to the best of your ability. She is the fastest and most accurate coder. She assumes employers are honest like herself until it becomes obvious that the aren't. Tired and stressed at the end of a full day, she fights with her husband at night. The computer programme has errors that interrupt the smooth flow of her work and waste a considerable amount of her time. She points the errors out to the programmer and discovers she knows more about the programme than he does. Why is he earning three or four times her salary?

When Dianne discovers our first pay cheque is wrong, Lorraine makes an official complaint about it. When Maria falls ill, Lorraine is at her side. As Maria doesn't want to go home and lose a full day's pay, Lorraine discovers she has nowhere to rest, no first aid cabinet to use. She speaks to the supervisor about our simple, basic rights.

ONE CODER WAS TAKEN ASIDE BY MANAGEMENT ON A FRIDAY AFTERNOON AFTER WORKING HOURS. IT HAPPENED TO BE ONE OF THE CODERS WHO HAD BEEN PARTICULARLY VOCAL ABOUT SHODDY WORKING CONDITIONS. THE CODER BELIEVED SHE WAS BEING THREATENED WITH TERMINATION OF HER EMPLOYMENT. THE ASSISTANT DIRECTOR CLAIMED IT WAS A MEETING TO DISCUSS PRODUCTIVITY AND HER 'PROBLEMS'. HE DID NOT PRODUCE ANY EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT HIS CLAIM THAT HER PRODUCTIVITY WAS LOW AND HER ERROR RATE HIGH. HE DEMANDED THAT SHE SEE A COUNSELLOR. SHE BELIEVED IT WAS AN ATTEMPT TO SILENCE HER BY VICTIMISATION AND HUMILIATION.

I have had a university education which makes me slow to act and prevents me from clearly seeing to the essence of things. I recommend further education to Lorraine so that she won't have to face these working conditions all her life. But she's sure that the best thing to do is to stay on the shop floor and help fight in the important battles that always take place here.

Lorraine has courage. I'm full of fear. But I don't know why. My fear is irrational. The people who employ me are just that. Though they are men. If we all stood naked together, we'd be equal. To remember we're equal. It's a confrontation with power. It's abstract (though I experience it concretely) because I can't put my finger on what it is exactly. They earn a lot more money than us. They're secure. It's also a matter of manners. I have been trained to be polite, but I don't want to be. Politeness is used as a deflator of genuine grievances like threats to your health and safety. We all behave as if we're in a civilised environment. The assistant director has a beard and wears soft, open-necked shirts in cream or maroon.

I begin developing completely inappropriate explanations: the assistant director is a very short man, so he gets into power in a big way, taking out his revenge on the world, but especially women.

FOUR CODERS WERE CHARGED WITH DISOBEYING AN ORDER FROM THE MALE SUPERVISOR. THE CODERS DISCUSSED WITH A MANAGER THAT A MISINTERPRETATION WAS QUITE EASY IN THE CIRCUMSTANCES. AT THE TIME THE CODERS ALSO DISCUSSED WITH THE MANAGER THEIR GENERAL DISSATISFACTION WITH THE WORKING CONDITIONS, AND IN PARTICULAR WITH THE SUPERVISOR. HOWEVER, AFTER SPEAKING WITH THE SUPERVISOR SEPARATELY, THE MANAGER CHOSE TO IGNORE EVERYTHING SAID BY THE CODERS AND THE FOUR WERE SELECTED OUT TO BE MOVED PERMANENTLY TO THE HEAD OFFICE. THE ASSISTANT DIRECTOR SAID THAT IT WAS PURELY AN ADMINISTRATIVE MEASURE, YET HE STRESSED THAT THE CODERS COULD NO LONGER COMMENT ON CONDITIONS IN THEIR FORMER OFFICE.

We demand to speak to the director. That's impossible. He walks about the office. The office staff exchange pleasantires or listen to him. But they don't make demands or ask questions. This is an unwritten law like those surrounding gunfights that take place on Hollywood sets in B grade movies. Yet the director walks about the office. We see him.

We speak to the assistant director. Briefly, cramped in his office with a view of the vastness of the city, we behave in a genuinely anarchic fashion. Lorraine calls him a liar. He looks to Dianne for support. She looks away from him to us with a sweeping but silent ooo-wah! At the conclusion Chris makes sure we have our tea-break.

We are successfully isolated from each other in the office. Not one of us is in view of the other. Lorraine immediately turns her buzzer up to full volume. It's a small attachment on the machine that beeps when the pages are turned on the screen. When I can't hear the buzzer I get worried.

I have a friend who is five years old. I talk with one of her parents about how she will adjust to school. She grew up on a small farm where she ran, jumped, dived, kicked, squirmed. I remain seated in front of my machine because I succeeded in school.

Certain things have become clear: why migrant women are called hysterics when they complain about industrial injury, and why foot soldiers are cannon fodder, and nuclear capability is increasing.

