

***An Anarchy of Man: Cartesian and Post -
Cartesian Representations of the Self in
Selected Western Literature.***



Submitted by

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Abstract

This Master of Arts thesis is on two parts: a novel, *An Anarchy of Man*, and an exegesis which places the novel in relation to philosophical concerns about the self and the way those concerns are portrayed in selected works of Western literature. The novel is set in Canberra and Sydney and tells the story of the relationship between two characters: Joe and Gin. It explores the way we in the modern Western world think about ourselves and those around us.

Chapter One considers the view of the self in the work of the philosopher Rene Descartes and explores how this view is portrayed in three contemporary Australia novels, and in *An Anarchy of Man*.

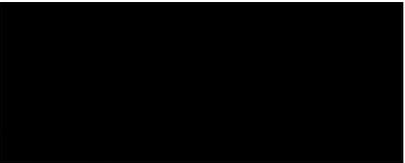
Chapter Two examines post-Cartesian views of the self, especially those in the work of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, and then considers the way the self is portrayed in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, and in my own *An Anarchy of Man*.

Chapter Three examines postmodern conceptions of the self and considers how these conceptions are portrayed in the work of the contemporary American novelist Don DeLillo and in my own *An Anarchy of Man*.

Declaration of Authorship

1. I hereby certify that this thesis - the novel *An Anarchy of Man* and the accompanying exegesis - is my own research and original written work. This thesis has not been submitted previously for any other academic award.

2. The content of the thesis is the result of work carried out since the official date of commencement of the program.

Signed: 

Date: 31/8/03

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An

Anarchy

of

Man

By Joel Spencer

I

We sat on the roof of the Bondi Hotel at 3 am. Below us Campbell Pde crackled with people. Voices rising like red ribbons to our ears. The big pink neon light wrestled with the darkness, buzzing like a gigantic fly stuck to the wall by bolts as thick as your arm.

And out there, just across the road and over the sandstone bridge, the ocean lay flat and black and whispering. Black shiny glass ocean.

Leon fumbled for another cigarette.

A car turned slowly up Curlewis street.

I leaned against a big black metal stand and felt briefly giddy at the height.

Somewhere down there something held these people together. Some strand of shared belief which kept them from the breathless chaos of uncaring.

We sat there wondering, as unsteady sheets of wind whipped us clean of all their games, (or so we imagined), and the memory of other, more important times, fell like so many old bus tickets.

Soon it would be morning, and we'd climb back down before the security guards could catch us at their change of

shift. We'd fumble back into their world, chased from our clear perch by their guards.

And though I can't exactly say what it is I was wondering about, though I'm not really sure of how it came to this, or of where it should be going, I know at least that I'll go back to that roof as soon as I can.

II

Imagine if all the rhythms of all the systems of all the bodies in Sydney were drumbeats. Each rhythm beating out it's own way- a huge cacophony, an anarchy of beats.

Deafening, piercing, interjoined yet separated. Like faces, joined by anatomy but separate by expression.

And all the systems dying and all the new ones starting out.

And imagine if in all that seething, disconnected mass of anarchic tempo, of pound and tap of heartbeats and eyes flicking around in sockets, somewhere out there: you may believe that there is a system which beats the same (or even better, contrapuntal) to yours.

But if you did find the perfect beat to make you a rhythm; what if it were some kind of loud and bashing punk, which would blow out your ears and bones?

What if in going into the rhythm you lose the sound of your own tapping? Or you try to live with the punk and it grinds you off in pieces?

So maybe you think: 'If there's no rhythm for me but that godawful punk shit what the fuck am I going to do?' - As if you needed a rhythm in the first place. You'll think maybe you don't need another drummer, that it's better to be a lone drummer, way out there in the neon and cement wilderness, late at night, hearing the echo which proves your existence only off the tall hard walls of monolith buildings, rather than getting mixed up in the bangcrash of someone else's disintegration.

III

Around six pm Leon started shivering for a drink. We only had about thirty dollars between us. Somehow there would be a way. Somehow we always found a way. I've been out with Leon when we've only ten dollars between us and somehow managed to find ourselves in some bizarre location, drunk at the spread of dawn.

Leon shuffled into his leather jacket, picked up his keys and his packet of smokes and stood at the door taking a

deep breath, a look of concentration, like an actor about to go on stage.

“C’mon Joe, we’ll go and drink some Chinese tea.”

Outside the early evening was busy with traffic. Globbs of light sped past with a stiff metallic ignorance and deadly indifference.

We walked down Randwick’s main street.

Looking through the windows of pubs and cafes, there was that warm feeling of somewhere slow when everywhere else is skipping by too fast.

We went to the Coach and Horses. Some old blokes slouched around the bar obviously on their last drink. If it hadn’t have been their last two dollars they’d have been glaring at the TAB screens, cursing, swearing, laughing.

We found two chairs on either side of a small, round, unsteady table, over in the corner behind the green pool tables.

We had a beer and cased the place. It became quickly obvious that nothing was going to happen there, so we moved on to the Transformer Hotel. We had twenty dollars left. Something would have to happen soon.

We found Caudral leaning up against the bar. I saw Leon smile. There was a full ashtray in front of Caudral, some scattered change on the red beer cloth, a half empty pint of Guinness in his hand.

There was also an unknown, delicately composed woman next to him, receiving the treatment. Caudral was drunk and blabbering something about North Queensland, about pearl diving.

We were standing right next to him before he noticed us.

“Lads! How’s it going?”

We all smiled and shook hands and did the ‘how’s it goin’?’ thing.

Caudral ordered a round of pints and placed a fresh fifty on the bar. He winked at us, meaning; ‘Ask no questions’.

“Not a fucken problem.” I replied, taking a cigarette off Leon.

The woman’s name was Rebecca.

It turned out she, like almost every other unemployed woman in the inner south east of Sydney, was an ‘actress’.

But that’s okay, because I told her I was a ‘writer’, just like every other unemployed bloke in the area. Leon said he was a writer too.

Caudral it seemed, had turned into a deep-sea diver.

He felt no guilt about creating personalities if it would get him laid, but he only ever did it in the Transformer Hotel. The name gave him a kind of licence.

We made bullshit chit chat for a while, but I dragged Leon over to the pool tables as soon as possible. Caudral

obviously wanted to be alone with Rebecca, but Leon, blind to body language, had not noticed.

Pool, as Leon would say, is not a game of chance. It is a mathematical expression in the physical domain. Every shot can be worked out precisely- if you're good enough. Variants like the 'roll' on a table, bent cues, warped balls; are usually compensated for by the relative size of the pockets. Leon is a maths person.

But pool is not about getting the balls into pockets. As Leon is keen to repeat, it's about holding the table until you get to play the most beautiful women in the pub. Holding the table may require mathematic skill, and thus the whole process is a great example of scientific advantage paying social dividends. Leon likes processes.

It being only about nine pm. Thursday, the place was pretty empty, so we just played to pass the time.

At about ten, Caudral came over and slipped us seventy-five dollars and winked.

"I'll see you later."

And he stumbled out the door with Rebecca.

So we settled in for the night.

We met some young women from England, Jen and Lisa, out here for a holiday and ready to drink. They spent a lot of time whispering to each other. We made small talk for a

few games, the introductions and ‘where are you from’ type thing.

After a while:

“Are you boys just gonna hang around here tonight? Or is there someplace else to go?” Jen seemed to be the leader.

Leon flicked eyes around her.

“I don’t know. Leon, where should we go tonight?” I asked, leaning over the table for my next shot.

“Huh. What sort of pubs do you like?” Leon spoke gruffly, trying not to give away any idea that he might be interested in the women.

“Oh we don’t care, music maybe.” Jen also acted nonchalant, leaving the end of the sentence levitating for effect.

Leon took the cue and let it slide through his hand, leaving the rubber end to touch the green industrial carpet while he looked over the ball placement.

“We’re musicians.” He said with a dry laugh, pointedly not looking at the women, just the game. “We could play you a song.”

“Oh really.” Said Lisa, and she looked at me since Leon was looking at the table. “What do you play?” Smiling with her moment.

It seemed I was meant to reply. “I play flute and guitar, he plays drums and guitar.” Motioning to Leon, who had finished his shot and was creeping back into the corner.

Jen followed him.

“Do you play in a band?” She asked, and Leon smiled with the strange inevitability of this conversation.

Lisa finished her shot and passed Jen the cue, who took it with no immediate intention of playing.

“Flute! How did you come to learn flute? I love flute!” Lisa said, and motioned for me to give her a light.

“I learned to play as a child and it’s just hung around with me ever since.”

“But you still play?”

“Only on special occasions.”

“I’d love to hear it.” A cocky smile, her grey-blue eyes daring the game.

“Then we’ll have to make a special occasion.”

She laughed, smiled wider, I was playing her game.

We decided to go to another pub, and strolled down the street a few blocks before finding this place I’d never been to before.

A folk band playing in a small red-lit corner, the shuffling coloured lights of the poker machines chequered the musicians.

The girls were keen on drinking spirits, but Leon and I were already right on the verge and so stuck to Guinness.

After the band had packed up and gone home, and we were left sitting around a small table by ourselves as the bar staff cleaned up, the girls invited us back to their flat to smoke some pot.

Leon was asleep on the table most of the time, or else propped on one unstable elbow glaring at Jen. His big red eyes, his slouch, his leather jacket with drops of alcohol on the sleeve ends. I couldn't see much, only feel a wave of unsteadiness deep in my guts. I tried to speak.

“Nah....back to Bondi...gotta get..”, was all I could get out. I had to get home. My head was swirling and my arms were loose as if they were only the shirtsleeves themselves. No arms at all, just sleeves.

If Jen and Lisa hadn't have picked us up we would have gone home hours ago, gone home and bought a bottle of whiskey and drunk ourselves to sleep.

But they had flattered us and looked at us and held our arms. It was a closeness neither of us could say no to. Lisa the secretary from the car rental company in London, whom I had not known a few hours ago, had suddenly become the repository of all this wholesome drunken hope, wrapped up in flustering dizziness and slurred imaginings.

Lisa was looking at me.

She was looking at my lips and then back at my eyes.

I blinked and bobbed my head around, looking into the corners of the pub.

Leon's head was resting on his chest, but his eyes were looking up at me, his mouth half open. He seemed to be trying to catch a thought, but found himself chasing its tail. I couldn't help him. We were drowning.

"C'mon ladies and gents, time to go." A big voice bellowed down at us from an enormous man.

Leon moved his head upwards slowly.

"Ar what! We were juss beginin ter dringk. Bing uz whizkee."

It was blatantly obvious Leon was more likely to die on his way home than not. The barman laughed and said:

"C'mon lads, you've had enough."

And he was right. I decided to make an escape attempt and took a deep breath, gushing air into my lungs, filling them up, holding in the oxygen. I must have made some sound, or been overly obvious. Leon wobbled his head around to be looking at me, scowling. He saw me inflated, with big red eyes, looking ready to burst, holding my breath for no obvious reason, he says.

There was a moment.

His eyes slowly took it all in. He smiled. He burst out laughing. "Look the fuck ... you you...look...fucken' ...look."

And he fell off his chair shrieking with laughter, one long arm tentacled out to the table, spilling a drink.

I bolted for the door. Leon grabbed one ankle as I climbed past and tripped me up.

“Run! Run!” I shouted, kicking to untangle myself from the laughing maniac. “Run! You bastard!”

He laughed even more, clutching at my feet.

I finally managed to break free and scampered to the door, lurching against it, now seriously after air.

Next thing I was staring at a Venetian blind through which the sunlight burned in strong violent bars. I couldn't move. There was a strange wooden bedside table, a comb, and a glass of water. I was lying fully clothed above a doona. On the other side of the bed, under the doona, lay Lisa. Her eyes open.

“Good morning.” She said.

The thunder in my head.

“Hi.” Was all I could drag up.

“Well you and Leon certainly had a big one last night.”

She said, and smiled mockingly.

Leon. I wondered where he was.

“I suppose so...”

More thunder in my head.

“I feel a little ill.” I told her.

“No wonder, but that’s okay. You’ll get over it.”

She tugged at the doona, wanting more. I rolled over and almost fell out of the bed. She kept tugging and finally I had to sit on the floor. She wrapped the doona around her and left the room.

The clock radio said eleven thirty. The brown carpet was thick and seemed to be a good place to go back to sleep. I almost rested my head into it, but caught myself in time; and rallied blood to my legs.

Stood up.

Left the room.

They lived in a small third storey flat. I found Leon in the tiny lounge room, already at the window staring blankly out into the morning. He had borrowed a pair of sunglasses and scabbed a cigarette.

“Joe.” He said flatly as I entered the room, a gruff recognition of our survival.

“Leon.” I replied.

Jen appeared from the bathroom wrapped in a white towel. This made me realise the lounge room was completely brown. I was going to point this out when Lisa came in and offered coffee.

Leon did not move.

I sat at the round brown table and drank the tepid coffee quickly. The girls seemed happy and healthy, shooting sly grins at each other, pitying us.

I tried to smile, and took a cigarette from a crumpled packet on the table.

Leon spoke.

“We must leave you now.” A thick and low, ominous statement. He thought the girls hated us.

Jen went over to him and put an arm around his waist. Looked out the window. “What are you looking at?” She asked. “Nice view isn’t it?”

“I’m gunna need these glasses for a while. If that’s okay.” Said Leon.

Jen rested her head against his shoulder.

“Sure. I’ll get them off you on Saturday. Tomorrow that is. It’ll be fun.” And she suddenly bounced away to the kitchenette.

Leon remained silent.

I finished the coffee while Lisa sorted around the room. Three half full ashtrays, an empty bottle of whiskey, a few beer bottles in one corner.

Finally she sat opposite me.

“Well,” I said, “we must be on our way I guess.”

“Do you need a lift somewhere?” Lisa smiled, and looked delicately into my eyes.

“Well that depends on where we are now.” Leon said suddenly, breaking in. “Where are we?”

Jen laughed in the kitchenette: “Bondi Road.”

“Then no,” I said, “we’ll walk.”

We left and went down to the beach and stood there. It was cold and cloudy and we were quiet for a long time.

Then I asked Leon: “What the fuck was all that about Saturday?”

“I haven’t a fucking clue.”

“Do they have our phone numbers?”

“I haven’t a fucking clue.”

We went back to my flat and found Caudral sitting in the lounge room chatting away happily with Rebecca.

He asked us about last night but we couldn’t really answer coherently. I went and got twenty dollars out of the bank and shouted Leon a coffee.

It was, after all, dole day.

Gin arrived right on eight pm. She had no time for the mixing customers with their small intrigues and giant egos. When she was on duty it was different. Then she would smile at every slobbery joke, patiently replace spilt schooners, and accept with an unshown resignation the lascivious scanning of her body by half drunk, frustrated men of all ages.

Outside of work she did not interact with them more than a polite nod. If she saw a customer on the street, which was not uncommon in Canberra, she might smile at him. But if he ever approached and tried to talk with her, she felt a dirty discomfort, and if she were with her friends- a kind of embarrassment.

So tonight, as every night six times a week, she went straight through the loose crowd and behind the bar. She hung her bag on a nail that had been bashed into a beam near the cash register and served as staff storage room.

Her co-worker, Kate, passed her an envelope. "It's from the boss. How are you this evening?"

Gin took the envelope casually. "Oh alright." That was all she felt like saying. Another shift.

"Boss called a meeting for this Saturday morning."

Kate nodded toward the envelope.

"I hope it's not too early. I'm on 'til stumps on Friday night. Won't get out of here 'til three." Gin slipped the envelope into a pocket of her bag.

“I know you poor thing,” Kate tapped Gin’s forearm, “it’s for eleven am. so....” She left it there, powerless and wondering.

Gin exhaled and rolled her eyes.

“I don’t know how much more of this I can take.” But she smiled.

Four months straight of night shifts. It gets to you. Turns you round.

At first she’d coped by ignoring it; trying to live a normal day life as well as work until three am. But it soon became impossible and she’d told herself ‘it’s not for long, just a few months and then some day shifts will reappear.’ But they hadn’t. Not for her anyway.

She flinched from the very idea of work politics, and because she refused to play it, she was stuck with these incessant bloody night shifts.

That’s what this Saturday morning meeting was bound to be about- some new kid who’d impressed the boss enough to have shifts changed in his favour no doubt.

The boss always had a golden boy around. At first Gin couldn’t decide whether this was a failing on the boss’s part, his easy friendliness attracting admirers seeking favours. Or else, a calculating enlistment into the cause of creating the boss wealth. It didn’t take her long to realise the latter was the case.

A new worker would start out shy and ungainly, then within a month or so the boss would be seen conspiratorially in the corner with him, boosting his ego, making him feel somehow special. As if the boss saw some spark of difference in him and was willing to kindle greatness.

This made the new worker dodge eyes with the rest of the staff, and take on a barely hidden attitude of superiority.

But it never lasted, and when the boss stopped his special doting the worker fell into one of three categories.

He was either sacked, learned to keep his head down and his mouth shut; or else he became a sniggering member of the boss's fan club, a petty power tripper in an enclosed, almost religious world, with boss at centre and a half dozen pretenders vying for his affection.

Clever man, the boss.

Gin fell into the second category, and maintained a precarious distance from the fan club.

This meant she missed out on the benefits of blind allegiance, but at least kept working.

Being on nights was a kind of snide test of her fidelity to the business. It was an attempt to force the issue, either she would quit, or be worn into joining the fan club in a bid to get better shifts.

Four months and she had not broken either way.

At her first five minute break, Gin read the letter from the boss, a bland note informing her of the meeting and the issue: shift changes.

The night came and went, the customers got drunk, there was one push-and-shove fight, and they closed at one am.

After cleaning for an hour, Kate and Gin sat at the back of the bar for a break and a vodka and lemon.

“Shift changes, hey.” Said Kate, inviting comment, showing that she too was not impressed.

“Ah well. It can’t really get much worse for us hey?”

They both laughed shortly.

“Any idea who the new golden boy is?” Asked Kate, who shared Gin’s observation of the boss’s ways.

“No. No I don’t.” Gin shaking her head, wondering.

“But I hear he’s quite young though, quite the lad.”

“Yeah I bet.” And they smiled.

There was quiet for a moment. They looked out over wood floors they had yet to sweep and mop. The cigarette butts, the odd smashed glass, the torn up beer coasters. They were too tired to think in words the thoughts that came to them; instead a weary kind of disbelief, mixed with quiet relief that the customers were gone.

Kate at last felt she had to say something.

“Have you heard from Joe?” She asked, just to make conversation.

“Hmph.” Gin raised her chin. “I spoke to him a week or so ago. He sounds like he’s enjoying Sydney.”

“Working up there?” Kate only half heard herself ask as she slipped back into a numb contemplation of having to mop.

“No not really. A bit of building apparently.”

Gin stood up, willing blood back into her tired knees and aching feet.

“C’mon, I S’pose we better get this job done.”

Caudral and Rebecca spoke as if she were the cliffs and he the ocean. He would wash into the stone wrinkles of her conversation, foam against her hard insistence, and then caress back out into silence, leaning back in his chair, waiting for her next position. She, sitting straight and smiling high in her thin black jumper and elegant brown hair, watched him recede and seemed to breathe the rhythm which would dictate his eventual return.

From our square table in the cafe; crowded in by frenetic, eager-eyed backpackers, we sat and waited for a suitable time to go to the pub.

Leon curled in the corner seat beneath a black and white framed photograph with 'Bondi Beach 1946' etched into a brass plate on the bottom.

Coffee had given his pallid complexion a new ghostly energy, but he needed alcohol to fill out his caffeine hardened, hollow bones. He waited impatiently.

Two panadeine fortes each had eradicated the more cutting edges of our hangovers, and I was left with a light feeling outside, but an awkward heaviness inside.

Being ideologically opposed to staying sober on dole day, I faced the coming night's drinking resiliently, but

avoided eye contact with Leon for the impatient reminder his face would insist on imparting.

For the time being I was content to watch Caudral and Rebecca beginning their relationship.

“I don’t know,” she said, meaning the opposite.

“Sometimes I read them just for the fun of it. They’re funny.” And she smiled again and shrugged, and looked out the wide window at the bustle of Campbell pde. This morning’s clouds had dissipated and it was now a bright sunny day, people with towels wrapped around their cossie clad bodies. It was still a bit strange to see people bravely face the blue, tinged with the last glints of winter.

Caudral leaned forward again, speaking as if imparting an epiphany of reason: “But they mean nothing!” He shook his head and ashed into the black plastic ashtray. “They’re a con; a false hope, a fool’s pastime.”

Rebecca raised her eyebrows and continued looking out the window.

“I’m not sure that everyone who idly reads the star pages could be described as a fool.”

She was daring Caudral to insist his point, thereby calling her a fool by extension- something she, and everyone else, knew she patently was not.

Caudral guffawed and went to say something; but then didn't. He shrugged instead, not willing to agree, nor push his luck.

Leon twisted an empty sugar paper again, then flicked it into the ashtray.

"Let's go." He said for the fourth time, and looked at the peeling, pink painted ceiling. The air of boredom hung about him like a thick grey coat he never took off; and in which he shuffled uncomfortably, but still preferred to walking naked.

Caudral looked at Rebecca, waiting to see her reaction to Leon, hoping she would go along with his suggestion. Then, when they found themselves drunk in a few hours, at least it wouldn't be all his own fault.

But Rebecca kept looking out to the sea, expressionless as a porcelain doll, and just as composed.

Leon looked at me, drilling me, castigating that I might succumb to the frivolity of Caudral and Rebecca. I nodded at him, and spoke to Caudral:

"Maybe we should meet you later."

"About fucken time!" Leon exclaimed before Caudral could answer, and started climbing out from his corner.

Caudral looked alarmed, like he didn't want to be left alone with Rebecca, at her mercy again. He tried to imbue the

situation with some sort of excitement by raising his voice, hoping Rebecca would join in.

“Yeah. Okay. Where an’ when?”

Leon laughed slightly, both at the absurdity of the question, and at its manner of delivery. “Fuckin’ guess.” He half snarled in response.

Caudral glanced at him sharply, then at Rebecca.

She turned. Like a realisation of natural beauty; however she moved it was as if it was meant to be. She looked at Caudral’s empty coffee cup.

“It’s alright. You go too...I have to go home and meet Siobhan.”

Caudral looked for some sign of Rebecca’s further intent, but saw nothing, no clue.

“Maybe I’ll call you later?” He asked her as Leon walked out the door, stumbling over the short step.

Rebecca watched Leon, but without interest.

“Not tonight,” she spoke softly, but not at a distance. “Tomorrow. Call in the early afternoon. We could do something tomorrow night maybe.”

Caudral perked up. “Yeah okay, a dinner or something?”

She nodded.

There was silence for a moment.

“Yeah well...” I filled. “Nice to meet you Rebecca.”

She smiled up at me but said nothing.

We were amusing to her. All our professed rebellion a mere incapacity to encompass the higher attribute of acceptance.

Caudral kissed her, it amazed me.

We left.

We found Leon sitting at a table on the plush stone landing out the front of the Bondi Hotel, three schooners of beer in front of him.

“You still have to pay for these.” He said to me and nodded sideways, smiling. “Who was that?” He asked Caudral sarcastically, referring to Rebecca and bestowing his disapproval.

Caudral shrugged, but I didn’t hear his answer as I went inside to pay.

Olivia, the barmaid, accepted the money and scowled that I’d have to tell Leon he couldn’t order beers until he had the money in the future.

I grumbled into the change and nodded, but wouldn’t bother telling him as he’d only laugh and look forward to the next time he could try it on.

Back on the landing I sipped the rough life-giving gold, and waited for Caudral and Leon to agree about the night’s events.

Leon was on the side of alcohol.

“Look. I know he’s got a hundred and forty after rent.”

He was referring to me.

“But that’s got to cover us for the next week. I don’t get dole ‘til Monday week.” Caudral was trying to persuade Leon to accept a take away bottle of whiskey and fifty-dollar foil of pot.

“Fuck that.” Leon protested. “You’re both doing building next week. And I get three hundred on Monday.”

“But a hundred and forty’ll go in a matter of hours here. And then we still got the weekend to get through.” Caudral tried to show Leon it wasn’t our fault the pub was so expensive.

“So we’ll get some more.” Leon acted as if money would come to us as a matter of course.

“Where from?”

“Busking.”

“Fuck that.” Caudral and I said in unison.

“Alright, we’ll get a few beers here now. A bottle of whiskey around six, then come back around nine and get properly pissed. It’s Friday fucken night for Chrissake! We can’t suck a cask at home on Friday night!” Leon spoke with a convincing finality.

That would have to be the mediated settlement.

They both looked at me for final approval.

“Okay. S’pose then we might have enough for half a foil over the weekend.” I creased my face and studied hard into the beer.

Caudral leaned back in the moment’s silence, smiling at our stress of having no money. He was asking to be asked, so I did.

“What’s the matter with you?”

He paused, just to let the moment rest back into his memory.

“Of course...we could spend this.”

He reached into his back pocket and brought out his wallet, then carefully removed a thin wad of twenties from a side compartment.

He was beaming.

“Jesus fuck you.” Grumbled Leon. “You’ve been holding out on us. You liked to draw it out on us you bastard.”

Caudral smiled at his little joke again.

“Now we’ll be right. Here. You mind it. It’s two hundred and twenty.” And he passed me the money.

“What is all this shit?” I asked. “Why’s she giving you all this money?” For Rebecca was obviously the only possible source. “You only met her yesterday didn’t you?”

“Yeah. Down the Transformer. Though I’d seen her around before, enough to start talking anyway. She’s loaded, thinks I’m some kind of...I don’t know.” He looked confused.

“She just kept on giving me fifties every time she wanted me to get her a drink. Then she wouldn’t take back the change.”

He shrugged, wondered.

“That’s some very weird shit mate.” I whispered.

“Ask no questions I reckon.” Said Leon, seemingly unfazed as usual. Then, as an afterthought: “I think I’m falling in love with your girlfriend Caudral.”

Caudral smiled. “I don’t get it, but there’s something about her, something strange, something...”

We all looked out at the clear sky above the ocean.

Caudral’s sudden wealth dismissed all thoughts of moderating the night’s coming adventure with take-aways. We soaked ourselves slowly, slipping into drinking with a new optimism.

Backpackers crowded in, flirting madly with each other, drinking heavily. For many of them the hotel was their first stop in Australia, their first chance to play out the wild image of their dreams, literally a world away from whichever force controlled them back home. They were so excited they tried to pack all their wishes for freedom into a reckless few days.

Half the time ours were the only Australian accents in the place. As Leon would say: “It was a very different experience.”

In the large front bar, groups gathered roughly according to accent. The big Englishmen complaining that there weren't any pint glasses to drink from; the laughing Irish; the quiet Northern Europeans. A smaller table of Americans, getting drunk much faster than they thought because they're unused to Australian beer. The Germans having the opposite problem.

Four Japanese women sitting nervously in the corner, dressed in the latest fashions, but shy of the raucous stumbling Westerners.

We found an unoccupied table near a corner window, and sat watching the crowd.

Caudral though looked bored, his four or five beers had bought him melancholy. He pondered Rebecca, but couldn't find where to start, so pondered about why that would be.

He decided to drink spirits. He would solve small confusions by creating one big one.

Whether Gin's vision of the future was a loosely woven tapestry, rough to touch; or a clear glass model, transparent, delicate, smooth: even she herself could not tell.

All that was certain was that the idea of Joe stood somewhere in the dream.

