

It was very beautiful.

The woman looked at her watch. She said: Beautiful? Where?

The hills. At Apollo Bay. You remember.

No, she said. I don't remember. I've never been there.

The room quiet. Silence some part of the small clean space, the corridor beyond the open door, the other rooms, and the other corridors and the open wards, voices, people walking. She said: I think it's time I was leaving.

Are you busy?

I will be. I hope.

I suppose it was romantic. Yes.

Romantic?

For us to go there. I think he despised it. Even then I thought that.

Charles?

It seemed a long way then.

I doubt if my father despised a bit of romance. However far he had to go for it. The way he used to dress up. All those medals. Anzac Day. Occasions. Very handsome. But you are the romantic, mother. For all your hardheaded business success. It paid off in your business.

He never wrote about it.

I will come in tomorrow. I really do have to go.

Home.

Home, mother, is Sydney. I'm going with Richard.

She's coming to see the house, Jessica. He said: Kathy never has time.

You know I haven't had time.

He said: Of course.

Mother, I will come in tomorrow. I promise.

It was beautiful.

I'm sorry?

Her mother's face was still. Her head turned on the pillow. From the window the tops of the buildings, the trees and the small roofs of houses, the rise of land beyond the railway line, coloured streamers of the service stations, used car yards.

Tomorrow then. She bent towards her mother's face, touched her hand.

The wide windows framed grey scrub and the slope of dunes, the road and traffic. At one edge the angles of houses, broken, disordered, on the rising land. Framed carefully. A set. The moving cars. Perth changes, she said. Whenever I come back I see it.

Yes, he said. In its way.

It's strange my family ever came here. Very confirmed Victorians, actually. As you know. My dear father did get back there, of course. Rather sooner than we expected.

Beyond the road and the moving cars, the sea. The backdrop. Low clouds, and the light from the broken water.

Oh no.

I'm sorry?

That awful place. This reminded me. It's very impressive, Richard. And of course you will watch the America's Cup from here.

If I knew what I was looking at. And had a powerful enough telescope.

I see. Will you voyage out there?

I will not. You were too busy to see this last time, as I recall.

Well I was.

It seemed sensible to sell the other place. We'd been there long enough.

And you came here. It's very prestigious.

I came here. Yes. I like this view. And being near the sea.

Yes. And the girls like it here.

I'm sure. And Ann.

Places don't mean all that much to Ann.

Where is she?

She's gone with the girls to Singapore. The university vacation.

Of course. She lives here?

Ann has her own place. She stays here when she wants to. Kathy, you know all this.

Cosy. And she takes the girls away. How fortunate.

For them. Yes.

Lucky girls. It was harder for us, Richard. All this rushing about the world. Much harder for us.

At their age, I suppose it was. But it didn't restrict you. Later.

No, she said. She ran her hand slowly along the arm of the heavy lounge. And why aren't you with them?

Work. And, well, your mother.

I'm sorry. Richard, it is very good of you.

I'm fond of Jessica.

I know. You always did get on with one another. Better than I did. Or my long gone brother.

Let me get you another a drink. I'm sorry the girls are not here.

She turned away from the glass. The glare from the water. The room comfortable. Neutral. For all the discreet furniture,

expensive. All the houses with their careful views of the ocean perhaps the same. However desperate their facades. City Beach. A name without relevance. A line of drab names holding about all these beaches. Cottesloe. Scarborough. North Beach. A recital from her childhood.

How strange.

Strange?

The names of these beaches. I'd forgotten.

English, I suppose, some of them. Reminding someone of beaches at home. Once.

My god. How could they.

How could they. Kathy when you said that awful place. Which this reminded you of. What did you mean?

Not like that. No. I've been working in this terrible South Sea thing. Horrible really. An island. Which of course was not too far from Sydney. All surf and sun and bodies.

You are very brown. Sounds like your kind of thing, perhaps.

Maybe not any more. Tensions. Bad feeling. Terry just can't work with some people. You're not going to believe this, but they built this great native hut thing. Which was to burn with some effect. It had to be one off, of course. So in flames it went, everyone staggering from the burning wreckage. And the odd stuntmen. The camera had jammed.

I suppose that can happen.