UNEMPLOYED

I am waiting on a travel concession. I have deliberately chosen an opportune moment to come to the barrier. No-one else is there. But other commuters inevitably come. I have to wait aside while they are served. They wonder why. I'm not worried yet. A man making up my card asks for my age. Thirty. My day hasn't been too good so far; suddenly, the whole world collapses. He shares a joke with the ticket-seller. It's probably not at my expense. I think it is. I don't think of myself as thirty; it's a fact I keep hidden from me. I am twenty-six or twenty-four. (Do I dress as if I'm that old? My mother — '. . . dress her age!') I am like those male American novelists who think the worse thing they ever did was advance in years beyond sixteen. If I don't have a job at thirty, when will I? Will I become a mature/responsible adult? If I haven't made it by thirty, there's a good chance I've missed the boat completely. But I'm an 'alternate'. Trouble is these forages into straight society represent cultural shocks that result in the upheaval of one's personal identity. I don't meet people from my past. I look like such a failure. Marriage, house, kids, great salary, professional ambition, responsible position. Actual achievements on a large scale that you can point to. Finger. Handle. But I do have jobs. Part-time. They're responsible. Professional. Just not enough money. I end up being committed to these alternate things that don't pay, but leave me no time for a full-time job. But the ticket-seller wouldn't understand. She's got a job. With the railways. I'm applying for full-time jobs. Look. That one in the paper on Saturday.

Ringing Up About A Job

I go down to a public telephone. I make an early call. Very early. It's the right thing to do. But it's too early. No-one's in the office. (Actually they are in the office, but they don't want to answer the phone.) Ring back in 10-15 minutes. O.K. What am I going to do for 15 minutes? Hang around town and look stupid. I go home. I

come back. I ring up. There are 15+ callers ahead of me. Can I hold on? It's an hour later and no further contact with the voice beyond the black dummy I hold. I'm on the line but it's not doing me any good. I'm not cut-off. (I couldn't stand being cut-off.) I'm in a marginally better situation. But I haven't got any evidence to show how. I think about it. I'm lucky not to be dragged out by the collar of whatever I'm wearing — be splayed under glass as someone's boot goes through the door. I'm on the phone for an hour and I haven't actually spoken to anyone about the job. I do give up. There've been blasphemers, single mothers, salesmen on the road who've given up. Any one of them with an urgent call to make. I've been in conversation with people outside telephone booths about the young lout inside, who sees we're waiting, but doesn't shorten his call. I go down to the shopping centre where there's a set of booths in the hope that if I'm in one for long, the other two are available. I've never seen people lined up outside the booths. People are lined up outside the booths. One booth is out of action. I'm in the other for fifteen minutes. 'Ah, come on love, I have to ring up about a job.' I replace the receiver. 'I was ringing up about a job too.' I go down to make a call. I dial the wrong number. Paper is stuffed up the coin-return slot. I can't get my coin back. I don't make another call. Rules for making calls on public phones: always bring more than one coin. This may seem obvious but it's often overlooked. I go down to make a call. The 'burring' sound isn't correct. I dial anyway. The correct number. No ringing tone. I get my coin back and go away. I go down to make a call. There's no dial. I go down to make a call. The receiver's broken in two.

At The Dole Office

I stand in a queue. We shuffle our feet, hedge around, hope to hand in our forms without question and be gone. Of course, it always happens like this. But we always suspect otherwise. Cigarette smoke here is that much staler. The office staff are pale. The unemployed look unemployable.

Application

For this job I'm happy to work under supervision. For this job I'm a self-starter with initiative. For this job I've had experience working as part of a team. For this job I've always worked freelance, independently. For this job I'm a specialist in my field.

For this job I can turn my hand to anything. For this job I dress conservatively. For this job I've an outgoing personality. For this job I've had experience with children. For this job I don't ever expect to be pregnant. For this job I have experience in shit-work. For this job I've never been employed in shit-work in my life. I want to make this job my career. In this job I realize I only have twelve months tenure. For this job I want part-time work. For this job I want a full-time position. For this job I'm a culture fiend. For this job I'm politically committed. For this job I've never been involved in anything suspect. For this job I'm a radical feminist. For this job I'm a feminist, mildly. For this job I've been to high school. For this job I have three degrees. For this job I've been in paid work. For this job I've been in unpaid work. For this job I've studied it. For this job I've done it. I've researched this job. For this job, I know someone on the selection panel.

Letters of Rejection

At night, in bed, I lull myself to sleep contemplating the design of logos on letterheads from government departments, businesses, and educational institutions, on letters that paper my bedroom wall. A depressing prospect? I need no mandala. I drift off to sleep contemplating the phraseology of rejection: 'Thank-you for showing interest . . . but . . . '; 'The response for the particular position was overwhelming . . . We regret . . . '; 'Loved hearing from you. We're fine. Quite happy to keep rejecting. Yours, or rather, not, Prospective Employer.'