The idea of what they could be had entered her future as a realisation, it had fallen into place in an order which could not be elucidated but which none the less asserted its presence as a happiness, a knowledge that the future had tentatively arranged itself into something which she could look forward to being.

She had definitely not sought his devotion, she thought, nor prodded her own. Though the workings of her more intricate motivations were not something she wished to delve into too deeply.

He leaned against the bar and read the newspaper. It had just gone past three a.m., and she had gone along with some of the other girls for a drink after work.

The bright tides of pink and blue neon, the golden whisky, the stumbling end of day-workers dangerous night out. He drank a beer slowly and raised his eyebrows at the stories.

In the dizzy-eyed corners of Canberra, at this time of night, a man reading a newspaper was out of place. But he didn't look out of place. She watched from her table as he exchanged courteous hellos with some of the punters. They seemed to know him and straighten out their drunkenness before they spoke. They obviously knew he'd be sober.

At the next round of drinks, she offered to pay and stood at the bar next to where he was perched on his stool.

He looked at her of course, all men looked at her.

She smiled, he smiled.

He ruffled a page in his paper and scanned across the broadsheet.

She smiled when she remembered this now. She kept that first image close, barely touching, but close enough to feel the invisible smoke of knowing.

It was just one of her images she had gathered in her hopes. One image to flutter with many others around him like so many birds, bearing in their beaks a seed, looking for a way to plant in him the centre from which the future would grow.

He fell among these hopes, resting back into her smile, and gently breathing his acceptance of the future.

But she couldn't tell if all this was in her head only; and whether his kindly acquiescence was really a simple unguarded ignorance of her love.

This was hardly a way to go forward, treading water, half doubting whether she knew there would be a foothold. All the time knowing at least that if there's not one, danger would be next.

This is how she sat there, her fingers knitting small balls of air as she waited for Kate to arrive and for this tangling insistent dreaming to dissipate for a while at least.

Her stillness was all filled up with potential, but no clear path appeared.

Through action she could dance forgetfully, free in her old self, and free from the future.

She watched the cafe-bar customers, kids smoking as they whiled the late Saturday afternoon away. She had deliberately arrived an hour early, time to watch and think and escape the dangerous quiet solitude of home.

But it had followed her here.

At last Kate arrived, dressed up and bouncing with energy. She scowled at Gin's coffee and went straight to the bar; came back quickly with two bubbly vodka and lemons.

"To unemployed bums!" Kate raised her glass.

Gin clinked cheers and smiled.

In still morning moments, when the low swell of traffic receded behind quiet local streets, and the vacancy of houses attested to the fact that everyone else had something to do; Caudral would wonder into that quietude, wonder about his place in it all, and of late also the strange soft hands with which Rebecca caught him.

He fulfilled the morning ritual slowly. Coffee and cigarettes and yesterday's newspaper spread out on the crumb encrusted thick green carpet.

Her knowing smile lifting the pretensions of daytime, or goading the violent freedom of night against its inevitable paupery results.

She had come to own his trajectory.

Even during the morning ritual he thought of her, because he couldn't get around the sharp tangle of her aloofness, or sift through her words and gestures to a neat, resolved understanding.

Because of this he thought of her.

He looked at the newspaper and half read, half planned the coming day. Not arranging his business, but scratching for some event, which would keep him sober until six, when he would not hate himself for drinking.

Joe would wake up soon and come smoking into the lounge room. Mumbling and moaning in his white y-fronts and baby pot-belly. He would be worried about money, about getting more money, about how expensive everything is.

Caudral was tired of money, and refused either to resent or envy Rebecca for her wealth.

Caudral heard Joe stirring, and smiled across the World in Brief. He tapped the curling edge of his roll-your-own, and for a moment Rebecca left his thoughts, but only to stand behind the curtain, left of stage.

Coughing. A moan. More coughing.

The white door banging open and Joe thundering down the hallway, wincing against the infernal noise of his own indelicate making.

Boots, y-fronts, pink pot belly, Joe sat on the scavenged blue section-offable couch and beckoned for a smoke.

Caudral slightly laughed, and leaned back on his palms.

“How’s it goin?”

“Mornin’.” Joe smiled and beckoned for a lighter.

“What’s up today?” He asked, wincing from the smoke.

“Nothing much I don’t think.”

“Seein’ Rebecca later?”

“She’s meant to call or I’m meant to call her or something.”

A pause. Already the small room was filling with smoke, that ribbon-like, slowly dancing, tangling smoke of roll-your-owns in the morning light.

Joe watched it.

In the mornings he always looked toward bright windows. Lots of other people hate bright sunshine, hide from it behind sunglasses and curtains. But Joe remembered reading somewhere that looking to the sun in the morning wakes you up faster. He had taken this to heart as a child, and now it was a habit.

“She tell you what she does yet?” Joe asked, exhaling more blue smoke to smash through the delicate ribbons.

“Actress.” Said Caudral, aware of the response it would bring.

“Of course. I’m sorry I forgot. So...has she told you what she *does* yet?”

Caudral smiled at the joke. “Yeah, kind of. She works in the city somewhere, something about trading paper.”

“What papers?” Joe easily got annoyed with any kind of obfuscating. He couldn’t stand imprecision in these kinds of things. “What kind of papers? Newspapers, chunks of paper, pulp paper, paper clips, toilet paper? What does paper mean?”

“No I mean like shares and shit, you know, stockbroker stuff.” Caudral was concerned at Joe’s anger.

But as old friends he could easily calm Joe down. They had been sharemates on and off for eight years, four months at this flat, even since Joe moved up from Canberra.

“Oh right.”

If pressed, or if drunk, both Joe and Caudral would have derided the whole electronic Wall St greed-is-good bullshit. But since Rebecca was a kind of girlfriend, a small, awkward, but not serious, quietness ensued.

“Maybe that’s why she’s not too fucken keen on saying.” Better that Caudral say it than it not be said at all. He smiled and stood up, patting around the various scattered pants in the room for his wallet, which in turn he hoped would contain a new pack of papers.

There is a moment when all the odd angles of your life seem to lean together and the dizzy empty future, which once spread out before you with airy insistence fills with a clean new certainty.

Gin's tapestry of Joe, which once had seemed loose and rough, suddenly spread taut and the angles of its true beautiful colours edged together and seemed art.

She didn't mean it to be this way. Though she had often curled her hopes around the idea of him, and guessed into the future with a smile, suddenly it was there, standing as an almost physical reality: she would move to Sydney.

She would move to close a circle, and to wash her life of its tepid endings. Always these endings. End of school, end of uni, end of job, end of seeking a partner, end of Joe.

There was the future.

But not *for* him. Not *because* of him. But because of him *as well*. Because there was no future for her in Canberra, and because even all the endings had finished. A sticky circle from which she had never been able to escape because there had never been any clear vision to look to. Sydney suddenly seemed that vision, it lifted her eyes, frightened her, and so attracted her.

She didn't want to tell her friends for fear of discovering in their reactions some kind of blameful folly. But she knew she had to.

She had first mentioned the idea to Kate the Saturday night they went celebrating unemployment. Kate had burst out in happiness over the idea, even believing for a moment that Gin had found an answer for them both.

During the next week, people who had seen Joe and Gin's affair couldn't help wondering if there were some reason for the move embedded in the strange anti-climactic ending of the affair six months previous. But Gin gave no hint, not even an obvious anti-hint, so no one asked.

Instead raised eyebrows kept their tantalised interests silent.

Gin didn't even call Joe, and in the week between her decision and standing at Jolimont bus station at one p.m., she had also hoped he wouldn't call.

He hadn't, and she was going to stay with Jac, an old uni friend, for a week or so.

She would call Joe when she was settled.

She had given away her bed and couch, and found a new tenant for her flat; so all the financial hassles had disappeared quite easily.

She had a \$700 payout from work, and when the bond on the old flat came through, another \$480.

Jac had said she could stay as long as she wanted- but this was just being polite.

If she couldn't find any bar work (something she wasn't really keen on anyway), she would sign on for the dole.

Kate had come to see her off, and cried.

Gin left Canberra.

Between action and reaction there always seems a moment of equality and nothingness. Sometimes the moment is so quickly passed that it's as if the transition is instantaneous, like burning your hand on hot metal.

But even then you seem to feel that if you'd been quicker, enough to exploit the millisecond between heat and burn, somehow you would've got away unharmed.

I'm not sure if it's the same with people you meet. Is there a moment between their affecting you and you being affected? A slim time of silence where you can see but not be affected by the sight?

Or is it that in order to know the moment has arrived, the moment to avoid arriving must have already passed, and you're affected?

Surely by the time you feel the effect the chance to avoid it must have already passed.

Outside of this there is plenty of room for regret and hope.

Leon begins like a claw, curved inward, always slightly leaning on something, looking out of his corner.

Then he seems ungainly. He makes you feel nervous as if he's going to knock over anything that is longer than it is wide.

But then he attains a certain grace. Like a bare tree in winter with all its odd angled branches interlinked- impossibly organic, moving slightly, looking like a mistake, but possibly that's just your misunderstanding.

Toward the end of our living in Canberra he refused to leave his house.

He had fallen out of the place. No real reason, it just happened. Perhaps he was too mixed, too ungainly. They couldn't see his grace.

Perhaps he was a thorny starfish in a town of sleek sharks. They couldn't eat him but they wanted him gone.

It was summer and we used to sit in his small lounge room and drink tinnies and play chess. The cricket on the tv for background noise. There was one of those big helicopter-blade fans stuck into the ceiling.

At night we'd sit on the front porch and play guitar with whoever came round. It was always great fun until about midnight, when it became dangerous.

I stayed with him and Jac for three months. Then they broke up. Leon became even more isolated, so moved to Sydney. Just to look around. "Maybe make a million bucks." He joked at the time, always saying the opposite of his fears.

That was eight months ago. I've been in Sydney now for five months.

Leon's past is mostly irrelevant. It's like an old pop song which once aroused such levels of emotions that he had to scurry out from its grip.

Now it's annoying, even for him, to think about. The whole action of Canberra and all the things it stood around, all those flat colour head-films we call memory, now only come out late at night when he's sifting through the nether bandwidths of his mind.

Leon remade himself. He fell to this point of desperation when Jac left him for a musician they both knew. And when he was right at the bottom he seemed to slip right into life. Like this persona was waiting for him all along, waiting for the fall. He found being by extremes, and it took him no longer than a month of drinking to wrap himself up in this way.

When I first moved to Sydney he was still snake eyed and drunk. Leon and Caudral and I would sit in the pub, any pub, and drink until we only had enough cash left for a bottle of something strong. Then we'd go home to the flat Caudral and I share and finish off the job.

He was erasing the edges of his memory. Breaking himself down until he felt nothing about the past, and until that past was far enough away that it couldn't reach him again.

He succeeded. Although he didn't become what would widely be considered worthwhile to society, at least to himself, and of himself, he became a new person.

Unlike Leon, I can't find any confidence in dissolving, dissembling.

He breaks through ropes. I'm constantly knitting tangles.

We're two forces acting at once. Not against each other, but concurrently in different directions. Or maybe it's the same direction in different ways.

He needs me to encourage along, to tap me with a friendly sneer and say "C'mon ya girl, what do you think this is?"

I need him so I can duck guilt.

Leon ignores guilt.

In all the messy 2 a.m. dead end holes, with glittering colour spilling on pale, alcohol filled faces. In all the hopeful inner city rip-off dens, and green carpeted corner pubs, in all these places the two same forces.

Leon's grace gives every Tuesday late night bender the feeling of an adventure, even of a nobility. He takes it all in, drops his whole being in the middle and swims like he was always meant to be like this; like it's oxygen to him.

And I go to it with both shoulders. But to me there's never enough in too much. For Leon it's straight like that, too much is just fine, you can never have too much, you just keep going going going and fuck the rest.

I sift along. Where I look for the quietness behind the noise, trying to peel and pare back to something; he takes the quietness that comes when all the noise is going full bore and you can't grab on to anything.

There's peace for him in anarchy, peace in the huge crash of disintegration.

But in effect we are the same.

By the time his ex, Jac, moved to Sydney, he was well and truly free. They've never met in Sydney and Leon reckons the chance of their meeting is just another dice on the wheel. If and when it happens, he'll just eat that moment up too.

Sydney's one long natural (or alcoholic) speed trip to him; but you have to know him to know this.

To most he's still bent like a claw, leaning in a dark corner, probably sneering.

Caudral decided there are too many clocks. He took the one clock and two watches in the flat and smashed them on the

footpath out the front. Grinding with the heel of his Blunstones. Then he put them in next door's green bin.

“I couldn't be fucked with them anymore. Always got to know the fucken time.” He muttered in a friendly manner. Having to call Rebecca at a certain time, or waiting for her to call at a certain time, had focused his mind on the issue. “I just can't be bothered with it.” He shrugs.

I nodded and smiled, passed him the joint.

“Well now that we're outside we may as well keep going. Up the pub.” I suggested. “We got any money?”

Caudral shrugs again.

Now that he had become involved, Caudral pined for the clockless freedoms of bachelorhood. Forgotten were all the lonely-creature nights of self doubt and self-pity. They were replaced by the singular tension of a new relationship. Where before he would stretch into uncertainty and find himself gaping into a future without that supposed comfort of a lover; now her 'love', which in any case refused to provide certainty, had drifted into him like smoke but stuck like coral. All in three weeks.

She didn't mean it to be like this, she just happened to turn the handle and surprise them both by finding Caudral unlocked for once.

Now he had her inside him and didn't want to.

Of course, the terrible paradox lay in her seeming ignorance of this. She didn't seem to want him clockbound, she preferred him free; but with Caudral this attitude only made it worse. Her casualness had made waiting for her call uncertain, thus all the more painful and annoying. She possessed him more by not attending to him.

Caudral was floating in that silence between action and reaction, and she held that space entirely at her whim.

“Yes. The Hotel.” Caudral fingered his pocket, produced a fifty from somewhere. “It must be hers.” He said flatly and started walking up the hill toward the pub.

I followed.

The Bondi Hotel is a room with a horseshoe bar, a collection of stools with torn black vinyl cushion tops, and two pool tables. There's always a group of gigantic Maoris on one side of the horseshoe.

It was a bright blue day, late afternoon, just before rush hour. We liked it there because it was quiet. We could perch on a stool and drink pints of Guinness in peace. The Maoris liked us for some reason- maybe because we seemed out of place, maybe because we bought pot from them, or maybe because we offered absolutely no threat to them. Other people seemed intimidated by their size, but they never gave us any hassles. Quite the opposite- their presence kind of guaranteed

no fights would break out for fear of the protagonists being quickly killed between the thumb and forefinger of even the smallest Maori.

At least that was their image, and they never went out of their way to change it.

We were on nodding and smiling terms with all of them.

When we were seated and served, Caudral began.

“Alex says he’ll give us some more building work.”

“Tomorrow?” I asked wincing.

“Dunno. Next week for sure. Where’s Leon?”

“Maybe we should leave the phone off the hook tomorrow morning. Just in case. What d’you want to do tonight?”

“Dunno. Where’s Leon?”

“Give him some time, we’ll get him on the mobile.” I looked around. Just us, the bar man, and the Maoris.

I nodded at the Maoris. They nodded back.

Caudral began again.

“I’m not going home ‘til late. That’s for sure.”

“You wanna miss Rebecca’s call?”

Caudral smiled, hooking his chin upward and exhaling a long thin cloud of smoke. Then came back, “Yep.” Like there was nothing he could do, so he’d made some kind of resolution.

“Just like the clocks.” I said, not knowing what it meant, just that there was something there that it could mean.

Caudral glanced at me, concerned.

“What the fuck do you mean?” He asked kindly, half laughing at the nonsense.

“I don’t know,” I said, “shall we give Leon a call?”

“Give him a bit more time I reckon. Game of pool?”

“On the next beer.”

“Fair enough.”

Caudral looked around.

“This is a funny fucken place for us to end up isn’t it?” He said, looking at the roof.

“S’pose. Roll of the dice mate.” I said, again just for something to say.

Caudral looked concerned again. He couldn’t see I had merely said something because actually I had no idea how we ended up here.

“What dice? I haven’t rolled any dice for...” he thought, “years probably. I certainly didn’t role any dice to see where I’d go, that’s for sure.”

I didn’t reply. Just nodded.

“You sound like Leon.” Caudral said after a moment’s silence, and picked up his cigarette, pondering.

“That’s funny, he says I sound just like you.”

We played pool. Caudral dropped the black, then he called Leon.

“Very strange.” He said, returning to the bar and beckoning for another two pints.

“What?”

“He didn’t answer.”

This was indeed strange.

“Hope he’s not trying our house.” I offered.

“If he does, he’ll find us.” Caudral smiled at the inevitability.

We drank.

It’s like there’s this bubble and we’re jumping on its surface and floating along and the bubble won’t burst.

Leon took six drags to finish a cigarette and nine sips to finish a bottle of Carlton Cold. But it worried him that maybe this was only when he counted them.

How could he find the truth?

He tried to count and smoke naturally, but there was no way he could tell if he was really being natural, or just pretending.

‘Fucken fools’, he thought, and went looking for his keys. He lived in a small two bedroom flat in Randwick with his younger brother and his girlfriend. They were successful, and blind to the deeper successes of Leon. It was six o’clock and they would be home soon, so Leon was preparing to go out. Hopefully they wouldn’t run into each other. He could usually avoid them pretty well, and in the last week he’d only seen them two or three times. He wanted to avoid their stupid apologetic eyes as his brother, no doubt goaded by his girlfriend, sheepishly enquired about rent, or bill money.

He realised he should contribute something. But they were both working in good paying jobs, while Leon had nothing. Even the dole people were hassling him about doing some kind of training.

He bought bread and milk, and they both knew that with his degree in programming, as soon as he got his shit together he'd be earning more than enough to 'compensate' them, if that's what the idiots required.

He drank a glass of water with dissolving Aspro, found his leather jacket, and looked in his wallet. Never enough. He checked his mobile, turned it off, and slipped it into his inside shirt pocket, and lit a cigarette as he was leaving.

From the footpath he looked back at the four storey orange brick box in which he was forced to live for the time being.

The air was surprisingly warm for this time of the afternoon, and a short wind flicked around his face.

With no real plans, he started walking up the long main street, looking into the windows and searching for a comfortable place where he could sit for a couple of quiet beers before deciding what he would do next.

He had woken early today, and sat around the flat going mad. He couldn't stand the enforced idleness. When he was out at night, and running in his head, and exploring and taking it all in; then he felt fine, full of life. But when he had to just sit there in the blinding light of another bland day he felt only the wash of ennui.

And worse today was that memory had started again.

He went to the Transformer. That place brought him luck, and ordered a beer. He found an abandoned newspaper and sat at a table near the window facing the main street. He didn't really want to read the paper, just have something to rest his eyes on in between moments of looking out the window.

After only his second sip of beer he started to feel decidedly better. That thin film of sickness, which rested in his guts dissolved, and a freshness, an optimism even, began to take hold.

He drank slowly, wanting to spend time. He would have a couple at least, maybe take an hour or so, and then walk further on, see what adventures might be evolving for tonight. Call Joe and Caudral and see what they're up to.

He wondered about asking them if he could move in. He stayed there at least every second night as it was, and since he only had his duffle bag and three blankets, surely it wouldn't really be that much of an issue. But he didn't want to force an uncomfortable situation, and he did cherish his moments alone, so long as he wasn't alone in those moments. He liked to just disappear for a few hours into the mouth of the city. The crowded streets and bars and especially the back streets and little, out of the way bars; they soothed him, gave him freedom. Freedom in anonymity. Anonymity to others, and in a special way, to himself.

He wanted to disappear. He wanted to go into that city and in some way become one with it's reckless, futureless freedom.

But that required money, and he never had enough money.

He decided to make his way slowly over to Bondi and find Joe and Caudral. On the way he'd walk down King St, which at the time was perceived as the centre of 'hip'. Although Leon derided the posers and their shallow false prophets, he liked the lights, and enjoyed sneering at the young uni types. All dressed up in their anti-fashion fashions, with tight little cliques set around certain pubs, bands, 'looks'.

He felt like a long walk. It would clear him. He could catch the train straight to Bondi from the far end of King St.

This plan settled him, and after one more beer he left quickly, stretching his aching legs as he walked the kilometre or so to King St.

Sydney's polluted air warmed her. It felt comfortable, exciting, and very distant from the clean cold air of Canberra.

Here was a city full of beginnings, a city whose potential rushed to be fulfilled and then expanded once more.

The constant action, everyone going going.

She sipped her coffee and looked out the cafe's window, as Jac casually laid forth her enthusiasm, with a new accepting demeanour which had come only after the dance of action had been accepted and she'd grown this cool kind of wisdom.

"Of course there's plenty of work here. And you *have* to work anyway, it's so expensive. Everyone I know works, and the thing is there are plenty of other things to do...I mean, not just bar work and waitressing."

"I don't want to go back to that in a hurry." Said Gin, still looking out the window. The late afternoon was already filling with eager young people, all off to somewhere or other that Gin didn't yet know. But she would know. She would learn.

Jac kept on, understanding Gin's feelings. "Yeah I know. Well one of my flatmates works in market research and he's always asking if I want to do a shift there." She offered.

Gin looked interested, if only because it was something different.

“Yeah, it’s over the phone you know. Sixteen dollars an hour mind you.” Jac looked serious.

“Not those bastards who call you at home?”

Jac smiled at small Gin.

“Yeah. Those bastards. But he tries to be nice and for sixteen dollars an hour....”

Gin cocked her head and raised an eyebrow- she could understand that.

But she didn’t really want to think of working just yet. She had a room at Jac’s for two weeks while a flatmate was away. Her other two flatmates seemed nice enough, and since Gin had insisted on paying rent, even though the absentee was paid-up, they had warmed to her considerably.

They also seemed to like the idea of her being a newcomer to Sydney, and were keen to show her around, imparting their knowledge to someone who was now what they once were. Warming themselves by the difference therein, feeling their own personal progress.

“Well you’ll have to get something, so you may as well keep it in mind.” Jac said, and followed Gin’s eyes to the street, the people.

“What’s there to do on Thursdays?” Asked Gin. The weekend was too far away to be bothered waiting for. She had

waited all through Tuesday and Wednesday and that was enough. She wanted to go out.

In the week since she'd arrived she still hadn't called Joe. He seemed to slip back in her mind somewhat, behind the new curtain. She wanted to explore a bit before calling him, make sure it didn't seem like she had come chasing him, which, she had started to think, wasn't true anyway.

Maybe the idea of Joe had been the hook she'd used to motivate herself to move out of Canberra. But now that she was in Sydney, now that she had taken that extra step and found herself suddenly alive, maybe he wasn't so important.

At least, if not any less important, certainly less imperative.

Jac thought for a moment, scrolling through possibilities for going out, but nothing really appealed. Gin spoke first. "I know! Let's just go out around here. You can show me the locals. A kind of guide. We haven't really done that yet."

Jac didn't want a big night out, and her finances forbade it anyway. But a few beers here and there wouldn't hurt, and it would be a great way to show Gin around, show her how much she knew. So Jac borrowed one of Leon's phrases and gave it her own enthusiasm.

"Yeah for sure. Why not? Kind of a girls' own pub crawl!"

“Yeah that’s right!”

They both laughed, leaning forward like it were a bright conspiracy.

It still being only around five o’clock, they went home to get dressed. Gin felt like seven years had fallen off her. She was young and starting out again. A strange town, an old friend, a free night. She breathed the excitement of the new.

Jac fell warmly into the comfort of familiarity. Though her newly gained big city mannerisms and sharpened personal borders did not show it to Gin, Jac was relieved to have her around.

Jac lived in a thin terrace share house a few blocks back from King st. Prime location. She had got lucky and found the place quickly after she moved to Sydney. It cost only eighty dollars per week, and her room was tucked down toward the back of the house, very private.

She had three flatmates, Andy, Bernice, and Kim. Kim had gone away for two weeks, back to her family near Armidale for a break.

Andy and Bernice were both had jobs, so were always out working or else in their room. This meant Jac mostly had the house to herself, and when she didn’t it was mostly just Kim studying or sleeping. Kim socialised outside the house, was friendly enough, and easy to get along with in a sharehouse- she didn’t pry too closely, nor coldly ignore.

They had all moved up from Canberra in the last year. Andy and Bernice were from Canberra originally, and Kim had done her undergraduate studies there. Jac had found the house through what they all jokingly, factually, called the Canberra ex-pat community.

It was a friendly, dusty, functional household. They didn't socialise together often, but nor did they ignore each other, or in any way disdain if they did end up together on a Friday or a Saturday night.

Very casual.

The wind through our flat makes its doors and windowsills creak, its windows rattle so it sounds like a boat you might imagine moored somewhere.

It's quiet at three pm.

The sun washes it.

It's not a boat, it's a flat. We can't unhook it and sail someplace else. Instead we have to tend to it because it's made of dark red bricks and it won't budge.

I mentioned this to Caudral and he agreed, so we discussed how we could get a boat.

It was seven pm and Leon still wasn't answering his phone, so we'd decided to go on with the night not really expecting his company. Maybe give him another call later, just to make sure, just to find out.

"How much do they cost you reckon?" Caudral leaned back on his bar stool. It was sundown and more people had started coming into the hotel. Maybe a crowd would build. We were warming to the occasion.

"You'd have to be able to get one for not more than twenty thousand." I guessed, trying to reckon on the actual materials that go into making a boat than on the whole finished product.

“No way.” Caudral shook his head. “You couldn’t get much for that.”

“I’m not talking about much. I’m talking about something that floats.”

“Oh shit yeah. You could probably get a raft for twenty thousand, but I doubt a boat.”

Then, because Caudral really was warming to the occasion, and because he always liked to talk to strangers in pubs, “Let’s ask someone.”

He turned to the bloke next along the bar, a middle-aged tradesman with small whiskers and a blue flanny.

“Hey mate, how much d’yer reckon we could buy a boat for?” Caudral spoke broad Australian when talking to men like this, in places like this.

The man winced and looked up slightly, then said to Caudral, thoughtfully:

“Dunno. Maybe hundred grand’d set you up.”

He obviously didn’t care for idle chat about things that would never actually happen. A man of realities.

Caudral’s eyes opened slightly wider in polite surprise.

“Yeah right.” Then he turned back to me. “See. This bloke reckons a hundred grand! You wouldn’t get shit for twenty grand.”

The man, after further thought, decided he should qualify, and added: “Well you might get something for twenty

thousand. But I doubt you could do anything with it. It's not the boat that costs you anyway." He paused, giving us time to look more closely at his hard face and hands, time to recognise his authority in all things real.

"No." He continued. "It's the motor you put in it that really costs."

We looked like we were learning something. He tightened his lips and looked like he could teach us something, but couldn't be bothered. I wondered if he went fishing on the weekends.

"Yeah actually I've heard that somewhere before."

Said Caudral.

The man sniffed, and sipped the last from his bottle of beer.

Caudral, always friendly toward strangers: "Can I get you another beer there mate?"

The man looked askance for a moment, but then relaxed. It must have been a novelty to be drinking among young men again.

"Yeah orright. Won't say no to an offer like that."

Caudral smiled and straightened his back, sorted through his change on the beer cloth.

"What's that you're drinking?" He asked stupidly, since the man was drinking probably the most common, everyday beer in Australia. He looked taken back for a

moment and I thought he might be offended. Instead he smiled wryly and shifted his index finger to tap the side of the bottle.

“One a these’ll do fine.” He smiled, almost indulgently.