It depends. There was a lot of not speaking to one another

for quite a time. Believe it or not I was a society matron. I did get to wear a grass skirt affair. Which I lost eventually. At the water's edge. Sunset. Like out there beyond your windows.

The famous boobs and bottom.

A little spread these days. Unfortunately.

I'm only jealous, Kathy.

You don't have to be.

Someone?

Not for a while. If you must know. Are you offering?

Not quite like this.

No, she said. Oh well. It's not any better, is it?

We could have dinner. Here. Or go out.

Yes. Here. We can fix something. I'd like that. She lifted her hands. That awful island. Promise you won't watch it.

She said: It is quite a splendid meal.

Mrs May leaves everything for us.

And the girls help.

I wouldn't say the kitchen was their favourite place.

No.

He said: I saw you a while ago. At one of those award nights.

You didn't watch that?

There you were.

There I was. Not receiving any recognition for my efforts actually.

I missed that part.

It had all been nicely arranged. Not too much bitching.

She was looking at him. Without expression. Mocking him. Or herself. He said: When I see you like that, among all those people, it's someone I don't know.

Not me.

I don't know.

But you are afraid it might be.

Do you think so?

Yes, she said. And I don't know if it is me. Sometimes I'm afraid it is.

They can't be real. Those people.

They have their masks.

I suspect they are their masks.

So do I, Richard.

I'm sorry, he said. I didn't mean to get round to anything like this. Did you enjoy the evening?

Yes, she said. I suppose I did.

The room in darkness without shape. The windows curtained, a faint light, nothing for her eyes, the walls endless. She said: Richard. Please.

What is it?

I don't even know where you are.

Quite close.

The light from the bedside lamp drawing shapes still distant.

Softened. Age, she said. Tearing at my bones. Just hold me.

The curtains held a pattern of colour, greyed, obscure. The sheets of the bed neat, her fingers touched them. He came quietly into the room. A movement of the half-light. He said: I didn't wake you. But if you would like breakfast.

I was lost last night, she said. But yes. And thank you.

He drew the heavy curtains slightly. Without sound.

That, she said, looks down to the sea, I suppose.

Yes.

It would have to. But it's too early to know that kind of thing.

I jog down there. Along the beach on a good morning.

Not this morning.

Yes. A high tide. The beach was hard. Clean, except for the plastic rubbish.

Is that bad?

Always now. I'll get your breakfast. No changes?

No.

She drank the coffee, the small pieces of toast broken, pushed about the plate. A morning battle in which her fingers twisted nervously at some adversary he had never understood.

He said: You are welcome to stay.

I think I would like to.

Then stay.

And I know I should. But I can't.



There are no problems, Kathy.

Oh yes. One, I have to go back today. There is this part in a series. Soap, yes. It may be quite horrible. But Richard there are just no good parts for someone my age. Few enough parts. Period. But at least I haven't got to making a fool of myself in daft tv ads.

Kathy you know you never need do that.

You don't understand. I don't think you ever did.

I do. And I don't.

If I miss this it will go to dear Alison. That I can't afford.

I'm sorry. If it is that way.

She moved the things together on the tray. Crushed the paper napkin. And there's us. We are not enemies.

No. I don't think we were ever that.

Even good for one another. In small doses. Lethal if taken to excess.

Well, as I said, I'm sorry.

It's for me to be that. And I am. And I shouldn't be leaving my mother. But I sit there and if she says anything I don't understand it. Part of the time she doesn't know I'm there at all.

I think she does.

It could just go on like that. I can't stand it.

The light beyond the window had hardened. In the room, filtered, but clear. She reached out her arms slowly, as if her fingers might test the light, her skin brown, firm, upper arms full, the curve to her shoulder.

She won't know if I'm not there. It's very strange. She has always somehow seemed to be able to slip away somewhere. I don't know. Just not there. I think as a child it frightened me. I used to try to make her see me. Oh god Richard all this is very early morning. I hate mornings. But it sent my father away. Oh, other things. But that, yes. And it made my brother a stranger. He went too. Canada. You can't go further than that. And now it's like this. Oh shit. Richard. Please. As a favour.

He said: I wouldn't put it like that.