PROSE IN TWO MOVEMENTS

One

The family owns a multi-million dollar consortium of companies. The original basis of the empire is a meat plant. Theirs is the ritual rise to extraordinary wealth in a capitalist economy. Competitors speak of 'devotion to business'. 'Hard work' and 'enterprise' are the keystones to their success.

Sticking to butchering proves most successful. In busy periods, the wives attend the cash registers and finish parcelling. At the meat plant during a strike, the brothers and husbands slaughter, skin, clean and bone the carcasses. The sons work in the plant during school holidays.

All over the country people are trapping rabbits and transporting them to the Eastern plant. Soon the family is displaying frozen rabbits at American conventions.

The company expands from the processing and packaging of meat, to animal by-products to plastic coat-hangers and shoelaces, to chemicals, electronics and mining. The brothers personally lobby the government for business expansion, but lacking the anonymity of other companies, the family keep a low media profile. They make no comment on local community complaints of air pollution from the meat plant.

The original ambition of the patriarch was to own an expensive car, become wealthy and change his address. The family moves from the Western to the Eastern suburbs.

Leisure, like business, is a family activity. Winters are spent at the holiday chalet in the mountains, less than an hour away by private jet. Skiing is a favourite sport of one of the sons and the family indulge him. He dies on a run down the slopes.

There is a service. A set of stained-glass windows, designed and executed by an artist, is commissioned in memory of the son. The service has national television coverage. The report concentrates on the work of the artist and, discreetly, on the family mourning in solemnity.

Two

Helene is a worker in a meat plant. She prepares meat for freezing. She gets up in the morning at five to make breakfast and prepare lunch for her husband, who goes to work with her, and for her children, who will go to school. She leaves home at six to get to work at seven.

Her children hang around the school playground until the other kids arrive and classes begin. Sometimes the children go to Helene's friend who is not working, has young children of her own, and is prepared to supervise a couple more.

Helene is happiest when this occurs. She does not have to rush home at 4 p.m. to check on her children's safety. Perhaps she can do a little shopping on the way home for that night's meal. She is most anxious when they return home alone to an empty flat. She cannot make or take phone calls on the process line.

One day she is slower than usual in getting to the canteen for the morning tea-break. Menstrual cramps, aggravated by the cold from the concrete floor on which she works, force her to stop for painkillers. All of the other women have gone ahead in the usual centrifugal rush at the sound of the bell. She is in the cranking lift alone and having trouble getting the upper and lower doors to close. She stands close to the entrance of the big, box-like goods lift, looking from the top to the bottom door, while tugging on the thick piece of free-swinging rope that is part of the mechanism that moves them. After several tugs, the doors come crashing together.

The lift moves upward to the canteen. Some women moving from the canteen back to the work areas, find her body on the

floor of the lift. On his way to a later morning tea with men from a different section of the plant, the husband finds his wife's head outside the lift door.

After taking the official amount of compassionate leave, the husband asks for more time off work. He finds it very difficult to do the simplest tasks, his concentration is negligible. His employers refuse him an extension of leave.

THE USHERETTE

I rush to my post, late.

Gosh, I AM late: I dropped my uniform. I continue evoking my own subliminal fears, to deal with them on a conscious level: I thought I'd left it in the train. Imagine half-way to the western suburbs by now. It'd have no chance! But I recall myself as it was just outside the stage door.

I adjust my hair, uniform — it's a kind of 1930's American movie/bell-hop/sweet-seller style for theatricality with convict/swaggie/anzac/resource boom overtones for Australianess. 'Ah, these artistes!', is all my employer can say in what amounts to an apologia for the designer.

'Have we been open long?' I ask Derek, the doorman. 'No, only just,' Derek pertly replies. Derek's a veteran of several hundred concerts in other great 'centres' around Australia. 'I wouldn't let it happen again though,' he says in a cautionary spirit, 'you know how they are here.'

I can hear THEM now, as I stand cleaning the nails of one hand with the other, and cutting them on my teeth, 'You are here TO SERVE. You are representing a world class concert hall. Music lovers expect a certain standard.'

The warning bell rings. I stand to attention, ready. The onslaught doesn't materialize. (They all wait till the last minute.) My attention wanders; my eyes survey the place. I stand, dwarfed by the grey cavernous walls of the concert hall — spray-painted to look like an Australian mineral deposit. It's like standing in a pit at the bottom of an open-cut.

I move into the aisle and await the migration of the lemmings. I practise a few waist-trimmers. 'Side-to-side.' A few push-ups. 'One. Two. Let's get physical. Physical. I wanna get physical-a-a-al. Let's get into phys . . . '

I imagine a fire, caused by a smoke machine used in the avant-garde staging of some opera, and I escape by the side doors.