Caudral pretended not to notice, and got the man a beer.

“Cheers mate.” The man grumbled happily. “Name’s Harry.” And he extended his hand.

Caudral took it, careful to squeeze just as hard as the moment demanded.

“I’m Caudral. This is Joe.”

“G’day.” I said, and as we were out of a polite arm’s reach we just nodded to each other.

Harry was quiet again for a moment, formulating.

“So what do you to blokes want to know about boats for?...Plannin’ on sailin’ away?” And Harry, and all the old ghosts he used to know, smiled to each other with the joke.

“Yeah maybe.” Said Caudral flatly, playing into the joke, but leaving just enough of an ambiguity to feel he had one up on Harry. Caudral is good with intonation.

Harry sipped his beer and looked like he enjoyed it.

“Well I hope you’ve got some money.” He said.

“Just dreaming.” I dropped in.

“Thought so.” Said Harry, smiling again. “I almost once got a boat until I realised.” And he left it there.

“Realised what?” Asked Caudral.

“Just what your mate said. That I was dreamin’.”

Again, the master of realities.

“Well you got to have dreams.” Said Caudral, and he seemed to drop back into the cliché, then, after a moment, come bubbling back out of it.

“But what if you could get a boat. I mean, people do do it don’t they. There’s blokes out there who just sail around the world and shit. They are there.”

“Rich bastards.” Said Harry. “Rich bastards and god knows where they got the money from.”

“Family probably.” I dropped in again.

Henry nodded

Caudral was suddenly more interested in the topic, like there really was something there to chew on.

“No but come on,” he said, goading towards touching the ideal, “there just must be a way to do it.”

Harry shook his head at all young men.

I wanted Caudral to leave the topic before he became too worked up. He could easily catch on to fantasies and imagine himself away in them. I remembered that once he had planned to become a sailor, actually gone on some course about it. I shuddered that this connection was making him attend the boat idea as somehow actually attainable.

“C’mon mate. There’s nothing in it. Maybe you should get a tats ticket.” I tried. Harry nodded, he seemed to like it.

Caudral looked at me like there was something I didn’t understand. I wondered for a moment, but couldn’t think of anything it could be.

“Yeah maybe.” Caudral said, but I could see he was thinking.

He lit another cigarette and perked up.

“Well let’s have another beer anyway.” And he beckoned the barman. “So what do you do with yourself?” He asked Harry.

“Building.” As if that wasn’t obvious already. Harry said it like it was the only job there is, and it was obviously the only one he had ever known.

“Yeah I know what that’s like.” Said Caudral, and drifted off into thought again.

Leon looks at the worn tops of his Blunstones. Leon never really sleeps. Not like he wants to sleep. Leon just lies there thinking and scheming and trying to get around all the bullshit little things that stop him from sleeping. He can't even say them because he's not sure what they are. Just a feeling. A slow feeling that everything is happening way too fast.

He walks.

Leon likes the rhythm of walking, and he walks a lot. He feels like a ship sailing through all these people. He's really a tourist in this life, though he snarls at tourists on the harbour. He likes views of big things and little set piece scenes like inside little bars. He hates nightclubs but goes there when he gets speed off one of his brothers friends. The friend wants Leon's brother to 'lighten up' and be more like Leon. Leon's brother plays along the top of it, saying things around the boys he would never say in front of his girlfriend. This is because Leon's brother is afraid. Just like everyone else is afraid, but no one is afraid like Leon is afraid.

Leon walks down a few side streets on his way to King street. There's this one street that seems to have been transplanted from some dreamlike suburb and plonked right in the middle of all the inner city grime. Rich people must live there. Down each side of the street are huge silvery oaks,

twisted trees with bark a perpetual moonlight, and green clutches of leaves hugging the branches. Leon walks down it because somewhere in him he too likes the countryside. Though that street is close enough. He looks into the houses, seeking those wood panelled study kind of rooms, and imagines having one of them one day. Then he remembers not to dream like that and instead wonders if he could break into one, or if one day he'll meet someone who has access to one. That would be enough. Just a visit.

The warm spring air. The fading afternoon light. Leon is at peace while moving, but at the same time feels the sickness of always having to move. He doesn't want to have to face his brother and his brother's girlfriend. He just doesn't want the hassle. The petty little hassles that seem to rule their lives. He's also aware that to most people all life is made up of these petty little hassles. How to get enough money. How to find a good place to live. The whole of life just a sponge for all these troubles.

He doesn't want to face them because life should be much more than that. He's sure that to some people life is a whole lot more than petty everydayness, more than the insular little bickerings of People.

How to get around all that? How to slip around and land bang in a life that is worth the effort?

He stops under one of the oaks and kicks around a few of the sticks. He's thinking too much now. He looks up into the mess of branches, and through them the sky, still blue, but over to the west already the massive oranges and pinks of sunset.

He breathes in and out. This is the way he stops thinking. After a few breaths he feels much better. He shouldn't think so much. It only ends in this quiet, sad, hopelessness.

Instead, he thinks of the coming night, and his freedom. He doesn't have to face his brother tonight. He's got enough money to get him by, and later, when he's finished his long walk and if he hasn't found any other adventures along the way, he can stick to his original plan and end up over at Joe and Caudral's house. Crash there.

Leon walks out of the strange dream-suburban street and on to a busier road. He feels more at home here, the car lights, the shop windows, and the constant stream of people doing things DOING things. That's where he wants to go, into the people, into the lights and onto the stage.

Though of course he'd never act, he'd never pretend. He'd just walk across stage without the audience even noticing. Straight through all the actors and their crooning. Just watching them.

And if the audience did happen to see him, and a murmur came from crowd, Leon might; and only might; stick his finger up or something.

He giggled to himself now, walking along the road, imagining someone crossing a stage mid-play at some fancy theatre, and when the audience noticed...Leon giggled and thought of what he'd do next.

Jac gave Gin a necklace she had bought at the markets the Sunday before Gin had arrived. It was a gold chain with a series of tiny emeralds studded into it all the way around. Of course it was neither real gold nor real emeralds, and it was tarnished as the fashion of the day demanded.

Gin held it up to the light in the small square back yard.

“Oh it’s gorgeous. It’ll go well with this black thing I’ve got.” She smiled, things were working out.

“Yeah that little dress. That’s what I thought when I saw it. And it’s not much anyway, so even if it doesn’t…”

“No no it’s gorgeous.”

“A new thing for the new city.”

They smiled at each other.

They took turns in the bathroom with their makeup, and in Jac’s small room with their hair.

Jac kept her smooth black hair in a bob. She had once been a kind of goth in her teenage years, and the traces of that still showed, though dimly, in her wardrobe. Gin didn’t think about her hair except when she was in situations like this, when she was forced to. She preferred to stay casual about her appearance, and didn’t like to worry too much, though in Sydney this was obviously going to be impossible.

By the time they had finished it was six thirty. This was way too early to go out for Jac, though just about right for Gin. They went back down to King street slowly and found a cafe with lounges and posters and cool looking feral waitresses. They decided to have a coffee there before going further, give the place some time to warm up.

“They never have anything like this in Canberra.” Said Gin when they were seated, uncomfortably leaning back into the deep orange vinyl sofa.

Jac tried to look like this was somewhere she went often, even though this was only her second time there. She had hated the deep sofas the first time, and managed to get a table the second. The coffee was good, and cheap.

“Yeah well these sofas end up just giving you the shits.” She said, and ruffled through her bag for her cigarettes.

Gin realised what she was doing, and offered one of her own, but Jac refused, waving her away: “No no I’m trying to give up. That’s why I’ve got these low strength things.” She found them, looked at them and grimaced. She really wanted to give up, but her addiction was social as well as chemical, and the social seemed the harder to abandon.

Their coffees arrived.

“So I noticed you haven’t called Joe or anyone yet.”

Jac smiled, conspiratorial.

Gin returned the conspiracy, “And you haven’t called Leon.” Which was ridiculous, but that was just the point she was trying to get across.

“Yeah but I mean we broke up a long time ago. I thought you and Joe never really...I don’t know.”

“Well neither do I. But it’s okay. He was fun. But we never really had any kind of rules thing happening. Very..” Gin searched for the word and found it, but used it with an unpleasant taste because it wasn’t quite true: “Casual.”

Jac saw the discomfort and avoided Gin’s eyes. Jac is bad at that sort of thing until she starts drinking. Then she’s desperately involved in intrigue.

“Well whatever.” Jac shrugged, but softly.

They looked around.

“You ought to try the walls in these places for somewhere to stay.” Jac suggested haltingly, she didn’t want Gin to feel rushed at all, but she did want to help.

Gin looked around. Still bored with the idea of looking for a house or a job. Something would come up. She felt lucky, like because she was here and everything seemed new and fresh and available, all the little things like job and house would fall into place of their own accord. It was easy to daydream because everything was right there in front of her, all she had to do was reach out and take it. Gin was aware of the expense of living in Sydney, and of the need to get a house

and a job, but wasn't she already getting offers? Even this afternoon, when Jac had mentioned Andy was always asking her to do a shift. Gin decided she would follow that up and ask Andy tomorrow.

“Yeah I should.” And she scanned across the notice board, not looking at anything.

They had a foccaccia each. Huge pockets of alfalfa and carrot and eggplant. They were both pleased with the healthiness of such a meal. Then another coffee. They were talking about people they knew in Canberra. Jac would remember a name, and Gin would give an update as to what was happening in that person's life. A surprising amount of people had finally joined the public service and disappeared into the suburbs. When they were all at uni together they used to joke and guess about who would take the public service option. In those days everyone had dreams. In these days most people had jobs.

So the conversation was regularly punctuated with Jac saying: “No really! I don't believe it. Oh well.” And then happily, sincerely, since it was after all a job: “Well good for them.”

After a list of about ten people, it started to seem as if they were the only ones left living this poverty stricken, job-

to-job life. This worried Jac, since she had always meant to ‘make it’ in Sydney. It worried Gin too.

But they both rathered not to think about it. Instead they took comfort in the fact that they were here. Free and in the big city, and they both knew that they could never really deal with the whole nine-to-five-buy-a-house-kids-husband thing. They might dream about it now and then, worry that they were missing out on something, or throwing their lives away. But really, they could never trade places with the people they used to know. Jac had even almost fallen into security with Leon, before discovering that Leon was definitely not secure.

Eventually, one day they would be ready. Then they’d settle down. But not now.

Gin held this last thought, and jumped from it into the excitement of having a night out. Her enthusiasm was infectious, and Jac perked up too.

“So where to first?” Gin asked, and balanced her empty coffee glass on the edge of the table next to the couch.

Jac thought. She too suddenly felt rebellious in comparison to her old peers. Something would happen to sort things out in the future. And when she was in this frame of mind, the Royal Artillery beckoned.

She smiled at Gin.

“I know a place I think you’ll like.”

“Oh good.” And they left.

“You know, if you’re really keen, maybe you could just hire a boat. Like for the day or something.” Harry had been quiet for a while, and Caudral and I had started on other topics, when Harry decided to speak.

It took us a moment to remember what we had been talking about.

Caudral looked interested.

“Now that might be an idea. But I bet it still costs a fair bit.” He shrugged, but looked at Harry as if he were asking a question.

Harry cocked his head and considered. “Well it’ll cost a hell of a lot less than buying one.”

“Like how much do you reckon?” Caudral asked.

“Aw probably get one for a couple of hundred. They have charter cruises going out all the time. Or you could just hire the boat and sail it yourself. Probably a lot less again that way.” Harry was chatty.

I joined in. “Yeah mate even a couple of hundred’s probably a bit much at the moment. And I don’t think either of us would be that good as captains.”

Caudral looked mockingly offended. “I reckon I’d be a fucken excellent captain. Get myself one of those cockeyed

hats with a feather, and shove a hook up me sleeve. I'd be the whole bit."

We all laughed lightly at this. Harry looked away as someone he knew entered the pub.

"Righto lads, here's a mate of mine. I'll see youse later." He left the bar and went to sit at a table with his mate.

But his idea remained with us.

"You know," I began, "it might be fun to hire a boat one day, if we had the money. Just for a couple of hours kind of thing. Go out around the harbour and act like pirates for a while."

Caudral smiled. "Yeah but it'd be expensive." He said with emphasis on 'expensive'.

We both thought for a while, wondering exactly how much it would cost, what would be a reasonable price.

"I reckon it couldn't be more than two hundred for the afternoon." I offered. "That's a hundred each." And then another idea. "But if we got Leon and Rebecca into it we could probably swing it for fifty each. Grab a case of beer. Could be an excellent time."

Caudral had started listening with a bored look on his face, but then he suddenly lit up.

"No man. I know! I could ask Rebecca about it in a kind of romantic adventure kind of way. She's obviously fucken loaded. She'd be right into it when I think about it." He

was thinking and speaking at the same time. He looked up at the roof.

“Yeah but that doesn’t leave much room for me. I mean, maybe I could stand on the beach and wave to you as you went past or something but..”

“No bullshit.” Caudral cut me off. “I’ll figure it alright so you can come along.” He paused, then added: “And Leon of course.”

Caudral had been caught by the idea. I could see him imagining it right there, already playing it through his mind.

He ruminated. “I bet Rebecca’d love it. It’s just the thing to do. An afternoon sailing the harbour. I’m sure she’d pay for at least half, and then we three can split the other half. It should be manageable then. Really it’ll be no trouble.”

“But you know this means you’ll have to be very nice to her. Like you should probably go home now and wait for her call.”

Caudral looked dejected. He could see the sense in this. But he didn’t want to leave the pub when he was just starting to have a good time, making plans that might never come to pass, but nonetheless seem brilliant in their conceiving. If he was to be serious about it this time, he would have to go home. He stayed quiet for a few moments.

“Nah. I’ll call her tomorrow.” He said finally, allowing in the threat that the boating plan might just sink with all the

other half drunk pub plans. He turned and looked straight at me.

“But this thing is going to happen. I promise you.” He said, and since Caudral has never broken a promise to me, I knew he was serious.

Then he smiled wider. “Anyway, I’m a bit too far gone now. So calling her tonight might actually endanger the plan. Better I do it tomorrow.” He nodded, agreeing with himself. “It’ll be a good thing.”

We drank a few more cans and talked of old times. Things always look better when there’s something in the future. Even a little thing, like going on a boat, can take on huge comfort value when nothing much is happening. All night, whenever there was a pause in our conversation, or whenever one of us had to go take a piss, I thought of the ocean.

It was getting late quickly, but we were having a fine time. Harry stumbled over to say goodbye around ten, and soon after we decided to walk down the hill and along the beach to the other hotel. The night was still warm, and the brief ocean breeze, and the sound of the waves; I felt free again. For a few hours the twist of the long day’s poverty, of all the little worries that wrap you up so quickly, so insistently, seemed to vanish.

Instead the easy night's reckless freedom. Tomorrow would be another hangover, another stretch of worry. But staying sober tonight was not going to solve any of those problems anyway, so I might as well have gone out. Because I could. Because I wanted to. Because it was my choice.

During the day there were no choices, just endless quiet war.

The Hotel Bondi was full of young backpackers as usual. It's a great cultural difference from the Bondi Hotel, with its even mix of old working class and Maoris, to the Hotel Bondi, the youth of the world. Just a reversal of words.

We were half expecting to see Leon there, since he hadn't shown up at the other hotel and still wasn't answering his phone. But it was difficult to look through the crowd. We found two empty chairs with an acceptable view of the bar, thinking that if he was in the Hotel, he'd have to go to the bar at some point and then we'd catch him.

We sat for a couple of expensive schooners. Just looking at the crowd, listening to the different languages, laughing at the dizzy enthusiasm of so many young people gathered in one place.

We had to raise our voices to talk to each other, and Caudral leaned over:

“You know these kids are from the other side of the world and we’re worrying about getting the shit together for a harbour cruise.”

We smiled and nodded at each other.

Caudral was restless, and we were cramped in this odd corner, so after one more beer we went to sit out on the landing and keep an eye out for Leon entering or leaving.

By now it was around eleven thirty pm, and the ocean breeze was cooling off. The party was still very crowded out on the landing, but we managed to find a small table.

By the end of our beers it was too crowded to be bothered fighting a way through to the bar, so we gave up and bought a six-pack from the bottle shop and walked home.

Caudral was thinking about the cruise all the time.

When we arrived at our flat we had to climb through the window because we’d both forgotten our keys. Then we sat in our small lounge room and smoked the last of our pot.

It seemed a normal night, except that Leon was missing, and Caudral had become determined to do something.

Small ideas vindicate themselves to many people purely by virtue of their smallness.

Always clutching to whatever idea comes along you'd think they're all drowning in some existential ocean, trying to keep afloat by getting hold of anything.

Leon thinks he has learned to float in this ocean.

Other people don't realise the ocean because they *are* in fact drowning, and in their panic they've forgotten that they're drowning and instead just grab at these small ideas. Then they feel safe.

But Leon doesn't need the aid of small religions. He can just slip up onto his back and float freely, looking towards the sky. Like an island.

Or maybe more like a boat.

Sailing easily through the early evening crowd of King st. The unbalanced lights of cars and the enticing, ever circling energy of the pubs and cafes.

Leon felt comfortable here.

He went into the Station Hotel and sat at the bar, craning back around to look out the window. He ordered a beer and looked for the blackboard to find out who was playing there tonight. But the blackboard was gone.

"Hey mate," he nodded at the barman. "Who's playin' here tonight?"

"No one." Said the barman flatly. "Got all these new pokies in here." The barman gestured away.

And suddenly Leon noticed.

The whole back half of the pub had been converted to a series of rows of madly barking poker machines.

Leon's eyebrows rose.

"What's all this?" It wasn't really a question, more of an exasperation.

The barman guessed he was being addressed, and shrugged, then looked more closely at the rag with which he was wiping the new black vinyl bar.

But Leon persisted. "When did all this happen? I was here only last week!"

"Boss got 'em in on Wednesday I think." The barman seemed more concerned about getting the actual day correct, than addressing Leon's obviously growing distress.

Leon looked at the strange boxes, and their stranger, hunched, blue-faced companions. He had seen pokies in other places, but never really been close to them, nor expected them to creep up to him. He had simply thought of them as television in the pub. Why go to the pub if you're just going to watch television? And lose your money?

Now he perched on his bar stool as the tide of them washed in, seeking out every crevice to splash their blue electric light, and suck people toward them. Little whirlpools in the waves among the rocks, people spiralling into them, going into the nothing. Grasping for anything, any loose change.

Leon became frightened for a moment, then he left his beer half finished as some kind of personal protest, and walked out.

The street had started becoming more crowded.

Leon threaded his way through the people, not really looking at them, just the wash of their faces. He went to the Criterion, his most frequent drinking hole where thankfully there weren't any poker machines yet.

He wondered how long it would be before everything is taken over by the crass lights and shifting shallow grab bags of modern commercialism. He loved the lights. But he loved them because of their ability to heighten humans, to take us to a level of almost surreal exploration. The sensual freedoms of the chaotic, whirling night. He hated them for their debasement. The way some people get it all wrong. The way they just flip out at too much of a cacophony, too much of everything. Some people can't handle the freedom. To them the lights and the night are just a trip. Some kind of drug, which quickly bores them unless they take more and more, and then it either kills them or shoves them out into the suburbs in a kind of lifetime come-down, a sentence to nonentity.

Leon sat in the Criterion like a man on the run cowering under a bush where its cool and the dogs won't find him for a while.

He sat in the corner as usual and peered out the window at all the people.

He thought how the poker machine is a distillation of all the flash and lies. Promising everything, it takes even more, and even convinces its victims that they are safe while in fact they are being bled.

But Leon couldn't touch those people. You have to let them be their own mistakes. It's just when they start taking

over all the hotels that it seems unfair. Why can't they just keep to themselves and leave Leon and his night to get on with their own dance?

Suddenly, "Hey Leon. How's it goin'?"

A young, tight faced, clean shaven man sat down opposite Leon, and leaned back like he was familiar.

Leon remembered the face but couldn't hook a name or a definite memory to it. Still, he seemed friendly, so Leon smiled.

"Fine thanks mate. How are you?"

"Aw you know, kicken' back, soakin' a few beers." The man paused. "What about you?"

Leon warmed to the man's ocker accent, and his loose smile looked comfortable.

"You know, just the same I guess. Just havin' a look around."

The man didn't seem to recognise Leon's inability to remember his name.

There was quiet for a moment while they both sipped their beer.

Then Leon asked: "You know if anything's on tonight?" Meaning if there were any bands playing.

"Not that I know of hey." The man seemed to offer a dejection in solidarity. "Fucken pokies springing up everywhere. There'll be nowhere for anyone to get a gig soon. Let alone how fucken hard it is now." The man looked out the window and even the soft light made him wince.

Leon saw a possible adventure.

"But there's got to be somewhere that's got a good show on tonight. Just anything for chrissake." Leon offered. Not really asking a question, but hoping for an answer.

"Yeah you'd reckon. I hear the Royal Artillery can sometimes have a good Thursday. Probably just some local lads you know. But..." The man cocked his head, and left it there.

Leon thought about it. He didn't usually go to the Royal Artillery. Yuppies were invading the place, according to Leon, and its death was imminent. But then again, he hadn't been there for a while, and maybe things had picked up a bit.

"Yeah I'll think about it." Leon looked serious. He took another sip, offered the man a cigarette.

The man took one, smiling. "Last time I seen you you said you were tryin' to give up."

Now that was a mystery. Leon must have been on some kind of drug when he met this bloke. He tried to dip back into his memory, seek out the dark and semi-lit corners, hoping the man's face might throw some light on a few sketchy details and maybe put it all together. But no use.

Somehow his name would come up. Until then Leon would just call him mate.

"So mate," Leon began, "How long is it since you've been to the Arty."

The man poked out his bottom lip thinking. Leon remembered seeing that before, but still no idea where or when.

"Aw must be a good two months or so. Mostly just hang out round here." He thought some more, and then,

sounding like he'd made an agreement with himself, he nodded, "Yeah must be two months." He smiled.

Leon thought maybe this man was a bit crazy. He just seemed too familiar, and he flicked some of his movements. His face was a little bit too expressive.

"Yeah well maybe I'll head over there." Leon went back to looking out the window, not sure if he should be glad to have met this man, but nonetheless glad to have found an adventure.

When they got to the Royal Artillery there weren't many people there yet. Jac bought two Stolly's and they found a table next to the window. They were far enough away from the stage where in a few hours, the blackboard said, 'Funky Groove' would start playing 'loud funky rhythms'.

Gin was excited. This was just what she was looking for. The Royal Artillery was not too flash and rich, but not too dirty and grungy. A kind of hip, relaxed cool. Bright posters, a small dance area, and old but not disintegrating tables with basic chairs.

A mix of tired looking ferals with dreadlocks piled high or tied back, and smarter looking students being reborn out from the suburbs.

Happy people. But with a certain difference, the big city distance which was so unlike Canberra's friendly, almost small town acceptance.

But Gin was not uncomfortable, rather just aware that things were done differently here.

Jac saw this in Gin and smiled.

"Yeah this place is pretty good. Pretty easy going."
Said Jac, and they clinked bottles.

"Do you come here often?"

"Yeah, when I'm after a more relaxed kind of fun."

They both looked around.

"Have you seen that band before?" Asked Gin, motioning to the black board.

Jac squinted and tried to remember.

"No but they always have different bands on here."

"Sounds all right." Offered Gin, thinking about funk. "Bit of a dance." And she wiggled her shoulders and smiled.

"Yeah but they won't start for a while. Not until nine-thirty at least."

"They must go pretty late." Gin suggested.

"Sometimes. That's why people tend to go out later here. Sometimes we don't leave home until ten pm." Jac said, almost proudly.

That idea didn't suit Gin. She was used to pubs closing around eleven on weekdays in Canberra. That's why she would usually get out of the pub by one or two a.m. in Canberra.

"Jees, the staff must work late then." She shrugged.

Jac smiled, offering her acceptance.

They watched the people. Different groups of friends meeting, laughing and comfortable in their favourite place. There was not much mixing between the groups though; just polite nods here and there.

They chatted away, and tried not to talk too much about Canberra, about past lives and past concerns. Everything was new now, and Gin in particular didn't want the past to lose itself in her mind, which she knew could be over-dramatic when alcohol turned memory into sentimentality.

She became more comfortable as the night went on and the Stolly's went down. She even managed a small, flirtatious smile with two or three of the young men.

Around nine o'clock, they were whispering together about some guy over near the bar. He had two friends with him. He had smiled at Gin a little while before, and Jac, with a few drinks in her, was goading Gin into action.

"Go on. You need to make a new start you're always saying. We can just go and stand up near the bar over there. Let him see us." Jac winked.

"Oh I don't know. I just got here." Gin giggled. The idea of flirting with some new guy excited her, but she was still wary of being in a new pub, and a new city. She wanted to look around a bit first. Still, she could just talk to him.

"It'll do your self-esteem some good." Jac said as if she had been considering the topic of Gin's self-esteem.

Gin went wide eyed. "What do you mean?" She laughed again, happily nervous.

"Well you know...It's good to get some attention."

"Why don't you go and talk to him?"

Jac went quiet. She never had the courage for that type of thing. She had always had to get other women to go forward. Although she was keen enough to get into the conversation, it would have to be Gin who did the 'leg work'.

"Oh I don't know." Jac looked sheepish. "Tell you what. We'll both go over and I'll stand with my back to them. We can just talk and you get some of that magic eye stuff going."

Gin screwed up her mouth. Jac pushed forward: "Oh I don't mean that. You don't have to. We'll just talk. See what happens hey?...C'moon."

Jac could be charming, and daring, with the Stolly's.

Gin still looked unsure.

"C'mon." Jac almost harangued. "Look. I'll buy you a drink."

Gin gave up. She would do it for Jac, who was obviously using Gin's supposed enthusiasm as a boat for her own wishes.

"Oh alright. What the hell."

Jac leaned back in her chair. "Oh goodie!" She mimicked an excitement she was pretending not to have.

They did not look conspicuous at all. They simply walked through the gathering crowd toward the corner of the bar where the three men were standing.

Gin thought Jac a bit obvious as she glanced and turning her back on them, leaned on the bar. She moved too much, and with too much élan.

This made Gin a little more shy. But she thought she could just ignore the men anyway, if she wanted.

"So. Another Stolly's for you my dear." Said Jac, and fished into her purse.

"Mmmm." Gin agreed.

The guy looked at her. She caught his eye and smiled and he nodded hello. She smiled wider, and then they broke eye contact. It was enough. They knew they were there.

"Yes. I will have another." Gin's voice seesawed, letting Jac know contact had been made.

"Oh good." Said Jac, liltily, letting Gin know she had got the message.

The barman put the two Stolly's on the bar, and Jac slid one toward Gin.

They raised eyebrows at each other as they took their first sip.

As they talked more, Gin made more eye contact with the man. He looked youngish. Twenty-one or twenty-two. But strong, like he obviously played a sport. This was not usually Gin's type, to look at anyway. He had keen eyes, and glasses like you imagine old Professors might wear. This juxtaposition had something promising in it. He laughed a lot, but his manner seemed retiring. His friends had to stop talking when he spoke because he didn't speak loudly. He held a bottle of beer, but he held it for a long time.

Finally he finished it and Gin could see him nod to his two friends, asking them what they wanted. They leaned back a bit, like it was a small surprise. Gin could see him say something like "No it's alright I'll get this round." And he glanced at her again.

His two friends just held up their beer bottles, beckoning for the same again. He nodded and took three large steps and was leaning over the bar just behind Jac, waiting, ostensibly, to get the barman's attention.