She held the thin robe about her and he opened the door. The smooth cement sweep of driveway with the clean garden beds. A long rectangle of lawn. He said: Take the other car. You can leave it at the airport. I'll have it picked up.

I can get a taxi.

No. I'll come out if I can.

I'll call at the hospital.

I think she would like that.

I haven't told her I'm going. I don't think she would remember, anyhow. It would do no good.

The car slid neatly down the drive. Into the traffic already along the road. Indistinguishable. From the upper window she looked down at the garden. Like an architect's drawing. All there. Everything that should be. And beyond it the dunes and the sea. Cold, clear in the early light.

Her mother seemed asleep. A television set placed across the bed, blank, silent, and she knew her mother was watching her.

You have the television, she said. There are some good things on that.

Her mother's hand moved. I don't think I understand it any more.

Who does. But it's been bread for a few of us.

Her mother watched the clear window space. Each morning the nurse drawing the curtains, the day there.

Richard sent his love, she said. And the girls. He'll be in to see you.

The girls are at school.

University, mother. They have gone on holiday.

It was too late.

Too late?

That I met your father. It was not my fault.

Of course not.

I think he did go to England. After the war.

I thought he came over here.

He had to wait.

Wait?

A passport. Papers. Though he never said anything. It was a long time ago, Kathy. He didn't think I knew. He would never say anything.

I don't know why my father would ever have had any trouble getting a passport. Are you sure?

I wanted to see if he would write about it. Whatever it was. He never did. But I wanted something out of it all. I was glad.

Yes, she said. There were flowers on the small shelf by the basin. Carnations, some deep red flowers, fronds of fern. The light from the window held the tops of the houses in clear colour. The glitter of the car yard streamers. Green. Gold. The deep green lawn where her mother always had the sprinklers going. You are wasting water, she said. No. The plants like it. And it makes the place cool. I'm going to get reticulation and a bore put down. The man is coming next month. My god, she said, you'll wash the place away. The deep beds of zinnias, petunias, gerberas. Lush fleshy-leafed annuals, the leaves splashed purple, red. She had brought the fallen leaves in and placed them by her bed. Carefully, on the small dressing table. Her mother never removing them, and they dried slowly. Heavy shrubs her mother argued about with the gardener. They need only light pruning. You take too much from them. People passing in the street to look at the garden. She had not been back there. Her mother seeing the garden grow beyond her. To leave, and the expensive, fashionable home unit. Pot plants in strange profusion on the cement balcony. They will fall off one day, mother, and kill someone down there.

They never did, did they.

No, she said. And for a moment in the small white room was startled. I'll have to go soon. Is there anything I can get you?

Come tomorrow.

If I can.

I've been trying to remember. I meant to tell you.

Tell me now.

I can't remember exactly.

Almost at the last minute, before the flight call. A script timing.

As perhaps it was. She turning to face him.

I'm glad you came.

I thought the traffic had beaten me.

You hardly have traffic here, she said. Richard, when you see my mother, ask her if she wanted to tell me something. She was just being stubborn this morning, I think. My god, she could always be that. But if it is anything, could you let me know?

You think it might be?

I don't know. Sometimes we seem to read each other's minds. Always. But she might have been dreaming.

Can I ring you?

Do that, she said.

He moved quietly into the room, a shift of light that had no shape, no edge. Moving about the basin, reflected briefly in the mirror, forming from the greyness, the flowers in his hands.

The others are still fresh, she said.

He looked up quickly. Jessica. I thought you were asleep. Yes, they are. They can go together.

You needn't bring them, Richard. Go to that trouble.

It's no trouble.

He sat by the bed. She was looking beyond him, to the wide stretch of sky, dark, the patterns of lights, lines of streets clear like a grid. The red glow along the curving highway. A giant video game, he said.

Video?

Down there. At night.

Is it night?

Yes. Now.

A nurse stood briefly in the doorway. Smiled at him. Kathy had perhaps been right. Beyond all this, now, a vagueness, always. Something not touched. Which he did not question, and he had always been comfortable with it. The two of them in silence.