Stuff that Philippines usherette — the A.B.C. news report repeats in my head: 'In the fire in the Philippines theatre, the usherette attempted to keep the crowd calm; all escaped without injury. The usherette was commended for her bravery.' Still, it could mean a mention in the papers: 'It was the usherette's quick thinking that saved Mr Montague's life. At the climax of the symphony the multi-millionaire suffered a heart attack. The usherette was rewarded with a quarter of a million dollars. When asked what she would do with the money, the usherette replied (in my best Mae West accent) 'I don't reaally care. I'm just glad I could be of assistance.' I lift my khakis to reveal my legs for pin-up photos.

I suppose I could have a practice, a run-through. A dress rehearsal. For the few moments when I'm in the spotlight. When the whole show depends on me. 'There's no business like show-business, like no business I know . . . ' I direct patrons, with the utmost efficiency, to their seats. Coming to attention at the particular row. Returning the tickets. Marching back to my post. Turning in a pirouette away from the back wall to face the audience, placing my feet in third position — 'Applause. Applause, applause.'

And here they come! 'Good evening, sir. Can I take your ticket?' He backs up immediately in a panic. 'No, no, you can't have it, it's mine,' he squeals, 'I paid good money for it.' I'm shocked. I try to explain: 'That's not what I meant.' He backs up further, ready to fend off a physical attack. 'But I have to look to see where you're sitting,' I say, bewildered. 'No, no,' he intones. I'm exasperated. This is a fool. 'It's standard procedure.' I feel stupid saying that. I simply demand the ticket. It works. He, suddenly, resignedly: 'Oh, all right, here,' he gives me the ticket, 'if you're going to make such a fuss about it.' I whimper quietly to myself.

Now K, K is before L: no, no, it's after L because we're going backwards forwards (we rock to and fro on our feet.) 35. 35 is to the left (we lean left). No, right (we lean right). 21 is the aisle seat. 21 from 35 is : 1 from 5 is 4, 2 from 3 is 1 (he lends me his calculator). 1 from 5 is 4. 14 seats along, but 15 including the aisle seat — I'll never understand the mathematics of that. 'This row sir, the seat is towards the middle of the aisle, row, well maybe more towards this end than the middle. No, no, this aisle, row, sir, this one, this one, this. And the seat number, 21; no, 35. On the front of the seat, not the back, the front, the front, the front of the seat.'

I'm exhausted. I have to sit down. I do. In the main body of the hall. No, no, what do I think I'm doing. I get up, hope that no-one has seen me. I walk primly back in an attempt to regain my dignity.

It's one minute to. The onslaught begins. I step into the aisle. I wait to take the first ticket. But they're coming at me all at once. 'One at a time, one at a time,' I plead. But it's no use. They keep coming . . . I'm on the floor. Flat on my back. They're finding their seats OK by themselves. I'm being trampled to death. I crawl back to my post.

The lights go down and my torch battery goes flat. For the latecomers I crawl on my hands and knees to read the brass letter-plates at each row and then send the stout-hearted patrons forth to explore, in pitch black, along a long row of seats, to find an empty space, a niche in this cultural environment, which, albeit temporarily, they can call theirs.

The orchestra plays Wagner. I am in S.S. uniform — coat, cap, boots and whip.

I strut down the aisle, tapping the whip on my leg. I am keeping an eye on my little charges. One is about to sneeze. I whip the whip under his nose. 'Eh, excuse mee, you don't sneeze durink zee performance. I am here to vutch you all! No-one puts a foot out of line! Vee vill listen to zee glorious musik of our fatherland.' I salute.

Suddenly I hear the crackling of lolly paper. I scan piercingly a section of the audience. The crackling stops. I return my attention to the music. The crackling starts up. I tip-toe up behind the offending lolly-eater. I place the whip on his shoulder. 'Vut do you dink you are doink? Give me dat! Vut decadence! Dis is not permitted. Mal-TEASE-ers. MalTEASErs! You sadist!' I whip him flagrantly.

Tchaikovsky's Fantasia finds me in tutu and roller-skates. I speed on my haunches along rows the width of the concert hall, while members of the audience make way for me by alternately raising and lowering their legs as in Busby Berkeley choreography. I glide down the centre aisle — gay, light hearted, fanciful — stopping to arch my back over the first four seats in row H, one leg in the air, and then swinging on high from the perspex sound discs suspended from the ceiling, like a Peter Pan in drag, my flight impaired only by the weight of the roller skates. I come crashing into the open mouth of an inert tuba.

During interval a gentleman stands in the aisle, under a recessed light. 'Can I help you, sir?' He is reading his programme. 'I can't even read in my seat, there's not enough light.' (Well, I'll just call the architects, builders and labourers; we'll have a planning meeting, draft some remedial measures, begin work and hope that we finish during interval). 'Oh right, it is a bit dim there, isn't it sir!' I move on.

An Italian visitor, here for the Vivaldi and a string ensemble, comes up to me: 'Eh, exuce me please. I want the, eh, stage door, where do I go?' (Ah, per port-a and ah, per la stra-da — a bit of international flair, a bit of savoir faire from the employees.) 'Through the doors,' I point my finger. 'And down the street,' I wave my hand.