Jac felt the presence and turned just enough to see he was there, then said "Back in a tick." And left like she was going to the toilet.

Now they were facing each other, and Gin was wary.

She smiled.

He said: "Hello. How's it going?" A gentle voice, and he touched the bridge of his glasses.

"I'm fine thanks." Gin nodded and looked down at the bar, the ashtray.

They stayed quiet for a moment.

"Big night tonight." The man said as a matter of fact, and looked around at the crowd.

"Yeah. Do you know the band?" She asked.

"No not really. We're not from here."

"Oh right. Neither am I."

"Yeah?" He feigned surprise, and smiled. "Where are you from?"

"I just moved up from Canberra, staying with my friend." And Gin wanted Jac to come back.

"Yeah. Strange place Canberra."

This is not an unusual comment.

"It's not my fault." Gin said, bored with hearing the comment.

He smiled and half laughed. Then extended his hand.

"I'm Michael."

She looked at his hand for a second, then shook it lightly. "I'm Gin."

He looked surprised, everyone looked surprised at her name.

His beers arrived just as Jac returned.

"Well, nice to meet you." He smiled and nodded, and went back to his friends. Jac smiled at him as he went past, and then turned to Gin, one eyebrow raised, her mouth lopsided, questioning.

"Well?" Jac slid a cigarette from her packet on the bar.

Gin shrugged. "Nice guy."

"For fuck sake everyone's a nice guy." Jac laughed, having fun.

"Yeah and that's just what he is. A nice guy. Like ever other one."

They giggled into each other, and Gin realised she was getting drunk.

She preferred to forget about the men now that she had met one of them, but Jac, who had not had the chance, was till keen. So they stayed at the bar, Jac hoping the guy would be interested enough in Gin to bring his friends into the conversation and thus he would meet one of them.

But Gin stopped making eyes, so they stayed in separate groups.

Suddenly: "Holy shit." Jac said softly, like she just realised she'd left something important at home.

Gin looked at her, waiting for the explanation.

Jac dropped her eyes and looked directly at the bar.

"What? What is it?" Asked Gin, interested.

"You won't fucking believe this. Leon just walked into the bar. He's behind you."

Gin turned around but couldn't see Leon through the crowd. The lights had been turned down in preparation for the band, and there were a lot of people crowded around the bar.

"I don't see him. Where?"

Jac looked up from the bar. She peered around, but couldn't see him.

"He was just over there near the door. She pointed with her chin.

They both looked harder.

"I don't even know if I want to run into him." Said Jac, actually hoping to see him.

"C'mon. Why not? It could be fun." Said Gin, and stood on her toes, stretching her eyes through the people.

But they had lost sight of him.

"Maybe it wasn't him." Gin suggested.

Jac, who knew it definitely was him, just smiled. "Ah well. If he's here he'll turn up."

They both agreed.

Suddenly he was there, lining up at the bar next to them for a beer. He hadn't seen them.

Before Jac could say anything, Gin reached out and tugged his elbow. "Hey! Leon!"

He looked annoyed at his elbow, and then caught sight of the reason and a flash of shock lit his face.

"Gin! Jesus Christ what are you doing here?" He couldn't see Jac just next to Gin, because of the darkness and the crowd.

"I'm here. Look here." Gin pulled Leon over toward her, and presented him with Jac. Gin was delighted with this, and drunk enough to feel a mischief as well.

Leon didn't look surprised. Jac looked as noble as she could. They were suddenly very formal.

"Hello there." Said Jac, and didn't move.

"G'day." Leon didn't move either.

"So what are you doing?" Gin asked Leon, becoming aware of the awkward social situation she had just put the two of them in.

Leon loosened a bit.

"I was just...out for a bit." And he lost his way.

Jac tried not to look at him, but wouldn't look away for fear of it being interpreted as a hostile snub. She didn't feel hostile. Just awkward.

Leon regained himself and reached straight for a cigarette. Then remembered he didn't have a beer yet. Then wondered if he wanted one, for it would only mean having to stay here.

Gin spoke. "You wanna beer?"

Now he couldn't refuse.

"Yeah sure. I'll get it. What are you having?"

"No it's okay, I'll get you one." Gin turned to seek out the barman. This left Jac and Leon facing each other.

They didn't say anything for a moment, but the Jac decided this was stupid, and sighed. "So how've you been?"

Leon felt more relaxed. He could see Jac was still uncomfortable, and a certain disdain for her grew in him. He built a distance between them. That was safest.

"I've been good." And he tried to look powerful. "What about you?"

Jac nodded "Mmmm. Good."

Gin turned back around and handed Leon a beer. His brand. She remembered his brand, and presented it to him as a gesture of their past acquaintance.

She had also bought two more Stolly's, and pointed to one of them so Jac would know.

The band started suddenly.

The phone rang. We had forgotten to take it off the hook the night before and I knew it would be Alex, offering another day of building work. Caudral always slept through a phone call, so I also knew I would have to get up and answer it.

I wobbled down the hall and fell against the wall. Slid down so I was sitting, and it stopped ringing.

My luck.

I crawled into the lounge room and found Caudral already awake, sitting in his normal place, the papers spread out as normal, smoking as normal. It was too early to smoke. But I crawled over next to him and took a drag. Then I stole a sip of coffee from his mug. It was stone cold and I almost had to spit it out.

"Why didn't you answer the phone you idiot?" I asked.

He looked at me quizzically. "Why? Do you want to do building work today?"

"No. I'd rather sleep. But we'll have to tell him when he calls or else he'll just come round and drag us out to the site."

Alex was a shonky builder. But he gave us pretty good money and we only worked a couple of days a week mostly. The problem was, as a shonky builder he was always in a rush to get a job done, so that when his contracts were falling due, there would be lots of work, and he kind of felt he could make us do it because we had worked for him at the start of the contract. He did not flinch from coming around to our flat at

five in the morning, climbing through the window, and prodding us with a mop stick until we got out of bed and went to the site.

I didn't want him to come round.

Caudral looked concerned. "Yes. We'll have to hope he calls back. Then you can answer the phone and tell him."

"You can."

"No you can."

"Nooo. *You* can because I told him last time."

I thought about it, but I couldn't remember what had happened last time we had had to get out of work. I felt sick.

"When did you get up?" I asked Caudral, gesturing to his stone cold coffee.

"About ten minutes ago. That's yesterday's coffee."

And he smiled.

It was a bright blue day again.

I went back into my room and got dressed. Then to the small kitchen and rummaged for coffee. Amazed that there was plenty left, I made a big pot of it on the stove, and went back into the lounge room with two full mugs.

Caudral gestured for me to leave his coffee on the carpet, and offered me a cigarette. I lay down on the floor and looked out the window.

"So. When are you going to call Rebecca about the boat?" I asked, half jokingly, in case Caudral had left it as a dream in the pub.

"I'm still thinking about it." He said flatly.

"Look. We don't have to do it if you don't want. It was just an idea in the pub. Fuck it doesn't have to go any further."

Caudral looked up and out the window too.

"Yeah but I want to do it. I promised you. And I really want to get out on the Ocean. Only problem is I don't even know if Rebecca will want to see me again. Let alone pay for us to hire a bloody boat."

"Maybe you can offer it as some kind of romantic kiss-and-make-up gesture."

Caudral looked back at his paper. "Not a bad idea that."

Suddenly there was a strong knocking on the door.

We both leapt to our feet.

"That's fucken Alex!" Caudral whispered intensely.

"Why didn't you answer the fucking phone!?" I whispered back just as intensely.

"No point now. What'll we do?" Caudral looked around the room, as if some answer could come from the mess of junk we lived within.

"You answer it. Tell him...I don't know tell him we're sick."

"I'm not going to answer it. You answer. You can get out of it better and it's your turn."

More strong knocks.

"Fuck it. Let's just pretend we're not here."

"But he'll just think we're asleep and climb in the window."

"Then out the back!" I said, and bolted through the kitchen to the back door, which led to a small garden we shared with the rest of the flats.

But the door was deadlocked.

Caudral stood in the kitchen, looking around still for an answer.

More strong knocks.

We looked at each other and gave in. We couldn't escape.

"Hi ho." Said Caudral, mimicking the seven dwarves' song.

I nodded unhappily and yelled out "Hang on! There in a sec!"

We collected our gloves and went to the door. I opened it and found Leon.

"Jesus thank God." I exhaled, and stood back to let him in.

He shuffled past without speaking.

Caudral laughed and dropped his gloves in the hallway, turned; and we all went to the lounge room.

"I'm happy someone's glad to see me." Said Leon.

"Yeah we thought you were someone else." Caudral said, looking at me.

Leon saw my gloves. "You building today?"

"Hope not. What the hell are you doing here so early?"

"It's eleven o'clock." Leon said, and smiled wryly.

That was good. It was too late for Alex to come around, so there would definitely not be any work today.

Leon stood near the window and turned to face us, like he was addressing some meeting.

"Well gentlemen I have an announcement."

"Have you got a job?" Caudral asked. He was waking up after the shock, and sat lacing up his boots.

"No. Don't be stupid." Leon said certainly. "Last night I got pissed." He paused.

Caudral and I nodded agreement. "Yeah we were tryin' to call you. Where'd you go?"

"I went to Newtown and then to the Royal Artillery. Do you know it?"

I had never been there, but Caudral said "Yep."

Leon looked at the carpet and gave up on his addressing. He spoke normally, with a bass note sneer.

"I saw Jac there."

Caudral perked up considerably. "No shit? How is she?"

"She's fine. She was with a friend."

"New boyfriend?" I asked, enjoying the talk of old acquaintances.

"No. She was with an old friend of yours. Gin."

Caudral laughed heartily at this.

"Really? How long is Gin up in Sydney for?" I asked.

Leon looked serious. "I think she's moved here."

I felt sad that she had not called to tell me.

Caudral scrunched his eyebrows. "You two blokes are like fucking drama queens. Why do you give a shit if Jac and Gin are both in Sydney? You've known Jac was here for ages. And now Gin's here, well..." He smiled to encourage us, "We should all go out one night. Big old Canberra ex-pat hoe down."

Leon turned and looked out the window.

"No Caudral you don't understand. This is my town now. It's not hers. She had Canberra. She owns Canberra. Because of Jac I can hardly walk around Canberra streets without feeling fucked over. Now she's here. What's her problem?" He asked himself.

"How was Gin?" I asked.

Leon looked over his shoulder. He had always suspected there was more between Gin and me than we had let on. Sometimes I think there was less between us than we let ourselves realise.

"She was fine Joe. She said she was sorry she hadn't called you. But that she would call you soon."

I wondered if it had been her who called this morning.

Caudral stood up.

"Well come on then let's get out of here."

"Where're we going?" I asked.

"C'mon and I'll shout you two coffee down the beach. And Leon, I have a little challenge for you."

Same old cafe. Same old kind of day. Same three blokes sitting round with nothing to do and too much wishing. Hope is something which requires attachments, you can't just hang it out in the air and expect it not to dissipate.

Leon felt no one understood how important it was that he'd seen Jac. I didn't know what to feel about Gin. A strange awareness was creeping into me, a kind of emptiness. I had achieved an unsteady balance with the great eternity. Now the thought of Gin made me think she was going to have to see me sooner or later, and then she'd make a judgement; and for

some uncomfortable reason I felt I had to make the impression to her that I was okay. I had given up on making impressions.

Caudral thought the whole thing stupid, and below us. But it was he who needed our help.

"Leon. I need your help." Caudral looked seriously at his coffee.

Leon looked confused, and then almost flattered. But still at a distance.

"What?" He asked carefully.

Caudral began like he was telling a story.

"We want to go to the Ocean. What do you think?"

"Yeah I can understand that. Let's go." And he went to stand up, thinking Caudral meant a short walk down to the beach.

But Caudral and I didn't move.

"No. Not like that." Caudral shook his head. "We want to go out on the Ocean in a boat. And I think I need your help. I'm actually not sure how you can help. Maybe you can't. But as I said, it might seem a challenge."

He then relayed the story of our previous night. Leon listened and became agitated.

"I don't know what I can do?" He said when Caudral had finished.

"Well. Have you got any money?" Caudral asked.

"Of course not." Leon sneered again. It was a stupid question.

Caudral got slightly offended, and turned his chair to be looking out the window, toward the Ocean. "It's so close but it's so far." He said sadly.

Leon rolled his eyes. Then he looked sheepishly at me.

"What are we going to do Joe?"

"I think we should do nothing. Or else we should do everything. It's just because at heart we're extremely bored that their being here seems important."

Leon thought. But he couldn't fit the idea.

"No it's not that for me. It's something else."

Then he looked at Caudral. "Oh Come on mate, we'll get on the Ocean somehow. Rebecca'll pay. Just go and see her. Tell her you were out with me and Joe last night commiserating my relative's death. That's how I feel anyway, so it's not that far from the truth."

Then Leon looked alarmed. "And do it today for Christ's sake. I'm staying at your flat tonight and I don't want you coming home sober at ten o'clock and wanting go out after me and Joe've been at the pub all evening. Right Joe."

"Damn right." I mustered the answer.

Caudral turned back to us and smiled.

"Right then. Here's the plan. I'm off to see Rebecca. I'll be back by around six so I'll meet you two at the pub around six or six-thirty." Caudral seemed settled by having made a decision.

"Ah. That might be a bit difficult lads." I had to interject. They looked at me confused.

"We don't have hardly a penny." I told them.

Leon raised one eyebrow at Caudral, who looked in his wallet and gave us his last twenty.

"I'm sure you can get plenty more of this where you're going." Leon said as he folded the note into his top pocket.

Caudral looked unsure, but then shrugged as if to say 'I may as well try'.

We finished our coffees and Leon and I walked Caudral to the bus stop. When he had gone we went down to the beach and sat there quietly for a while. I knew that Leon didn't like that he was worried about Jac being in town. He wanted to wash away the memory of her and feel into the future like his past had never happened. But she was there. And because she was there he felt held back. But he also knew it was only himself holding himself back. Jac could not be blamed for her own existence.

Leon was aware of this and that's what made it all so weird for him.

"Jesus I wish she'd just piss off." He said, following with his eyes some pert rollerblader, as she sailed along the beachside promenade.

"Forget it mate."

"That's precisely my point."

The end product is that we exist. Indelibly, irrefutably. So the struggle is not to wonder at the impossibility of 'getting it all together', but rather to accept the process. For Leon, *The Rebellion*: a serious proclamation of some adolescent ideals which misfit themselves yet fire brightly.

Sometimes I thought it was the boredom that made him so awkward with the world. But Leon made boredom a kind of sin. You're only bored because you think you shouldn't do anything. Leon wanted to keep moving.

"Well we're not sitting here all day." And he twisted his head around, as if looking for some target, some object which could engage us for the afternoon.

Suddenly I was struck with the need to go and see Gin.

"Leon. Gin's staying at Jac's house you said?"

"Yep."

"Let's go and see them."

Leon looked taken aback for a second.

"You must be off your fucken rocker." He looked down at me.

"No. I'm not. They're just people. Let's look at it all differently. Let's walk toward what we're afraid of."

Though I don't know if I actually felt afraid.

Leon dropped his cigarette and crushed it with his heel.

"Why would I want to do that?"

"Look. It's bloody ridiculous. We share the earth with these people. In fact we share a lot more. Let's just go and see them in *Sydney*." By emphasising 'Sydney' I meant to show Leon that they too had come here to be different people. Probably to escape Canberra and try to make a life in the big place.

Leon looked unsure.

"Well I don't know what the fuck else we're going to do today. We've got to wait at least a few more hours before going to the pub or else that twenty will run out before Caudral gets back, and if there's one thing I refuse to do it's sit in the pub with no money. Bloody torture."

Leon snickered at this.

"Yeah I suppose so. But there's got to be something we can do. Never go backwards Joe, never go backwards."

"It wouldn't be going backwards. For Christ's sake just imagine they're not who they are. Just imagine they're some other people up from Canberra. We're just popping by to say hello."

Leon looked unsure.

I wanted to see Gin now. I wanted to glow to her. I wanted to see if she still moved the same way, and if her voice still faded out at the end of her sentences, like her face did in my dreams.

"Well I'm going." I said firmly and stood up, hoping Leon would fall for my bluff. I certainly would not have gone without him.

"Fuck it. Let's go."

Leon put his hands in his pockets, and it struck me that I had never seen him do that before.

Gin woke slowly, winding herself out of annoyingly insistent dreams. She kept seeing Joe. He looked strange, like he was keeping a secret from her, and she kept telling herself: 'You don't need to worry about his secrets, you don't care what's happened to him, you're a new person now.' But in her dream she still worried.

Eventually she had too much strength to push them aside and go deeper into sleep, so she just lay there, looking through the bottom of the thin red curtain to the morning light.

She felt surprisingly well considering the amount she had drunk the previous night. She wondered at Jac, who had so successfully dealt with her first meeting with Leon, and she felt foolish for having almost paraded the fact that she hadn't called Joe yet. But with the Stolly's she had felt high and important, and had wanted Leon to give a good report back to Joe. She had indeed delighted in the idea of Leon telling Joe how successful she had appeared.

But now lying there she felt she had done something wrong. She knew that it had been the strength of knowing Joe was here that had allowed her to come, and now that she was here, for some reason, she had last night wanted almost to hurt him. But not hurt him. Really to show him that after all she didn't need him, she could cope fine just by herself.

But that was unkind because he had never known that she had used the idea of him as a motivation to get her out of Canberra. He had no idea that she had even moved.

No, last night she was in fact parading in front of herself, and using him as a kind of mirror. She could refract her idea of herself in that mirror, and she shone all the brighter because she controlled the image. But she had no right to use him in that way. And more, she thought, because she had used him in that way she was still not free of him.

How could she be free of him if it mattered so much to her that he see her as successful and independent?

She would be free when she no longer needed to compare herself to the image she thought he had of her.

And there was a point: she had in fact been parading in front of her idea of him. So the censure was inside herself, not outside, not in him. She had invented this measure and attributed it to him, when in fact maybe no such censure existed in him. Maybe it was all her.

She decided to give him a call, then almost simultaneously decided never to call him. With this thought she got out of bed and went to find Jac.

Jac was sitting at the small, square wooden breakfast table, talking to Bernice, her flatmate.

They all smiled and nodded and drank their coffee together. Jac was recounting to Bernice the pleasure she had got out of meeting Leon.

"I swear it was funny. He was just the same. Just the same." And she shook her head but smiled.

Bernice knew Leon by face, everyone in Canberra knows everyone else.

"Oh I thought there was some difference." Gin offered, she wanted to atone for her feelings, give Leon the compliment of having changed and hope that he would pay her the same when speaking to Joe.

Jac scrunched her eyebrows and looked happily confused. "Oh well. Maybe he looks a bit skinnier."

"Skinnier!" Bernice mock shrieked, "How could he be any skinnier!?"

"I know. I don't know, but he certainly looked much skinnier than I remember." Jac mused lightly.

"Maybe you had just grown used to it." Bernice said, insinuating something, but no one was sure what.

They chatted away for a few more minutes before Bernice glanced at her watch and rushed out the door to work. "Don't forget tonight." She softly chided as she shut the door behind her.

"What's that about tonight?" Gin asked.

Jac looked concerned, she felt somewhat sicker than Gin as she had drunk a lot more after Leon turned up.

"Well you see, that's the problem with going out on Thursday night. Everyone else wants to go out on Friday night. There's some party just around the corner. Some work friends of Andy and Bernice's. We don't have to go if you don't want." Jac hoped Gin didn't.

Gin didn't know what to say, so just cocked her head, "Mmmm maybe."

"Well whatever. I think a quiet day during the day though don't you?" Jac made a sick face.

Gin smiled. "Yes I think so." With even emphasis on each word. She thought it best to leave Jac alone for a while, give her time to recover. She also wanted to go down to King street by herself. Just to look around and see how she felt about the place when she was alone.

So after a piece of toast she told Jac she was going for a walk, and Jac nodded easily, and said she might go back to bed for a few hours.

Another blue sky day. Gin felt refreshed, even if still a little edgy, and she walked the three short blocks to King street with a growing excitement.

She had made it. Last night's outing had made that clear. If Leon could move to Sydney and make a success out of it then Gin surely could.

Also, she thought, she couldn't honestly underestimate the boost to her self-esteem the brief flirtation with the stranger had given her. Even if it meant nothing, she felt comfortable to know she had some currency in the highly choosy and difficult market that is the Sydney scene.

So she entered King street happily, and acted as if she actually lived there. To forward this cause she decided to use this day looking at rent prices and getting a feel for what kind of accommodation she could afford.

She went first to the cafe she and Jac had been to last night. The board which advertised rents was pretty near full of slips of paper. She ordered a coffee and sat as close to the board as she could. The table nearest it was already taken, so

she tried to look unobvious as she squinted from a couple of metres away.

Expensive. But a few possibilities. She grew quickly bored of it, and grabbed a copy of some glamorous looking newspaper from a coffee table near hers. It was full of ads for places she'd never heard of before.

She started to feel lost again. What if she couldn't find anywhere to live? What if there was no work? She only had about \$650 dollars left and in this city that would be gone very soon. Going on the dole would be a last resort, but she was not far from her last resort, and even if she didn't feel too scared about it yet, she would have to get it together soon.

She calmed herself by thinking about Joe.

She decided she would call him after all. They could go out for a few quiet beers like they used. He could make her laugh with their little in-jokes. He was always inclusive of her. Even when he had left to go to Sydney he had come to see her to say goodbye and she could see then he was feeling very guilty about it. Even though she could hold him by no contract of pledged allegiance, he had obviously felt bad about leaving. And that was nice.

Still, if he had felt really bad he could have stayed. But then...a million possibilities too difficult to make out. By a couple of weeks after he had left she had convinced herself it was for the best in the long run. She had told herself they wouldn't have made a good couple in the end anyway. He was too deeply cautious about himself, too unwilling to let go when it really mattered.

She thought she was lying to herself. He was not too cautious; he had come to Sydney while she had stayed in Canberra. She had chosen the easier path.

But what are these paths?

She caught herself back and tried to think of something else.

Jac and Leon had not danced with each other at the Royal Artillery. This was not too surprising since Leon had never liked dancing before.

But Jac had danced at the pub. She had danced with elation while Gin and Leon stood at the bar trying to think of things to say to each other and not notice Jac's rebellious happiness. It had been obvious to both of them that Jac was parading her independence. At one point Jac had even taken Gin aside and enthused about some guy she had just been dancing with. It was only Gin's stiff insistence on being kind to Leon that had prevented Jac from probably going home with the guy. That would have been too much.

Gin smiled at the memory. Jac swaying slightly and giggling and obviously delighted with herself.

But, Gin thought, if Jac had to parade in front of Leon she was not free of him.

She finished her coffee, and didn't bother writing down any contact numbers from the notice board. She would come back on Monday and start the new week fresh. Get herself together later. She could give herself at least a bit of a holiday in Sydney before she had to become serious. There was still another week before Jac's flatmate came back, and anyway, since Gin had paid for the room she may as well feel safe in it

and use the time to wash away her old life and seek, if not find, a new persona, a new optimism.

She walked down King street. Just looking in cafe and clothes shops windows. Here were a people she felt she could want to relate to. Half of them dressed in a way that would have made them seem 'way out' in Canberra. She liked this, but was reticent to change her own, somewhat conservative dress sense.

But soon she grew bored, not of the colourful people, but of her current inability to engage them in any meaningful way. When she got a job she would meet more of them, and that made her think she wanted to go the party tonight. That would require rest, so she headed back to Jac's house for a quiet day.

We rang Gin's house from Leon's flat. She had given him the number the night before with brief "Sure, call sometime and we'll do coffee or something."

Leon didn't like the idea of calling her the very next day, but I told him to say that I had made him, that I wanted to meet up with Gin if she was around.

He looked unsure at this, even though it was the truth. He was scared Jac might think it looked like some kind immature excuse to get her see Leon.

I told him he thought Jac must be some kind of egomaniac to assume that. Leon looked thoughtful for a moment, then rang her.

I sat back in his brother's brand new couch and tried not to feel uncomfortable.

Leon got Jac on the phone and made the arrangements quickly, saying it would have to be early this afternoon because we were going to be busy this evening. He liked that, he had to appear socially in demand.

Jac agreed, feeling the same.

We caught the train and walked from Newtown station. Leon was perturbed to find Jac was living in such close proximity to his stomping ground. The thought immediately tarnished his idea of the area. If people like Jac were moving in it surely couldn't be long until the whole place went over to the mediocre.

I told him not to be so cynical.

He looked surprised, as if no one had ever said that to him before.

Gin and Jac were having another coffee. Gin was already feeling like she'd had too much coffee that day, but it seemed that drinking coffee was the only thing to be done.

So when there was a knock on the door, she couldn't help feeling nervous about meeting Joe, even though he had thoroughly psyched herself into a happy, mature attitude.

Jac smiled and went to answer it, but then stopped in the kitchen door way. "No. Let's let them knock again. See how keen they are." And she cocked her head, waiting.

"Don't be silly," laughed Gin, "just get the door."

Jac looked mock disappointed and tramped down the hallway.

Suddenly Gin felt like calling her back. She was confused about where she should be.

Should she go to the door with Jac? Then they'd appear like two little girls waiting for two gangly boys.

Should she wait here? Then it would look like she was too nervous to come to the door.

The hallway's three metres suddenly seemed a long way.

When she heard the door open she stood up, and felt foolish in the middle of the kitchen, standing like a doll, waiting for others to act upon her. But she didn't know where else to go. She castigated herself for having too much coffee. She went to light a cigarette, but what could be worse than a doll in the kitchen smoking?

So she took a breath and three great strides and was in the hallway confronted by Leon and Joe looking sheepish, and Jac revelling in it, leading them toward her.

They all said 'hello', and 'nice to see you' and 'how's it going?' but the words were just covers for the posturing, the break down of nervousness, the reassertion of familiarity. And it went well. None of them could have told any other what the responses to the polite words had been, but at least in a few seconds they were all leaning around the kitchen and Gin found herself boiling the kettle for yet another coffee. They all smoked of course, and this would make the small kitchen uncomfortable very soon. But no one was going to stop smoking, nor begrudge the others their calm.

Gin was relieved she was smiling. Joe had the ability to appear completely calm even if he wasn't; this disarmed the others and made the situation relax back into a kind of loose, if still somewhat overly polite, familiarity.

"So how's Caudral," Gin asked. Better to start things with people who aren't there.

"He's fine. Good even. He's got a girlfriend I think." Said Joe, and looked at Leon.

Leon became gruff in these kinds of situations, and a powerful need for beer had struck him. He felt like just bolting out the door and down to the pub and ordering a nice fresh bottle of VB and downing it in one. But he also felt that maybe he shouldn't feel that way, so leaned harder against the low bench top and tried to agree with everything anyone said. He didn't want to talk, but he smiled at Joe, giving Gin and Jac the

impression that there was some story behind Caudral's new girlfriend that they were keeping private.

This of course gave them the opportunity to pry, and thus relieve the tension by talking about someone else, while at the same time enclosing them all together in the comfort of a gossip group.

And so they went, the women pretending to be more interested than they were, the men more reticent.

Leon hardly said a word, which made Joe feel he had to say more, and yet he didn't want to. He didn't like talking about Caudral when Caudral wasn't there, and besides, as he tried to say something, he realised how little he actually knew.

But it was safe, and easier than standing round the kitchen silently.

