

Blue Collar, Red Dress
A novel and critical commentary

Volume 1: The novel.

Master of Arts (Research)

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NB: Blue Collar, Red Dress and the Critical Commentary have their own contents pages.

Abstract

This submission for a Master of Arts by research is comprised of a novel, "Blue Collar, Red Dress" and a Critical Commentary.

"Blue Collar, Red Dress" is a work of fiction, based on my own experiences of growing up in Housing Commission flats in the 1960s. It is the story of Linda and Heidi, their friendship and their lives as they both make transitions across social classes, one through further education and the other through her work. Ultimately they both realise you cannot eradicate your past, but for one of them the journey ends in tragedy.

The Critical Commentary, the theoretical component of the Masters, explores representations of class, and particularly Anglo working-class women, in a range of Australian women's novels from the 1930s to 1960s, and the 1970s to 1990s. My hypothesis is that these representations have taken on a particular focus, and sites of reference, due to the class background and experience of the writers themselves.

This thesis involved using a range of qualitative research methods, including the use of both primary and secondary sources. The novel, whilst drawing on my own lived experience, also required historical and social research. The critical commentary was completed using more traditional research including analysing a range of sources on class issues, analysing literary theory (particularly relating to class, race and gender), searching of literature data bases, and analysis of novels (and reviews of those novels) in the two key periods. I also referred to various sources regarding the background of the writers studied, including autobiographies and directories of Australian writers.

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Heather Nix: my fellow students who provided a strong support group.

Ian Syson: who referred me to, and supplied me with, a range of valuable secondary sources.

Declaration

I **Susan Holmes** declare that my thesis, **Blue Collar, Red Dress**, is my own work and has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part in respect to any other academic award.



BLUE COLLAR, RED DRESS

a novel

by

Susan Holmes

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Prologue

No. 17: "Cheap Wine" (Cold Chisel)

She strides through the glass doors. Heads swivel on necks like startled emus.

"Geez, Bob. Look at her!" The young porter's mouth is fly-catching wide. "She's beautiful!"

His older, wiser workmate follows her profile as she glides across the soft carpet to the mahogany desk.

"No. No, she's not beautiful, but she's got...something else." His voice evokes age old awe for the unattainable. "She's got class."

I pace the city streets and wonder what the hell I'm doing here, darting around from one shop to the next, eyes glancing off objects, unsettled and expectant.

I watch the trams clatter and clang down Bourke Street, impatient conductors ringing bells, people leaving offices and shops in ant-like lines. Final rays of sunlight are caught in the glass of tall buildings as shadows lengthen. Night overtaking the day like a sprinter.

The penthouse suite feels like home, soft, silent and welcoming. She parts the floor-length drapes and beyond the expanse of glass watches the lights from Government House across to the bay. Her birthday candles, but where is the centrepiece? She frowns at her old friend the moon, looking sad with part of his face missing. Not the clean scythe of the quarter but a caul disfiguring the orb. The in-between time when nothing is whole. Incomplete.

I pass the bank I worked in so many years ago. A lifetime ago. Heidi and I starting out on our working lives. Breaking free from school, restrictions and rules. Itching to leave the flats, to leave our past behind. I didn't know then that the old life can never leave you, never disappear, because you were there, you lived it and it lived you.

Life in the Housing Commission step-up flats. Living in a concrete box, one of many. Life was colourless when I was fourteen. That was before I got to know Heidi.

Chapter 1

No.7: "Over the Rainbow" (Billy Thorpe & the Aztecs)

"Of course Eileen went into Professional, she's a very brainy girl."

Mum's arm is red as she takes it out of the frothy sink to wipe away a stray hair. I don't know how she bears the water so hot.

"I thought you wanted to do Commercial, Linda."

"I thought I did. It just seems a bit...dull."

"Dull! Do you think there is something glamorous about doing Professional?" Mum inspects each plate carefully before she gives it to me to dry.

"None of the boys are doing Commercial."

"Is this what this is all about? Boys? They won't get you a good job. More likely to get you pregnant."

"Mum!"

"Who's getting pregnant? Jenny Thomas?" Julie is yelling out from the lounge room. Earwiggling as usual.

"She's away having her tonsils out. Get on with covering those school books, Julie."

I raise an eyebrow at Mum and she shrugs. Sure are a lot of girls from these flats going away to get their tonsils and appendix out. Must be an epidemic.

"It's not about the boys, Mum. They're all daggy anyway...or show offs. But nobody ever suggests they do Commercial, and they are not any brainier than I am."

"Why do you keep bashing your head against a brick wall, love? You're lucky to have had a choice."

"The only choice I had was between Commercial and Domestic. Nobody thought I was brainy enough to do Professional. Some choice! Now I'm stuck with Shorthand and Typing and Commercial Principles and Practice!"

"Office work is a nice, clean job, Linda. You have to be good at Maths to do Professional. Julie might be able to do it when she gets to third form. She's got a bit of a knack for Maths. You haven't."

"Julie's just going in to first form, Mum. It's easy then."

Julie carts all her books out and dumps them on the kitchen table.

"I'm not going to do Professional. I'm going to do Domestic."

"You're not!"

"Over my dead body." Mum snaps her head around.

Julie is making neat folds in the brown paper. Everything about Julie is tidy, methodical and planned. I'm the one who inherited the gawky genes.

"I'm going to get married and have lots of children. And live in a real house of my own."

Before Mum can explode completely Dad walks in the door and dumps his gladstone bag down beside Julie. He kisses her forehead.

"How's my three silly bitches?"

"Silly is exactly the right word for your daughters, Bill. You try talking some sense into them. Your dinner's in the oven."

Mum throws off her apron and goes to watch *In Melbourne Tonight*. Graham Kennedy always gives her a bit of a laugh.

"You girls been upsetting your Mother again?"

He gets *The Herald* out of his bag and leans it against the sauce bottle before getting stuck into his pork chops.

"Julie wants to have babies and I want to change to Professional."

"Uh huh."

Dad is intent on reading his newspaper. Julie winks at me across the top of it.

"I'm going to give birth to a couple of elephants, Dad."

"That's nice, love."

"Dad! You're not listening."

"Eh? Course I am."

"I want to try to transfer into the Professional stream at school, Dad. It's important."

"Isn't it a bit late. You're going in to fourth form aren't you?"

"Yeah, but maybe I could change over."

"What does your mother say?"

"She says I can't, because I'm not good at Maths."

"Well, there you are then. Smart woman, your mother."

He turns the paper over to the sports section. Julie gives me her 'I told you so' look, pursing up her mouth. If I stood on my head right here in the kitchen Dad wouldn't notice me now. I'm so angry I want to scream and this concrete flat feels like an oven. I open the screen door.

"Where are you going, Linda?" Mum looks up at me from the couch. She's fanning herself with a magazine.

"Going to sit on the front steps for a while."

I make my way slowly down the grey stairs to the landing below. Three out of the four flats have their doors open and I can hear arguments and crockery rattling above the noise of television sets. The only flat that's quiet is number one where Mr. Collins lives by himself since his wife ran off with a bloke from the post office. I don't remember ever seeing Mr. Collins sober.

I sit on the top of the steps leading up to the flats and take off my shoes. Not much of a view. Another block of step up flats next door and Housing Commission houses across the road. The house on the corner has a carefully mown front lawn, the rest have stopped bothering.

Julie comes backside first, sliding down the stair rail. She'll be in trouble if Mum sees her and so will I with my shoes off. Mum was brought up by nuns so she has a whole list of things that aren't ladylike. Invented for stopping you having fun, I reckon.

Julie sits next to me, chirpy as usual. She has an annoying habit of sitting close and peering into your face when she talks to you. I hope it means she's going to need glasses one day.

"Why doesn't anyone sit on the grass, Linda?"

"Dunno."

"Well, I'm going to."

She runs down the steps and into the very middle of the large lawn at the front and there she sits by herself. It's never occurred to me before that no-one does sit on that lawn, everyone sits on the steps like I'm doing. The men from the Housing Commission come and mow it so it looks neat, but no-one ever uses it.

"Today!" announces Mr. Wilson, whipping off his glasses, "to start off the new school year, we will have a special writing competition." He pauses. "With a prize!"

I think I'm going to like Mr. Wilson, even if he is a dog. An English teacher who will let us do story writing as well as boring old grammar. He points to the clock above the blackboard and tells us the sooner we settle down the more time we will have to write the prize-winning story. He refuses to tell us what the prize is but insists it will be waiting for the lucky person tomorrow. Some girls are giggling and others behind me have started taking bets on what the prize is. Some of their suggestions are pretty disgusting, relating to parts of Mr. Wilson's anatomy. Because I'm in Commercial it's an all girls class which I think is why they talk dirty so much. If we had boys there too they'd be scared of being called sluts.

The topic for the story is "I remember when" and I have a lot of trouble getting started. Nothing very memorable in my life so far. But then I think back to the creek and I lose myself in the story.

Julie and I have sneaked down to the creek, the creek forbidden to us and therefore full of mystery. Especially the opposite banks of the creek which are only accessible by the occasional fallen log or branch of a tree. It's a sunny day but the thick willows tangle with the undergrowth in the gloom at the water's edge. The creek is a long one with high banks and slippery edges. Our goal is the ancient house on the other side, impossible to find on foot through the heavy bush. We firmly believe the stories about a witch living in the house. Real life Hansel and Gretel. Except the house is not made of sugar, we can see the rotten weather boards held together with bits of tin, some still with the imprint of a maker or a slogan in coloured paint. I desperately want us to get to the other side.

"What if the log moves and there is no way of getting back?" whispers Julie, even though there 's no-one around.

"We'll have to swim."

"Yuk, Lindy, there are eels in there, maybe even snakes!"

"Eels are slimy but they won't hurt you. They haven't got teeth."

This is a deliberate lie so I cross my fingers behind my back. I don't know the first thing about eels, or snakes for that matter. But I am nearly eleven now and she is only seven.

"What if the witch gets us?"

"That's just kids stuff Julie. It's probably empty."

"No, it's not. Look, there's smoke coming out of the chimney. What if she throws us in her copper? What if she's a cannibal?"

"What if, if, if! You know what Dad says 'if your Aunty had balls, she'd be your Uncle.'

"Yeah well. I still don't understand that. What kind of balls does he mean?"

Julie is such a baby but right now I'm not going to tell her about men's private parts. Finally, holding her hand, I start inching across the log. It moves under our feet and we have to get down on hands and knees. Julie is whingeing about a splinter when the log does a big lurch from one end and we both end up in the creek. We scream as the thick mud squelches into our shoes. Odd bits of rubbish float by as we scramble for a foothold. Julie grabs me so hard she nearly knocks me into the creek. Luckily it's not deep and we are still close to the bank so I manage to pull us both out. Unfortunately we are covered in mud so when we get home Mum gets out the hair brush, gives us a walloping and puts us to bed without any tea. I'm crying and so is Julie. The hairbrush doesn't hurt much but I wanted so desperately to see what was on the other side and somehow I know I never will.

I've been so immersed in my story Mr. Wilson has to come up and prod me when the lesson is over. I'm happy it's home time. I feel for once I've done something worthwhile at school.

Everyone is excited and making bets on who will win when Mr. Wilson enters the room. I sit there looking stupid when he calls out my name. I have never won anything before, except a box of groceries in a raffle when I was five, and I don't count that.

I have to go to the front of the room to get my prize. I can hear a few jealous, angry mutters along the way but Heidi and Pat, the class rebels, call out "Good on you Linda!". Making me even more embarrassed Mr. Wilson insists I open the parcel and show the class the reward I am getting for "a very accomplished piece of work." There are gasps all around as I hold up the brand new Rolling Stones album, still with the cellophane wrapping. I get some envious looks. It is a good prize and yes, I answer, I love the Rolling Stones, especially Mick Jagger.

"Mum, can we buy a record player?"

"We've got a wireless, Linda, we don't need a record player."

"Oh please Mum!"

Mum's face is flushed from bending over the stove. She wipes her hands on her apron and sits down to have a ciggy.

"Money doesn't grow on trees and record players cost money. You can buy all the record players you like when you are working and earning your own money."

"Why do I have to wait for everything I want? Dad would want me to have one."

"Don't you dare mention this to your father, Miss. He'll only go and put himself in debt again like he did to get that bike of yours." She jabs the air with her finger. "And you never even ride it now. Luckily it can go to Julie."

"The bike was second hand. We never have anything new."

"Rubbish, we just got the new lounge suite, even though it's on the never never."

"Why do you call it that...the never never."

"Because once you start putting things on Hire Purchase you're always paying things off and you *never* have any savings."

Mum fans herself with *The Sun* and stares out the kitchen window.

"I've just finished paying for Julie's uniform and the last dentist bill. It's enough to make a woman old before her time worrying about paying all the bills."

"I won a prize today Mum."

I pull the record out of my school bag and push it across the table to her.

"You *won* it, and where may I ask, did you *win* it?"

"I didn't steal it, Mum! I won it for writing the best story in our English class."

Mum gives me a funny little smile.

"You wrote the best story out of the whole class, that's very good, love."

"Yeah, great, except I've got nothing to play it on."

"Haven't any of your friends at school got record players?"

"I guess so. But Mum I would feel so stupid carting this record around just so I could play it. Everyone would know we can't afford one."

"Well, I call that cutting off your nose to spite your face, but if that's the way you feel then you'll just have to keep it as a ...sort of trophy. To remind yourself that you once wrote the best story. Not that writing stories is ever going to get you anywhere in

this life. I wrote very good stories at school too you know. The nuns said I was talented but look at where it got me.” She stubs out her cigarette and keeps jabbing it against the ashtray, long after it’s out.

“Bugger!” She jumps out of her chair as the chops start to burn.