A little old man comes up to me: 'Is there someone coming round with ice-creams?' (Is someone coming round with ice-creams? This is a top-class world renowned Arts Centre of the first rank. Not your bloody town hall, school of arts, or mechanics' institute, not your jaffa-rolling flicks venue.) 'No, sir, food and drink are now allowed in the concert hall; there's a bar outside that serves alcohol and light refreshments.'

Another woman has found her seat broken. But it's more than just a broken seat. It raises certain issues: the absence of craft in mass production, the cultural dislocation of Europeans in Australia (she's European), the great Australian cultural cringe (I'm Australian), the cultural decline of present-day civilisation, trade unions in Australia (she wants the seat fixed on a Saturday night), fire regulations and the Towering Inferno (she wants a seat put in the aisle), the behaviour of the individual in a social context (she wants to sit next to her friend).

Derek and I have a little chat. Or as management describes it: we move from our station and gather in a group talking, and this is forbidden. I check my flashlight and Derek tells me there's a definite art to holding a torch. 'Zen and the Art of Torch-Holding' . . . possibilities? I fling on a saffron robe. 'As the violinist carries her violin so the usherette carries her torch in her armpit. The one the music of the sphere, the other the light of the universe. With the instrument so close to the body, the usher and her tool become one and out of this fusion the creative act flows. The usherette has indeed a special place in the universe in the search of all women for their seats. In the dark with which she is familiar, through territory she has already mapped, she guides her fellow travellers with a small circle of light. So with this act of compassion and humility, she has served her loving energy and let it flow on to her sisters and thus together they can enter the nirvana of concert viewing.'

The lights go down. I have to direct a patron to his seat in the dark. In vain I search row by row, for the bronze letter that coresponds with the one on the ticket. I drift ahead and he calls out, 'Miss, Miss, I can't see where I'm going!' Grumbles from the audience. I get back to him. This time he stays close behind. I'm confused about how the correct row has now disappeared. He catches me before I get too far ahead again and says he has found it. I hope he doesn't report the incident. There's something profoundly pathetic about an usherette with a torch who can't find her way.

Handel's Messiah is playing. In the choir the men are in dinner suits and the women in grey dresses, like penguins on Gibralter

and pigeons in holes. 'Unto us a child is born. Unto us a DAUGHTER is given.'

When the great organ detonates a chord, like atmosphere for a horror movie, I wrap my black cloak around my face, hiding my incisors, and sail toward a long, white, glistening neck that beckons me in the dark from somewhere in the audience. I glide stealthily, any noise I make being drowned by blasts from the organ. I find my victim and so near sweet blood my teeth, exposed, elongate by excitation, and as I lurch forward to sink my teeth into that tempting neck, 'I must drink — the air-conditioning in here makes you so thirsty . . .', the house lights go up, the audience gives three encores and I have to open the doors, wait till the hall is cleared, check for lost property and lock up.

I walk down the aisle and check along the rows: any rings, jewellery of any description, $10 notes, a few coins, some sweeties maybe . . .

BRIAN "SQUIZZY" TAYLOR

Hey, I must tell you what happened the other day.

You know how we went up the coast, um, with that young guy. He was like, ah, a self-styled punk. Yeah. Only about fourteen. Well he got involved in London, he was staying there for a while, with these working-class kids; you know, like real punks. They wrecked football trains and he got hooked on cough-mixture and god knows what, dog pills. Well, he came up the coast with us to dry out, and it's just rife with hippies, you know, blonde hair, Balinese gear, god! They went crazy over Richard Clapton, he had a concert there, when he sang 'I've got those Blue Bay blues', you know, about Byron Bay. I mean, that song must have been written ten years ago. Well, o god, he wore a heavy German overcoat, like a military one, and heavy boots, like these great clumping things and he had black pants, and short spiky hair dyed red and he walked onto the sand; I mean this is the middle of summer, the proverbial burning deserts; and I thought: what is this guy going to do? And then I thought: what do punks do in summer? No, really. What do you do in black plastic? It's non-absorbent right? Surely you have to consider these things. Unless, I don't know punks go in for endurance tests. I mean, it's downright uncomfortable. And black, all that black. It just absorbs the heat. And try to keep looking pasty-faced. They probably raid the chemists for Block-Out. I mean, how are you going to avoid a tan? Well, you just couldn't go out, could you. I mean, punks are really out of place in Australia, aren't they? Winter is the season of the punk. They must have a really hard time in Australia. Well, you'll never guess. I was just looking at the paper the other day, and what do you think? I saw this piece about this Brian "Squizzy" Taylor, and he's a punk-surfie. Can you imagine that? I mean it's taken an Australian to do it. Are Australians known for their ingenuity or something? 'cause this guy's got it. He's won some surfing award or something, you