Joe wished he could have spoken to Gin privately. Her movements, her voice, her eyes softly resting on his face. It all brought back the closeness they had once felt, and he wanted to spirit her away to some cafe, where they could sit together and talk quietly of quiet things.

Gin felt this too, but also a kind of sadness for how she had been thinking about Joe. He was not some dream. He was just a real guy. A nice guy, yes, but she could still see, or maybe was reminded of, that extra smile he gave her somewhere in her chest.

She daren't flirt with him. She absolutely did not want to seem in the least bit sentimental. She did not want to give the power of this situation over to him. She was in control here, she had done the unexpected thing of moving to Sydney. That alone was a defiant print of her independence. And yet,

standing there and watching him, and seeing that he was uncomfortable talking about Caudral; she just wanted to see him closely again. She couldn't help but trim her eyes with the message that she was still there. She still felt for him.

She tried to think how silly and adolescent that feeling was, but on the other hand, she didn't know many people in Sydney, and he was a good person. Why not spend some time with him? Indeed, the act of not spending time with him would seem some admission of her need to break with him. But they had never really broken, if only because they had never really 'gone out'.

Jac watched all this and felt relieved that she had been able to break this mould with Leon the previous night with the easy aid of alcohol.

Suddenly Leon couldn't take it any more.

"Well I guess we better get going."

They hadn't even finished their coffees yet.

Gin looked confused.

"But you just got here." And it sounded too pleading, she had slipped.

Leon looked at the floor. "Yeah well... We've got to go and meet Caudral at five."

Joe knew that was a lie, but felt sorry for Leon, so just looked out the small window.

Jac got a glass of water.

"Right. So what are you all up to tonight anyway?" She wanted to gauge their social life. Jac knew they would just be going down to the pub, and waited with delight with the information that she and Gin were invited to a party.

"Oh we're just going.." Leon cut off Joe: "We're organising an Ocean cruise with some friends." Leon smiled. He saw that Jac thought social standing important, and decided to play with her.

"Oh really?" Jac looked interested, but like it was nothing special. "Which company are you using?" As if she knew.

"Well that's what we're meeting Caudral and Rebecca and everyone else about this evening." Leon almost chided back. He was enjoying this. "It seems there are a number of options."

Joe was amazed at how obvious Leon could be when trying to make fun of people.

Gin looked at Joe. They saw each other across this strange exchange, and because they both recognised the petty squabblings of ex-lovers, they smiled closely at each other. Contact had been re-established. They had seen something together and recognised that fact. They had kept it to themselves. They had a new exclusive space.

But Leon was going to leave the place. He had had enough and the need for a beer welled in him to an insuppressable level.

He started to make insistent eyes to Joe. Eventually Joe saw the futility in trying to stay any longer. And anyway, he didn't want to be with them either. He wanted to see Gin alone.

So Joe agreed it was time they left, and made definite eye contact with Gin once more. He floated for a second and said: "So. Is it okay if I give you a call soon? Maybe catch up a bit better?"

He directed the question squarely at Gin and it made all four of them nervous for a second. But Gin also felt a kind of pride, an important, centralising pride that he was seeing her as successful and something worth desiring. She smiled broadly, "Of course. Call soon."

Suddenly Jac got an idea.

"Listen, what time will you be finished at your meeting?" She emphasised 'meeting', almost mocking it.

Leon shrugged and said flatly: "Dunno."

Jac looked to Joe, since Leon had become rock.

"I dunno. Later though." Joe offered quietly, he suddenly didn't want to appear too busy. He wanted Gin to know he was available.

Jac smiled. "Well we're going to this party tonight. Plenty of Canberra ex-pats.."

Leon butted in, "Oh no please no..." and rolled his eyes.

Jac just continued as if he'd said nothing. "And plenty of locals. Friends of Andy and Bernice's, so if you want to come along?"

Leon looked disbelieving as Joe nodded. "Yeah well. I don't know how late we're gonna be. But if we finish early maybe..."

Jac bubbled. She had won. In her eyes she had had the victory of being able to invite Leon and Joe to a party because she was more popular.

Leon made eyes toward Joe like 'You must be crazy'.

But although Joe knew he wouldn't make it to the party, he felt he couldn't say definitely 'no'. Not with Gin

standing there. Somewhere in him he heard a little possibility that he could somehow make it there. Then he could get Gin on her own.

He looked toward Gin, who was trying her best to look like she didn't care if Joe came or not, but was excited almost against her will that he might turn up.

Jac gave Joe directions to the party, and they all said their goodbyes. On the door step Joe promised to call Gin, for the third time.

We left their house. Leon didn't talk for about one hundred metres.

"Where're we going?" I asked him.

He grunted.

"Well it'd only be around four o'clock. So we've still got some time to kill."

Leon grunted again.

"What's up your arse?"

"Grunt."

We got back down to King street and Leon walked straight into a pub I'd never been to before. He went quickly to the bar and had Caudral's twenty-dollar note out before the barman even saw him.

"Two schooners." He said quickly. Then turned to me.

"I assume you want one?"

"Yeah sure." I thought it best to lie low for a bit if Leon was in a bad mood.

We got our schooner and went and sat in the darkest corner of the pub.

"So what's up?" I asked, though I had a fairly good idea. I had seen that Leon and Jac were playing a game.

"What the fuck you reckon?" Leon said sarcastically, though not unfriendly.

"Something about Jac I bet."

He laughed through his nose.

"Look Leon. Don't sweat over everything. What the fuck do you care what she thinks?"

"You know damn well why."

"Yeah well I guess I can see it. But I still don't think you should sweat it. Jesus you'd reckon..." I left it there, since I didn't really know.

Leon finished his schooner in three mouthfuls. Then stood up and looked down at me, expecting me to polish off my beer just as fast, so he could get another two.

I obliged, it was the least I could do. I realised he was taking all this much more seriously than he should have, but he was still taking it, even if it was wrong, or petty.

I shouldn't have intimated we might go to their party. But when Gin smiled a different way of thinking came over me. I no longer felt comfortable with the disarray. When it came down to it I realised I was merely hiding in this disintegration. Leon was truly living it. Or at least he was still capable of believing that he was.

He had retreated into the distance, but stood proud of his difference. And while Jac had tried parading her 'success', Leon had paraded his disdain for Jac's idea of success.

I could have done that too. I had planned to do it. But when Gin smiled, and when our eyes caught, I felt all this stuff we were doing, all this rebellion was merely a fashion.

When Leon came back from the bar again he seemed more relaxed.

"Yeah well what the fuck." He said, and raised his glass.

I smiled and did likewise.

We drank.

"You know they never bloody change do they?" Leon asked, or rather, he sought agreement, regarding Jac and Gin.

"No I guess they don't."

And that was the point for me. Gin had not changed. I had not changed. Of course, we had both sought to appear changed. But that look demonstrated the brief fancy of change compared with the deep closeness of what we had together.

It's strange. The simulation of sincerity, of living, of independence. I had slipped through all the life of Sydney but not really been affected by it. I had looked but not seen, touched but not felt. Leon had felt. Leon had seen. But yet, at that moment thinking back about Jac's house, and the way they had acted around each other; I knew that Leon too had been pretending. Maybe pretending something different, or the same thing in a different way; but he had been pretending something, and that ran so counter to our solidarity in Sydney that it unbalanced me.

Suddenly I didn't really want to look at Leon. I wanted to think about Gin. But then, I didn't want to think too much about the past, like those people who live for it, chasing their own tails.

After the second schooner I felt better. We both became more relaxed about the situation. Leon had done surprisingly well for someone who up until three days ago had been struggling to escape memory, and then been so suddenly confronted by the worst of it.

He even started to feel proud. He had achieved something he had been petrified of not long before. He had faced the past, danced around it, and maybe even safely secured it in a new way of looking. Jac had not bitten him.

After one more fast schooner each we realised we had better get going if we were to meet Caudral, so left the pub reluctantly. We didn't want a hiatus in our drinking. It let in the possibility of fatigue.

Leon at least felt braced, like he had built a new wall around himself to keep the past away. I knew that going into the flesh of my 'self' brought me almost to where I had originally left when I had fled Canberra.

We sailed through the people. It still being early there weren't any revellers out yet, and I felt that strange guilt at being half drunk in daylight. I hadn't felt that for a long time.

At the Hotel Bondi we found Caudral already waiting for us. He was perched on a stool at the bar, handing money over for a beer. I looked at the clock above the bar to see that it was still only five o'clock.

"How long have you been here?" I asked and took the stool next to him. Leon sat on the other side of Caudral.

Caudral smiled wide.

"This is my first." He smiled wider.

"Why are you so early?" At first I thought his being early had meant failure of the plan, but his smile attested to the opposite.

"Well my good buddies," Caudral put an arm around each of us. This made us both feel uncomfortable and Leon grunted and shrugged off the arm. I sat there and hoped he'd take it away soon.

"We are going to the Ocean." Caudral said proudly.

Leon just looked for the bar man.

"Cool! How'd you swing that?" I asked, and felt relieved as Caudral took his arm back.

"Bit a magic mate. Bit of magic." Caudral was very pleased with himself.

The barman arrived and looked at Leon, who nodded toward Caudral.

Caudral said: "Three pints of Guinness, thanks mate." And reached for his wallet.

"You've already got a beer." I reminded him.

"Fuck this. I was just gonna drink this until you two got here." He flashed me his wallet. It was stuffed with twenty-dollar notes. I didn't show any sign of amazement until the bar man had gone.

We all waited silently for the Guinness to settle. Then when the bar man brought them over, we thanked him, and said 'cheers' as the bar man left.

I turned face on to Caudral. "So where'd you get all that shit? And what the fuck is going on? There must a couple of hundred bucks in there."

Leon woke up a bit and looked inquisitively to Caudral, who smiled again.

"That my friends, was four hundred and eighty dollars. Minus three pints and a stubby."

Leon sniffed and looked out over the bar, disbelief.

"Why on earth did she give you that? You *must* be prostituting yourself." I insisted.

Caudral smiled, understanding that I might seek that conclusion.

"No. I'm not prostituting myself, I don't think." He looked a little unsure for a moment, but then dismissed the idea. "No. I'm not." Then he sat up straighter, the issue resolved in his head. "This is the money for the boat. I'm to hire it, and then collect as much money off you lads as I can, and pay that back to Rebecca. She's got a couple of friends who also want to come. Some workmates or something. So they're gonna chip in at her end."

Leon sipped his Guinness, and looked like he was seeing through the deal to the facts. "So Caudral. What you're saying is that money is ours. And we have to organise a boat."

"Yeah. With the money."

Leon leaned forward, agreeing only with half of the Caudral's implied assertion.

"No." Leon said factually. "The money is a separate entity. We have the money. We need the boat." He leaned his

head in opposite directions on each point, to emphasise their difference. "They are not the same thing."

Caudral had obviously seen this situation in advance, and knew where Leon was leading. He smiled at Leon carefully.

"I understand that Leon. But the fact is that this money is going to be largely used to hire a boat, and slightly used for drinking. Not vice versa. We have possession, but we do not have exclusive ownership, of this money." Caudral looked easily at Leon now, reminding Leon that Caudral would not let him down when it came to exploiting the windfall, but that he also had to meet some of Rebecca's expectations if this strange situation was to continue.

Leon turned away and looked behind the bar to the spirits rack. He didn't really care that much about going to the Ocean. He preferred to get drunk. And he knew that the easiest way to get Caudral to agree was to get him drunk also.

"Let's have a shot of whiskey to celebrate." Leon smiled.

Caudral, wanting to be conciliatory, nodded in happy agreement and searched out the bar man.

"Three shots of whiskey to go with these pints if you don't mind, mate."

The bar man served us, and Caudral paid willingly. We skulled them together.

The warm kiss of whiskey which floats down your throat and settles in a soft hollow in your stomach, and from there spreads its golden breathe to every part of you.

"So what is the plan?" I asked Caudral. "Have you looked into how much a boat costs yet?"

Caudral looked concerned.

"Yeah. We're not going to get away with much less than the whole four-eighty. But I found on bloke will take us out for three. He's run out of Circular Quay too, which is a plus."

Leon looked interested.

Caudral continued. "But the problem is that's on a weekday."

"That's no problem." Leon looked confused.

"Yes it is because Rebecca and her friends work."

We all looked at the bar top. Thinking.

"So if they work, how come you got here so early?" I asked Caudral.

"She took the afternoon off."

"Well why can't she take a Tuesday off?" Leon asked, as if the problem were some kind of deliberate restriction on Rebecca's part.

"I don't know that her boss will let her." Caudral said, pained.

I perked up; there was no point in being sad. "Look, the fact is that we've still got at least one-eighty, if we can convince Rebecca and her friends to go on a weekday. How much did you say it is on a weekend?"

"I didn't. But considerably more for the kind of thing Rebecca wants. Some even charge more than four-eighty."

"Well that's no good." I said.

"Fucken leeches." Said Leon.

Caudral looked upset. He did not have a very good tolerance to spirits, as Leon well knew.

"Well look," I began, seeking a moderated settlement. "We just have to tell her the facts. She can't afford a weekend cruise. She'll have to accept a weekday one."

"No," Corrected Caudral. "She can afford a weekend cruise, just no if she's also bankrolling our drinking habits." And he finally gave up. "Aw fuck it. Lets just get pissed tonight and wonder about it tomorrow. I feel healthy since we didn't do the job properly yesterday."

Leon cheered up considerably. "Damn right. There's nothing worse than having to be half-pissed. I couldn't finish the job either. Bloody Jac."

Caudral and I looked at each other and smiled Leon's predicament.

We drank.

When Joe and Leon left, Jac and Gin spent some time dissecting them. But while Jac was keen on outlining the differences, Gin only wanted to think about herself and Joe, and she preferred to do that alone. So she tried to dodge the subject when Jac asked her opinion, or else just listened to Jac.

Jac saw this, and tried prodding Gin into giving some kind of opinion, any opinion.

"Oh come on, you must have thought something!"

"Yeah but it's just a little strange yet. I haven't seen Joe for ages and I don't really have anything against him."

"But you knew him. I mean, everyone except you two seemed to think you had a thing going. And even you don't deny that you did."

"Yeah." Gin touched her chin.

"So." Jac led.

"So?..So I don't know. What time do we have to go to the party?"

Jac laughed, friendly.

"Oh Gin. It's so funny. We're just a couple of little girls sometimes. I wonder when we'll grow out of all this shit."

Gin smiled. There was nothing she could do.

"Maybe it's just a boredom or something. Maybe it's just all in our memories." Then she took a breath and looked even closer at the kettle. "Can't just hang around waiting for stuff to happen. They're in the past now."

This musing surprised Jac, who preferred her thinking private. And when the ugly shapes of thinking or emotionalism did ungainly rise, she preferred to move.

"Yes well. The party. So you want to go after all you think. We don't have to." Jac still felt a bit sick, and was thinking a quiet night might be the best thing to freshen her for the rest of the weekend.

"Well we may as well." And Gin was about to say 'what if Leon and Joe turn up?', but stopped herself, feeling it somehow wasn't the right thing to say.

Jac steeled herself. "Yes I guess you're right. We should get out and meet a few new people hey? Now's the time if ever there was one."

They gave each other a little laugh and looked at the round white clock above the fridge.

Jac spoke. "Well it's five. So Bernice should be home soon. We may as well go with her. Probably leave here around eight I'd guess."

They agreed with each other's nodding and looked about for something to do. Gin saw the dishes needed to be done, and thought it would be a nice thing to do for her new, if brief, flatmates. So she set to it, after Jac's polite saying that she didn't have to, and Gin's returned polite insistence.

Bernice got home at five-thirty and commented very happily on Gin's having cleaned the kitchen. Bernice liked Gin, and was happy that they were coming to the party because she hadn't really had any time to go out with them yet.

"Oh it'll be great for you to come. Plenty of people. Good fun people. I'm sure you'll be fine and have a great time." Bernice smiled. She had long bouncy curls of auburn hair, and she bounced them with her frenetic, happy energy.

This was infectious, and even Jac started to feel healthy again around Bernice's enthusiasm. Of course, for Bernice this was the long and eagerly awaited Friday night. So, even though she was normally energetic, even that energy had been sharpened by the long wait to be let loose.

Bernice raved.

"No you won't have to get too dressed up. It's just casual. God, most of them have to dress during the week so at a party they'll probably dress, maybe even *down* a bit. But I'm not sure. But I am sure not too much dressed *up*. I know most of the people there and there's this one guy I'm hoping turns up. I think his name's Dave or something but he works in the same restaurant as a friend of mine and he's just started and so even she's not really sure of his name. But I saw him when I visited her last week and she said she'd invite him so..." And she went on. Jac punctuated the raving with enthusiastic questions.

Gin nodded politely and smiled and laughed on queue, but she wanted to be alone for a while. Even half an hour. So at the first break she excused herself and said she had better go and get ready, save having to rush later.

Bernice agreed and suggested they have dinner somewhere on King street before heading to the party. Jac said this was a good idea and Gin agreed, though she worried slightly about spending money too quickly.

But Gin was not to get her time alone, because Jac also wanted a break from Bernice's raving, and ushered Gin into her room to show her some dresses she thought Gin might like, but this was just an excuse.

It was nothing against Bernice.

They left at six-thirty and walked down to King street. Even though she had not over-dressed; and she had declined Jac's offer of a very smart black dress on the basis that it was too cocktail-party-like (making it obvious Jac would never wear it), Gin felt a little out of place on King street. They were still too well dressed for most of the ferals who were lurching early toward their drinking holes.

Jac and Bernice seemed to love it. They almost strutted their way along, deliberately overlooking some restaurants so they could walk an extra few blocks. Jac wore her usual mock gothic style, a long black dress with a lace back, and a dark purple silk scarf. Bernice wore a short red dress wrapped in a thin overshawl of red lace, spotted with shiny red fake rubies, and a red skivvy with a short red and black jacket.

Gin felt small in comparison to them, yet her association was enough to turn civilian eyes. She wore a standard black mini dress with a high neckline that turned into a skivvy-neck. It had short sleeves, and over it she wore the necklace Jac had given her. She didn't take a jacket, so she would have to carry her purse. But Jac had a big handbag, and Gin could leave her wallet in that when they got to the party.

Gin walked between the others, but had to keep dropping back a little as they talked about things she wasn't

involved in; times they had had when Gin was still living in Canberra.

After a long way they turned left down a little street and came to Greek taverna style restaurant which Bernice told them was cheap but very good and, (winking) very nice to be served at, very gentle waiters.

"Jesus Bernice." Jac raised her eyes and opened the door. "Don't you ever give up?" Jokingly.

"Never darling. Never!" Bernice flourished past, mocking some kind of society lady.

Inside was made to look like what you might think a Greek Island, authentic Taverna would look like. Basic wood tables, candles in small glass holders. In the corners of the small main room were large free standing candles. Next to the main room were three little alcoves, just big enough to fit a table and tight chairs in each. The walls were covered in nineteen-fifties style tourist posters of Greece, particularly islands. In the main room there was also a small stage, where Bernice said they had a musical duo on Friday and Saturday nights, but that they were too early to see them tonight.

They were seated in one of the alcoves and Gin loved it. Such comfortable authenticity. There were some Greek looking people eating at two other tables, and Gin had always thought it a good sign if people from the actual culture were eating at a restaurant that claimed to represent that culture. Or maybe Joe had told her that.

The menu was written half in Greek. Bernice ordered for the three of them since she had raved previously about certain meals she had been told about before. This suited both

Jac and Gin fine. They had hardly heard of any of the meals on offer, and would have struggled over the pronunciation anyway.

"And we *must* get some Retsina!" Enthused Bernice to the waiter. Then to Gin and Jac: "It's this pine wine Andy told me about."

Andy had told Bernice everything about this restaurant. He had been there the previous week, but had hardly been around the house since, and so neither Jac nor Gin had had the opportunity to hear of his new 'find', as he called restaurants he had first been to recently.

Gin looked at the other two groups. A family, and a double-date.

Jac wanted to smoke. She knew it was impolite in restaurants, and that she shouldn't smoke anyway. Wasn't she trying to give up? But the double-date table were all smoking, as was the father of the family. It just had to be done in an atmosphere like this.

So she offered a cigarette to Gin, to seek permission. Gin of course could not refuse, and Bernice had to follow. So they sat there smoking but feeling awkward.

They ate and Jac and Bernice continued talking about other times. Gin didn't mind.

But then Bernice felt they were leaving Gin out, so asked her: "And so you got to see the old boyfriend today?"

Jac had told Bernice of their visitors earlier, in between Bernice's ravings about the party.

Gin nodded and looked at her cheese, then at Jac.

"Well I don't know if he was ever a boyfriend as such."

Jac looked at the roof.

"Oh come on. Enough of that excuse." She laughed softly.

"Well whatever he was. Yeah it was nice to see him." Gin smiled at Bernice.

She could feel Jac get uncomfortable.

She didn't want there to be a division between her and Jac because they had grown different attitudes to Leon and Joe. She felt somehow as if Jac didn't want her to like Joe. As if she needed reinforcement for her disdain of Leon. But that wasn't the case for Gin with Joe.

Bernice, however, had no attitude to the past. She enjoyed the future with the same level of intrigue.

"Oh." She fiddled her fingers in the air. "Do I detect a little old flame in this?" Bernice smiled, wanting more.

"No no no. It's not that." And Gin looked as if Bernice were misunderstanding something. Yet she didn't know if that was the case or not.

Jac stayed quiet. She wanted to let Gin sort her own life out. But she couldn't help feeling it would be a shame to see her friend, one of her best friends, go backwards in life.

Ultimately though there was nothing much she could do.

But Bernice did not see this.

"Then what? A little reminder meeting on the cards?" Bernice was insinuating something. But Gin thought maybe this was just in her own mind.

"Well, we'll catch up I suppose." And Gin cheered up. "Maybe tonight. It would be better to meet him at a party I

think." She said purely for the benefit of the others. "You got to meet Leon in a pub and it seemed a little easier than standing in the kitchen. You know?" Gin looked very polite, meek even, and as if she were wanting Jac to recount again their adventure of the previous evening. Also seeking acceptance.

Jac saw Gin's dilemma at last without judging it. Instead she felt a pity.

"Yeah it's alright." She put a hand on Gin's shoulder lightly. "It was easier to meet that bastard with Stolly's I'll tell you that!" And they all laughed.

Jac looked at Gin and smiled softly. She wouldn't pry anymore.

They all loved the food and ordered another bottle of retsina.

After, they drank strong coffee and smoked, comfortably now. They were looking forward to the party, but the food and the retsina made them feel unrushed. They would glide to the party when they were ready.

The party was just starting when they arrived around nine o'clock. It was a warm evening, with occasional whispers of warm wind to let Bernice, walking up the short front path, slide aside a curl of hair and smile at the three people sitting out on the front porch.

"Hello." Bernice said sweetly and confidently.

Two men and a woman. The men were wearing smart black shirts. The woman a green top and black pants. She looked almost like she'd come straight from work.

They all smiled but didn't say anything. 'That's so Sydney,' thought Gin as she nodded past them.

It was a house much like Jac's. Long and thin and cluttered. Though this one was a fair bit shinier than Jac's. There was no dust, and wooden floorboards in the small lounge room and kitchen. It was cluttered with new magazines, weights, newspapers. It was very brightly lit. There was a gigantic stereo-sound system next to the wide television in the lounge room. It was obviously inhabited by people with jobs, and Jac and Gin glanced at each other to confirm their recognition of the fact.

Bernice bounced ahead of them through to the kitchen, even though she'd promised not to leave them alone until they'd met people to talk with. This made Gin nervous. She rarely went into houses like this one. They made her want to clean her armpits, again. She began to think that when she spoke her accent would mark her out as different, even though no one else claimed to be able to hear anything 'broad' in it.

Gin and Jac followed Bernice into the small kitchen where six or seven people were nibbling on biscuits and cheese, and drinking from expensive looking bottles of beer or cider.

Everyone looked at them, but Bernice didn't notice. She was yapping away to a neatly dressed woman near the stove. So Gin and Jac stood still for a moment, fast becoming embarrassed, and annoyed with Bernice.

Gin took the lead and side-walked around the pine table to next to Bernice, tapped her on the shoulder, and smiled sarcastically.

"Oh oh! I'm sorry!" Bernice remembered. "Gin...Gin this is Sharon, a girl from work, well, not my work but she used to work with me. Now she's moved up in the world, eh?" She looked at Sharon and cocked her head. "Oh and where's Jac?" Bernice swung her curls around. "Excuse me, I must go and find Jac. So...you two know each other.." And Bernice hurried out of the kitchen.

Sharon shook her head in friendly disbelief and laughed. "She's certainly has energy, wouldn't you say?"

Gin's eyes followed Bernice out of the room. "Yes. Definitely so. She's a lot of fun."

"Where do you know her from, Gin? 'Gin' wasn't it?"

"Yes that's right. Strange name but I live with it. I know her through Jac, do you know Jac?"

"I think I've heard of her. Maybe Bernice has mentioned her before. Her flatmate right?"

"Yes that's right."

Sharon noticed Gin didn't have a drink.

"Did you want something to drink?"

Gin suddenly realised they had forgotten to stop somewhere on the way and get some alcohol. The retsina had warmed them enough, and though she didn't really feel like anything straight away, she thought it better to accept the offer while she could.

"Yes. Well, actually we were just at dinner and it seems we forgot to stop off on the way and get some. Is there a bottle shop close by, I could just run up and.."

Sharon leaned close to Gin's ear and spoke as if imparting a secret.

"Don't worry about it. Most of the people here are filthy rich and they've bought heaps of wine and beer and cider for the party anyway." Then she pointed to the fridge.

"Oh I don't know about that. I don't know anyone really." Gin demurred.

Sharon looked concerned for a moment, and then leaned forward, over the pine table. "Hey Mike, Mike darling, grab us a.." She turned to Gin, "Cider? Cider okay?"

Gin nodded.

"Cider, thanks."

A tall man, obviously Mike, who was standing right next to the fridge, opened the door and casually selected a very expensive cider. While the door was open Gin noticed the fridge was packed with the colourful bottles of expensive drinks.

Mike smiled and handed the cider across to Sharon, who took it and thanked him and said: "Mike, this is Gin. Friend of Bernice's."

Mike looked like he was agreeing to that, as if it was conjecture, and then went back to his conversation with the two men next to him. They were all dressed in a similar fashion, neat shirts and new looking pants.

Sharon gave Gin the cider. "Don't worry about him. All these programmers think they're Gods."

"He seems okay." Said Gin, looking for a bottle opener.

"It's a twist top," Sharon pointed at Gin's cider.

Gin opened it. She'd never had this brand before, and it tasted too sweet. Sweeter than any sweet cider she might usually drink. But she thought maybe it was because she was used to Stolly's after the previous night.

"So how do you fit in here? You worked with Bernice did she say?" Gin asked Sharon.

"Yes that's right. But not for long. I work as a secretary now. Or *administrator* as these people would prefer to call it."

"Oh yeah. Where at?"

"Nowhere you'd know. Just a bullshit company in the city."

"Is that where you know all these people from?"

"Yeah. Here and there. Bit of each. What about you, what do you do?"

Gin liked Sharon's easiness, and she felt friendly toward her almost immediately. Also, she was relieved to have found someone to talk to so that she didn't have to look lost among a whole lot of people she didn't know.

"Oh nothing at the moment. I just moved up from Canberra where I was working behind a bar."

"Done that." Sharon said and smiled in solidarity.

"Are you from Canberra as well?"

"No I mean bar work."