Kathy in that nothing like her mother. Assertive. Driving the girls. Angry when he protested. But a talent. Lost to herself in those roles and scenes he had watched. At times with the girls, both of them, as he was, proud of her. If those images, those projections, were what she wanted. What she believed she could have done. What she believed, perhaps, she could still do. In the plane, pursuing some vision she despised. Or the steps to it despised. An ambition fading. It was difficult to know. Impossible. The woman's light cold fingers on his

startling him.

You are tired.

No, he said.

You have been very good to me.

No. We have always been good company for one another.

Kathy will come?

Yes. Later.

The flowers were rich, massed on the glass shelf in the half light.

Her father. I want to say something to her.

I will tell her.

He was here, she said.

She should not have taken the window seat. Looking down. The plane banking for the low range of hills, not hills, a scarp, Richard always said. As it moved in air that could not hold and the ribs of land turned beneath them she was afraid. Trying to walk across a plank in the garden when she was a child. If you don't look down, her mother said. A swing, the plank across two drums, the patch of yellow sand by the fence. All the rest clean, tidy. The gardener every week. Sometimes an extra day. Thin, preoccupied, as if he might forget something, looking at them with a contempt she did not understand. Camellia bushes in the shade at the side of the house, the wide

diamond shaped bed of roses at the front. The flowers strangely beautiful, touching the petals, the bushes higher than herself. Don't touch them, her mother said. The petals bruise.

The ground below now brown, bare. A few dark patches of scrub. A long black stain of fire, smoke drifting from the edges. All geometrical. Even. Circles of what might be water. The lines of dams. Mud coloured. But it is not like that, she said. It is, Richard said. From here. Leaning across, quickly. It's dead. All that area. It's surprising how much, I suppose. Going back to his paper. He did not like talking in planes. They're like public toilets, he said. She could not remember how long ago that had been.

Her mother standing by the wide glass doors to the terrace. The heat of the early afternoon. As if her mother allowed it, carefully, into the house. She said: Will you please listen to me. I am listening, Kathy. You don't hear. What am I saying? That you want to go on with your acting. I want to go to Sydney. Her mother looking at the tubs of greenery on the terrace. As if she calculated them. Measured. Yes. Sydney. I know you said that, Kathy. But you don't care, do you. Kathy, it doesn't matter if I care. How could it? But you don't think I should leave Richard. Her mother closed the doors quietly. The glass panels clean. Clear. I have thought you would. I like Richard. Yes you do. He should have married you. Before you say anything, that's a joke. Her mother said: And the girls? I'm so often over there they won't notice. That might be true,



Kathy. But if you have to do this. You think I don't understand. Perhaps I do, much more than you realise. She said: We're not fighting. Nothing bitter. We'll manage it decently. It's not so bad. No, her mother said. I understand.

The land gone. The faint white ridges of the waves. Some vast piece of wrinkled cloth. A thought worthy of Terry. And that film. Islands. There were none down there. Terry with an undying fund of solid cliches. All of them workable. Most translated into moving images. With competence. Which people liked. And critics understood. The hostess beside her. She said: I'm sorry. I didn't realise. No. Nothing, thank you.

The woman's hand was relaxed. She was sleeping, but if he moved his own hand the thin fingers held a faint response. Jessica, he said. In his tiredness, the warm air, the quiet of the room, he might himself have slept. Beyond the windows the lights patterned the roads and buildings he did not recognise, shaped differently in darkness, each time to be placed again. The nurse came into the room, for a moment he had not seen her, she might have been watching them. She said: Asleep. If you want to leave.

She moved the woman's arm, straightened the cover. By the door she said: She was talking to me before you came. I think she thought I was your wife. She wanted to tell me about

someone in the war.

I see. And did she?

Well, in a way. I didn't understand. I thought in some way it was about you.

No, Richard said. It would not have been about me.

No. I realised. But it was very confused. And then she seemed to see me and she stopped. I mean, she realised I was not her daughter.

She didn't say who it was? Or what she wanted to tell Kathy? Her daughter.

She never mentioned any name.

No, he said. Thank you anyhow. And for all you're doing.

Along the walls of the corridors massive Aboriginal art designs. Fusions of careful patterns of colour. Precise. Repetitive. He walked quickly. In the car park the lines of cars were shadowed, small trees, shrubs, breaking the ordered rows, suddenly strange in the darkness so that he stopped at the pavement, moved back.