“Now look what you’ve done. I’ve gone and burnt the chops. You should be grateful that you get fed and clothed, and you don’t want for anything you really need.”

“Yeah but nothing I really *want*.”

“If wishes were cabbages we’d all be rich. Try to be happy with your lot in life, Linda. You’d better go and do your homework if you don’t want to end up in a pickle factory.”

I think Mum has forgotten what it’s like to be fourteen.

My head is bent like everyone else’s as I battle with adverbial clauses. Not quite everyone else’s.

“Psst, psst, Linda!”

Heidi and Pat are whispering to me from across the aisle. They are forever in strife at school but I wish I was like them, not frightened of speaking out and livening up the classroom. They have always been friendly to me but it’s just the two of them hanging about, ever since first form, probably since primary school. It must be fantastic to have one really good friend.

“Do you know what that thing is around his neck?” asks Heidi, jerking her head in Mr. Wilson’s direction.

I don’t understand what she means at first but then I notice that through Mr. Wilson’s white nylon shirt, and on his chest, you can see the outline of something small and square.

“I think it’s a scapula.” I whisper back.

“A what?” asks Pat.

“Linda Comben, stop whispering and get on with your work.”

Mr. Wilson glares at me over the top of his bifocals.

“Sorry,” mouths Heidi and grins.

As the bell goes for recess there is the usual slamming of desk lids and shuffling of

feet. Mr. Wilson tries to yell over the top something about homework but gives up when the ones in front start pushing through. Cooped chickens peck and scurry for the freedom of the sunshine glimpsed through the windows.

Heidi and Pat stroll over to where I'm sitting on the wall of the basketball court, my nose in a book.

"Peanut butter sandwich?" offers Heidi.

"But that's your lunch."

"Go on, give me a good excuse to nick down to the chip shop at lunchtime."

I don't like to refuse, but I don't know if I like peanut butter. I've never eaten it. Strange for an Aussie kid but Mum has things she buys and things she doesn't buy. The bread is the unsliced kind, cut in big pieces with crispy looking crusts. We always have sliced bread. Mum says it keeps better. I gingerly take a bite and feel quite brave, eating something new. God, I'm a wimp. It tastes OK although it has a strange feel, kind of like glue.

"What did you say he has around his neck?" asks Pat. "A scalpel?"

I almost choke on my peanut butter sandwich.

"Don't mind her Linda," says Heidi with a grin, "she always mixes words up."

"It's called a scap-u-la. You're not Catholic?"

"Nah, C of E." says Pat.

"Heathen." says Heidi.

"A scapula is...er...a piece of cloth. Supposed to be made from the clothing of a saint. I think."

"What do you wear it for?" asks Pat.

"Have you got one?" asks Heidi.

"No. I think I had one when I was little, at primary school. It's sort of like a thing to keep you safe."

"Like a rabbit's foot?"

"Or a clove of garlic for vampires?"

Pat and Heidi are like Laurel and Hardy the way they bounce off each other's thoughts.

"Mm, yeah. I guess it is a bit like that. Then there's holy water too."

I'm warming to my subject now. All the stuff that goes with being a Mick. At least it's one thing I do know about.

"Why is it holy?"

"What do you do with it?"

"Where do you get it?"

"Sounds like witchcraft!" Heidi makes spellbinding motions in the air. It's hard trying to explain stuff that I've grown up with and just accepted.

"It's water that's been blessed. You sprinkle it around."

I get the giggles from embarrassment. It sounds so stupid when you try to explain it. But Pat and Heidi are laughing too.

"Mr. Wilson probably baths in it."

"Nah," says Heidi decisively. "Have you smelt him on a hot day. I don't reckon he tubs much at all." She dismisses Mr. Wilson with a shake of her head.

"Hey," says Pat suddenly, "Congratulations on winning the story competition last week. What's the record like? Any good?"

"Yeah great, terrific." I look down at the half eaten sandwich.

"Is that song they keep playing on the radio on it?" Pat persists.

"Yeah, great isn't it? Got a great beat to it." I can feel myself beginning to blush, the redness creeping up from my neck to my face in its usual blotchy way.

Heidi picks up my book and slowly turns it over in her hands.

"Next sports afternoon," she says, still looking at the book, "a bunch of us are going to piss off to Marlene Black's house and muck around. Why don't you come too and bring the record so we can all hear it. Marlene's parents have got this great, huge stereo system." She looks up. "Much better than any pissy little record player any of us would have."

"Good idea," says Pat. "I can fake your Mum's note for you if you like. I'm getting to be a real expert. Heidi taught me."

"OK. Thanks. I'd like that." I say as the bell goes and we head off to our lockers. Funny how life can change so quickly. Or maybe it's me.

She sits in the kitchen, the text book propped up against the teapot. She concentrates on the page, trying to block out the harsh cackle of laughter from the lounge room. She stares at her faint reflection in the blackened window. She starts to write in her exercise book, her biro pushing down heavily, quickly filling up the empty spaces.

“And where is Heidi Johnson?” asks our sports mistress, looking pointedly at Pat as she inspects notes from three of us.

“She got her period real suddenly, Miss,” says Pat with a dead pan face.

“Well, she should have told me.”

“She couldn’t, Miss. She was so embarrassed, bleeding everywhere she was.”

“All right, Pat. That’s enough. I’ll deal with her later. Linda I’m having trouble reading your mother’s writing. Does this say you have to go to a funeral?”

Shit! I should have asked Pat what she wrote.

“People don’t usually have funerals in the afternoon. I’ve only ever known them to be in the morning. Most unusual.” She glares at me accusingly.

“It was stipulated in her Uncle’s will, wasn’t it Linda?” Pat nudges me in the ribs.

I mumble away and lower my head so the teacher won’t see me blushing.

“She’s upset, can’t you see, Miss? Linda was very close to her Uncle.”

Finally we head off, careful not to all go in the one direction. I’m glad I’m not chasing around with a stupid hockey stick or playing netball. I get confused by all that speed and end up passing to the wrong person. I catch up with Pat near the bus stop.

“Did you have to say I was going to a funeral, Pat? If my Mum ever finds out she’ll kill me. And where is Heidi? She’ll get into trouble for sure.”

“Oh stop your whinging, Linda, I got you here, didn’t I?” Pat hitches her tunic way up above her knees and inspects her legs for stray hairs. “Heidi’ll be all right. She’s way in front of most of our dumb teachers. Here comes the bus.”

As the bus lumbers up the hill I slump down in the seat. Pat is chatting away but I’m not listening. Too busy being scared one of our teachers, or worse still, my Mum will see me.

Heidi is sitting on the fence outside Marlene's house, reading the horoscopes in the *Women's Weekly*. She doesn't even look up as she speaks.

"What's your star sign, Linda?"

"Um. Capricorn."

"Says here your week is to be one of emotional turmoil."

"Is that good?" asks Pat, peering over Heidi's shoulder. Heidi gets up off the fence and throws her the magazine.

"Depends on whether you like thunderstorms or clear skies I guess. Stop looking so worried, Linda, it's all a load of crap anyway. Let's go talk to the spirits."

Marlene and Diane have already set out the letters of the alphabet in a circle on the coffee table and put a glass in the middle. We sit on the floor and start asking questions of the spirits, mainly who will we meet on Saturday night. I've never done this before and I'm pretty spooked because it doesn't seem like anyone is pushing the glass, it's moving all by itself. It's impossible to be scared for long though, Heidi keeps asking ridiculous questions which have us all in hysterics. When we stop to make coffee I have a good look around. I reckon our whole flat would fit into Marlene's lounge room. The furniture is all solid and heavy, real wood not the veneer stuff and the curtains are the sort you open and shut with cords. The windows are what I like most. They're huge and they slide open. You can actually reach out and touch the hydrangeas.

"What on earth are you doing?"

At the sound of Marlene's voice I very nearly topple out through the window.

"Nothing. I, ah, just need some fresh air."

I follow her through to her bedroom where everyone is trying on lipsticks and eye shadow. Heidi has stuck a scarf around her head and is pretending to be a beauty consultant. Marlene has everything she could possibly need in that room, shelves full of books, a record player and a radio. The bed, the dressing table and wardrobe all match. There is a big board with posters on it, I guess so she won't wreck the walls with sticky tape. It's a great bedroom. The only thing is, it's all in pink. Every shade of pink you could ever get is there in that room.

We decide to go back to the spirits. I'm the last to go out the bedroom door and Heidi is in front of me. She speaks to Marlene's back.

"I see you like pink, Marlene."

It's a statement, not a question. Marlene swings around but Heidi is deadpan. As we go through the doorway into the lounge room Heidi turns around and winks.

She lies in bed with the covers pulled over her head until she hears the door slam shut for the second time. The bedroom lino is cold on her feet. She pulls the blankets off the bed and wraps them around her while she stares out the window at soggy, grey washing hanging heavy on clotheslines. Her warm breath fogs up the window and she draws swirling, expansive patterns on the glass with one finger.

Her grey school tunic hangs on the doorknob, the shiny pleats proclaiming its age. Grey tunic, grey shirt and grey stockings. Still, they are all clean and pressed. She has seen to that. Wouldn't trust her to iron pleats properly with her big heavy handed movements.

I hate the smell of our classroom on a rainy day. Damp bodies squashed together. The leftover lunchtime smell of egg sandwiches, meat pies and stale socks. Rain buckets down on the tin roof clashing with the sound of our typewriters. One person per desk, in case we cheat on shorthand. On the other side of the room Heidi is banging away viciously at her typewriter. She has been in a foul mood since last week when Pat's family moved out of the flats. I know how Heidi feels, but I don't know what to say to her. She has this wall around her. She has removed her cover board from the typewriter keys. This is strictly against the rules.

"Heidi Johnson!"

Mrs Gogh peers over her bifocals. We all stop typing, except for Heidi, who jabs at the keys with all the wrong fingers. For a long moment we sit there frozen. Mrs. Gogh calls out again, even more sharply. Heidi is saved by the shrill sound of the bell from the loudspeaker which someone has turned up full bore.

"Mrs Gogh!" I call out loudly as everyone starts to pack up, putting covers over the typewriters and shoving books into bags. I race out to her desk and ask a couple of stupid questions about homework. I can see Heidi edge out of the door, head down, while I am told I haven't got the brains I was born with. Whatever that means.

Heidi is halfway down the hill by the time I get out the school gates. I can see her bright red umbrella weaving, jostling people out of the way. I get jeered at by a stupid boy as my schoolbag thumps him in the side. I yell out to Heidi. She turns and stares, her face still looking like thunder, but stops and waits for me.

"Shitful day"

"Shitful life! Thanks for that back there, I saw what you did."

"Yeah, well. She's such a bitch.

"Pat's lucky, she doesn't have to put up with her anymore."

"You've heard from her? How is she?"

"She's pissing and moaning about being in the country, but she's O.K."

"You gunna go and visit sometime?"

"Don't reckon. Her mother doesn't like me much. Besides, we don't have a car and it's at the other end of the state."

Heidi lurches into a big puddle and pulls out a sopping foot. "Shit! Bloody winter. I hate winter!"

"I like winter, but not at school."

Heidi looks at me like I've gone completely crazy.

"You *like* winter? You really are weird, Linda Comben. Fancy anyone liking cold winds, rain and fog"

"You would too," I retort. "If you had red hair and freckles, and your mother kept running after you with a hat, every summer of your life."

Heidi's frown disappears and she laughs loudly.

"There's no need to laugh at me." Now I'm cross.

"I'm not laughing at you, silly. I'm just picturing this little kid who hates hats. Anyway you can hardly see your freckles and your hair isn't red. It's...what do they call it in the movies, strawberry blonde!"

"Sounds like a milkshake. What would you like? Blue Heaven or Strawberry Blonde?"

"Speaking of food," says Heidi, with a grin, "how about some nice, hot potato cakes?"

We make a detour at the service station on the corner, and head into their toilets. Heidi gets a mascara wand out of her bag and runs it under the hot water tap. The automatic way she does it tells me this is a ritual. Pat and her probably stopped here all the time.

"Want some?" she offers me her mascara.

"Better not. It's black."

"So?"

"I use brown?"

"Why?"

"Cos I've got red hair."

Heidi shakes her head slowly at me.

"You've got a lot to learn. Or unlearn. Come on, let's go visit Fang."

"Fang? I thought we were going to the chip shop?"

I see what she means. I've never been inside this shop before. The bloke who runs it is big, dark and hairy with the most rotten looking teeth I have ever seen. He doesn't speak much English but that doesn't bother Heidi. She prattles on to him in broken English, waving her arms about. I swear she is getting him to laugh, just to show off his rotten teeth. She's sending him up but he's having a great old time. He looks at me with a puzzled look. Probably wondering where Pat is. I feel like I've wandered into someone else's house by mistake. But I am enjoying myself so I give a silly grin, watching and laughing at the two of them.

The rain has finally stopped and some blue sky appears as we walk slowly home, eating our potato cakes. Heidi's with vinegar, mine without.

"When did your family move into the flats, Linda?"

"About four years ago. When I started High School. Mum was worried about me getting a job if we were still in the country when I finished school."

"You lived in the country? Like Pat? What was it like? Did you live in a house or on a farm?"

"A weather board, Housing Commission house."

"Oh! At least it was a house."

"The house was incredibly cold. At least in the flat we've got a gas heater, and there's not so much space to heat. You should have seen the fogs in Yallourn. Dirty coal dust and the smell of the paper mill. I still miss Fiona though."

"Fiona? Nice name. Was she your friend?"

"Yeah, my best friend for a long time. Since bubs. We still write to each other sometimes but it's not the same, you know? I don't know half the people she writes about now."