know, like riding a board. He's got these black wraparound sunglasses and tight pants and sandshoes, and he walks onto the beach like that, I mean isn't that amazing? It's like, well I think it was an art book, yeah, on Van Gogh, and in it his letters to his brother were quoted, and I remember looking them up and finding they hadn't been published in English, then I don't know, a few weeks later a book of his letters came out, in hardback; it's one of the few hardbacks I've bought; I bought another one, I think it was Blood Red Sister Rose, you know, by the Australian guy, Thomas Kenneally, that's right; or another time I'd seen a programme on Che Guevara and Tanya, his last girlfriend, and then I was just looking at some poetry in a bookshop and I saw a poem about Tanya by William Carlos Williams, or was it one of the American women poets, Anne Sexton or someone? Yeah, and then I was thinking about how punks manage in Australia and here's this Brian "Squizzy" Taylor in the paper.

COLLECTING BROOCHES

The only jewellery my mother wears is a wedding ring, and a brooch.

I buy brooches until this activity seems a foolish hedge against time; the objects themselves too fragile.

A brooch I lost was ivory: small and delicate, the spindly legs of the reindeers at its centre, like fine needles. I lost it somewhere between the city centre and a suburb, within the ten mile radius for the immediate effects of a ten megaton bomb. I owned it for several years. Its disappearance meant another sure foothold gone.

And one from India: Jaipur, the pink city of the Rajasthan. A hand-painted miniature. A veiled woman kneeling beside a peacock, its tail fanned. The paint chipped away and the ivory, thin like a host, split in the centre. I cannot keep anything, nor maintain continuity.

That summer I move house so regularly, it seems a disease like paranoia. I shed possessions like a snake sheds its skin. I take a bicycle back to a friend. We talk in the re-created loungeroom of a squat, next to a room full of rubble. She tells me of a local film-maker who plans to buy an old bus and travel round the country making films. I suppose this to be a bright idea — to keep moving, always be ahead, always in another spot. Better to be in Australia than Europe. She says I am forgetting the bases: these are scattered ingeniously across the whole island.

I have a friend who moved deep into the Tasmanian forests in the early nineteen seventies; he thought the world was going to end then. Another bought a house in the mountains outside of

Sydney. Yes, perhaps we should study wind currents she says, to know the pattern of fallout. Wind currents. I can't imagine myself doing that. But every night on television weather maps, we watch the movement of air pressure systems as they drift across the whole continent.

During the day I work in an office performing the mundane tasks that keep the movement going at times when the cause is not in vogue. One night I have a dream. I am at a party with others from the office, because the following morning we have to leave the city. The dream ends there.

In the morning there is an item on the radio news about a possible invasion in Europe, at a time when we have been talking at length of clandestine and well-organised plots against the kind of people we are and the things we do.

He says he will go to the mountains if the invasion comes off. I haven't yet lifted my head from the pillow. We have been back from the mountain house about a week or so. The memory of a retreat is still with us. Half-asleep, I cannot grasp the present. He says he will not stay in the city. This is the survivor's mode. It is important, triumphant, to at least survive. Then there is time to consider the next step.

I think of my family immediately. How can I convince them to leave everything? They're on their way to work. They'll want evidence, and we are only making an educated guess, a kind of punter's wager, that this is the moment for a decision.

Like my father, I don't own anything of value. But I buy woolly jumpers, hoping they'll keep me warm for years ahead, and practical things like sewing machines and tools maybe, if I have the money. I think about buying non-electrical appliances for the energy crisis and the post-nuclear world. And I find myself collecting brooches again.

ROUND ONE

Lou lay in bed watching.

Andy sat naked, immobilised with the warm shock of waking. Lou stretched out and rubbed him affectionately on the back.
'How are you this morning?'
'Fine. I had a good sleep; seeing I didn't have to get up for the minx all night.' He lay down on her.
'How about coming back to bed. Remember how we used to lay about in bed before she came. It seems ages ago.' She paused and thought. 'But it's only been two months. I'm surprised she isn't awake yet. Fancy being up before her.' They heard the patter of the child's feet on the kitchen floor.
'I wouldn't speak too soon.' Andy sat up, ready.

The child came to the bedroom, saw her father and rushed to him, smiling, happy. She sat on his knee. He rubbed her back. 'Hello sweetheart, how are you, eh? Have a good sleep?' She was waking up. Yawning. Stretching. Looking into the day ahead.
'Am I going to kindy today?'
'Yes, it's kindy today.'
'Can I wear a dress today? Not pants. I'll wear pants, um, after two days.'

Lou looked away and spoke up to the ceiling. 'I wish you would discourage her from wearing dresses. Anyway, she'll have to wear pants today, all the dresses are dirty.'
'Oh, there are no dresses today, sweetheart. Daddy will have to do a wash. Just pants for one more day.
'I love you daddy.'
'And I love you minx.'

*

When she heard the child's footsteps, Lou lept out of bed to head her off in the kitchen before she entered the otherwise empty bedroom. She determined on being bright and ingenuous.
'Good morning.'