"Yeah well I'm not in any hurry to go back to it if you know what I mean."

"I most surely do. But don't worry, you'll get something else around here if you look hard enough."

"Mmm I hope so."

And they chatted in this easy, friendly style for ten minutes. Then Jac came into the kitchen and excused her way over to Gin.

"There's a few people here." Jac commented, meaning there were lots of people.

No one else had come into the kitchen, so Gin assumed the rest of the house must have been filling up.

Jac smiled at Sharon. Gin introduced them, and they did the routine rounds of finding out how each of them knew Bernice.

Jac was still without a drink, so Sharon got Mike to pass over another cider for Jac, and one more for herself.

This was all right. Gin felt comfortable now that she had her own little group in their own little space.

Bernice drifted in and out of the kitchen, on each occasion appearing that little bit more drunk and bubbly.

Mike and his two friends left the kitchen and Sharon egged on Jac and Gin to take over their position near the fridge.

They all delighted in this. And Sharon did a play-act of 'blokes standing next to the fridge', leaning back with her knees bent and her belly stuck out, waddling around and swearing.

Gin laughed easily, and the easy proximity to free cider helped her along considerably. Sharon seemed a real joker,

and Gin could understand how she had become a friend to Bernice.

Jac laughed too, but she was also keen to meet some of the men she had seen throughout the house, and after another cider tried flicking eyes at some of them.

Then Bernice came into the kitchen again and beckoned them out to the front porch. Bernice was drunk now, and elated by the party.

She led them to the porch, despite Sharon's protest in mock ocker that they were "Leevin' the fuckin fridge behind mate", where they found a loose group of three men and two women who Bernice wanted them to know.

She introduced them but Gin and Jac forgot their names immediately. Sharon already knew three of them

They looked like they'd just arrived at the party. This was confirmed when one of the men excused himself and carried two shopping bags full of beer into the house.

Again the polite rounds of conversation, but by now Gin was becoming aware of the fact that she was getting drunk. She wanted to smile all the time, and preferred Sharon's previous jestering to this polite posing. She was consoled when one of the men smiled sweetly at her and asked her how long she'd been in Sydney.

"Not long. I'm still staying with Jac." And she gestured toward Jac, who was slightly jealous that Gin was talking to this man. "What about you?"

"Oh," the man laughed, "I've lived here all my life. Went to Newcastle once, on a holiday. But apart from that nowhere really. Just around here."

Gin nodded and tried not to feel too dizzy. She beckoned for a cigarette from Jac, and then asked if she could put her purse in Jac's bag.

Jac took the purse and looked intently at Gin, trying to get across the message that she wanted to join the conversation. Gin understood, but had forgotten the man's name, so was unsure how to re-introduce them.

But then she didn't have to, the man spoke to Jac:

"So you're the famous Jac. Bernice talks of you often."

Jac smiled and blinked.

"Yes. I guess that's me anyway."

They all laughed politely.

Bernice butted in, she has been standing a metre away: "Yes this is her. This is my legend flatmate." And she drunkenly kissed Jac on the cheek.

They all laughed politely again, and Gin saw the man give Bernice a sideways glance, like he disapproved of her being so drunk. Bernice was having none of that, and glided through their group and back into the house.

Jac did not want to lose the man's attention.

"Yes she's very energetic. How did you say you know her?"

Gin missed the answer because Sharon had rolled her eyes at Jac's obvious intentions and beckoned Gin away to the other end of the porch.

She pulled two more ciders out of her short jacket pockets and handed one to Gin, who was still halfway through her third. They laughed at Sharon's petty theft, and stood the two bottles next to a post that supported the porch's roof.

"Oh dear Jac seems keen." Sharon confided.

"Yes, I think she's got something to prove since she met her ex the other night." Somehow last night seemed much further away than it was.

"I know that situation," began Sharon. "There's nothing like the sight of an ex to want you to go out with someone else." She smiled into the darkness.

Gin thought for a moment.

Sharon turned suddenly back to her: "Have you got a boyfriend?"

Gin looked surprised. "Me!? Oh. No. Not really. I mean. I used to have one, kind of."

Sharon smiled and looked back out into the darkness.

"What about you?" Gin asked, wanting this weight off her chest, out of her throat.

Sharon didn't move, but replied: "Yeah. I've got one."

"Where is he?" Gin tried to sound chirpy. She wanted to be happy, and had thought Sharon would be full of fun.

But Sharon spoke quietly. "He's not here. He's working." Then she turned back again to face Gin. "So that means I'm free!" Sharon smiled and raised her bottle of cider. They clinked bottles.

Then Sharon leaned back against the post, and they chatted about anything but men.

When they'd finished the two bottles Sharon had stolen, they contemplated going back inside for more bottles, 'on a mission', as Sharon had termed it with wide eyes.

But the house was obviously packed, and the music loud, and Gin was reticent about going through so many

people she didn't know. Sharon made a sad-clown face, and, grabbing Gin by the elbow led her in.

They were both too drunk to stop for conversation, and wound their way through the crowd with Sharon dum-di-dum-dumming the theme from Mission Impossible.

They got to the fridge with Gin in almost hysterical laughter. Sharon kept up the theme song as she opened the fridge and piled them both with bottles.

Then she shut the fridge and pushed Gin with her laden arms, still dum-di-dumming all the way back through the house, out the front, and to their place on the porch.

They stood the bottles next to the post, which Sharon leaned against, guarding the bottles with her legs. Gin leaned against the house, still laughing, and puffing, and not thinking anything.

When she had calmed down Gin opened another cider and looked around to see if anyone was looking at them strangely.

Bernice bounced out of the house and came over to them.

She spoke low, official like: "That was an excellent mission well accomplished. Good work." And she picked up a bottle.

Gin was happy. This is what she had been looking for. Fun. Just some fun after all the trouble, the endless looking and wondering and lamenting. All she needed was to wave her arms about and laugh.

"Where's Jac?" Bernice asked, and swayed slightly.

Gin laughed at Bernice's swaying. Gin had the giggles.

Sharon smiled down at her, as Gin leant over, breathing in quick gasps, trying not to laugh so hard.

"I don't know!" Gin stood up, tears in her eyes.

She breathed slowly and calmed down.

"Do you get this girl?" Bernice asked Sharon sarcastically.

Sharon shrugged happily.

Gin mostly recovered, and then spoke to Bernice: "No I don't know where she is. I just saw her with some bloke over there." She beckoned with her cider. "But she can't have gone far. She better not have she's got my purse in her bag." That thought straightened her out somewhat.

"Oh don't be worried." Bernice told her. "She'll be around somewhere." And she saluted in thanks for the cider and bubbled over to the other side of the porch.

"You're just a crack up." Gin told Sharon, trying to make the comment bring her the giggles again.

Sharon smiled. "I know." She raised her eyebrows quickly.

Jac suddenly appeared. She didn't look too happy.

"Gin. Gin Joe's here."

Joe.

"What?" Gin scrunched her face, wondering if this were some kind of joke.

"Joe's here. He's inside." Jac looked concerned.

Gin thought how silly it was for Jac to be upset that Gin had invited them.

"Is Leon here?"

"No. Thank God. But Joe is. He's inside looking for you. I think he's had a few. I didn't speak to him. Just saw him." Jac spoke deeply.

Sharon stopped leaning on the post and stood forward.

"Who's Joe? Sounds like my kind of fella! Bring him out." She enthused.

"Where inside?" Gin asked, not wanting to aggravate Jac. She felt dizzy, trying to focus on the fact of Joe's presence.

Jac flicked her head. "I think he's coming out in a second. He will when he can't find you anyway."

Gin didn't say anything. She put her cider down and went straight inside. She didn't even think about the crowd, she just forced her way through. She ran into him in the lounge room.

"Joe. There you are!" She touched his arm, remembering just in time that she couldn't hug him anymore, she couldn't just grab onto him.

He smiled and remembered the same.

They stood looking at each other for a second.

Then Gin ushered him outside to the porch. She felt embarrassed that she had forgotten to be embarrassed.

Jac and Sharon didn't say anything when they arrived. Gin tried to remain calm.

Jac decided she had to be friendly. She had nothing against Joe, really.

"Oh good. You found each other."

Joe smiled. Gin smiled. Sharon looked confused.

Jac introduced Joe to Sharon, who smiled and raised her cider. "Where did you pop up from?"

Joe looked at the three of them. He seemed to concentrate. When he was sure he was safe from the stiff attitudes of the yuppies he'd seen inside, he spoke happily.

"I've been down the pub with Caudral and Leon. They couldn't come, I'm sorry." He looked at Jac, who had become embarrassed about feeling hostile toward him. She had only thought, when she saw him first, that it meant Leon had also turned up to hassle her friends, to show off. She smiled at him, they knew what each other meant.

"But I was getting bored with the pub so I hopped a train and caught a cab and now I'm here." He was relieved to be drunk enough to be able to deal so carefully, and comfortably with the situation. Yet he feared they might think him too drunk, so tried hard to appear as sober as possible. He had come to speak with Gin.

Gin tried not to look at him, rather to smile at Jac and Sharon.

Sharon could see there was some kind of connection between Gin and Joe. She guessed he was the reason for Gin's reluctance to say whether she had a boyfriend or not.

"Well it's good of you to come." Jac said, sincerely now. She wondered if she should leave Gin with Joe, for that was probably what they both wanted. But what if it was absolutely not what they wanted? But she had more important things to do, she wanted to get back to the man she had been talking to inside, so quickly excused herself and left. On the

way she gave a friendly eye of warning to Gin, but on second thought turned it into a look of encouragement.

At least it would be something different.

After their first, forgetful delight at finding each other, Joe and Gin slipped back into wariness. But they had both seen the happiness in the other when Gin had found him. It had happened just when he was giving up hope of finding her and while she was still too surprised to hide her excitement. They had seen it and would remember.

But they were also both happy Sharon was there, it gave them someone new to bounce themselves off. They could pretend casually that Joe hadn't found his head full of her and come racing over to the party at near midnight to speak to her without knowing what it was he would say.

And Gin had let him know, in that first sight, that given different circumstances she would have fell to him, held him.

But neither really wanted to deal with these newly rediscovered flashes yet. They were happy to know of them, and yet scared of them enough to want to hide from them by talking with Sharon.

Gin held her happiness with a wilful suspicion. She told herself it was just the alcohol. That she had slipped. That she didn't really want him to think of her as excited by his presence again.

But maybe she did.

Maybe she was really enjoying this and why should she hold back because of some unruly mental demand that she had placed on herself to be free of him? Maybe she didn't want to be free of him. Maybe she never had.

She smiled at Sharon and felt Joe was beside her. She wanted Sharon to make her laugh again, to make them both laugh. She wanted Joe to have a good time.

So they talked and laughed, and then Sharon left them briefly to get some beer for Joe.

They didn't know what to say to each other while she was gone. They had too much to say and nowhere to start.

"How long have you been here?" Joe asked, meaning at the party.

"I think we got here around nine or so." Gin replied and tried to sound casual.

Yet under that attempt Joe could hear a nervous energy, and he was relieved that she would feel that. It gave him permission to go further.

"You know I came here because I wanted to see you." He turned to face her, but she kept looking out into the darkness.

"Not now Joe. Lets just have fun for a bit. I don't know what to think at the moment. And.." Before she could finish Sharon returned with two bottles of beer.

They tried to look normal, but Sharon saw the unsteady flick in their eyes. She gave Joe a beer and they were quiet for a moment. Sharon thought it best to leave them. She could see they wanted her to stay, but also that there was something of which she had no knowledge happening between them.

"I've just got to go and see if this friend of mine has turned up yet." Sharon said, craning her neck to look into the house through a window, pretending.

Gin felt her knuckles bristle with fear; she wasn't ready for Sharon to leave yet. But there was nothing she could do about it, she had monopolised Sharon's company all night.

"Don't worry, I'll be back." Sharon mimicked a famous movie phrase and left.

Suddenly Joe didn't want his beer. He took a big deep drink from it.

Gin looked at him, trying not to give any message in her eyes.

"It's a pity Leon and Caudral couldn't come. Did you organise the cruise?"

Joe had forgotten about the cruise.

"Oh yeah. The boat. We figured it out somehow. Caudral's got the money. We just have work out which day."

"Right. That sounds good."

"Yeah. Should be fun."

And they sipped their drinks and looked back into the darkness. Joe offered Gin a cigarette, and she took it.

"So how do you like Sydney?" He asked.

"Well. I just got here. But it's been pretty busy so far." She thought of how true that statement was. "What about you?"

"Yeah it's good."

The force of what had made him come, the thread that resiliently connected them, was as untouchable as it was inescapable. He had drunk happily with Leon and Caudral, planning and joking and debating. But through the night, and

as the alcohol loosened his thoughts away from the immediate; memories of Gin had become more and more insistent.

But this time he had not sought to drown them out with reckless abandonment. Instead they had filtered through his motives to be free of her and softened his will to be new.

By nine-thirty they had been animated and happy, leaning across the bar ordering more whiskey, or another three pints, and laughing at how stupid the rest of the world was. Caudral had freed himself of the guilt of spending Rebecca's money, and hid in the certainty of a few hours drunkenness.

Leon was in his own version of heaven, and flying to it with fine gusto.

But Joe couldn't shake Gin away. The thought of her close proximity, of her smile, her barely hidden excitement and nervousness at seeing him earlier in the day.

Maybe he was just clutching at easy answers, looking for a raft to save himself from Leon's impossible project. But he had to go there.

The distance between the Bondi Hotel and the party had suddenly seemed a direct challenge to his independence. He knew he was drunk, and that the party might have turned out to be some lame wine and cheese night, but he had to go.

He realised that in fact he had been trying to convince himself not to go, and that if let free he would have run there, run all the way.

It was this thought that caught him. If he was always saying to Caudral and Leon how he wanted to be free of the constraints and rules of the middle class. If he had repeatedly pledged to try to break the cast of narratives which formed him

to mediocrity. If he had found anything of value in the deliberate attempt at distancing himself while seeking the silence behind the chaos: he had to go there.

Even though he didn't know what he'd say when he got there, or even if Gin would still be there; maybe it was the journey there that mattered, more than the knowing what would happen at the end.

He also knew he might sorely regret it in the morning. But he would always be regretting something.

So he told Leon and Caudral he was going for a wander, took fifty dollars and some change from Caudral, and left with Leon's suspicious eyes laughing at his back.

Now he looked at her, but could not think.

Gin finished her cider, reached down, and got another one.

She was going to open it, but decided against it.

"Do you really want to be here?" She asked at last, half wondering at why she was asking it, but relieved by the speaking of it.

"No. Actually I don't." Joe replied as if it were a joke.

This lessened the tension between them and for a second they smiled like they used to.

"You wanna go down to King st, get a beer at a pub or something?" Joe asked. Gin's eyes, and the tone of her question had let him.

She shrugged and let go all the petty hardness of her plans for her self. He did the same on queue of her shrug.

"Yeah. C'mon let's get out of here." She said, and winked.

Gin went inside to get her purse and found Jac chatting up Mike, the programmer who had passed Gin a cider earlier. It looked like Jac was being quite successful as he was standing close to her in a corner of the lounge room.

Jac gave Gin the purse and winked. She was too happy with this newly found man to be worried about what foolishness Gin might get up to.

"If you get back late just knock. Keep knocking and I'll hear you. I don't have a spare key on me."

Gin brushed the instructions aside.

"Oh look we'll only be gone a little while, he just wants to have a talk I think. If we're about an hour I'll just come back here yeah?"

Jac agreed, but added, "Just a talk? Oh yeah, right." And rolled her eyes again.

They walked down to King st, talking about other people. As Jac had before, Joe now went through a list of people they both knew in Canberra and Gin gave him updates on their lives.

This gave them conversation topics all the way, until they found a pub which didn't look too crowded.

They luckily found a table in an obscure corner and Joe gave Gin a cider that he had smuggled out of the party, opening for himself a beer he had obtained in the same way.

Gin laughed at this, and shook her head.

"Joe will you ever change?" She smiled.

"Why? Why would I want to change?" He smiled wryly and sipped from the bottle.

They had almost forgotten. They talked as if no time had passed, and this was some pub in Canberra a year ago.

But occasionally they remembered to be awkward, and told themselves to be careful.

Eventually Gin felt comfortable enough to ask him: "Joe how are we going to deal with being in Sydney together?"

Joe shrugged and sipped from his beer again. "I don't know. And honestly I don't care. I mean, I don't care to make any rules." He was getting too drunk now, carrying himself away on how successful their meeting seemed.

Gin looked at the beer coaster she was tearing to little pieces.

She wanted simultaneously to keep him in the past, and to know him now. She was afraid that if she touched his new reality, the shards of him, which she had felt so dearly in Canberra, would dissipate and she'd be left with smoke. But if she didn't, she would never know.

"Yeah but I think we're probably a bit different now?" She looked concerned.

"I suppose. But Gin I don't care. I think one thing one day and another thing the next. Each day I tell myself 'Yes Joe, this is the right thing'," He mimicked a teacher preaching, "and then the next day it's the opposite. I'm all over the place at...at stuff." He couldn't think of the word.

Gin smiled and remembered how he used to rave like this. How when she had first seen him in the pub late that

night, a long time ago, he had seemed so calm among the patrons. Then when they had started seeing each other more often and he had lifted away some of his fear, she had found him to be fond of these loose thinking speeches.

He recognised her remembering, and stopped. He didn't want to rave. He was trying to impress here, not frighten.

That thought surprised him. He had almost accidentally slipped into acting for her. And as he realised this he also felt a new comfort in this role. Not that he wanted it. In fact, he thought, he had left Canberra to get away from being so *comfortable*.

But where before that kind of stultifying, silent comfort had made him restless for a new kind of anarchy; now her quietness, or the quietness he found by being around her, climbed into him and perched with confidence next to his eyes.

They tried to look into each other, but were both too uncertain about what they were actually looking for to be able to know if they were seeing it.

Suddenly Gin remembered she had to be back at the party soon. She looked at her watch and saw she only had fifteen minutes. She had felt, and explored around what she might feel, but had as yet not grasped onto anything that she could use in the morning to construct a new, more steadily confident self. She knew it was probably best to leave now, but also wondered what the point would be? If this was all, then tomorrow she would be wound around his memory

without having even tested it's worth. She still stirred in a desire to know.

He had come this far and was falling on the side of taking it further. He wanted to go into this re-awakening, and although he was also aware that it was largely alcohol driven, he found himself frightened that when he woke up tomorrow and thought all this had been a mistake he still would not have swam into her enough to really know. Then she would remain in him, somewhere, unable to be dislodged finally because doubt would still insist on being heard.

"Look. I've got to get back to Jac. She's got the keys to the house. I have to meet her back at the party in fifteen minutes." She said, not as an excuse, but as a hassle that they would have to dispose of if they were to continue here much longer.

He was stunned by how quickly time had gone, and didn't want her to leave.

"Why? Can't you just knock on the door or something? I'm having a good time." He fished.

"Yeah. Yeah so am I." She asked herself, daring to find a way.

"So?" He left it hanging for a moment. "So why don't we go somewhere else?"

"Like where?" She asked, wondering if she should be feeling so willing.

"I don't care. Let's just walk somewhere. See something." He smiled, encouraging.

She could see he didn't know what to do. She felt sorry for him, tenderly, carefully.

"No. I really think. I mean. We could meet up later it's not like I'm going anywhere. I'm here to stay." She said as one last check, to find out if she really was going down this path. And as the words struck her she flinched, knowing they were not what she wanted to say, but would serve well to find what he wanted. She wanted him to hold her. Yet she knew they couldn't do that here in the pub, and that really, no place was safe. Everywhere there were people they used to know who would judge them, who would hold opinions.

She cocked her head slightly and smiled, showing him what she wanted.

He reached across the table and rested a hand on her arm.

"Let's just go."

Gin fell into her memory. She knew he would never want to hurt her, even though he had before. Now, if she truly were a new independent woman, surely she could receive his affection equally, and not be afraid of the morning. Maybe it would be like a closing, a finishing for a relationship they had never really admitted to properly in Canberra.

Joe wanted to touch her. To close with the fear he held of about seeing the past. It would not be re-living his memories, or even if it were it would only be transitory. A fleeting reminder of a world he was more and more successfully growing away from.

They might even be able to find a freedom that was never there before in the tight eyed social world of Canberra.

Surely, if they were free, they could do whatever they wanted.

In the taxi she almost changed her mind. But she rallied herself with the thought that this was what she needed. She would go with him to his place and they would fold themselves together. She would go living into all those images she had kept of him after he left Canberra. There was no question of them starting up a new relationship, this was not for the future exclusively. Rather it was to loosen the grip of memory and free the future.

But also she was plainly excited and she let herself be. Why not? Here she was fulfilling something that had kept her up nights in Canberra. She had imagined this repeatedly, though never exactly like this.

So she put a hand on his thigh and hoped that this brief replay of their past closeness would be beyond the morning's possible reprimands. They might blame themselves later, but in the taxi they both doubted that possibility.

He held her hand and squeezed it and knew that he was going back to a flat that was quite likely to contain a very, very drunk Caudral and Leon.

But instead of fearing Leon's likely snide comment, he relished imagining the look of shock on Leon's face when they walked through the door.

Joe laughed to himself out loud.

"What?" Asked Gin, thinking it was something to do with the strangeness of their being together.

Joe squeezed her hand again.

"Nothing. Nothing don't worry." He looked at her lips and wondered. Life is good, he thought. No matter what happens life is always interesting and good, so very good.

As the taxi turned down Bondi Road, Gin realised that Caudral and Leon might be home. She asked Joe.

"Yes well they might be. But don't worry, we can just slip past them." He realised he had just assumed they were going straight to bed, and moved quickly to correct himself. "I mean, they won't be any trouble. Caudral said he'd love to see you again. And anyway, they'll probably be asleep. Or still out. There's really not much in between with them."

Gin felt a little uncomfortable about Leon and Caudral. She didn't want to have to socialise again. She had got herself into the mood of wanting a quiet closeness with Joe.

If Caudral and Leon were there, then she probably didn't want to be.

Then again, she was still drunk enough to think she should just loosen up and have a grand old lounge room drinking session with them, just like the old days.

When they got to the flat none of the lights were on, so they knew there was nobody else there. Joe opened the door and led the way down the long hallway to the lounge room, praying that it wasn't in too bad a state. He turned on the light and felt relieved. It was no worse than normal. He scooped up a pile of newspapers and took the ashtray into the kitchen and emptied it.

Gin smiled when she saw the flat. It, at least, was just as she had guessed. A share flat inhabited by men only is a

curious thing. She followed Joe into the kitchen, then remembered Jac.

"I'd better call Jac just to tell her where I am."

Joe showed her the phone in the lounge room and went back to the kitchen to get some kind of drink. They were still passing each other politely, with plenty of space between them.

Gin wasn't sure what message to leave Jac, so told the truth. "Jac I'm staying at Joe's tonight." And then quieter, just in case: "I might be back so leave a key under the mat."

She hung up and went to the kitchen, where Joe was looking in despair through the cupboards. It was too late for coffee, but surely there was some tea somewhere. Gin saw this and stood there watching him.

"I'm sure we've got something around here somewhere." Joe pleaded.

Gin leaned back against the wall.

"Don't worry. Joe. I'm not thirsty."

He stopped and turned around.

"Water even? You want some water?"

Gin walked over and put her arms around him.

He felt her soften into him.

They looked at each other and smiled, and then kissed. Excited, confused, certain of their closeness. They were testing on that soft edge the truth of their memories, feeling at once the easy reminder of their specialness, and the frightening contravention of what their normal mind would allow.

They kissed lightly at first, but dared each other further, until they held as they used to, but fresher.

They broke, and Gin smiled. Trying to reach into Joe and find some reflection of her own dismay. It was there and easy to see.

He had to lighten it.

"It's good to have you back." And though he only meant for the night, and in Sydney, it sounded like something more. He looked even more scared for a moment and Gin understood. She shook him slightly.

"That's okay. I know what you mean. And it's good to be back." And they kissed again.

When they broke the next time Gin wanted to go to bed. She cocked her head and smiled and said: "C'mon then. Let's go somewhere else."

Joe led her down the hall to his room.

They were feeling into the darkness and finding the angles of their limbs. The smell of their closeness, sweeter than before. He could feel the cloud of her skin gather its electricity, and she smoothed her hands along his back like she could touch him beyond his physical being.

And she could, and this delighted them.

He wound about her hair and traced her neck and found every part of her and kissed. At each new angle he was like bathing her in this clear water.

She held him so close, trying to press him to her until they could merge and become one feeling. Moving her spine, her breasts to him. Then leaving him to go back, to look at him, to wait, to see. Then holding him close again, amazed, aware, unready, complete.

He was going beyond himself, going to her memory, her presentness, her undeniable nowness, she was here, actually here, and he was a whisper curling around her. Yet he was real also. He could feel her hands on him and hear her breathing play beyond the impossible closeness of words.

They found each other in this and they remembered. They were happy. And for a long time afterward they didn't say a word. They listened to each other. They felt each other relax. They kept holding each other.

Then, after a long time, Gin whispered: "I never forgot you."

Joe kissed her lightly on the forehead.

They held each other and slept.

Even on the inside I am pretending. What if I actually am the person I show the world, and the secret little thoughts I keep inside to gauge my worth, what if they are all pretence and posing?

What if my sleeping with Gin, for all that I think of it as some slippery idea to discard once I have established an independence from her; what if in that very discarding I am discarding myself? And instead of her being the outside past that I need to grow away from, what if she is the reality, and my professed attempts at growing away are all spectacle and vacuous dreaming?

Who's to say the difference? Who is there to see the difference but myself? And if I am pretending on the inside, and she is the reality, how can I tell which part of me is the one driven by false fantasy, and which the truth?

There is no difference. I am telling a story to myself about Gin when I think of her; but I am also at the same time telling myself a story *when I tell myself* I am telling myself a story about Gin; and for no good reason believing somehow that the latter is more true than the former.

It is all the same. When I touch I am being touched. And feeling, which is the sum of our knowing that we are; is not some stratified experience, where part is real and part is not.

The foam at the wave tops here is not stirred by the wave, it is the wave. The vast ocean, and the silence of the sky

which floats just above it- they are not different things. They are the same knowing.

I would not have slept with her if I had not wanted to feel again that simplicity. There is no point in telling myself anything else about it.

If I hurry to divide my motives, I cut out forever the possibility of knowing peace. Why turn one part of me against another? Why divide myself into inner and outer, or hope and memory, or past and future, or even 'Gin' and 'Joe'? These are all merely rough tags to cover and divide a oneness I have previously refused to accept.

And yet, she is not me, and I am not her. Our past is forever gone and different from our present. I hope away from memory. And I wish I didn't know this. I wish I could see it plainly and suffer only the clash of my motives, seen clearly and as merely an adjunct to a greater hope for my life. Instead I must look, and touch the Ocean with fear, and wonder at whether or not what I want is the pretence, and what I pretend to be is the real.

When I woke she was already awake. She was lying there quietly, looking out the window at the new morning light. She blinked.

I squeezed her lightly and she looked at me and smiled, without words or questions.

We lay there and felt the warmth of our sleep along our limbs and reluctantly woke into decisions.

After a long, too short time, she spoke.

"What are going to do today?"

"I have no idea."

We lay there for a few more minutes and I watched the easy softness fall from her as she began to think of explaining all this to herself.

Then suddenly she held me close and didn't move.

I breathed, and we separated.

"I've got to get back to Jac's house. She'll be worried."