"Tell me about it!" Heidi kicks an empty coke can across the road.

"Sorry. I've got a big mouth sometimes."

"It's OK" She shrugs. "I'll live. So, how do you like living in the big smoke?"

"Melbourne is OK. Better than Yallourn. It's the flats I hate."

Heidi stops with her last potato cake halfway to her mouth.

"You really hate the flats?"

"Yeah, that's what I just said. I hate the flats."

Heidi holds out the potato cake toward me.

"Here take it. It's yours." She holds it out to me like a present.

I take it and eat it, even though I don't like the taste of vinegar.

"What, especially, do you hate about the flats?" Heidi has her arms crossed, staring at me. I feel like I'm doing a test.

"Concrete. No space. The noise. People yelling at each other all the time. Drunks beating up their wives. One night Dad had to go downstairs and save Mrs. Spriggs."

"Go on! Save her from what?"

"Mr. Spriggs. He'd been belting her with the ironing cord and then locked her out. She was worried because he had the baby in there."

"What did your Dad do?"

"He didn't have to do much. Mr. Spriggs is a puny little runt. I reckon she could knock him over with one swipe if she wanted to. She's huge."

"Blokes are always stronger though, Linda, even when they look small."

"Yeah, you're right. I sound mean and I guess it's hard for her with three little kids but she always looks so...hopeless. Like she can't seem to get out of her own way. The flats seem to put us all together, you know. You can't move outside without bumping into somebody, and they're all nosy. Must be great for Pat with all that open space."

I have a vision a Pat running through tall grass in a long white dress.

"It's not that good. There's no local milk bar where she can escape her parents. They don't have any neighbours and she says the quiet at night spooks her. No street lights and small animals making funny noises."

"Oh!" My mental picture of Pat undergoes a few alterations. "I wouldn't like that. At

least some of them around here give me a laugh, and someone's always shifting in or out. Except for Harry and Ethel. I reckon they've been here forever."

"Is Harry the one who walks with his head forward and bum out, like a rooster?"

Heidi does this fantastic impersonation of Harry, sticking her neck out and making bird noises. A young mother drags her toddler out of Heidi's path, giving her a filthy look as she passes. Heidi pokes out her tongue and crosses her eyes at the child who is craning his neck back to get a better view.

"And he nods and sniffs when he's talking. Do you think he's the full quid?"

"Don't know. I've hardly spoken to him but Julie and I took in Ethel's washing one day. It's so dark and musty in their flats with all the blinds down. She did look like a witch in a flannelette nightie. Mum says, don't be mean, they're harmless, but I don't know. Don't you think there's an awful lot of batty people around here? More than usual, I mean."

"Dunno. Never lived anywhere else. Not that I can remember anyway. Ah well, only another couple of years and I'll be out of here. For good."

"You going to leave home as soon as you get a job?"

"Soon as I have enough money. I'd leave school at the end of this year except my Typing and Shorthand isn't good enough. And I'll probably get more money if I'm a bit older."

"You gunna do office work?"

"At first. Until I can get into something better. Get a job, save some money and get out of here. That's all I'm thinking about for now. What about you?"

"I'd like to be a journalist but my marks aren't very good. I'll see how I go this year and next. Probably end up in an office. I can't wait to earn some money of my own."

Heidi looks at me like I'm a jigsaw puzzle and she's not sure where to put the next piece.

"I've heard they're looking for casual workers over Christmas at the biscuit factory. You interested? We could make some money for clothes and stuff."

"Yeah, why not? It might be fun."

"No Linda, it won't be fun. But it'll be better if we do it together. I'll see what I can organise."

Same old routine. The teacher marks the roll at the beginning of class.

"How come you've got such an unusual name, Heidi? Your Mum must have a lot more imagination than mine."

We're up the back of the room as usual, pretending we understand the double entry bookkeeping system in our Commercial Practice class.

"Nah." Heidi carefully rules up her columns, her tongue stuck out the side in concentration. "Just a lucky accident."

"Accident. What, you mean she came across it in a book, or something?"

"Get off it! My mother has never read a book in her life. It followed on from Shirley."

"Shirley, your sister?"

"Yeah. When she was in hospital having her she didn't have a clue what to call her. The woman in the next bed was calling her baby Shirley, after Shirley Temple. You know, the movie star?"

"Right. But I still don't get the connection. There weren't any movie stars called Heidi, were there?"

"No, but when she was having me, much to her disgust, as she constantly reminds me, she was stuck again for a name. She told the woman in the next bed how she got Shirley's name and they talked about Shirley Temple movies. The woman asked Mum had she seen the latest one, which was called...?"

"Heidi! I get it. The one on the mountain with the goats and the grandfather."

"Yeah. So I was lucky she hadn't seen *Lassie Come Home*, or she probably would have called me after a dog."

I laugh too loudly and the teacher walks toward us to tick me off yet again. Luckily he is interrupted by the loudspeaker announcing we are going to have a minute's silence because it's Remembrance Day. We all shuffle to our feet and stand in the aisles.

"Dare me to make a noise in the middle?" Heidi whispers across the desk.

"You wouldn't!"

They play the last post over the speaker. It always sends a shiver down my spine. Sure enough, as we all stand there in silence, heads bent, Heidi lets rip with a giant

fart.

“Mother I’ve come home to die and the bed’s not made!”

Dad hands Mum a paper bag with a couple of bottles of Fosters in it, takes off his raincoat and collapses into the couch.

“Do you want a beer before your tea?” Mum calls from the kitchen. As usual she has Dad’s tea heating up over a saucepan of water on the stove.

“No. I had a couple after I finished at the pub.”

“Dad, have you got any medals?” asks Julie as I hang Dad’s gabardine raincoat over the chair in front of the gas fire.

“No, but I’ve got a chest to pin them on.”

Dad laughs at his own joke and Mum shows her usual disgust by making an ‘ick’ noise. Our lounge room is only two steps from the kitchen so we often have conversations from one room to the next.

“No, seriously Dad, have you? Do you march and wear them on Anzac Day?”

“Yes, and no,” says Dad as he turns on the television.

I can tell Julie is going to persist, silly bugger. I’ve tried to get Dad to talk about the war before and he is just not interested. Julie is the most stubborn person I have ever met though, she never gives up, and she’s still only twelve years old.

“When the next march is on, Dad, can I come?”

Julie kneels on the couch next to Dad and stares at him in that annoying way she has.

Mum stands in the doorway with a potato peeler in her hand and points it at Julie.

“No, you can’t. It’s no place for little girls. It’s just an excuse for drinking afterwards, anyway.”

Now Mum is pointing the peeler at Dad.

“Oh, come on love. I never stay long. It’s important to some of them.”

“Why isn’t it important to you Dad?”

Julie picks up on everything. Mum looks interested too as if for once we might get a big speech out of Dad. Fat chance, I think, he'll just make a joke or change the subject, but Dad runs his fingers through his hair a couple of times which is a sure sign he is thinking hard.

"I was glad when it was over Daught, I just want to forget it, OK?"

"But Mum said you volunteered. You must have wanted to go." Julie counters, while Mum gives Dad the same look she gives me when I've been a smart arse and backed myself into a corner with Julie and all her questions.

"Yeah love, we all signed up." says Dad eventually. "We all had the wool pulled over our eyes, thinking we could save the world."

Dad is sounding sad now and he isn't even looking at the telly, just staring at the tiny gas fire.

"It was a big con. All of us ordinary blokes fighting other ordinary blokes, just with a different language. It didn't change anything. The rich got rich and the poor got poorer, just like they always have. Some big wigs made a lot of money out of that war and the ordinary blokes like me died or sometimes wished they had. The medals were to make blokes feel they had done something important, but they hadn't, the world didn't change."

Suddenly Dad looks really angry.

"And now the bloody Japs are doing very well thank you!" He slaps his hand down on the arm of the couch. "Bloody conscription again. Sending young blokes off to a war that's got nothing to do with us. It makes me bloody sick. Didn't they learn anything!"

Nobody says anything for what seems a long while.

"We had the minute's silence in class today, Dad." I say finally.

Dad makes a snorting noise.

"And Heidi farted loudly right in the middle of it."

Dad's face breaks out in a huge grin.

"Good on her. She's a good sport that girl."

She grabs the key to the shed and slams the screen door behind her. The wire is disintegrating, a silent witness to damaged lives. She locks herself in the tiny concrete box next to the communal wash house. She feels the solidity of the walls,

gradually shutting out the angry shouting and bitter words flying through the air like bullets.

Heidi raises the frame above her head.

"Heidi! No!"

She brings it crashing down on the steel fence post. The canvas is so tightly woven and sprung it sticks to the post like shit to a blanket.

"You could have given it to me." I sulk.

"You don't want a C plus painting."

Heidi does a spot on take off of Mr. Taylor's voice as she points at the canvas stuck on the fence post.

"This...piece...fails utterly in jux.ta..position and therefore has no form. The colour composition is ... interesting."

"What does juxtaposition mean, Heidi?"

"Bugged if I know. Doesn't matter though, 'cos according to hairy legs, it doesn't have one."

We both stand there looking at it.

"He said the juxtaposition failed, so it must have one somewhere."

"Maybe the hole is straight through it."

"Could be."

Heidi's thick dark eyebrows contract.

"Helen O'Reilly got an A for hers."

"What was it like?"

"A shitful bunch of flowers in a crappy old vase."

"Oh!"

I try to pull the painting off the post, but it seems determined to stay.

"Give us a hand, Heidi."

“Nah! Leave it. It’s now a piece of sculpture. Probably sym...something, you know.”

“Symbolic?”

“Yeah.”

She stomps off. A bear with a sore head. I give the poor thing on the fence post one last look and hurry after her.

“I don’t understand how you could destroy it just because someone *you* don’t like doesn’t like it. At least yours doesn’t look like a bucket of spew.”

“He didn’t say that?” Heidi looks hopeful.

“No, but it does. I kept overpainting until it was all a big lumpy purple mess. I didn’t hand it in. I’d rather fail.”

“You can have one of mine to hand in, if you want.”

“That’d be cheating.”

Heidi stares at me, like I just came down from another planet.

“Linda Comben, haven’t you *ever* cheated in your life?”

“Of course I have,” I say huffily. “Well, once anyway.”

We reach Heidi’s block of flats. As we climb up the concrete steps she gets her key from her blazer pocket. An old man from one of the upstairs flats comes shuffling down in his slippers, taking each step slowly and carefully, grabbing the handrail tightly. He stops halfway down and has a good cough. Something that looks like dried soup stains one side of his old pillared cardigan. I hope to God he’s not going to spit.

“Hello, dear.” He says, in our general direction.

I mutter a hurried hi ya but Heidi just glares at him and quickly steps inside her flat.

“Hurry up, Linda.” she hisses at me.

“Dirty old bastard,” she mutters as she throws her schoolbag in the lounge room and starts whipping up the brown holland blinds. All the flats have the same brown holland blinds. The windows are so small they don’t let much light in so I flick on the switch in the kitchen. The kitchen stinks of cat and burnt toast. Heidi tells me to put the kettle on while she cleans out the cat’s box. Her cat is a big black thing and it keeps sticking its nose in while she’s trying to clean out the kitty litter.

“Piss off, Macka.” she gives it a gentle shove with her foot. “I’ll feed you in a minute.”

I would offer to feed the cat but the smell of all that jellied stuff in the can makes me want to vomit. I keep moving around the kitchen so the cat won't attach itself to me. I can't stand cats, they're so squishy. I'd love a dog, a big dog, maybe a labrador, one day.

"So, tell me about the time you cheated," says Heidi. We've made the cocoa and she has her stockinged feet up on the table.

"It was in an Arithmetic exam in 3rd form. I copied off the person next to me."

"And?"

"And, she was dumber than me. I got them *all* wrong."

Heidi is laughing so hard she gets a stitch in her side and I've got tears running down my cheeks.

"Oh, that's rotten luck, Linda."

"More likely God punishing me."

Heidi thumps her empty mug down hard on the table.

"There you go with all that Catholic shit again. Guilt is ruling your life, girl."

"Don't be mean, Heidi. I can't help being brought up Catholic."

"But Linda, you're fifteen now. Don't you reckon it's time you started figuring things out for yourself?"

"What things?"

"Things like what's right and wrong, for *you*. Put your name on one of my paintings and hand it in to old hairy legs. Go on, I dare you!"

"What if he finds out?"

"What are you scared of?"

"Being told off. Being called a cheat. Getting expelled. Bringing shame on the family. I dunno."

"Don't you get a buzz out of doing something wrong?"

"Nope, just scared."

Heidi folds her arms in disgust.

"I don't get it. We went to the pub last Saturday and we all got drunk, you included, before we went to the dance. We are underage drinkers, illegal! That's worse than cheating."

I have to think about this for a while. I look around the kitchen. It's clean and neat but it doesn't have anything bright or colourful in it. It has all it needs, but nothing extra.

"My Mum and Dad wouldn't care if I was drinking in a pub. As long as I didn't hurt myself or anything. Everybody in our family drinks. Drinking is O.K. But cheating is different. Cheating is sort of like stealing. "

"What about that new watch your Dad bought at the pub? It was 'hot' wasn't it?"

"*Dad* didn't steal it."

Heidi raises her eloquent eyebrows.

"Yeah, OK you're right. Look, there are things we do, in our family, and things we don't do. That's the only way I can explain it."

Heidi purses her mouth, puts her head on one side and inspects her fingernails.

"So, what are you going to do about the painting?"

I get up and rinse out the mugs.

"Dunno," I say with my back to her. "I'll have to think about it."

I walk slowly home feeling confused and unhappy and not knowing why. Probably just getting my period.