But the child was immediately disappointed at seeing her first thing. The face developed a grimace for crying.
'No, no, not you. I don't want you.'
'Listen, daddy had to . . .'
The tears began.
'No, no, go away. I don't want you. I want daddy. Daddy.'

And she tried to struggle past Lou into the bedroom. Lou got down on her knees to be on the same level as the four-year-old. While she prepared to explain the situation to the child, she failed to simplify, squeezing too many messages into the one rationalisation.
'You were asleep honey. We didn't want to wake you. You didn't go to sleep till very late last night. You see, it's better to go to sleep early. You'll see daddy when he gets home.' But the child pushed past her, ran into the bedroom confirmed what she already knew and threw herself onto the bed.
'I want daddy to pick me up, not you.'

Lou had followed her in to put on some clothes. Already considerably weakened by those first few brutal moments, she sensed that the morning ahead was going to be all battle. It was like waking up to the eight o'clock news, three times over.
'OK I'll ring him. Now come on, we'd better have breakfast and get you to kindy.'
'I don't like you.'
'I know, you've told me that before.'

Lou was actually very bored by the thought of another bowl of muesli for breakfast. The more she economised on ingredients the less exciting it became. And it seemed that she'd been having it for so long, she couldn't remember life-without-muesli. So it was without personal conviction that Lou sttod on opposite ground, instinctively, when the child complained.
'Oh I'm sick of muesli. I want Weeties.' She took to the chair by

her knees and played petulantly with the spoon and soaking oat flakes.

Lou released a theatrical sigh. 'Well I'm sorry, there's only muesli, now just eat your breakfast. I'll put on your bath and we'll get going.'

*

Lou shouted down the hall to the child sitting on the fence. 'Come up now please. I don't want you getting dirty. It's time to go to kindy.'

The back of her head told Lou she was determined not to pay attention. She sat on the fence in a fantasy, in which her father might walk by at any moment and she could catch up with him. Or as a second option, the kids next door might come out to play, and she could forget about her present problems.

Lou was out of control. 'If you don't come up immediately I'll have to come down and get you. And I'll be very angry.' The child turned and scowled. Lou stormed down. Dragged the child inside. A flood of tears.

When nothing goes smoothly, nothing goes smoothly, thought Lou. She was attempting to put pants on the child.
'I don't want pants.'
'There still aren't any clean dresses. So you'll have to wear pants.' Childish self-indulgence in victory thought Lou. So she added, 'Just for one more day, eh?' She picked up the little plastic sandals.
'Oh I don't want those shoes. I don't like them.' The child threw herself at the bed and slid to the floor.
'Look, if you want another pair of shoes, you'll have to find them.'

Off she went and Lou heard her rummaging through the toys and shoes as they hit the bedroom walls. She eventually dragged herself out of the bedroom. She couldn't find them. Lou had to help.

*

Lou couldn't drag the child screaming, uphill, to the bus stop, so she picked her up. The child enjoyed being carried. Memories of being in her father's arms, strapped to his bicycle, or riding in the utility. Now she was expected to walk everywhere. She spoke of the phone call they would make to her father.

Lou got on the red phone. 'Andy, it's been a dreadful morning. You'll have to pick her up.'

*

Lou thought the perfume exquisite. Sweetpea. She had decided to develop the garden of this house.
'There, you do have a green thumb,' said Andy. He moved toward her, giving her a hug, and admiring the flowers. Lou briefly indulged in the compliment.
'There aren't any flowers in my room.'

Lou explained to the child that the flowers in the kitchen were for everyone. She continued arranging them and when she turned round, the child had disappeared.
'Quick, while we've got the chance.' She gave and shared a warm embrace with Andy. 'Oh, it's so nice to hold you. I wish she wouldn't get up so early on the weekends. There's no time for us. I don't know, I always get up feeling I've missed out on something.'
'O minx.' Andy renewed the hug.
'I'm not the minx.' Lou pulled away. She had pinpointed a Freudian slip.

They heard the child's footsteps. She came in with more flowers, looking for a suitable vessel. 'These are for my room.'
Lou shouted, 'Did you just pick all those flowers in the garden. I don't want you to touch them again.' She ran down to assess the damage.
'Daddy, can I use this for the flowers?' She found a glass.
'Yes dear.'
Lou shouted from outside. 'Just look what she's done. She's pulled every single flower out.'

Andy called down to her. 'Lou, it's alright. They're flowers. They'll grow back again.'
Taking his hand, the child led her father. 'Bring them into my room for me daddy, please.'
Lou returned to the kitchen and Andy left the child playing in her room.
'Well, did you say anything to her?'
'Lou, they're only flowers.'
'Oh, she makes me so angry. She deliberately pulled every flower off that plant . . . '
'She's only a child.'
' . . . to spite me.'
'Lou, listen. She's basically got a very sweet nature. You're attributing far too much cunning and spite to her than she's capable of.'
'Look, when she first came here, I filled her whole room with flowers. I don't remember her taking much notice. She wasn't very concerned with flowers then.'
'You're being very irrational about this.' He called to the child to take her down to the garden and talk with her. She came out, but specifically forbade Lou to follow them, 'Not you, Lou.'