"Worried about what?"

"I don't know. But I should get up."

I found Leon asleep, fully clothed, spread out face down in the hallway. His leather jacket half up around his shoulders, and one bootlace undone.

Caudral was curled up asleep in a foetal position in the lounge room, also fully clothed, with three crushed cigarettes next to his mouth. He still wore both his boots.

I guessed they'd had a big night, and didn't want to wake them, so took Gin down to Campbell Parade for coffee.

She laughed quietly when she saw Leon and Caudral, and shook her head in some kind of recognition.

At the cafe I realised I felt pretty healthy considering in all plain truth I had merely got drunk and slept with my ex-girlfriend.

Gin was happy and smiling, though she would grimace and hold a hand to her head periodically.

"So...thanks for coming round last night." I told her and tried to look like it was easy.

She raised her eyebrows at my pretending and smiled slowly, "That's okay. Thanks for having me."

We both felt the strangeness of treating each other like we had no past together, and laughed and looked at our coffees.

"So. Shall we meet again?" I asked, and not wanting to sound like it was meant to be serious, but also wanting to leave that possibility open to her, added, "Sometime."

She looked at me again. It was silly, and spurious to be playing this game. We should have been able to talk directly to each other, honestly. But we were both eager to give the other their space, and time to consider what had happened. To wonder if anything of importance had happened.

Gin thought quietly.

"Yeah." She said like she was daring herself a happiness she wasn't sure she should want. "Yeah why not." But she wanted it anyway.

I had an idea.

"Hey listen. Why don't you and Jac come on this cruise we're organising." I knew I would have to account for my actions to Leon and Caudral, and if I could at least say I had scrounged some more money for the trip via getting Jac and Gin to come along; it might temper their judgements somewhat.

"Oh yeah." Gin said, thinking. "But I don't know about getting Jac and Leon on the same boat." She smiled mischievously. "Could be a bit...*interesting*. Don't you think?"

"Yeah right. I had forgotten. But there will be lots of other people. I mean, I think Rebecca's getting some people along as well. So I'm sure Jac could hide among them if she

wanted to. C'mon I reckon she'd love to go on a cruise. Fuck Leon, he can just deal with it.

And I'd really like you to come."

Gin felt it.

"Okay I'll ask her."

"And even if she doesn't want to. Surely you could still come. It would be good fun."

That was too much. Gin looked concerned. Then she stirred her coffee, and I gave her a cigarette.

"Okay. I'll see what I can do. But Joe.." She stopped, looking for what it was she wanted to say.

I leaned forward.

"Don't worry Gin. I'm not thinking anything at the moment. Just playing it along by ear, and going wherever I go."

She nodded in half agreement, as if she were convincing herself that were a good course of action, a reasonable decision.

"Yeah let's not worry about where this goes. No expectations okay? I'm trying to do something here in Sydney, and I'm...I'm thinking of you, but not like..."

She scanned my face, trying to make me see.

I nodded and held her hand briefly.

"That's cool. I understand."

Which was an absolute lie.

"Mate. You must be either fucken stupid or a fucken masochist or both." Leon smoked, ashing into an old cigarette packet.

Caudral sat on the couch and held his head in his hands. "I wish we had some fucken pot. Joe. We must have some pot. Is there *any* in the house?" He pleaded.

"I don't think so. Try the roaches in the ashtray." I replied to Caudral. Then to Leon: "I don't know about that. It just happened. So what? It doesn't mean we're going out or anything."

Leon sniffed.

"You must be fucken flipped." He said, shaking his head, his voice low and scraping with what must have been a truly viscous hangover.

He had woken and merely dragged himself into the lounge room, and now was sitting with his back against the wall and his legs straight out in front of him.

"No mate. I'm not flipped. I just did it. I'm aloud to sleep with ex's if I want."

Caudral left the couch and walked, still hunched over, into the kitchen. Then he suddenly darted back past us, down the hallway, and into the toilet. Slammed the door. I tried not to listen.

Leon was still shaking his head.

"Look," I began, "not everything works to clear cut angles."

Leon rolled his eyes and gave up.

"Okay, okay you've had your piece. You don't have to justify your life to me. I just reckon you're making a big

mistake. Big mistake." He shook his head some more.

"Fucking huge mistake."

"I can handle this. Jesus Christ you'd think I'd bugged a choirboy by the way you're goin' on. Do you want a coffee?"

Leon groaned and nodded.

I'd bought coffee at the supermarket after seeing Gin to the bus stop.

Caudral came back and we all sat in the lounge room drinking our coffee.

"Where's my wallet?" Caudral asked softly, and we looked around but did not move.

"There." Leon whispered.

I threw it to him, since it appeared I was the only one able to move.

Caudral looked through it.

"Two hundred and eighty. That's two hundred we spent last night."

"Where did you two go?"

"Don't ask me." Said Leon.

Caudral thought for a moment. "I remember the pub. Then..I'm not sure. There was a nightclub somewhere wasn't there?" He asked Leon.

"I haven't got a clue. I remember a taxi."

"How did you know Gin had stayed?" I asked them.

"Umm." Caudral thought. "Oh that's right. We got back here..." He looked around, seeking clues. "That's right and I checked if you were back."

"Found you weren't alone." Leon smiled.

We all smiled.

"And I thought you must have gone to some pub after the wander." Caudral offered.

"I knew better." Leon chided.

Caudral changed the topic. "So that's two hundred I have to make up somehow. I knew this would happen." He said, without censure, just an acceptance.

"You're dole day on Tuesday isn't it?" I reminded him.

Caudral looked relieved. "Yes, thank God."

"The government you mean." Leon moaned, and beckoned for more coffee.

"No. I mean God." Caudral defied.

I got another round of coffee.

"Have we at least got any Panadeine Fortes left?"

Caudral asked plaintively.

I went to the bathroom and brought him back two tablets. He swallowed them with coffee.

We were quiet for a while. Just sitting. Leon trying to put energy into his legs, while still feeling the dizzy alcohol swirl.

Caudral trying to do simple arithmetic and battle away confusion, and wondering how he could get out of seeing Rebecca today. Or maybe he wanted to. Maybe that was just what he needed, a woman's touch to clear away all this mess. That or some pot.

"Let's go and get some pot." Leon suggested.

Caudral shook his head. "We've got no money. I don't know how I'm going to get back the two hundred let alone find extra money for pot."

"Come on," Leon egged Caudral along, "What's another twenty-five dollars going to matter?"

I wanted out. To get away from this, to somewhere where the air was not so full of breath, of people.

Or else I could go straight out again. Go running into the City, or to King street, or to Campbell Parade and throw this day in a few cold beers and a nice sleep in the afternoon.

I didn't feel hungover. I felt a need to move, to keep moving so that the thoughts of last night could never catch me. So I wouldn't have to think about Gin, or about what I wanted, or about what other people thought. I could just keep going and never stop until sleep blanked me for a few hours.

But that would be foolhardy. Even though I had no wish to stop and face the plain air of my actions, I also had a nagging feeling that maybe I didn't want to keep running, and that maybe there was nothing to be afraid of anyway.

On the bus she smiled. It was good to know she was still wanted by Joe, even after he had left her. It was also good to have held him again, and at least she knew, even if tentatively, that she could do without him now. What was important was that she had got her power back.

At last this broad city was not going to be difficult because of memory.

She felt for him, and did not deny herself that knowledge. But now she could deal with it on her own, concrete terms. Where she would go from now on was no clearer, but the mode of transport was.

She knew this because when she had woken she had felt sentimental. And sentimentality is always about the past. She had looked around his room, and knew that that was not where she wanted to be in the future. Joe had merely transplanted the anarchy of his life in Canberra to Sydney. She had moved in order to change. He was not changing.

And because she was close to him she felt sorry for him because of it.

She wanted him to do better, and she knew he wanted that also. But she also knew she would not be the one to change in his way, with him. And this made her happy.

She caught the train to Newtown and walked slowly back along King street toward Jac's house. It was not as if anything had changed, but she certainly felt free enough to look at things differently. Next time some nice guy tried to

flirt with her, she would not hide behind her secret hope of meeting Joe and only test out her currency with the stranger. Men are not scary.

And though it had been wonderfully interesting, there was no way she was going over that old ground with Joe again.

The closeness had been good, and she had fallen into the fullness of their time. The sex had reminded her of what loving magic that closeness could create. But only reminded her. And she knew very well that she had suspended her hopes and fears in order to experience it.

She was not sorry for last night. Nor was she mercenary.

She had meant every moment of it, and felt it shine through her. But now, she knew it had been fantasy. A good, whole fantasy, which had freed her to get a real perspective. But a fantasy nonetheless.

Now that she could, she would use that perspective to move forward.

She even giggled as she got to Jac's, wondering at what Jac would say, and excited to have come this far.

But Jac didn't see it. She was hunched over a coffee in the kitchen. She'd just had a shower.

Gin slinked and smiled into the kitchen, Jac just looked blankly at her.

"So how was Joe's?" She asked, interested but slow.

Gin recognised that she couldn't expect Jac to see the different confidence that she had learned. She poured herself a coffee and sat down opposite Jac.

"It was good. Really good."

Jac's eyebrows rose, she was thinking merely in terms of sex.

"No. Not that." Gin saw what Jac was thinking. "Well, that too." She corrected herself. "But more than that. I think I got something out of my system."

Jac nodded. She had hoped this would happen, and realised that it probably would. But Jac felt sick.

"Looks like you had another big night." Gin said sympathetically.

"You'd be right there." Jac scrunched her face.

"What happened with..?" Gin started to ask about Mike, but stopped as Jac shook her head.

"Oh. I'm sorry. He looked like a nice guy." Gin tried to look concerned, showing solidarity.

Jac smiled and drew a circle in a puddle of spilt coffee.

"Fuck that Gin. They're all 'nice guys'."

And they laughed, tenderly, and sipped their coffees.

They watched tv for the rest of the day. They ordered a pizza for dinner and caught up with The Bill. They played scrabble on Sunday, and Bernice won easily. Gin tapped around herself. After the first flush of independence on Saturday morning, she had filled her silence either with plans for getting herself together in the coming week, or with nagging reappraisals of Joe. On Sunday she had even been ambushed with a want to call him, but only because she felt he was a friend, and it would be good to talk to him, and she was bored. She had to remind herself that she was free of him in order to convince herself not to call. She didn't want to go backwards, not after the few first great strides.

But she wondered about what he might be doing, and couldn't help but think of him whenever the future seemed to threaten emptiness.

But she would train herself out of this; and so when she caught herself thinking in these terms about him, she would stop and try to think about finding a house and a job.

Jac suffered a two-day hangover, and was very quiet. This would usually have been fine with Gin, but now she hated silence. So she spoke to Bernice, and wrapped herself in Bernice's frenetic, free eyed enthusiasm for living.

"I'd go on the bloody boat for sure. You can't turn down an offer like. Who gives a stuff who else is on it? Did you say how much it would be? As if that matters really I mean it's going to be pretty cheap and I mean there can hardly

be any damage in it hey?" Bernice decided said as if it were obvious.

"But what about Jac? She's fairly hung up on the whole thing, don't you think?"

"Jac? Oh God forget about her. She'll either love it or hate it, go there or not. Either way it's a drama."

Gin smiled her agreement.

Jac was in her room, sleeping. It was five pm, Sunday.

"So apart from the boat, what are you going to do this week?" Bernice asked, her eyes searching for a topic.

"Well I'm going to have to find a house." Gin didn't mean to sound unfriendly, it was just a fact.

Gin nodded in concerned understanding.

"Yeah I wish Kim would stay away a bit longer. Nothing against Kim. Maybe we could fit you in the lounge room for a few extra days if you need it. It's no hassle I'm sure."

Gin thanked Bernice, but tried to forget the offer. Bernice was probably only being polite, and Gin felt it was time to move on. She'd had her little holiday. Now it was time to get it all together. This was what she had come to Sydney for anyway.

Later that night, as Gin, Bernice and Jac sat around the lounge room watching television, Gin told Jac of Joe's offer to go on the boat.

Jac looked at the ceiling and went to make a face of exasperation, but then looked back down at Gin, crossed her legs, and asked for more information.

Leon stayed over on Saturday night. He got his pot. Caudral finally gave in and we went down to the Hotel and scored off some Maoris. But it was too bright for Leon and Caudral to smoke a joint on the beach, so we went back to our flat.

Caudral sat cross-legged on one division of the dividable couch, a large bottle of water in front of him.

Leon went back to his sitting on the floor with his back against the wall, exactly where he had been before we went to get some pot.

I mulled and rolled the first joint for them, thinking that once they were stoned I might go for a walk around the coast to Coogee beach and have a look around.

But I must have been more tired than I felt, or else the pot was much stronger than usual, because just after my second drag I was struck by a wave of dizziness and had to lie down and fall asleep right where I was in the lounge room.

I heard Leon and Caudral laugh for a few seconds and then make some strange confused noises, then they too fell asleep.

When I woke it must have been around five o'clock, judging by the sunlight in the window. Caudral and Leon were still asleep. I shook my head and realised to my relief I felt fine. The joint we had started smoking was butted out in the ashtray, still half unsmoked.

The whole place was quiet like it gets on Tuesdays or Mondays around three pm. But I still knew it was Saturday, and wondered why the distant babble of voices and drone of cars wasn't filtering through to us from the beach.

I tried hard to listen, and then suddenly it was back. I cursed myself for trying to hear it, and knew that it was pointless to try to ignore it now. It had stuck.

Caudral woke and stretched out his arms and shook his head.

"Jesus that was strong shit mate. What the fuck was all that about were we just bent or what?" He smiled happily but also looked confused.

Leon heard him and opened his eyes. Then stood up quickly and went down the hall to Caudral's room, went in, and we could hear him fall on to the bed.

"Well I'm certainly not touching that shit again."
Caudral said with warning.

"Maybe we were just really tired."

"And maybe we were fine." Caudral drank from his bottle of water. "Mate, I might just have to give up on pot if it's going to be that strong from now on."

We sat and chatted, and Caudral didn't ask once about Gin. He seemed to want to eave me to it, and I felt thankful for that.

We went back down to Campbell Parade and Caudral bought three chicken falafels for dinner. We ate ours on the way back and threw Leon's into Caudral's room, then sat back in the lounge room.

"You going to give Rebecca a call or what?" I asked, hoping that Caudral wasn't, so I wouldn't have to be alone, or stuck with Leon's castigation all night.

But she solved the question by calling him just when I finished asking it.

"That's freaky." Caudral commented as he put down the phone. "She must be able to sense you or something. She wants me to go over and watch videos. I don't see how I can say no." And he shrugged.

But I understood that he probably wanted to anyway.

He left and I listened to the radio and smoked cigarettes and watched the sun go down.

It was all too quiet.

"So you can come then?"

"Yeah I think so."

"You *think* so?"

"Well I mean.. Yes...I can come. I'm just not sure about Jac."

"Oh right. Well. She doesn't have to come if she doesn't want to. But I'd really like it if you could. Just tell her not to worry about Leon. Jesus I'll still be surprised if he even turns up. You can never tell what he'll do until he does it."

"Yeah I know. It's just I think she's got something else....hang on.."

The wind, the ocean, this public telephone box. Buses, the cafe's lights. Cars. Too many Cars. Have to speak loudly to be heard.

"Are you there Joe?"

"Yes I'm still here."

"She says she can make it. But we've got to be finished before dark...Is that okay?"

"Yes of course. We'll be back well before dark. It's only three hours from four pm. We'll be back by seven. I doubt the captain will want to take us out longer than what we've paid for."

"And how much again? Each?"

"If you two can bring fifty each, just to throw into the kitty, so to speak."

"Fifty's a bit much."

"Yeah I know but we'll make that include beer and cider and food."

"Yeah okay. She's nodding at me now so I guess she means she can afford it."

"Cool."

"So what then? Will we meet you at the boat, or somewhere else?"

"Meet us at the Mercantile. Do you know that?"

"Hang on...The Mercantile...Hang on.."

The warm wind and the cars. A group of drunks wobbling down the hill across the road. Where to go to next? What is there to do?

"Yeah Joe?"

"Yeah I'm still here."

"She says she knows it. What time?"

"Better make it three. I'm not sure where we have to go to get on the actual boat but Caudral says it's not far from the Merc."

"Okay then."

"Good one. How have you been?"

"Alright."

The senses, her fading. She doesn't mean it. She means there's something not right.

"Oh good. I guess I'll just see you there then? Thursday."

"Okay."

"Bye."

"Bye."

The wind. The night. Caudral and Leon standing there looking out over the ocean with the ends of their cigarettes sparking out like little orange stars.

"Bad luck Leon. She's coming."

Leon flicks his cigarette and shrugs like he couldn't care less.

Caudral leaning forward so he doesn't have to raise his voice over the traffic, the wind.

"How much? How much can they chuck in?"

"A hundred. Is that okay?"

Caudral smiles. "That'll be just fine. Thanks for that."

Leon throws his cigarette and it goes flying out over the sand.

"Why don't you two just get your bloody phone fixed? Save us standing out here like dogs."

Caudral pats him on the back, smiling:

"Come on fly boy, I'll buy you a beer now that Joe's rigged another hundred in the pot."

That was Tuesday night.

"Good. I'm glad you're coming."

"Yeah well I couldn't leave you alone again. You remember what happened last time."

"Don't worry about that."

They went back to the lounge room, to the television.

"I wish I had an ex-boyfriend who invited me out on harbour cruises." Said Bernice.

"There'll be a price to pay somewhere." Warned Jac.

"Oh come on. It's just a bit of fun. Spend some time on Thursday. It might even keep us *out* of trouble for a while."

They all looked as if they weren't sure about that.

On Monday, Gin had taken down some numbers from the notice board at the cafe. A couple of share houses sounded all right. Only ninety dollars per week. She had called them and gone to look at them earlier today, Tuesday.

All three had been terrible, and she had become suddenly depressed at the prospect of having to live in some dump. But then when she got home Jac had come bouncing down the hall and thrown her arms around her.

"Gin! Gin! Kim's not coming back!"

Gin looked confused.

"Oh I feel sorry for Kim." Jac had demurred. "But her parents have decided to put her into a college for the final half-semester since her marks were, well, not up to scratch let's say."

Then Jac went back to beaming. "Soooo. I spoke to Bernice, and rang Andy at work. And they both reckon if you want it you can have Kim's old room!!"

Gin was still confused. She didn't know if after all she did want to stay with Jac. They had been best fun partners for almost two weeks, and moving in would require a calming down. But after a few minutes, and after Jac had backed off a bit and said it was of course all up to Gin, the easiness and the plain sense of the matter had prevailed. Gin was already here, the rent was cheap, she knew the people and they knew her, and they all got along.

Although she still had her reservations, Gin saw that the best, most sensible idea was to accept.

So she did.

Bernice had then ambushed her from her room and wrapped her arms around her and threatened her with all the dangers of sharing a house with such an outrageous child as Bernice.

They decided that as a treat and kind of celebration they would make a huge dinner and warm the house with their quiet friendliness.

They bought a roast, and two bottles of red wine, and made a mess in the kitchen and joked that they'd leave Andy to clean it up when he got home at two am.

By the time they'd eaten, and drank the wine, they found themselves all exhausted again and retreated to the lounge room to veg out.

For a while Jac and Bernice talked about Kim. They said they would miss her, but, like everyone she had her foibles. And they would not miss them.

Gin felt comfortable, and relieved that she had found a base from which to plan her future expansion into society.

A weight lifted from her, and she inquired about whether Andy would have any more shifts going at market research. Jac and Bernice said they were sure he could get some work for Gin. If not, Bernice would ask at work, and around the traps. Though they all agreed it would be better if Gin didn't have to go back to waitressing just yet.

Gin went to bed at ten, and started to read 'Portrait of a Lady', by Henry James. She warmed into the doona and mischievously hoped Kim wouldn't come back for at least a few more days to pick up her stuff. Then Gin would have to go looking around the St. Vinnie's for her own bedding.

But she was happy, and relieved to have the space and time, and that's why she started to read the long book with the easy expectation of being able to finish it this time.

Rebecca. I realised I had only ever seen her twice before. Once, the night Caudral first met her; and then again the next morning when we went to the cafe.

She met us at a yuppie pub just off Pitt St. She had brought two of her friends. They were all beautiful. That sharp, big city beauty that is untouchable, and with such sharp angled limbs that I can hardly imagine ever being with one of them. Let alone imagine why other men, or indeed the women themselves, find it so attractive.

They wore office worker clothes, and their make up was visible like it was meant to be. They didn't look at me or Leon, and only Rebecca paid scant attention to Caudral.

Really short skirts and black stockings. They all had long brown, perfectly straight hair. They looked like they showered three or four times a day, and they had money. You could just see it on them, like money was something they never had to think about except maybe ordering the priorities of which thing they would buy next. And everything they had was shiny and the best. Even their purses were of a leather fashion I had no idea was even fashionable until I saw them, and saw that they all looked similar.

Their shoes were cleaner than our plates back at the flat, easily.

Leon and I felt like vagrants as soon as we walked into the pub, and like dogs when Caudral finally found Rebecca and her friends and we all stood in a semi-circle at the bar.

I knew straight away that Gin and Jac would be in trouble.

There was no way that they would feel comfortable around these City Women. I knew Gin would shoot me blaming glances, as if I should have told her about Rebecca and her friends.

But it hadn't crossed my mind.

We only had fifty dollars between the three of us, which became twenty-five after just one beer each.

Leon smoothed it through like a charm. He seemed to have been gripped by this natural air and he acted it so neatly Rebecca's two friends made eyes at each other over him.

But they were more pitying than interested, I guessed.

Caudral looked ashamed, as if by bringing us here he knew we were doomed to be out-of-place. I kept smiling at him, trying to tell him not to worry. Like I understood.

His girlfriend just came from a different world.

Rebecca remembered Leon and I. She smiled as if we were old friends, or toys, and as if we didn't need to be asked about what we had been doing. As if that was of no relevance what so ever.

When she had introduced us to her friends, they had smiled like they practised smiling in mirrors. I tried hard to look genuine. But they looked like they didn't care if I was genuine or not. Like they would prefer a well practised falsity to a barely hidden honesty, if that honesty were awkward.

They were going to ignore us as best they could. Maybe they wanted to prove to Rebecca that she was going out with a deadbeat who had deadbeat friends.

If that was the case it didn't seem to be doing any good. For after her initial all round coldness and only brief acknowledgment of Caudral, Rebecca steadily warmed to him.

As Leon and I held on to the beers we wanted to skol but couldn't for fear of having nothing to drink after we finished this one; Rebecca and Caudral became closer and closer.

This amazed me just as much as it had that first morning back at the cafe. 'Why on earth would she go out with *him*?' kept rattling through my brain. It just made no sense at all, unless it was some kind of dominance trip, or kinky wanting of poor rat bag loners, which I doubted.

But it was happening. And happening fast.

As my beer became warm, Caudral slinked an arm around Rebecca. She kissed him on the cheek. He played with the back of her neck.

I had to finish my beer. This was all too strange. I skollled it, and when Leon noticed me, he did likewise. He was probably thinking I was about to get out of there, go down the Merc an hour early. It was only one pm, and Rebecca and her friends had started their 'lunch break', though of course they were taking the rest of the day off. To be with us? Very fishy.

But I wasn't planning on leaving early, since I still had no money to call my own I just had to finish my beer in this Alice in Wonderland weird yuppie pub and hope for the best.

As soon as I put my empty beer bottle on the polished pine bar, Rebecca waved to the barman and ordered three more. One each for Caudral, Leon and I, and then she held Caudral close, kissed him on cheek again, and said:

"C'mon honey drink up. You're getting slow in your old age."

Leon looked at me and shook his head slowly. I could see he was just as confused as I.

Caudral downed his beer, reached for the fresh one and, smiling at us, shook his head and said: "Argh she's a hard woman this one. Drives a hard bargain I tell ya mate." And he winked.

'Why is he being so ocker?' I thought, and realised the answer as I reached for the beer.

I thanked Rebecca and held the bottle precariously.

Her friends smiled as if they were being indulgent toward Rebecca.

We stood around and listened to the women talk. Leon dropped a word in every now and then, and they received them politely, if diffidently.

I was more concerned with figuring out a way to get word to Jac and Gin. I felt sure they would not have dressed up for this event, and that they would rue that, and blame me for it.

But the time passed quickly and before I could devise an easy excuse to get away early, Rebecca announced that we were all leaving.

We walked as a divided group. Leon slouching ahead, impatient to get to the Merc and down a couple of pints before we had to get on the boat. I kept between him and the rest of them.

Caudral and Rebecca walked arm in arm, and Rebecca's friends whirled around them, chatting, giggling, excited.

But whenever I glanced back they quickly found something else to look than me.

When we got to the Merc, Jac and Gin weren't there.

I felt relieved, and engineered it so that we got a table near the window. The plan was to see Jac and Gin coming, and then head them off at the door and say something. I hadn't yet figured out what I was going to say. Maybe it would be insulting to them to presume I should give warning. Maybe they would feel fine among these power dolls. Halfway through my next pint I had already dissuaded myself of that.

Leon bought a whiskey each for us. We slammed them down ostentatiously. Leon had grown a glint in his eye and I knew he was working himself up into being able to take the piss out of these women once we were safely on the boat and they couldn't kill us with their eyes, their manners.

Caudral saw our whiskies and flicked his hand at them. Rebecca saw, and gave him fifty dollars, saying happily: "Whiskey! Now there's a good idea. Go and get us a round why don't you sweetheart."

I had to blink to see if this was the same, porcelain Rebecca I had watched at the cafe. Then I reminded myself that Caudral had, after all, met her at the Transformer, and any woman who goes there can't be shy of a beer.

We tried not to look at each other while Caudral was at the bar, and as he was returning he saw five faces all looking up at him, waiting.

He balanced all five shots in his two hands, and delicately set them around the table. Again, he winked at Leon and I.

Leon downed that whiskey in one, just like his previous.

I sat back on it, waiting to see what the women would do.

They raised their shot glasses and one of them, (not Rebecca), said loudly: "To a VERY long, well deserved weekend!"

And they skulled them. I guessed they were taking tomorrow off as well as today.

I felt sheepish at having to go along with this toast since 'weekend', or 'weekday' mean nothing to me. Maybe there are a few more people around on the weekends, and it's harder to get a beer in Bondi then.

I skulled along with them anyway, and Caudral put his shot glass down with a huge smile. Then he turned and kissed Rebecca, again.

Leon smiled now. He was becoming tipsy enough to deal with the strangeness. Rebecca's friends laughed with each other at Caudral's brashness, and I could see he was going to play right up to them.

Then Gin and Jac arrived. I hadn't noticed them through the window.

Rebecca and her friends scanned up and down Gin and Jac's bodies. It was so obvious. I bet it was calculated to be so.

Gin shot me a glance of concern, confusion.

Rebecca pulled up two more chairs and edged Caudral out of the way, beckoning with giant gestures for Gin and Jac to "Come on! Join the Party!"

But her friends were still cold.

Jac sat down first, trying to slink as much as she could. But she was out of her depth with Rebecca's friends.

Gin sat next to Jac, with Caudral next to her. Gin didn't even try. Her eyes just flicked around like a new kid at her first day of school, finally catching me and then turning quickly into blame.

Rebecca was showing off, though friendly enough for Jac and Gin to run under her pretence and at least feel halfway comfortable.

Of course, this left us men all perching up the other end of the table. Caudral seemed to fret somewhat that he was away from Rebecca, as did Leon and I. She was the source of the money after all. We needed Caudral in there fighting for us or we'd be left high and very, very dry.