Chapter 2

No.2: "The Carnival is over." (*The Seekers*)

I'm running, out of breath with a stitch in my side. I can see Heidi in the distance as the bus roars down the hill toward her at the bus stop. She is beckoning and waving her arms for me to hurry but I'm already running as fast as I can. My feet pound heavily into the footpath and my shoulder bag slaps against my hip. I hate running. I know how stupid I must look, big arms and legs flying, no bloody coordination at all.

I cannon into Heidi who has one hand clutching the side rail as she argues with the bus driver. She hauls me up, nearly pulling my arm out of its socket and we both flop into the nearest seats.

"What happened, you slept in didn't you?" Heidi accuses as I try to settle my breathing back into its normal pattern.

"No, I did not." I snap back. I pull up my skirt and point at my leg. "This is what made me late."

"You laddered your stocking and that made you late?" Heidi raises her eyebrows and smirks at me.

"No, smart arse! I was late because I was trying to stop the ladder by putting clear nail polish on it. But as you can see, by the pink nail polish I couldn't find the clear. I looked all over the flat and accused Julie of taking it, which started a fight. And where was my clear nail polish?" I raise my eyebrows and smirk in imitation.

Heidi covers her face with her hands and peers out at me from between her fingers.

"At my place?"

"Correct." I turn my back on her and stare stonily out of the window.

"Sorry Linda. Forgive me?"

"Huh!"

"If you don't forgive me, I'll sing."

"Don't you dare! Not on the bus."

Heidi opens her mouth wide and starts to move her head from side to side just like the clowns faces at Luna Park where you put the white balls in.

"I forgive you, just shut up, please."

“Good, that’s settled then. Now, how long are we going to stick at this stupid job? I don’t think I can last out the two weeks.”

“Yeah, bloody awful isn’t it? At least you’re not on the cleaning machine like me.”

“If I see another biscuit I’m going to puke.”

Heidi rolls her eyes and puffs out her cheeks, like she’s got a mouth full of something dreadful in there.

We both sit there gloomily while the bus drags us every minute closer to the biscuit factory where we are working in our school holidays. I didn’t tell her that I had almost hoped I would miss the bus this morning, just so I wouldn’t have to put in another day there. But in the end I knew I couldn’t leave her waiting for me at the bus stop, to go on her own.

Heidi, because she is small and quick, is on the conveyor belt, picking off the well formed biscuits and placing them in the packets. She stands there scowling, moving quickly and surely, ignoring the banter of all the women around her. Meanwhile I am on the machine that washes out the old biscuit tins. It’s a totally shitty job. I get wet and filthy and am sure I’m going to find a huge spider or a dead rat in one of them. So many people keeping these biscuit tins under the house or somewhere equally filthy until they realise they can get a cash refund on each tin.

“At least we don’t have to do this forever. It’s only for two weeks.”

“Yeah but we’ve only done three days and it seems like three years!”

“Just imagine if we had to do it for the rest of our lives.”

“Like my mother, you mean?” Heidi has that horrible concrete look on her face and I wish I hadn’t imagined anything at all.

“Yeah, I guess. Well, I mean she isn’t in a *biscuit* factory but I guess it’s the same thing. Guess what? My Mum’s got a part-time job.”

“Yeah? Doing what?”

“Cleaning the priest’s house, the presbytery or whatever it’s called. She makes me laugh. Thinks she’s one up on Aunty Bet.”

“How come?”

“Aunty Bet works in a bank. She’s only working in the canteen but she’s been made Supervisor. You could see Mum was jealous when she told her. Well now Mum thinks she’s the most respectable one, working for a priest.”

“It’s better than working in a factory.”

"I don't reckon there's much difference. Cleaning, factory work, it's all lousy. Don't you ever feel sorry for her, especially now you know how horrible it is?"

"Nup. She made her life the way it is and she shouldn't take it out on Shirley and me."

I can't argue with the last bit. Her mother is bloody hard to live with but I can understand how fed up and bitter you could get when you work so hard for such lousy wages. I'm jealous of the girls at school who get jobs in chemist shops or dress shops in the holidays, especially the chemists where they wear white uniforms and get to try out all the new lipsticks. I've talked to them about it and they got the jobs because of their parents or someone in their family. Heidi and I haven't got the connections you need to get one of those jobs.

At the stops along the way the bus picks up some of the women who work at the biscuit factory. We stop near the migrant hostels and three get on together. They are all big, blonde and pommy. Either pom or Scottish. I can't tell the difference. They have a joke with the driver and call out a cheery hello to us as they head to the back of the bus. I smile at them but Heidi barely acknowledges them, she is in such a bad mood now. I feel terrible because it's me that's put her in the mood, mentioning her Mum. The women's loud voices float up to us as I try to think of something to brighten her up. I'm wondering how come they sound so chirpy when they are on their way to a whole day at the factory, same as us. Hell, not just a whole day, or two weeks but maybe years and years! Suddenly I'm much happier.

"Hey Heidi. We've only got seven working days to go. Just imagine how great an office job is going to be after this. We've got years and years to do all the good stuff in life, and only seven days to spend in this shit heap."

Heidi looks at me in amazement as the bus pulls in at our stop.

"What's made you so happy all of a sudden?"

"I've just realised that I can probably stick at anything if I know it's going to end. And at the end of this I can get that new jacket."

"The green velvet one? You're crazy Linda, that will take just about all the money you earn."

"I don't care. It's beautiful. I will look beautiful."

We are heading toward the factory gates with hordes of older women. Some of them look too old to be there, but maybe they have withered early like the apricots last year on Grandma's tree. There are a few young ones, not much older than us. What a rotten start to a working life. I'm glad now that Mum talked me out of leaving school at the end of the year. Making money of my own seemed *the* most important thing.

The cloak room is full of noise and bodies jostling against one another, metal lockers clanging open and shut, women shouting out a latest piece of news about children or a new lounge suite. Heidi is beside me, struggling to get all her thick shiny hair into one of the hair nets they provide.

We file past the clock-in machine in a row, each hand automatically grabbing for the card and popping it in to hear the metallic click that says we have started the day's work. A supervisor is leaning casually against a wall but watching us carefully.

"What's he looking at?" I ask Heidi, behind me in the queue. "Does he fancy someone or is he just having a bludge?"

"No, you goose. He's watching to make sure no-one clocks on for anyone else."

"Why would they do that, and how do you know anyway?" Heidi amazes me sometimes with her stock of knowledge.

"If someone is late they might ask someone else, a friend, to clock on for them so they don't have their pay docked." Heidi is speaking slowly and carefully as if to a child, and annoying the heck out of me. I don't want her to see that she is getting to me though so I nod wisely.

"Yes, I can see the sense in that but how did you know? Has someone here been caught?"

"Nah. Mum told me about a woman at her work who got the sack, on the spot, cos someone clocked her in. The person who clocked her in got the sack too."

"That's a bit rough. Couldn't they have warned her and just docked her pay anyway?"

"Think, Linda. If the management did that the women would think they were soft and try to get away with a heap of stuff. There's lots of unskilled people out there wanting a job so it's not as if anyone is hard to replace. Anyway, I think they deserved it for being stupid and getting caught."

Sometimes Heidi is awfully hard on people, though maybe she's just more...worldly than me. She is six months older than me. She has no sympathy for people who don't think things out before they act. Mum says I live in cloud cuckoo land half the time so I understand getting confused when you're in a hurry and not thinking straight.

My morning on the machine is pretty uneventful, mechanically picking up tins, striking them hard to dislodge the grime before emptying them into a bin and then on to the huge machine with its fierce swirling sprays of water in the middle, metal racks on the bottom and strips of leather at the other end. As I am about to finish one lot of tins a young bloke, the only one here, hauls in a trolley with more tins on

it. The poor bugger has bad posture, severe acne and buck teeth. The women yell out at him, calling him lover boy and making dirty suggestions about his private parts. I feel sorry for him but annoyed at him at the same time. He honestly has nothing going for him, not looks, personality, money, nothing. But I give him a big grin and say hi anyway. After all it costs me nothing and he is a fellow human.

I'm daydreaming so hard about me in that green velvet jacket that I don't hear the whistle for morning tea and Heidi has to yell at me. Luckily we are in the same section, even though on different machines, so we get the same tea and lunch breaks.

We sit at one of the laminex tables with cans of Coke and listen to the conversation around us. One of the women is showing people photos of her daughter's wedding and the rest are all going and gahing about how nice everyone looks. I would love to sneak a look too but I can feel Heidi wanting to distance both her and me from what is going on. One of the young ones, Wendy, starts on about the kind of wedding she wants to have.

"I'm going to have a sweetheart neckline and lots of lace." she says dreamily. "And have the reception at that new place up on the hill, with the nice garden."

"That'll cost your parents a pretty penny, love." says one of the big blonde pommies. She nudges the woman next to her. "Has the boyfriend popped the question yet?"

Wendy's friend Annette chimes in.

"Nah. She's only been going out with him for three weeks. She hasn't even got a friendship ring yet."

Annette is careful to place her hand on the table, showing her friendship ring.

"Not like Joe and me," she adds smugly. "We've been going steady for two years now."

"What does he do for a crust?" I ask even though Heidi is glaring at me.

"He's a trainee storeman, and his boss says he can go for his forklift driver's licence soon."

"Woopy do!" mutters Heidi under her breath.

"I'm only working here until we get married of course."

"And then she's going to become a ballerina." Heidi whispers to me and I nearly choke on my Coca Cola and have to cough to cover up my laugh. Annette has the fattest ankles I have ever seen.

"Planning to have babies then, are you love?" another of the pommies asks. "Had

the same ideas myself but a house and babies costs money. And then there's the schooling, uniforms and all that."

The other women all nod and add to the list of things you have to find money for.

"So here I am back at the factory, bad back, veins and all. You enjoy your wedding day though love, wherever it is. And make sure you get plenty of photos, you'll need the memories to keep you going through the next twenty years." she adds as the whistle goes again and we all start to get up. "Still that's life, isn't it ladies?"

"That's not my bloody life and never will be." Heidi says to me as she heads back to her spot on the conveyor belt.

She stands at the gate until he disappears around the corner. She wants to run the last three blocks home, but forces herself to walk briskly, confidently. There's nothing in darkness that can hurt you, only people. She clutches her handbag hard, prepared to use it as a weapon.

"So, I said, 'My, aren't you observative?'"

Heidi hugs herself at the memory of her date last night with the school heart-throb.

"There's no such word as observative, Heidi."

"What? There isn't? Oh my God, what have I done?"

She covers her face with her hands and rocks back and forth.

"It won't matter. He might not know there isn't either."

"He will, I know he will. He's probably laughing like hell about it now. Telling all his mates. I'm such a dickhead. He'll never, ever ask me out again."

"Yes he will. Don't be so dramatic Heidi. You don't drop someone just because they get one single word wrong. It sounds like it *could* be a word. He may be gorgeous, Heidi, but he's not a genius you know. What did he kiss like?"

"Great." Heidi's eyes go all glassy, but then she starts to bite her bottom lip. "What if I'm a lousy kisser. I haven't had all that much practice. I hope I haven't got that wrong too."

This word business has really got to her. I should never have told her but it popped straight out of my mouth without me thinking.

"What is the right word, Linda?"

"Observant."

"Of course. I knew that word. Why did I go and bugger it up, at exactly the wrong time. Do you think I should drop in an observant next time I speak to him. Just to let him know?"

"Definitely not. Just forget it. He probably has, if he noticed in the first place. If he's as ga ga as you are he probably didn't hear a word you said. Even extremely intelligent people stuff up now and then. You're intelligent and you're funny, and you've got great hands."

"Yeah, but my nose has a bump in it."

"Nobody's perfect."

Heidi is now inspecting her hands as if they belonged to someone else. I hold out mine next to them. Heidi's hands are small with neat tapering fingers, unlike mine which look like fat sausages, fat freckled sausages. I wish gloves would come back in fashion in a big way. Heidi changes the subject.

"Did you get a note to get out of sport tomorrow?"

"Not yet. Couldn't think of a good enough excuse to give Mum."

"I forged one."

Heidi has so much guts. I think I must have been born scared.

"What if you get caught?"

"I haven't yet. I've been forging notes from my Mum for years."

"Haven't they ever been suspicious, the teachers I mean?"

"Yeah, probably, but there's nothing they can do. They wouldn't ring her at work unless it was an emergency and we haven't got the phone on at home. Matter of fact I don't think they've ever seen her writing. Don't know that I have, come to think of it."

"Are we going to Jane's house this time? It's nice, isn't it?"

"It's O.K. Pretty cruddy taste in furniture though."

I think this is a bit rich, given the state of Heidi's flat but I guess she didn't have any say in that. Heidi is the only person I know who manages to look good in a school uniform so I think she does have the right to criticise the looks of things.

"Yeah, but did you see the size of her bedroom? You could fit another four people in there. Wouldn't it be great to have a bedroom all to yourself?"

"I'd rather have a toilet to myself. Or at least one that wasn't in the bathroom."

"Why?"

"So I could have a bath in private without Mum or Shirley coming in to use the toilet. It's so revolting."

"We're not allowed to have baths anymore. We have to use the shower and make it quick."

"Why?"

"Uses too much hot water, Mum says. Something went wrong with Dad's pay last fortnight and they can't fix it till his next pay, so she's got us all on this money saving thing."

"Speaking of money, can you help me with my homework for Commercial Practice, Linda? I'm damned if I can get the hang of it."

"Sure, but I'm probably not much better than you at it. It's easier now though with decimals. I reckon it was because of pounds, shillings and pence that I failed Arithmetic all the time. Dollars and cents are so much easier."

"Peter is good with figures." Heidi starts to go all glassy eyed again.

"Why don't you ask him to help you with your homework?"