Lou was taken aback with this short shrift, and heaved another sigh.

*

Lou sat at the kitchen table peeling vegetables. The child drifted in, dragging her feet on the floor and her fingers across the table. Lou sensed her boredom and tensed. She was feeling tired herself.
'I want to make some pastry.'
'Not tonight honey, it makes too much of a mess. Go and play with your blocks or something, eh?' Lou recognised a cliche, but presumed the child wouldn't.

The child continued round the kitchen and stopped at the storage jars. As she picked one up full of flour, Lou darted across to stop her.
'Don't pick up these jars. I've told you about that. They're too

heavy. I don't want you dropping and breaking them.'
'I want to make some pastry.'
'No, I told you it's too messy.'
'But I want to make dinner.'
'I'm just cutting up some vegetables. It's too difficult for you. And I'm almost finished. Go and find something else to play with, eh?'
'Oh, I'm bored.'

As Andy had just arrived home, Lou was saved from uttering another sigh of complete hopelessness.
The child was always excited on his return. She jumped around like a rabbit. He patted her on the head. 'Hello dear, how are you?' He moved across to give Lou a long, slow, warm hug.
'I didn't get a hug.'
'Oh I'm sorry dear.' Andy moved back to give the child an embrace. Lou set dinner out on the table.
'It smells great Lou. It's delicious.'

The child fingered her food. Lou watched her. 'Don't be a little piglet. Eat with your knife and fork.'
'I don't like vegetables. I'm sick of them.'
'Listen minx, Lou's cooked this lovely dinner for us . . . '
'O God, I give up.' Lou dropped her knife and fork. 'I'm leaving.' She stood up. 'I'm going to join a communal house again.' She grabbed her coat. 'Or better still, I'm going to live alone . . . ' She yelled out as she left. ' . . . and take up radical celibacy.'
'Lou, Lou . . . ' Andy called after her.
'Daddy, you know what we did today?'
His attention was brought back to the child. 'Yes, yes dear, what is it?'
'We saw a movie today.' The child ate happily.

THE AESTHETIC TABOO

At certain times these things strike me as being the most important:

— Dianne and Maria have their own mothers look after their children while they go out to work, and Sue pays for professional child-minding services while she goes out to work and is subsequently approximately forty dollars a week poorer than the child's father who is elsewhere.

— Paul is employed in the steelworks and his problem is to come out alive at the end of each shift.

The way when I walk in Carlton, the beautiful people are always there.

And the way the woman walks out of 'Reds' and says 'how boring' and you just know because of the way she looks, she didn't want to even consider women and men in revolution.

Jutta Brukner: 'The suppression of reality that lies behind the aesthetic taboo is the most cemented one of all.'

Sarah won't wear the rugged walking boots we buy her, and insists on the black patent court shoes that are 'city shoes' she says. She likes looking at 'fancy shops' she says, while I take her along Chapel St. South Yarra and we look at little girls in dresses.

Women cluster on the floor around a symbol of the writer as a feminist at the Adelaide Arts Festival Writers' Week. I listen to a visiting playwright alongside women in bomber jackets in desert tones, and they say 'Isn't he wonderful!' while he talks about the great isolation of the writer. And one woman comes to the microphone, not to ask a question but to praise him, and she

slides very seriously into tears of admiration. While alongside him sits the theatre director who cringes at the next person whom he thinks is asking an uncool question.

We never went to the theatre. When I came home from school in the afternoon, my mother would be absorbed in ironing, sewing, or coming home from shopping, and soon she'd start the evening meal.

When I go to the theatre now, I don't know anyone. I don't recognise anyone's face. No-one speaks to me. Have all my friends had culturally deprived backgrounds, or are they politically astute?

When I go to the theatre now, I am haunted by group bookings of young women from private schools where the sports fields run down to the waters of the harbour.

(Did you notice going home on the school bus that the private school kids all had clean hair and clean skin and it was always the opposite with the rest of the kids? And as adults you can always pick them because they wear casual clothes in navy blue.

There was a girl in my class who came from a doctor's family. Her brother went to a G.P.S. school. She read Seventeen magazine and went to June Dally Watkins grooming classes. Once on a school retreat, she wore a long, red, pure woollen dressing gown with satin trim. I searched for such a gown years afterwards and bought, on sale, an unlined pink one from which the buttons fell.)

A man at a party wants the woman in long legs and it's a Playboy way of seeing.

I talk with the women in the office about whether Raquel Welch is beautiful or if she's a silicon clone. As we work together in a job we feel is mutually oppressive, I learn we, ourselves, are beautiful.

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