But after Rebecca had done the introductions and swept Gin and Jac into the group, she leaned back in her chair and ruffled another fifty dollar note out to Caudral.

"Will this be enough for you dearies for a while?" She smiled, and I thought for a second Leon was going to hit her. This was much too embarrassing in front of Gin and Jac. But instead we tried to ignore it, and hoped everyone else did too. Rebecca's friends didn't. They shook their heads and laughed politely. Gin and Jac showed no signs of noticing. They were too busy taking surreptitious moments to flatten down their

shirt tops, hoping to somehow wave a hand and be suddenly dressed as well as the other women.

This annoyed me. Why should Gin want to be like these freaks?

But I knew she didn't want to be, she merely wanted to appear acceptable to them. And it was my fault anyway.

The situation was worse for Jac, who actually took great pride in being at least fashionable in the shade.

At their house they had decided to dress down. That way, they wouldn't get anything too dirty on the boat if the boat was dirty. And, if they were caught with Leon Joe and Caudral wanting to go out afterwards, they could decline on the excuse that they weren't dressed. Though they knew this was a flimsy excuse for the men, they thought it sounded all right when they were getting ready.

After a quickly quaffed cider each, Jac and Gin started to feel a little more relaxed around Rebecca and her friends.

Gin was still annoyed that Joe hadn't warned them, and even entertained the idea that it may have been deliberate. Maybe they had planned to show them up like this, and strut the beauty of the women they had started to hang out with once they had unburdened themselves of Gin and Jac.

But she dismissed this idea pretty quickly in relation to Joe. He wouldn't do something like that when he probably held the idea of a new relationship with her somewhere in his motives. But Leon could have done it. He certainly had the motive and the most to gain in his eyes.

Joe realised all this at the same time, and read it through Gin's glances in his direction.

He wanted to tell her that it wasn't a deliberate showing off, but then realised that maybe there was an answer in this thought to why Leon had so suddenly smoothed into the action.

Joe watched Leon some more. His comfortable relaxed attitude must have taken an effort, but the more Joe saw it the more he realised that Leon *had* taken this opportunity to slight Jac.

Joe smiled widely at this realisation, and decided to enjoy the show, looking forward to finding out how on earth it could end peacefully.

Gin saw Joe smiling and thought that maybe Joe had had a hand in this set up. She was disgruntled that he would do so, and affronted that he should act so friendly and calm and unthreatening on the phone, goading Gin into making Jac come along, only to make them the butt of some sick social posing.

She decided she would bash on through it. She would show Joe up.

Rebecca was the life of the party, she enjoyed governing, and did it well. She insisted on buying Gin and Jac a whiskey each so that they might 'catch up'; and promptly sent Caudral on the errand with a light slap on his behind and a wink at the other women.

"Where do you know that reprobate from?" Rebecca asked Jac cockily, tilting her head at Caudral as he went to the bar.

"Just around. He used to live in Canberra, like the rest of us." Jac waved a hand toward Joe and Leon, and smiled at Gin.

Rebecca smiled at Leon and Joe.

"Oh yeah." She said to Gin. "So you're from Canberra as well?"

Rebecca's friends looked suspiciously at Gin.

"Well I went to uni there." Gin didn't want to negotiate this mire with words yet. She needed more cider to give her the confidence. She waited impatiently for Caudral.

Everyone nodded at her.

Rebecca asked: "What did you study?"

Gin looked at Rebecca's friends, but their eyes shot to her clothes, so she looked back to her cider, then up to Rebecca.

"Arts. A waste of time." She said defiantly.

They all tittered at this, including Leon and Joe. Jac took the opportunity to smile at Rebecca's friends, who at least made eye contact back.

Caudral returned with the two whiskies and three more pints. He distributed the pints to himself, Leon, and Joe; the whiskies to Gin and Jac, and then sat down again between Joe and Gin.

Joe and Gin shuffled in their chairs, and changed the direction of their crossed legs, pointing away now.

"Only three pints!?" Rebecca yelled, leaning back to address Caudral from across the napes of Gin and Jac.

"Well I thought you'd be right there darling. We've got to get heading soon anyway yeah?" Caudral inflected the end of the question.

Joe delicately traced the cold condensation on the glass, making an exclamation, and a question mark, and turning it for Leon to see.

Rebecca shrugged and leaned forward again, addressing the women.

"These fucken blokes these days. You'd reckon it was the bloody dark ages. What's the time?"

"Quarter to." Said one of her friend like she was laying down a ribbon before tying a package.

Everyone waited for Rebecca to answer.

She leaned back again and asked Caudral: "Where is it we have to go to get on this boat? Honey?" The last word like a joke.

Caudral looked perturbed. He could not afford to have Rebecca off side.

"Just down at Circular. Take us five or ten minutes. He said it might be a little bit later since he had to pile on the beer and food and get his afternoon booking off the boat before us." He smiled, the ocker accent dropping off.

"Well we better drink up then sailors." Rebecca raised her glass and took a serious gulp. The all did likewise, but as the men had just got fresh pints they couldn't finish it all in one. Rebecca laughed at them.

"Come on you lot! Call yourselves Aussies. Jesus. Come on. One pint, one swig. That's the rule for my boat. Drink up."

And they did as ordered, while Rebecca and her friends smiled at the spectacle; and Gin and Jac felt concerned, like something was going wrong.

Where before they had felt it would be them to be under the glare of these fashionable doll women, it was awkward to find Leon and Joe and Caudral so out of step.

Then Jac smiled wide with the others as she began to realise the power here lay not with Leon or Joe or Caudral. She began to feel a delight that she had come along after all, and nudged Gin and laughed as the men guzzled, looking like pelicans with their heads right back, trying to swallow a big fish.

Gin didn't warm to it so quickly as she realised Joe had not set them up, and that he was just as out of his depth as she had felt herself to be just a half an hour earlier.

The boat was much smaller than anyone had thought it would be. The skipper, a tight muscled blonde man in his mid-thirties held everyone's hand as he helped them over the gangplank.

Leon was the most discontent.

"Jesus this'll hardly keep straight." He whispered harshly to Joe as they shuffled toward the front of the boat where there was a small open air area, with two curving benches along the railings. There was a similar, even smaller area at the back of the boat, and a cramped enclosed bar inside, under the wheelhouse.

The skipper smiled and confidently wandered down behind the group and everyone sat on a bench to listen to him.

"So welcome aboard, again. And it's a beautiful day to go for a cruise!" He had said this before as he helped everyone onto the boat. "My name's Dan. Not the diving kind." He smiled at this, as did the women, but it went right over the men's heads.

"You're Rebecca?" He smiled at Rebecca.

"Yep." She held onto the bench and leaned forward.

"Well. There are two cases of beer in the bar, and I've thrown in some champers on the house. My assistant shall be here shortly with the food refreshments. Her name is Toni. She'll be able to help you with any enquiries you might have as regards the trip this afternoon. We plan to be back around

seven pm, and I'll be taking you out around Shark Island, then back up the river a ways. On our return we'll go back round Shark Island and to the Quay here..where we are. By the time we're coming back it should be a lovely sunset and you'll get a great view of the city."

Then he turned to the men.

"I hope everyone has a good time on this cruise, and there is ample beer. Please don't take it overboard." And he smiled at his pun.

"Ah, here she is."

A small, equally tight muscled woman in her early twenties came trotting down the quay and nimbly over the gangplank. She held a large plate of food, which she quickly put in the enclosed bar before bouncing back out to where they were all sitting.

"Hello! I'm Toni."

Dan presented her like she were a prize on a quiz show.

"I'll be your hostess on the cruise. You'll obviously have freedom of the boat while we are under way, but I ask you to come to me if you want to go into the wheelhouse." She smiled the smile of a practised hostess.

No one said anything for a moment. The men were feeling that quickly gulped pint.

"Oh and the toilet is just in front of the bar." Toni answered the question they were about to ask.

"Any questions?" Dan looked like he loved his job.

"No?"

Everyone looked at each other, but said nothing.

"Okay then. Oh! One more thing. It might be a bit choppy out around Shark Island, but don't worry because it'll soon become flat and gentle as we head up river."

Dan looked over the passengers.

"Okay?"

Everyone looked like they agreed. Of course they did, they didn't know anything in order to disagree.

Dan said 'okay' a few more times and then disappeared into the wheelhouse.

Toni recognised a group that was new to cruises and jumped into action.

"So! Who's up for a beer!?" She said brightly.

Everyone nodded.

"Well come on then." She waved them to follow and went into the bar.

Rebecca stood up first and then the rest of the women. Caudral and Joe followed. But as Joe stood up he noticed Leon wasn't moving from the bench, and that he held on firmly to one of the silver railings.

"C'mon Leon. Free grog."

"Yeah just grab one for us will you? I don't want to go in there."

Joe shrugged and went into the bar.

It was actually much bigger inside than it had looked from the outside. There was a long table and a semi-circular bench around it, with windows above the benches. At the end of the table, facing toward the back of the boat, there was a miniature bar window. Toni stood behind it opening beer

bottles and passing them through the window to Rebecca, who doled them out to everyone.

"Oh this is cosy!" Rebecca said, insinuating something. "Come and sit by me sweetheart!" And they all climbed and shuffled so that Caudral could get around to Rebecca, who sat furthest around the semi-circle next to the door on the ocean side.

Next to Caudral were Rebecca's two friends, who were excited and looking out the windows to find the best way of looking out the windows.

The top of the semi-circle was a polite space between the two groups. Then Jac and Gin, a little unsteady about being on a boat, but willing to have a good time anyway. It was hot and stuffy in the bar, but with both doors open a slight ocean breeze promised relief once the boat was underway.

Joe took two beers and went to take one back to Leon. He didn't feel comfortable in such close quarters, and especially if he had to sit next to Gin, which he really wanted to do, but had to pretend he didn't. Gin tried not to look at him.

Just as he turned to leave Rebecca noticed:

"Hey sailor. Where're you off to?" She smiled wryly, one arm already draped over Caudral's shoulder.

"Just giving Leon a beer." Joe tried to sound as casual as Rebecca.

"Why? What's wrong with him?" She asked as if she were waiting for the punch line of a joke.

"I dunno. He might be afraid of the ocean. He just wants his beer out there." Joe shrugged.

Toni glanced at him, she hoped Leon wouldn't get seasick.

"Well get him to come in!" Rebecca enthused.

Toni excused herself permission to speak. "If he's feeling a bit off colour, maybe he should just stay out there a bit until we can get going and get some more air into here." She offered as solution.

Joe nodded at Toni, "Yeah okay I'll tell him." And he ducked as he left the bar. He could hear the women laughing at the idea of Leon being seasick.

"Here you go mate." Joe handed Leon the beer. It was an expensive brand.

"Thanks. Jesus this befits the style of sailing doesn't it?" Leon looked at the bottle.

"Fucken ay." Joe sipped it and heard the engines start up.

A chorus of an excited cheer came from the bar.

Leon and Joe were quiet for a while.

"You going to come in and join the circus?" Joe asked Leon at last.

"Nah." Leon held on to the railing with one hand, but his beer bottle between his legs, and searched for his cigarettes with the other.

"I think you can let go of the railing if you want." Joe said. He was standing, and motioned to the railing with his beer.

Leon looked concerned.

"No way. I'll be right mate, you just go and deal with the circus if you don't want to hang out here."

Leon was scared.

Joe walked to the front of the boat and looked back. He could see Dan in the wheelhouse, reversing out of the quay using mirrors, and occasionally twisting his head around. He looked professional.

"That wouldn't be a bad job." Joe motioned to the wheelhouse window with his bottle.

Leon looked up.

"Yeah spose."

Dan turned the boat around and started heading out toward Shark Island. He waved to Joe. Joe waved back.

In the bar the mood had lightened considerably. After they all cheered when the engines were turned they raised their bottles.

Rebecca asked Toni about the champers, but Toni recommended they wait until the calmer waters of the river. They all agreed.

It was quite rough all the way out to Shark Island, and so the group was mostly quiet, or peering out at the Opera House, or Kirribilli.

Both Joe and Leon held onto the railing and sipped their beers infrequently in the journey out, but were happy enough at the views.

Shortly they were coming under the bridge and heading up river. The water became much calmer and the adrenalin of the first views still tickled around them.

In the bar Toni opened a bottle of champaign.

Caudral wanted Joe and Leon to return and yelled out: "Champaaaaaaaaign!" As a message to them.

"C'mon. We can't abandon Caudral to those vultures." Joe joked, and walked back past Leon, waving again to Dan.

Leon stood up and realised how stiff his legs were. He had tensed them the whole way around Shark Island, in the rolling waves, and hadn't noticed.

At the door though Joe met Gin coming out. The bar had become too much for her. She didn't laugh as easily as Rebecca's friends, even with Champaign, and she wished Bernice were there. It was the kind of thing Bernice would really like.

But as Jac had finally pierced through the other women's wary plastic distance, and began talking and laughing and nodding, Gin thought it would be safe to get out of the bar for a while. Get some air and look around. She'd never been on a boat before.

And now they were almost tangled in each other.

Gin smiled politely, and Joe touched her arm.

They juggled words of apology while Leon stood waiting impatiently to get past.

"C'mon." Leon said. "Comin' through."

Joe didn't want to go in the bar if Gin wasn't there, so he backed away and they let Leon past.

Then Gin and Joe walked to the front of the boat.

The water was calm here, and the deep growling of the engine had softened.

They stood together right at the tip of the boat.

Joe looked back to the wheelhouse and waved at Dan again. Dan waved back.

"So how have you been?" Joe asked.

"Alright. Busy." Gin was casual, looking at the green shoreline.

"Have you found a place yet?"

"Yeah I'm going to stay at Jac's for a while. One of their flatmates has moved out."

"Oh that's good then. Hardly any hassle at all."

Gin nodded and sipped her champaign.

Joe followed her eyes to the shoreline.

"What are people meant to do on boats?" Gin asked.

"Same as anywhere I guess. Just relax and have a good time. We've bloody paid for it anyway." Joe said, and didn't want Dan staring down at them from the wheelhouse. He didn't want to feel he had to look at him.

A light warm wind played with edges of Gin's hair, she flicked it back from her eyes.

"So are you liking Sydney so far?" Joe asked.

"Yeah it's been good." Gin wanted to say more but couldn't find anything.

Caudral and Rebecca suddenly appeared.

"Oh sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt!" Rebecca laughed.

"No no you're not." Gin smiled.

Caudral peeled himself out from Rebecca's arm and sat on one of the benches, leaning back on the railings and sighing. It was hard work keeping up with Rebecca.

Rebecca sat next to him and whispered something in his ear.

"Have you seen the back of the boat yet?" Joe asked innocently, not letting Caudral and Rebecca think they wanted to avoid them, nor Gin feel tied to a partnership with Joe.

"No I haven't," said Gin, and stretched her neck, showing Joe she wanted to go.

When they got there they realised that the windows around the top of the bench in the bar looked straight out over the back of the boat.

Joe thought he had the choice of the monkeys, or Dan, watching them.

Gin didn't want to feel there was anything worth watching.

Leon appeared briefly and handed Joe another beer and Gin a fresh champagne. Then crept back into the bar where he had finally struck up a conversation with one of Rebecca's friends.

"Your friends will be keeping an eye on us it seems." Gin smiled as she spoke into the rim of her glass, then sipped.

"What? Don't worry about Leon." Joe said as if the thought had never crossed his mind.

"I won't." Gin said firmly, and looked back to the green mess of the shoreline.

"Gin?" Joe asked permission to speak.

"Mmm." Gin kept looking away, offering no angle of approach, as if there was nothing there, or as if she wished this to be the case.

“I wanted to ask you something about the other night.”
He felt unruly.

“What is it Joe?” She faced him and spoke quickly,
wanting it over.

“Well I guess that tone of voice tells me all I wanted to
know.” Joe said wryly.

Gin softened. I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant
that it really is enough now Joe. Maybe there’s some time in
the future, but I just don’t want to come to Sydney and start a
whole new thing with us, not just now. Not yet.”

Joe nodded and it was his turn to look at the shoreline.

“I really don’t mean anything against you Joe. Like I
said, who knows in the future? I don’t mean to say I don’t
want to see you.”

Joe turned on her.

“Don’t give me that let’s just be friends bullshit.”

“Well I don’t know what else to say.” She looked at his
lips, hoping he would fall neatly into her plans, realising that
he wouldn’t, and knowing that this was just the way it was
going to be.

Joe went back into the distance. He was looking at her
from a long way away and his eyes refused to touch her, and
instead her looked at her as if she were an object.

“I can see that I’ve been misinforming myself.” He
said, not challenging her, but recognising something.

“Don’t be like this Joe. How long have we known each
other now?”

He looked through the windows into the bar and saw
Leon and Caudral, swaying with the boat.

“In terms of time I guess we’ve know each other a while. In terms of depth I’m not sure.” He thought of how different everyone had become, or of how maybe he had never known them to begin with.

But how the years had melted their solidarity and enhanced their differences. Before, the games of life had been played for the thrill of playing them together, now it seemed they were merely spectators and perhaps they had always been so. All these people looking over themselves as if their lives were posters advertising some great adventure and all their friends were splashed in bright colours across a dream which seems enticing, engaging, but is irrefutably flat.

He sipped his beer and thought he might throw it overboard, as far as he could toward the shore. But he didn’t throw it because it was still quite full.

Gin wanted to curve him toward her now, to make him understand. But she wanted also that he would understand without having to be held.

“We’ve known each other.” She said. “And that was, is special.”

Why had he bothered? She had come to Sydney and used him. Why were all his decisions stymied by the seemingly random decisions of others? She could just as easily have decided to go into him again; he had not in the end really known the machinations of her motives. He had only seen her through his own perspective, his own motives. He had ordered her actions according to what he wanted, needed, wondered, and this had proved wrong. But it was all chance, really. People throw wide nets over their ideas and try to find order in

them, as if life were a well thought out plan, but really it's just random mess. What's the difference between her getting up this morning and saying to herself 'I think I'll go into Joe now, I'm happy about seeing him.' And 'I'm not going to see Joe anymore. I'm going to do something else.'

There's no difference. It's pure whim dressed up as some kind of life-force journey, a supposed motivation to do something or other, go someplace or other. And it's just bullshit. There's no point in planning out anything since the actions of others are as predictable as wind, or the height of the next wave.

Gin let him be. She didn't mind the quiet.

"Yeah well." He said, and without looking at her he went to the bar, leaving her alone.

Back in the bar the group were becoming quickly more animated. The alcohol and the novelty of being on a boat and pretending to be rich were a heady mix.

Leon had discarded his cynical attitude to Rebecca's friends and was revelling in the day. They laughed and yelled, and Rebecca let Caudral loose to rave his enthusiasms.

"Bloody good idea this boat!" Leon yelled. "Here's to Rebecca and Caudral!" And they all raised their drinks and cheered.

Joe squashed in beside Jac. Caudral saw Joe was uncomfortable and thought the best thing to do would be to get him drunk. He smiled at Joe and raised his eyebrows, saying 'Isn't this the life!' with his expression.

Joe laughed quietly and nodded.

Leon swayed against one of Rebecca's friends.

"And sorry. What'd you say your name was again?" He asked her.

"I'm Chloe, and this is Anne." She told him for the third time.

"Not that your name matters of course." Leon mimicked some kind of nineteen-twenties dapper.

Chloe laughed. "And neither does yours of course, Henry."

"Agreed then Eliza!"

Toni refilled the champagne glasses.

Gin returned and sat next to Joe, as that was the only place she could fit.

Joe ignored her and asked Caudral where he thought they should go after the cruise.

But Leon interrupted. "The Pub!"

Everyone smiled because they knew he was going to say that.

Caudral shrugged. "I guess Leon has the confidence of the floor."

But Rebecca didn't look so certain of that presumption.

"I think we had something else in mind." She told the group factually. Chloe and Anne went quiet in agreement.

"Cool with us!" Leon yelled and leaned back into the bench, looking from Joe to Caudral and smiling.

But Caudral worried that Rebecca's 'we' would involve himself.

Rebecca straightened her back and he feared his suspicions were right. She gave off an air of nonchalance, like everything he did was for her and that that was a matter of course.

Because he needed her and she merely acted as if she needed him, she could leave in an instant. She thought he was trapped.

He looked at her.

Those eyes, which once softly held him, and so gently laughed at his rebellion, now they had grown edges of mocking. Now when she smiled she was daring herself to disappear, and daring him to reach out to her and find nothing.

That's what would make her laugh now. Caudral leaning into nothing, or realising that he had been doing that all along.

And more than this mere trickery was the thought that his unrequited wishes should embrace her ego with the sweet comfort of victory.

Caudral didn't know if he was the only one thinking this, but guessed suddenly that everyone saw it. That she was strutting it and that was her point.

But he did have a fall back option. He had just shown it to Joe in his encouraging look. Caudral could always go on. He had a strength that required nothing save its own promise. He could cheer himself up easily. He was self-reliant. Even if he slipped his guard with Rebecca, and let her get into him in a way no one else had before, even sending him to breaking clocks, he could extract himself.

So he nodded to Leon.

"Yeah I'm sure we could find something to do!" They laughed with each other.

This was a direct affront to Rebecca's power, but she was too cool to confront it. She simply said nothing, and her silence said everything. She was still in control no matter what these children thought.

She smiled at Leon and then at Joe.

She drank some champagne, didn't look at Caudral, and said: "Suit yourselves."

All this was happening in the happiest of contexts. Gin, Leon, Jac, Joe, even Chloe and Anne, heard it all as merely easy bantering and posing, maybe sharpened slightly by the misguided confidence of alcohol. But that sharpening was

easily outweighed by the pleasure of drinking champagne on a boat. Leon particularly had no time for the others' little dramas. He was too busy making friends with Chloe in front of Jac to care about anything difficult.

Everything was good for Leon.

Jac likewise was having a wonderful day. She saw Leon posing for her and indulged it, like a doting parent towards a mischievous child.

So as the boat swung around Shark Island and headed back to the quay, the party was for the most part excitedly happy. Even a little overly so, and certainly Chloe and Anne's only concern was for slowing down their drinking if they were to maintain energy for a big night out.

They all thanked Dan and Toni as they left the boat. Toni smiled forgivingly at them and told them all to drive safely. Dan busied himself with boat work.

"C'mon! One more at the Merc! Just to get you land legs back!" Leon insisted. And with Rebecca's silent consent they all traipsed back to the Merc.

It was still quite light, and everyone had the taste for partying. Even Joe, though he had it in spite of his deeper mind.

Rebecca sent Caudral for a round of pints of beer, and they even got the same table they had before they'd left for the boat.

When they sat they realised how tired they were. Except Leon, who was just getting the buzz of reckless freedom, and Joe, who wanted to erase everything.

So it was Joe and Leon who finished their pints quickly while Caudral hurried to keep up.

Jac went happily along with Rebecca, Chloe and Anne. She felt smooth and equal with them now that their eyes had softened and even become friendly. Gin sat next to Jac and was content that she had separated herself from Joe. Her beer settled easily and she became more confident with the other women. They seemed powerful and forward looking, and that's where she wanted, needed, to be.

Leon stood up suddenly upon finishing his pint and drunkenly waved an arm over the table.

“Becca! ‘Nother pint hey!”

Rebecca smiled and passed yet another fifty dollar note into the fray.

Leon leaned over toward her: “If ever this mangy little mongrel decides to dump you. Or you get your head together and dump him,” he tapped Caudral on the back of the head, “you just give me a call. Anytime. Anywhere.”

Then he turned and walked concertedly to the bar.

Caudral was briefly embarrassed, but then a little fantasy hit him. Wouldn't it be great to be rid of Rebecca.

She looked at him and recognised his thinking immediately. She smiled at him. It was all the same to her.

Then she leaned forward and kissed him.

“Don't you worry my little angel, I won't leave you alone to the world.” She said loud enough for everyone to hear.

Caudral realised her game and that was the end of it as far as he was concerned. But he wouldn't tell her that, of

course. He would just coast along this evening, get enough money out of her, and then go with Joe and Leon back to Bondi for some serious drinking and appraisal of the day's events. He also thought Leon was pretending to be drunk.

By the end of the next round Rebecca and her friends had to go. They had joined with Jac so well that they invited her and Gin out with them for some 'serious clubbing'. This was not Jac and Gin's style, so they agreed only to accompany them to the next bar, maybe for some food, and then see what happened.

They left Leon and Caudral and Joe sipping at their pints.

Gin tried to look once more into Joe, but he refused eye contact.

Rebecca acted her concern to Caudral, and he did likewise to her, twisting out high camp poses like caricatures of themselves.

Leon waved his arm in a giant circle and wished them all very well on their adventure. Then he winked at Jac and she looked at the ceiling.

When they had gone the men smiled at each other in silence for a moment, then laughed.

Caudral and Leon pulled the money they had cadged off Rebecca from their pockets and put it in the middle of the table. One hundred and five dollars, and some change.

"That should do the trick for tonight." Leon said happily, and they raised their pints.

Gin woke early the next morning. She didn't want to, but something pulled her away from sleeping. After a small battle she gave in and got up. Kim was coming to get her bed later in the day, and Gin would have to organise getting a new one before she slept again. Jac had promised to take her around the local charity shops.

Gin remembered that she did not like nightclubs. She chided herself for having given in to the others last night, and having dragged her tired body from one black hole to the next. But she forgave herself quickly. She had spoken to Joe, distanced herself from him, and that was worth something. She had been infected with Rebecca's enthusiasm and at the time it had felt a challenge to keep up with such wildly confident women. Also, she hadn't drunk too much because neither she nor Jac had any money after the first bar. Rebecca had bought them a few, but not too many.

And they had left early as well, getting home by around midnight.

So she didn't feel too unwell, just a little shaky.

She pulled the wooden kitchen chair over to the small window and let the grey morning light settle into her.

Everyone else in the house was still asleep.

She listened to the distant rumble and wash of traffic on Parramatta road. It sounded like the ocean, but she knew the real ocean was too far away to be heard. And anyway, the sound of the traffic was too irregular, too insistent to be mistaken for the crash of waves.

She still imagined it though. Imagined that it was the ocean and she was sitting in some coastal farmhouse, and that

if she left the house her sight would be clear, not interrupted
by seemingly endless walls.

Dear Reader,

When I got up this morning Joe shook my hand and left. He said he would call me later, maybe a few days. But he hasn't. I'm not worried though; he can do what he wants.

He said he would be going up north or maybe to Melbourne, but that he had enough money. I gave him a hundred I had been hoarding and he told me off for hiding it from them, but took it thankfully.

I know that we will see each other again, and that he just needs to go off for a while because everything was getting too cramped for him.

I wrote this book so that those who knew him might see what we were up to in the time before he left, and so that those who didn't might see the kind of mild stuff that happens to us.

I've obviously made mistakes here and there, I can't be sure what was running through anyone's mind at any one time, but I reckon that I know Joe pretty well. So I hope I've stuck close to the facts as he would have seen them.

When you live you know that people are all bundles of confusions and contradictions, and Joe is no exception. Neither is anyone I have written about, myself included.

Also you realise that people just go on and on about bullshit most of the time, and that to them that bullshit can seem extremely important. This is probably a result of their

confusion. But you've got to live with them so you might as well just shut up and listen. Have a laugh.

I guess the best that can be said for Joe is that at least he realised he was full of it, and tried to do something about it.

His journey is not over, of course.

Cheers,

Caudral.