Heidi snorts in disgust. "You've got to be kidding! Invite him around to my place to meet the old cheese? As if it isn't bad enough that I stuffed up on that word. If only I could go back and have that night over again."

"Well you can't, so stop worrying about it. Come around to my place after tea and we'll do our homework together. Dad will give us a hand if he's not too tired."

"Is he still working two jobs?"

"Yeah, must be hard but I think he likes working at the pub, plus it gives him some money for a bet on Saturdays."

"Does he win?"

"Not much. Mum gets annoyed with him never betting each way and his horses always seem to come second. He's stubborn my Dad, just like Uncle Clarrie."

"He's your Nana's brother?"

"Yeah. He's always looked after Nana. Right now he's trying to teach her about decimals. She's so funny. She keeps asking 'how much is that in real money?'"

"It must be hard getting used to new things when you're really old. I don't think I want to get old."

"Well, there's not much you can do about it, is there?"

"Does your mother wash the stairs, Heidi?"

In the local garage yet again on the way home from school. Heidi is renewing her mascara and fixing her hair. Today I can't be bothered. Thank goodness it's only a few more months of uniforms, classrooms and teachers who sneer.

"What?"

"Does your mother wash the stairs at your flats? You know, outside your flat, the concrete steps."

"You got your period, Linda?"

"No, why?"

"You always ask weird questions when you've got your period. Must be your hormones or something."

"I do *not* ask weird questions. And you still haven't answered me."

Heidi grins in the mirror at me.

"Look at that face! You'll get permanent wrinkles if you keep frowning like that. OK, OK, simmer down. No, my mother doesn't wash the steps. Well, hardly ever. Can't you tell? What's this all about anyway?"

She puts her mascara in her blazer pocket and hitches up her tunic. Anyone would think we could meet Paul McCartney walking down Batesford Road.

"My mother is always scrubbing those steps and they never look any different. I could understand if she was polishing something, like wood or brass, where you get this shine and you can see yourself in it. You can see a difference. But she keeps on scrubbing those bloody concrete steps and complaining when someone spills something on them. Like they do it deliberately to mark her. The paint is chipped on the handrail and that board with the address on it keeps getting scribbled on in texta. The place is a dump but she keeps right on scrubbing those

steps, week after bloody week, like it's her job or something."

"You should be pleased. At least she tries to make things nice. Not like my old cheese."

"But it's a waste. A waste of time and energy. Anyone would think she was made to. Why can't she leave it alone, like everyone else? Instead of...oh I dunno, carrying it around."

"Maybe she *likes* those steps. If you ever move out she might have to apply to the Housing Commission to take them with her." Heidi does a great mime of someone carrying this load around on their back. Suddenly she straightens up and throws her arms wide. I give her a clap and she curtseys. We keep walking and she starts telling me about shoe dye.

"Like the bloke in the boat. That's it!"

I've interrupted her mid-stream and she gives me one her looks.

"You know!" I grab her by the arm. "That poem we read in class last week."

"How strange." Heidi pulls her arm away. "I mustn't have been listening."

"You've got to remember, Heidi, It was about this bloke who kept seeing this albatross."

"What's an albatross?"

"I'm not really sure. Some kind of bird. Like a pelican, I think. Anyway, he'd done something wrong. I think he accidentally shot it, the bird I mean, and it kept following him around, everywhere he went."

"How could it keep following him if it was dead?"

"I dunno. Maybe it was another albatross, a different one, or a ghost. But the point is it was always there, reminding him of what he'd done wrong. He couldn't get away from it. He was stuck with it."

"So what did he do about it?"

"I think he might have gone mad and shot himself."

"Silly bastard! He should have gone somewhere where the bird couldn't find him."

"No. Oh look I'm not explaining this very well. It's not a true story so people don't do things like they do in real life. It's a ...what do you call it?"

"How would I know. You're the one telling the story."

"Shit! I can't think of the word. It's like one of those stories that tell you how things got to be. You know, like how the elephant got its trunk. They explain bits of life."

"The meaning of life, huh? What a joke. Just live it and get what you can, when you can."

"You could be right."

My head is starting to spin what with trying to remember the names of things, let alone what I'm suddenly telling Heidi this story for. We've reached the corner. One way to Heidi's flat, the other way to mine. Exactly the same, just in different streets. We split up and I watch Heidi walking slowly, dragging her heavy school bag, but her body held straight. Home to feed her cat and do her homework before her Mum and sister get home from work. I trudge up the concrete path and sure enough there's Mum washing the bloody steps. I can't get angry with her though, I keep thinking about that old bloke and his albatross.

Debra Wilson squashes herself between us on the back seat of the bus, her apple basket nearly snagging Heidi's new stretch slacks.

"Sorry." she says, looking more pleased with herself than usual. "Have you two been shopping as well?" She completely misses Heidi's filthy look.

"No, no money. Just looking." I say shortly, while Heidi stares purposefully out of the window.

"Silly! You don't need money," she whispers, pulling a pink dress out of her basket. "Check this out."

She is careful not to display too much of it, just the bodice, but I can see the price tag is still attached. Heidi is refusing to turn and look.

"It's nice. Did you...steal it?"

"Course. Couldn't afford to buy it, at that price, could I? It's not really stealing, just taking an early birthday present from Myers."

She thinks she's a real wit, this one.

"I'm going to the pictures with Snowy tonight. You know Snow, don't you Linda? He lives not far from you."

Yeah, I know Snowy all right. Thinks he's Elvis Presley. He's such a nerd. Probably hasn't heard of the Beatles, let alone the Stones. Strutting around in his leather jacket with Brylcream on his hair.

I nod my head. Not much use talking to Deb, she prattles on without any help from anyone. Heidi is as far into the corner as she can get, legs crossed and arms folded.

"Snowy has a job now and he's going to get a car soon. We'll be able to go to the drive-in then."

She digs me in the ribs and giggles. I can feel my face going red. She laughs with her mouth open showing her ferretty sharp little teeth and a lot of gum. As the bus approaches her street she gets up quickly, nearly falling in my lap when the bus lurches to a stop.

"Hope you girls have as good a night as I'm going to have," she calls over her shoulder as she heads down the stop, clutching her basket in front of her.

"Bloody idiot!" mutters Heidi, her dark eyes following Debra off the bus.

"She is a bit dumb, but you could at least have spoken to her, Heidi. Anyone would think she had the plague the way you acted."

"The Bubonic Plague, now that's an idea. What did Mr. Wilson say about it? Big black things, eh?"

"Very painful, just like Debra Wilson."

"Carried by rats, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. Rats with sharp teeth, like Debra Wilson."

Heidi pulls her top lip up to show her gums and laughs in Debra's high pitched squeal. We're laughing so much we almost miss our stop. Heidi has regained her usual good humour and gives a running commentary on everyone's taste in curtains as we pace up the hill. I sometimes wish she wouldn't be so critical of everyone.

"I know Deb is a pain, Heidi, but why do you hate her? Is it because she stole that dress?"

"No." Heidi gives the question her attention, chewing her bottom lip.

"I wouldn't mind her so much if she stole a *decent* dress. Did you see it? Lipstick pink! With ruffles down the front. I don't care that she's *stupid*. I know plenty of stupid people. But stupid and no taste is ...a terrible combination."

"So, a fashionable thief would be OK?"

"Yeah. Or maybe an honest dog. Not the two together."

"Am I an honest dag?"

"You fishing for compliments?"

"No! I'm serious. I think I am a bit daggy the way I talk to everyone. I can't ignore them like you do. Even if I don't like them."

"I ignored her because I could. You were doing all that was needed. If I'd spoken I would have been outright nasty."

"I feel a bit sorry for her. She has all those brothers who treat her like dirt, you know."

"Yeah, I know." Heidi sighs. "But you can't spend your whole life feeling sorry for people, and talking to them just because you feel sorry for them. I'd hate to think people talked to me because they felt *sorry* for me."

"Don't think there's much chance of that."

We walk on in silence. An old lady up ahead has reached her front gate. She has a string bag in one hand and a jeep in the other. As she starts to put down her string bag Heidi darts forward and opens the gate for her with a flourish. The old lady thanks her and Heidi gives her best, sweetest smile, then turns to me and winks. I roll my eyes at her.

"Hypocrite!" I mutter, as we wave to the old dear.

"Not at all. I'm not mean, Linda. I just don't believe in being nice to people simply because they live on this planet."

The anger fills her like a gargantuan meal. Huge, monstrous, dormant. Waiting to explode and shatter like a stone-hit windscreen. She forces it to stay down, captures it within her breathing. She can control it, unlike HER. She will make it stay inside where its ugliness will be invisible.

"She's blowing a bloody fuse in there."

Heidi jerks her head behind her to her front door. I can hear someone banging things around and a tap running. Their cat gives a screech like someone's just kicked it. Today is the day our fifth form exam results are published in the newspaper. Heidi and I are standing at the letterboxes at the front of her flats. We both have a copy of *The Sun* in our hands. I just look at her. I know she must be disappointed and her Mum is angry. I don't know what to say.

"Congratulations Linda. Four subjects, not bad." She grins wryly at me.

"Yeah, it's OK. At least you got English."

"I knew I'd scrape through that, but I thought I'd get Economics too. At least three subjects would have been good instead of just the two."

"It's a shame you had to drop Art, you would have sailed through that."

"Yeah. That stupid coordinator and all that talk of doing practical, useful things. They're no bloody use if you don't pass them! Bloody Shorthand and Typing eh? Bet old Mrs Gogh didn't think I'd pass that."

"Yeah, the old bitch. Surely your Mum was pleased about you getting that."

"Nah, she keeps reminding me of how Shirley got dux of primary school. Hell, she never even got to fifth form, been working since she was 14. Mum's got no idea about school you know, just doesn't understand that it gets harder the higher you go. It's like she wants to be angry with me all the time now. Shirley just stays away from her."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Get a job. I've applied to the banks. At least I'll be bringing some money in and can get out of this hole." She jerks her head toward the door. "And away from her. Did I tell you, Shirley is getting married? I reckon it's more to get away from here than anything."

I have to agree with Heidi. Her mother has got worse lately. Last week she took to Heidi's new jumper with a pair of sissors, cut it to shreds, because she reckoned Heidi was rude to her new boyfriend. Heidi and I laugh about the boyfriend. We wonder how anyone could be attracted to her mother. Mrs Johnson might be good looking if she didn't always look so fierce. She also has a weird laugh which doesn't seem to belong to her.

I don't know whether Heidi hates her mother or the flats more, and she's sure she will never find a decent bloke while she lives there. She even lies to boys she meets about where she lives and never lets them see her home. I hate them seeing where I live too but at least my parents are pretty normal. There's something about living in Housing Commission flats which says rotten things about you, things that might not be true. Heidi cuts into my thoughts.

"What are you going to do Linda? Are you going back to do your Matric?"

"No, I need to have a science subject and it would have to be bloody Geography, which I hate. What the hell use is knowing about rain catchment areas, it's not as if there's exactly a whole lot of farming going on around here."

We both look around and laugh. Concrete box houses and flats in various stages of disrepair. Overflowing garbage bins and rusty cars in front yards, torn curtains at the windows. Not many bother to create a garden.

“Anyway it’s about time I earned some money. I’ve applied to some banks too. I might do one more subject at night school though because I do really want to be a Journalist.

Heidi’s Mum sticks her head out the door and yells.

“Heidi, get in here and clean up your cat’s bloody mess or I’ll shoot the bloody thing!”

She slams the wire door so hard it vibrates.

“I’d better go. It’ll be great working Heidi. We can go out more and we will meet lots of new people. Life will get better now, you’ll see.”

Chapter 3.

No. 9: "Friday on my Mind" (*Easybeats*)

The icy wind catches at my stockinged legs as I stomp up Spencer Street. My stomach is jumping and making gurgly noises. I wish I hadn't eaten breakfast. I'm sure I'm going to throw up all over the footpath. I shouldn't have said I'd go on relieving staff. Every new move makes me more nervous than the last. It's bloody stupid but I'm waiting for someone to tell me off, to catch me out doing something wrong, the same as at school.

I battle awkwardly with the big double bank doors and stumble inside out of the wind. The tellers are setting up at their cubicles, chattering away as they organise their money drawers. They look comfortable. They know what they're doing.

"Are you the new reliever?" calls out one girl with straight blonde hair and teeth.

"Yeah, should I go see the Manager?"

I'm trying to smooth down my hair which must look like a birch broom in a fit.

"There's no need to bother the Manager. I'll show you what to do." An extremely large woman with a wide face and grey hair descends on me, her voice booms like the announcements at the railway station. Mrs. Gogh in a bank uniform. I know this is not going to be a good place to work.

Sure enough the old bitch is there watching my every move, finding fault whenever she can. She double checks my work all morning. I'm due to be here for three weeks. I wonder if I'll last the distance. Maybe I can pull a couple of sickies.

Halfway through the morning the old building is quiet, nearly all the staff are at morning tea, their laughter trills through from the lunch room out back, spoons clink and biscuit wrappers rustle. I glimpse the dragon lady checking out the neatness of a cash drawer at the far end cubicle, so I risk making a personal call.

Heidi answers cheerfully in her best work voice. I can hear chatter and the tap, tap, tapping of the typing pool in the background. Wish I was there.

"How's the new place?" she asks. "Any good looking blokes?"

"You've got to be joking. The Manager is the only male. He's probably sixty odd and I haven't even seen him yet. There's this old bag watching over me. She's just like Mrs. Gogh."

"Shit! You poor thing. That's truly horrible. What are the girls like?"

"Snooty. No, that's not fair. It's just that no-one seems to notice you when you're a

reliever. They know you'll be gone soon."

"So, do something to get yourself noticed, girl. Stand on your head, look tragic, invent something!"

"Wish I could. You should be doing this job, Heidi, not me."

"Rubbish, you'll cope. And you didn't want to do typing, remember? You wanted to try something new. Is it the figures getting you down? You ought to be proud of yourself, Linda. You're the only person I know who is working with figures and got seventeen out of a hundred in Arithmetic."

"Don't remind me. No, the figures are OK. It's a lot easier when it's real money. I just feel a bit left out because I don't know anyone and I don't stay long enough to get to know anyone."

"At least you are seeing new places and new people. I'm stuck here all day with the same ones. Won't be for long though."

"What do you mean? What's happening, Heidi?"

"Come down the pub tonight and I'll tell you."

I can see the old bitch approaching as the others file back to their places. I've swapped one uniform for another, more people telling you what to do. At least I get paid.

"Yeah, OK. Gotta go. Bye."

"I do hope you are not making personal calls on the bank's time, Linda?"

A spark of Heidi ignites within me.

"Sorry. It's just that my mother is sick. I have to get her some medicine on the way home."

The old bitch mumbles what could be sympathy and strides off to harrass the tellers.

I go back to the adding machine. Tap, tap, click of buttons. I don't mind the adding machine. It has a soothing rhythm once you get going. I snap the elastic band around each batch of cheques when they're totalled. If I keep busy time will fly. The work is boring but at least it's straightforward. I shouldn't stuff up on anything if I concentrate.

"I've had a job interview, Linda, and I think I might get it." Heidi slaps down the

drinks and checks on her lipstick holding a little mirror from her handbag.

"Really? You're going to leave the bank already? You've only been there for six months. Is it better money?"

"No, it's a bit less actually. But a lot more future. It's for a clothing manufacturer and I'm going to be doing some modelling, as well as office work."

"Modelling. Wow! Is that why you've been on a diet?"

"Yeah, well, you've got to be a size ten and I am now. They make really great stuff, Linda. Mary Quant type gear. Smart and affordable. And I can get a discount on any thing I buy, so that will make up a bit for getting less pay."

I'm really envious of Heidi. Modelling! And she's only just turned seventeen. With my big hands and feet I could never be a size ten.

"There's only one, small problem," says Heidi, as she sips her drink. "The owner is a revolting little perve. Kept putting his arm around me when he was showing me around."

"Yuk! How are you going to cope with that? He won't expect anything more, will he?" I have visions of a horrid little man with beady eyes perving on Heidi when she tries the clothes on.

"Nah. I'll cope with him. Just keep out of his way as much as I can. The thing is I want to get into some sort of designer job, and without going back to school this is the only way I reckon I can get a look in. I won't stay there forever, of course. This job will give me the experience to go on to something better."

I raise my glass.

"Here's to you, Heidi. Here's to seeing the back of the bank and the front of something new and exciting."

I met this terrific guy Paul at the dance last week and he's taking me out tonight. He is very good looking, is a neat dancer and drives a little red sports car. I have never been out in a sports car before. I have spent all day making a red chiffon mini dress and dying my hair blonde. Mum is not happy about the hair but not terribly angry because it's more reddish blonde than blonde. I have also ironed my hair to make it straight. I picked this up from a tip in a magazine and it works really well. You have to put a tea towel over your hair so it doesn't burn. Of course your hair has to be long to do it and it doesn't last for ever. I think I look terrific.

Paul is picking me up at 7 o'clock so as usual I am completely ready by 6.30. It bugs me that I am always early, no matter how hard I try to be late and it's definitely

not cool to be early. Mum says I get it off Dad, he's always up at sparrow's fart. I'm so nervous I can't sit still so I clean out my underwear drawer and iron things that don't need ironing.

Dad calls out from the kitchen. It's quarter past seven and Dad is listening to the Brownlow count on the radio.

"You've run a skinner, love. He's not coming."

I know he's just joking, but I wish he wouldn't. It starts me thinking. Maybe Paul has changed his mind and won't turn up. Finally I sit down and watch an old movie on television with Mum and Julie. It's now 7.30.

There's a knock at the door and I nearly jump out of my skin. I smooth down my dress and put on my best smile. The smile slides off my face when I see dopey Darryl, Julie's boyfriend standing there.

"Come in, Darryl." I mutter ungraciously.

Mum makes room on the couch for Darryl and he and Julie make goo goo eyes at each other. I didn't even have a boyfriend at her age.

"Yeah, you've definitely run a skinner," says Dad again from the kitchen where he is licking his pencil and jotting down strokes next to people's names.

"Don't Bill, don't tease her." Mum calls out and looks at me, trying for a big bright smile, but she looks worried too. "He's probably just been held up love."

"Don't worry daught. He's probably not good enough for you anyway. Plenty more fish in the sea."

Dad has had a few down the pub and I know he is trying to be kind but I hate that expression more than anything. It's hard enough to meet a boy who you really like. Dad makes it sound like they are all queued up just waiting to meet me. I can feel my eyes filling up so I head off for the bedroom. It's a quarter to eight now. That's it. I have been stood up. Why did he ask me out if he didn't intend turning up?

I can hear a knock at the door as I'm about to pull off my dress. My heart jumps up into my mouth. I race into the bathroom and clean up my face. Please God don't let him see that I have been crying. And please God don't let Dad say anything.

I barely give Paul time to say anything other than hello to my family before I hurry us out the door. He really is gorgeous and has maroon trousers on. He has blonde hair, real blonde hair and it is almost down to his shoulders. Dad will be sure to comment on that later. If Dad's hair gets longer than a crew cut he reckons he should be playing the violin.

We head off down the stairs and into his car. I can see that Mrs Spriggs is peering

out between her curtains and I hope he doesn't notice. Luckily Mr. Spriggs isn't yelling at her tonight. For once the whole block of flats is quiet. Paul doesn't say anything about being so late so I don't either. Maybe I got the time wrong. He is probably too cool to worry about time anyway.

Heidi and I are going into the city to the Thumpin Tum disco. You are supposed to be eighteen to get in so I have Heidi's sister's birth certificate, just in case they ask. Heidi is seventeen now and could pass for eighteen anyway. I have new red suede boots and Heidi has blue ones exactly the same. We are wearing our sleeveless ribbed sweaters with the cut away shoulders and mini skirts which we made ourselves. I like sewing when it's easy, like a skirt or even a plain dress. It's things with sleeves I can't get the hang of, especially the fiddly bits like cuffs and button holes. We use Heidi's Mum's old knee treadly because neither of us can afford an electric machine yet.

I love the feeling of going in on the train with everyone going out somewhere. There is excitement all around us, it's almost like people are escaping from something. A few of the Jordy boys hang around the station but they don't bother us, they're so stupid and usually ugly with their black pointy shoes and rocker hair cuts which are well and truly out of date now.

The train is pretty full, especially the smoking compartments. We get in one of those even though we don't smoke. You get to check out more blokes that way. As the stations whizz past I fall into a dreamy feeling just like I always do on trains at night. It drives Heidi mad. When she gets excited she wants to talk, but I like to sit there very still to watch and listen. There is something about the dusk, and lights beginning to go on, that makes me feel happy and optimistic. It's like anything could happen, something just might change the whole course of my life in an instant. I don't know what of course, that's the mystery, the excitement.

Heidi is poking me in the side.

"Check out this character."

I look up to see a guy of about seventeen or eighteen stepping up into the carriage. He has slicked down his hair and his trousers are at half mast, especially when he sits down. He is all pale browns and definitely daggy. I feel sorry for him, like I always do the losers. Bent old people make me want to cry. Heidi adores these characters, loves to make up her own stories about them.

"His name is..." Heidi hesitates and grins at me.

"Gary or Gregory." I raise my eyebrows.

"No, his name is Robert."

Robert, I think. This is a strange way for her to start. Robert is a nice name.

“But his parents call him Bert.”

Poor brown Bertie we christen him as we collapse into giggles. The rest of the way in we create a little dark house for him in Richmond, old parents and a beautiful girl he sees every day from a distance who he is madly in love with but who won't even look at him. Heidi points out his fingernails which are bitten to the quick which makes me feel even more sorry for him. It must be awful to have something that shows how nervous you are to the rest of the world. We get to Flinders Street before we can end the story which I am glad of because I know Heidi will give it a murky ending.

We go into the ladies room at the station to check on our hair and makeup. I'm worried that the bright lights make my hair look yellow. Heidi assures me I don't look like a tart, but I'm not so sure. I want to look like Mary, out of Peter, Paul and Mary, but it's not possible when you have so many freckles. My makeup covers the freckles well at night which is great because I hate them just as much as my red hair. There are only so many years of being called 'bluey', 'carrot' and 'bloodnut' a person can take. Also you are automatically assumed to have a bad temper if you have red hair, which is true in my case but I don't like being reminded of it.

“How was the date with Paul? He is gorgeous. How did it go?”

“I don't think he'll ever ask me out again. It was all right when we were dancing and he's a good kisser but I felt stupid around him. He knows a whole lot about things I've never even seen, let alone done.”

“Like what?”

“He can play a couple of instruments, knows all about overseas bands and music. He goes skiing, snow *and* water skiing. I've never even seen real snow. He's only two years older than me but he makes me feel like I'm only ten years old.”

“Not a show off, is he?”

“No. He's just so confident. Knows exactly where he's going. No, I don't think he'll bother asking me out again. ”

Heidi grins and starts to speak. I hold out my hand to block her.

“If you say, 'there's plenty more fish in the sea', I'll scream.”

We meet up with some new friends of Heidi's she has met through her work. We meet them at a pub not far from the station so we can get up a bit of dutch courage before we go to the dance. It's much easier it is to talk to blokes after you have had a few drinks. Heidi's friends are clever talkers but fun. We laugh a lot and get louder

the more we have to drink. A few old married couples raise their eyebrows but the drink and being in a group has given us armour against any criticism. We laugh and clown around the whole way up to Little Bourke Street. Inside the Tum we check out the downstairs dance floor first with its bouncing coloured beams falling on the dancers as they weave around one another, legs and arms in strange contortions, hair flicking and flowing as they move about to the pounding rhythm. Jeff St. John's gravelly voice booms through the speakers as he gyrates round in his wheel chair, his neck arching back, big teeth glinting in the darkness. We can't see anyone we know so we all head upstairs to the bar. It's a tight squeeze getting up the stairs with some people hanging over the railing and a couple locked in a tight embrace against the wall.

One of Heidi's new friends, Kaye is nudging Heidi and pointing out a guy she is keen on. I am surprised to find it is Brian, a guy I met at another dance months ago and went out with a couple of times. I wasn't that keen on him and gave him the flick but now find he has a new attraction through the eyes of someone else. I reassess him and see his good points which is mainly that he is sweet, funny and lively. You couldn't actually call him good looking but he has something, an air about him and he was an extremely good kisser. Some guys make you feel like you just ate a big sticky icecream. He comes over and is talking to all of us but is obviously still keen on me. I play up to him and so does Kaye. He asks me to dance and I agree even though I know it's going to annoy Kaye and maybe even Heidi. Brian is not nearly as nice looking as Paul but he makes me laugh and I feel comfortable with him.

She yearns to go around inside the mirror and slap that girl staring back at her so defiantly, waiting to be attacked. Muscles tensed, stony face, lips shut tightly. She tries on a smile but it is too easily read. Thinking if she is carefully contained, locked in, no-one will guess what is on the inside. Stupid girl/woman. Mirrors and reflections are as dangerous as reality. Perhaps they are what's real.

The referee says, "Go!". The muscled arms of the first on the mark swing backwards and down, the bright blade of the axe hitting the mid spot and carving out the wood. A row of broad shoulders in white singlets, feet firmly planted on logs, start chopping, one after another. Light glistens off sharp edges in the air, the 'V' shapes form in the logs, wood chips flying. It's a tight finish, the crowd are yelling for their favourite. The first splits the log in half, seconds before the next one. The crowd cheers.

"What's the prize?" asks Heidi, chewing on a nail.

"Dunno. A medal maybe, some sort of trophy I guess. Like on *World of Sport*.

"*World of Sport?*"

"Yeah, you know, *World of Sport*, on the telly. Every Sunday morning."

"No, I don't know. Don't suppose I've missed much. Do you want to look at the animals?"

Heidi starts to walk off, hands in her overcoat pockets.

"You've *never* seen *World of Sport*? I thought everyone watched that. I don't ever remember a time when we didn't watch it. Mainly for the footy."

"Not everyone is interested in football, Linda."

"Haven't you ever barracked for anyone?"

"No. I've never seen a game. I'm simply not interested."

"Well, I think that's a shame, Heidi. We don't go much because of Dad working on Saturdays and Geelong's so far away, but I've had a fantastic time there. You can yell and scream all you like."

"I get plenty of yelling and screaming at home. I don't need to go out for it."

Heidi has a way of finishing a topic of conversation. Full stop. You know that's it.

"What do you want to look at? Do you want to buy any show bags?"

"No, they're childish rubbish. Let's go and see the crafts."

We wander over to the crafts pavilion and look through the glass at all the prize-winning cakes and sewing. Heidi seems to be so much older than me lately. I still like to see what's inside a showbag.

Heidi is riveted in front of one huge patchwork quilt.

"Look at the colours in that!" she whispers as if in church. She peers in at the cards and groans in disgust. "It got second prize. Second!"

The quilt is big and bold. Purple slashes across a blue surface, with a large black border. It reminds me of a thunder storm.

We move along slightly and check out the first prize winner.

"They rewarded neatness. Wouldn't you know?"

"It *is* nice."

"Nice! The stitching is perfect, sure. Everything is even and the colours match. But look at them, they're muted, they blend in with one another. Beige is the dominant

colour. Beige shouldn't even *be* a colour. This person has no imagination whatsoever."

"Well, it is the Royal Melbourne Show, Heidi."

"So?"

"I've been coming here for years and the craft stuff always looks pretty much the same. I'm surprised the purple quilt even got a look in. They've probably had the same judges since Adam was a boy. Anyway, Mrs. A. Brown might be tickled pink to get second prize. It might be the only prize she has ever got."

"If she's been here and seen first prize she should be angry."

"What are you getting so het up about. You don't even know her. You're not likely to put in an entry to next year's show, are you?"

"That's not the point, Linda. I get angry because it's not fair. People get rewarded for being ordinary. They ought to get prizes for daring to be different."

"Yeah, well. Life isn't fair. Why are you in such a bad mood today? Is your boss still being a sleaze?"

Heidi gives a huge sigh and rolls her eyes.

"He's absolutely disgusting. Grabbed me on the tit the other day. Another girl in the office told me it's why the job keeps becoming vacant. He can't keep his hands to himself and so they all get fed up and leave. Apparently I've lasted longer than most of them already."

"Just quit, Heidi. You can get another job in a bank or office somewhere. It's not worth it, is it, if it gets you this upset?"

Heidi gives me a sudden grin and grabs my arm.

"It's OK. Really. I can put up with it for a while longer. The designers and cutters are really nice and I'm learning an awful lot about colours, designs and fabrics. They've even used a few of my ideas. No. I want to stick it out until I've learned as much as I can there. And it's got me back to drawing and painting again. I never felt like doing that when I worked in the bank. You have to put up with a bit of shit if you want to get anywhere. Let's go see some of your favourite animals."

Heidi seems a lot happier as we wander around giggling at weird looking chooks. She even has conversations with a few, much to the amusement of their owners. But I'm worried about her. She shouldn't have to put up with some old bloke trying it on all the time when she is only doing her job. The bank might be boring but at least I feel safe.

"I'm sorry dear, but you were enrolled incorrectly. They took Shorthand and Typing as two subjects, whereas they are, in fact, counted as one. You therefore do not have enough Leaving subjects to do your Matriculation. I'm afraid you won't be able to sit the exams."

"But it's August, I've done all the work. I'm up to date. I've done all the homework, every week."

The Principal spreads his big hands on the desk, palms up, and shrugs. He shrugs away months of hard work, a wasted year of my life.

"Sorry, my dear, that's just the way it is. We will refund your fees."

I just stop myself from saying, bugger the fees.

"Isn't there anything I can do? I can't get into journalism unless I have done English and English Lit. I don't even have to pass them, I just have to sit the exam. Couldn't you please let me sit the exam, and then...fail me?"

"No, no, that would be going against all the regulations. This is a fine school. No, we couldn't do that. You could come back next year, do another Leaving subject, say Geography, and then the year after do your Matric. If you pass of course. Yes, I think that's the most sensible option for you."

He starts to gather up the papers on his desk and shuffle them into a neat pile, to match his neat suit and neat smile. I want to smash my fist into those precise features. I can feel the tears stinging the back of my eyes. I hear myself say, "Thanks anyway" in a small voice.

The train trip home is a blur.

I walk into our flat and there the family is, just as usual, Mum cooking the tea, Julie doing her homework at the kitchen table. Their normal lives go on while mine collapses.

"That's bad luck, love," says Mum, turning down the gas burner.

"It's *unfair*, Mum."

"Yes, well, life isn't always fair, Linda. Do you want one chop or two?"

Chops, mashed potatoes and peas, just like every other Tuesday night. I don't think I can make her understand. She accepts.

"I don't want any tea, Mum. I'm not hungry. I'm going around to Heidi's place for a while."

She gives me a sympathetic look.

"All right. But don't be too late, you've got work tomorrow. There'll be some food here if you want to eat it later."

I can hear Heidi fighting with her sister Shirley as I near their front door. I knock loudly to make myself heard above the din. Heidi pulls open the door, face like thunder.

"Believe me Linda. You do not want to visit right now."

"Bitch!", she turns her back to me, ducks and yells as a hairbrush comes flying at her.

"Come for a walk with me, Heidi. Just for a while. Please?"

Her face lightens.

"What a good idea."

"You can burn your own bloody tea," she yells into the flat and slams the door after her. Something hits the closed door with a thump.

"Thinks she's lady muck! I refuse to wear a stupid bridesmaid's dress that *she* chooses. She'll be sorry she married that twerp. Still, it does let her get out of here."

Suddenly my lack of response sinks in.

"What's up, Linda? You look like something bad has happened. You been crying?"

"Yeah, I've been crying. Not that it will do me any good."

"What happened? You didn't get the sack?"

"No, I didn't get the sack. It's worse than that."

"What? You're pregnant? No!"

"Not unless it's an immaculate conception."

"OK I give up, Linda. I can't think of anything worse than getting the sack or being pregnant. Or, both at once. What happened?"

I describe the summons to the Principal's office and my year of night school wasted, down the drain in an instant. Tears begin to drip down my face while I'm telling her

and I brush them away angrily with my sleeve.

"Here you go." Heidi pulls a hanky from her sleeve and offers it to me. "Go on, it's clean."

"Thanks."

"The bastard! His fault and all he can do is give you back your fees. Did you tell him what you thought of him and his lousy school?"

"No. It was probably my fault too. I should have known I didn't have enough subjects."

"Bullshit!" Heidi yells, startling a man out watering his front lawn. He frowns at her and she gives him a challenging look, moving toward him. I pull her away.

"Jesus, Linda. When are you going to start fighting back? Hasn't living in this crappy place taught you anything yet?"

"What's the point. I won't change his mind by yelling at him."

"No, but at least you could put up a fight."

"What's the use? Maybe I'm just kidding myself about being a journalist anyway. I should probably just be grateful to have a job."

"Grateful! Linda, we do not have to be grateful for anything. You work hard at your job, you deserve it, but that doesn't mean you can't do better."

"I'm doing better already than anyone else in my family has done. My Mum was a waitress. My father is a truck driver. I'm working in a nice, clean office, as Mum keeps reminding me."

"Yeah, but it's hardly living life high on the hog, is it? I mean you don't want to *own* a newspaper, just work in one. I don't call that huge ambition."

"Maybe not, for some people. But it is a step up in my family. And yours."

"*Anything* would be a step up in my family. A step *out* would be better. So, what are you going to do?"

"As the man says, the only choice I have is to go back next year and do Leaving Geography."

"But you *hated* Geography. You failed it at school."

"I know, that's the problem. Which leaves me with the other choice of just giving up the whole stupid idea."

"In which case you could at least have told the old bastard what you think of him. Oh, come on Lindy." Heidi puts an arm around me and gives me a little hug. "I know it seems bad now, really bad, but something will turn up."

"Like what? Prince Charming?"

"Maybe. Listen. Marilyn Westaway is having a party on Saturday night. It's her eighteenth birthday and she said for us to come. What do you say we go out on Saturday night and have some real fun? Forget about what a shit life is."

"I dunno. I wouldn't want to be a wet blanket."

"You won't be. Get a few brandies in you first and you'll see a whole different view of life. Come on. I'll loan you my new green top. It'll look great on you."

Heidi glances at her watch.

"Shit! The old bag will be home soon. We'd better head back before Shirley gets a chance to shitcan me. Mum is in a bad enough mood already about the wedding."

"Why? Doesn't she like Bob?"

"No, it's not that. She and Shirley keep fighting about the reception. About the money, about the food. They're at it hammer and tongs, insults flying like you wouldn't believe. I'm trying to stay right out of it."

"Poor you. Sounds horrible."

"It's only another couple of weeks and then I'll have a bedroom to myself. Most horrible things don't last forever."

Heidi scoots inside as we see her mother come around the corner, a scarf covering her head, her arms weighed down with shopping bags. I head off in the opposite direction just as rapidly.

She walks the streets at dusk to escape the noise, bouncing off concrete, hitting the pit of her stomach. She has trained her eyes to see only the sky as it changes colour. She walks around the oval, closing her eyes and listening to the final small bird noises and the train in the background, feeling the soft ground beneath her feet. Like a diver on a springboard she harnesses her strength.

"Have you ever had a birthday party, Heidi?"

"What do you think?"

I'm sitting on the edge of the bath watching Heidi put on her lippy. Neat, precise movements. You could make an advertisement from her delicate hands rolling the lipstick back down. Heidi's nails are painted the exact shade of the lipstick, a dusty pink. She flicks her black shiny hair and settles the fringe. If I didn't have a cowlick I would wear a fringe too.

Heidi's mother's laugh vibrates through the flat. Heidi frowns into the mirror. I follow her into her bedroom where Shirley is lying on her bed, flicking through a *Women's Weekly*. She darts a glance at Heidi who is opening the wardrobe to get her jacket. Their beds are placed as far apart as they can be in that little room which means you can't open the wardrobe door properly. Heidi has to stand on her bed to reach inside.

"Is that my lipstick you've got on?"

"No, it's not your bloody lipstick, it's mine." Heidi's mouth snaps.

"Aren't you going out tonight, Shirley?" I hate being in the middle of other people's arguments.

"No. Bob's working."

"Probably having it off with someone else." Heidi slams the wardrobe shut and hooks the elastic band across both knobs to make it stay shut. Shirley sniffs.

"See you Shirley," I say, but she doesn't look up from her magazine.

Mrs Johnson is watching the telly. She doesn't look up when she speaks to Heidi.

"Don't be late and don't come home pissed."

"Yeah, you have a nice night too, Mum."

Heidi pushes me out the door before I can say goodnight to her mother.

As we walk the five blocks to Marilyn's house Heidi brightens up. We stop a few houses away and have a couple of swigs from the brandy flask I have stashed in my handbag. We need to get a bit fired up for this party, Marilyn's eighteenth birthday. I don't like Marilyn much, Heidi doesn't either, but a party's a party. You never know who might be there.

"They've made it look nice," I say, nodding at the Weatherall's house. Marilyn's Dad has put up a snappy new car port and a wooden verandah.

"Ha! Silk purses and sow's ears."

"What?"

"It's a Housing Commission house, Linda. Doesn't matter what they do to it, that's what it'll always be."

"Maybe if they keep doing things to it, in the end it won't look like one. The garden is great."

"It's right smack in the middle of every other Housing Commission house, Linda, so it doesn't matter what they do to it. It can't change what it is because of where it is."

"Maybe they could shift it then."

"What, the house?"

"Yeah. Why not. Stick it on the back of a truck like a portable classroom."

"And where would they take it?"

"Oh...Camberwell, Hawthorn? No. Toorak!"

"Yes." Heidi hugs herself and laughs. "I love it. Buy a block of land in Toorak."

"In *the* ritziest street."

"Definitely. And, wham, slap down their Housing Commission house."

"There's probably a law against it."

"Yeah." Heidi takes out her ciggies and offers me one. "They probably couldn't afford a block of land in Toorak anyway. Mind you, Marilyn's Mum acts like they could."

"Do you think she's up herself? She acts, sort of, young for her age."

"She's not exactly ancient, Linda."

"I know, but she doesn't talk like a mother. More like she's Marilyn's sister. She flirts with Marilyn's boyfriends."

"No!"

"I swear she does. You watch, tonight."

"That's disgusting. People ought to realise when they're too old to flirt."

"She's still got a good figure though."

"Mm, not bad. She's got wrinkles. Heaps of those little ones around the eyes. She must be about forty."

"I wonder where we'll be when we're forty?"

Heidi gets up from the fence and starts straightening her jacket and pulling off imaginary bits of fluff.

"Now you're getting depressing, Linda. Come on, it's party time."

The rain has created a thin grey blanket over Melbourne all morning. The gutters are overflowing as I leave the shelter of the railway station for the long trudge up the hill to home. I have no umbrella, no raincoat, but I have to walk it. I would be too embarrassed to hail a taxi for such a short distance even if there were one around on a day like this. It's a short distance by car, probably only take about five minutes but by foot and in the rain it's a long way. An especially long one when my stomach grabs and cramps fiercely every couple of minutes. It's my usual period pains. One look at me and the boss sent me home early. He's a lovely bloke, never even hints at what is wrong or smirk like some men would. He has daughters and he also knows I'm a good worker and don't take sickies for no reason. He even drove me to the station at the other end so all I have to put up with is the trek at this end. I try not to anticipate the pain as I walk up the ramp. I also try to ignore the fact that I am soaking wet and my hair is hanging in candles. I'm so focused on getting home I don't hear her yelling at first.

"Linda, Linda Comben!"

Shit! It's Debra Wilson with a brat in a pram. She catches up to me and insists on trying to half shelter me with her umbrella. The result is the water drips off one corner and down my neck. You'd reckon misery would be a finite thing.

"So, how are you, Linda. You seen my new baby?"

I dutifully peer through the plastic covering at a little red face under a blue blanket.

"He's lovely, Debra. What's his name?"

"It's a *she*, and *her* name is Mandy." Debra sniffs at my ignorance. "She's put on two pound this week."

The tone of Deb's voice tells me this is a good thing. Funny, give it a few years and she'll be upset at putting on two pound in a week. I must be making the right noises because Deb goes on to tell me everything about the baby. Suddenly she breaks off and squeals.

"What's wrong with your legs?"

I look down. What the hell is happening, my legs are turning purple! Shit. The dye is running in my dress, the dress I made myself and which Julie says looks like stage curtains.

"It's all right, Deb, it's not a contagious disease, just the dye running in my dress."

"You poor thing. You should wear more clothes in this weather."

I really want to kill Debra Wilson.

"So, I guess you're married now," I say, knowing full well that she isn't.

"Not yet. But we will be, soon as Snowy gets out. Anyway Mum loves having the baby around. Says it keeps her young. Good for me too, 'cos I can go out and have a bit of fun once in a while, without having to worry about a babysitter. Have you got a boyfriend, Linda?"

"Not a permanent one."

"Oh, playing the field, eh?" She gives me a knowing wink. My stomach lurches. Serve her right if I threw up all over her. "How's Heidi going? Has she got a boyfriend?"

Luckily we've reached the top of the hill where I veer off to the left and she goes in the opposite direction.

"Got to go, Deb. Nice baby. Say hi to your Mum for me."

"I've got to get out of this place, Heidi. Debra Wilson sums it all up. Boyfriends, boyfriends, she went on like a bloody broken record."

I'm lying on our couch recovering, legs back to their normal colour, a hot water bottle on my stomach. Heidi is sitting on the floor, studying her learner's permit booklet. Mum, Dad and Julie have gone for a counter tea.

"I told you, she's a twit. Always has been, always will be." Heidi doesn't bother to look up from her learner's permit book.

"Yeah, but I was the one who felt like I had nothing to offer. There I was looking like a drowned rat in my home-made dress. I don't blame her for not being interested in my job, I'm not either. At least she had done something. She has a child, she's a mother. What am I? What have I got?"

"Oh for heaven's sake!" Heidi throws the booklet into my lap and gets to her feet in one lithe movement. "I'll make us a coffee." She holds out a hand. "Give me your hottie and I'll refill it. Anything to brighten you up, you sad sack."

I flick through the pages. I'm glad it's Heidi sitting for it and not me. I still don't know how I got through the Leaving exams. Heidi's voice floats through to me.

"So Debra Wilson is your hero now, is she? Her and her baby, living with her Mum in her Housing Commission flat?"

"Where do you think we are now, Heidi? In Toorak Road maybe?"

Heidi sticks her head around the doorway and points a teaspoon at me.

"We are biding our time. *She* is stuck. Have you got any chocolate biscuits?"

"I don't even have a permanent boyfriend and I'm pushing nineteen!"

"Bloody hell!" Heidi is crashing around with biscuit tins. "Is Milk Arrowroot all you've got?"

"Probably."

"What about Rob? Do you want him to be permanent?" Heidi hands me a coffee and offers the biscuit tin.

"I don't know. I don't know what I want really."

"You don't want to get stuck. Alan will do me for a while, but I've got plans, Linda. Getting my driver's licence is just one step."

"Step to what?"

Heidi stands at the window with her coffee, looking out at the glistening road and the moon beginning to rise.

"Just out of here and not stuck with anything or anyone. I want to try lots of different things."

"Have you done it yet, Heidi?"

"Done what?"

"You know. Gone all the way."

"If you mean, had sex, yes. Now, what's the next question I've marked in the book?"

"What was it like?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Linda. It was boring. Now can we please get on with the questions. I've got the test tomorrow you know."

"How much space do you have to leave when parking near a fire hydrant?"

Boring doesn't sound so bad. Most of my life so far has been pretty boring. If it means so much to Rob maybe I should do it. After all I can't stay a virgin all my life unless I become a nun and I don't think I'd make a very good nun. All clasped hands and no footy.

Through the tall buildings she watches patches of opaque white clouds surge forward across the blue sky, a steady marching army of turbulence, probably bound for an unsuspecting aeroplane, zooming rocket -sure through space. She knows already that's the way of life, cock sure one minute, pummelled into uncertainty the next.

I just want to forget it.

I look around this room in this dingy flat and know I've got to get out of here soon. Maybe if I lived somewhere else, was someone else, my first experience of sex wouldn't have been like this. It wasn't that I agreed or objected to it. I was too drunk to do either. Maybe I asked for it, wearing that low cut dress that I thought I looked so attractive in. I don't think I'll ever wear it again.

It's stifling in the flat tonight. Dad is taking us all down to the beach for a while, to try and cool down. Rob has arrived and is coming with us. I still feel too embarrassed to look him in the eye, but he doesn't seem to notice anything wrong.

It's beautiful down at St. Kilda beach. I dive into the water and swim out quickly, putting as much space as I can between Rob and I. I don't know what to say to him. It seems awful to break off because of sex. I always thought it was supposed to bring you closer together again. The thing I'm scared of is that he will want to do it again. I don't ever want to do it again.

Rob swims up beside me while I'm floating and tries to kiss me. I push him away.

"What's wrong Lindy? Look....about the other night."

"I don't want to talk about it!"

"All right, all right, don't yell. I just thought you might want to talk."

"Well I don't."

"Why are you so angry?"

"I don't know. I feel dirty. I wish it had never happened."

Rob is looking shocked. He has obviously never had this effect on a girl before. His eyes dart around as if he is looking for somewhere to go but there is just the quiet sea, the night sky and us.

"We could get engaged if you like."

I don't believe this. Rob has no idea what I'm saying and I haven't got the words to explain to him. I don't really know what I mean myself. The thought of marrying him makes me feel weighed down. I look hard at him and think that at least I know what I don't want.

"I won't be seeing you for a while, Rob. I'm going to Perth."

"Perth? Who with? What for?"

"I've been working with a girl called Jo and she comes from Perth. She's going back next week, she's been over here on a working holiday. She's invited me to stay with her family over there, so I'm going."

This is really weird. I had no idea I was going to do or say this. It's like it just popped into my head as a fully made plan. I haven't even said anything to Mum or Dad yet. Can't see them objecting though. I've been doing whatever I like for a long time now and they never stop me. Wish they had stopped me on one thing though. Rob is trying like mad to look sorrowful and sad but I can tell he is really relieved. He wants a girl who will think he's the ants pants. He thinks he is anyway because he plays in a band. It's not as if it's a fantastic band or anything and he's no Ringo Starr as a drummer. Still I shouldn't think that way, I'm not such a good catch myself any more.

I swim out further and can hear Dad yelling at me not to go too far. I feel like I could do a Harold Holt and swim straight to China tonight. The water rushes over me and I pull through it with smooth strokes. I am clearing all of Rob away from me and out of me. A new start somewhere else is what I need. Hell, I'm still not nineteen. Who knows what lies out there for me.

In her new area she walks the streets on a Sunday. She is an explorer, an adventurer. She needs to learn, to acquaint herself with what real buildings are. She has cerebrally repaired many of the old derelict properties, transformed them. What was once beautiful, still stands proud, despite neglect, is worthy of her plans. The utilitarian houses, post-war economy, she disdains. There is no core, no heart to their structure. She journeys to other suburbs and searches out turn-of-the-century mansions where true artisans worked with sure hands for style as well as function. At first many intimidated her but now her journeys are full of recognition.

The Matthew Flinders Hotel, a big barn of a pub, on a Friday night is crowded and raucous. Normally on a Friday night we would be in the city, after work with all our work buddies in one of the little taverns. But this week Heidi and I have both had the flu. I had serious visions of Heidi murdering her mother so I've dragged her down here for a bit of life, some people around, to cheer up both of us. Or so I thought. Wrong move, I'm rapidly beginning to realise. Heidi casts dark looks at

those who dare to be locals, some of whom we recognise from school. I'm fascinated to see how people have changed, but Heidi isn't. I'm trying to keep her there until the band starts. They're supposed to be good and I want to see them. Heidi keeps looking at her watch and flicking imaginary specks from her dark sweater. I attempt to focus her attention.

"Look, Heidi, over there. Isn't that Peter Truscott? Over at the bar, the one with the long, blonde hair. He doesn't look so bad now his acne has gone."

She coolly gives him the once over.

"Mmm. He was the one who won all the swimming medals wasn't he?"

As she speaks he moves into full body view.

"Oh, God. Look at his beer gut, Linda. What a slob!"

"It's not *that* bad. He's a lot bigger all over these days. He's still got a nice face though."

"What? You'd rather go out with him than Rob?"

"I'm not going out with Rob any more. I'm going to Perth."

"What happened to Rob and why Perth? It's right across the other side of Australia! Ah! Hang on. I think I get it. Something terrible happened with Rob so you're going as far away as you can. I'm right aren't I?"

"No. It's not like that at all. Hang on and I'll get us another drink."

I push my way through to the bar. I'm giving myself some time to think. I don't want to tell Heidi about Rob and the sex thing. She wouldn't understand. I guess I am running away but I'm not sure what from. Up close Peter Truscott doesn't look too hot. Still, no-one does around this area. They're all loud with big gestures and barrel-chested swaggering walks. Trying to look and feel important. I avoid looking anyone directly in the eye and take the drinks back to our table.

"Here's to me getting rid of Rob, who was, after all, pretty...boring. And to my adventures in Perth."

"Just as well I'm not a nosy person," says Heidi giving me a wink and clinking glasses. "Thank goodness I have some news too."

Trust Heidi to steal my thunder.

"I'm moving too, Linda, although only as far as Glen Iris. *And* I got my driver's licence."

"You're not moving in with Alan?"

"No. He's gone. He needs a pretty girl with no ambition."

"And big tits!" We clink glasses and giggle.

We've soon forgotten about Alan and Rob and everyone around us with the excitement of finally leaving. Heidi is moving in with a couple of girls from her work. I have booked my train ticket to Perth and Jo has written to say she's looking forward to my arrival. Our plans unfold in our heads and leave our mouths at a furious rate. Heidi's right. It's better not to be stuck.

I'm so broke I've had to catch the bus back from Perth. It's an horrendous trip, many miles of unmade road. We stop for a meal and a shower at a place on the Nullarbor in the middle of nowhere. Long stretches of red earth, sparse scrub, the horizon a long line seen from an immense distance. We have to use a special soap to shower, the water is so harsh normal soap won't work up a lather.

We reach Adelaide where we change buses early in the morning. I only have enough money for a coffee so I sit at a table with some old married couples and make my drink last until they've left. After checking that no-one is looking, I grab the half slices of toast they've left in the little silver toast racks. They used all the butter so I make do with jam and honey.

My first piece of real luck in ages! We have missed the connecting bus and they are going to fly us to Melbourne. I have never been in a plane before. Unfortunately I'm so tired I go to sleep as soon as we leave the ground and don't wake up until the plane is descending. I hang on to the arm rests, willing the brakes to work so we don't overshoot the runway.

How the hell am I going to get home? Dad will be working in the pub until at least six o'clock and that's hours away. I've got enough money for one phone call. Heidi! She'll know someone with a car. Please God let her be home.

"Heidi, it's me, Linda."

"Where are you? I didn't hear any pips. Are you in Melbourne?"

"Yeah. At the airport. Listen Heidi can you organise someone with a car to pick me up? Dad works on Saturdays and he's not expecting me until tonight. I'm broke."

"Your luck is in, Linda Comben. I have a car. I'll be there in forty minutes or so."

I'm waiting outside the Ansett terminal in the shade. I can feel my hands and feet beginning to swell from the heat and my dress is sticking to me. A bright yellow Volkswagen comes tearing along the path, swerving between taxis, horn blaring. Heidi gets out, looking her usual elegant self in a long flowered shift and gold sandals. She gives me a giant hug and lugs my bags into the back seat. Taxi drivers are glaring at her and gesticulating. She smiles sweetly at them and waves.

"OK if we go to my place? You can ring your parents from there. I'm waiting on a couple of phone calls."

"Fine. When did you get this?"

"Let's talk when we get home. I only just got this car so I need to concentrate."

The smell of coconut oil wafts upwards from Heidi's banana lounge to me on the big cane hanging chair in the shade. I wish I could lie out in the sun and slowly turn golden brown like Heidi does. I tried it once when I was fourteen, down at the beach, near Nana's house. I can still feel the burning and pain of the enormous blisters. What followed was an immense peeling of skin and back to white again. I forgave Mum for all those years of chasing me around with a sun hat and tee shirt.

Heidi adjusts the lounge so the top half of her is upright and peers at me over the top of her large sunglasses which have frames that perfectly match the bright green of her bikini. Her thick dark hair is caught up loosely with a large clip.

"So," she says, reaching languidly for her drink, "tell me about your adventures in Perth."

Where to begin. I only left a couple of days ago but it feels like forever. The trees and lawn in Heidi's back yard take me back.

"Kings Park is magnificent."

"You've been across the other side of Australia for twelve months and you want to tell me about a park?"

"Not just any park, Heidi. Kings Park is on top of this big hill that overlooks the city of Perth. You feel like you're in fairy land up there at night. Melbourne's got lots of good parks but nothing like that."

"Yeah, OK, so they've got a nice park, but tell me the real stuff. What did you do? Who did you meet? Did you have an earth shattering romance?"

"Nah. I went out with heaps of guys, some were better than others. I loved Jo's family, great people, very welcoming. And I lived in a tiny flat with two other girls for a while. I had mostly shitty jobs but the night life was good. Lots of night clubs, wine bars and Sunday sessions at pubs on the beach."

"What's a Sunday session and why were the jobs shitty?"

"A Sunday session is where some pubs are able to open for two maybe three hours on a Sunday. Must be some sort of different law they have over there. Anyway all the young people go to the ones that have bands playing, everyone gets totally pissed and has a really great time. Lots of singing, telling jokes, playing silly games on the beach. There's nothing like that in staid old Melbourne."

"So why did you come back? There was an earth shattering romance, wasn't there?"

"No. Sorry to disappoint you, Heidi. My Nana died. The funeral is tomorrow."

"Oh shit! I'm sorry, Lindy. Why didn't you tell me before? You were really close to her, weren't you?"

"Yeah. I loved my Nana. It was awful. The first funeral I'll have ever been to. I can't believe she's really gone, you know? Guess I will after tomorrow."

The tears start sliding down my face. Heidi gets up and goes inside. She comes back out with a box of tissues and a plate of chocolate biscuits.

"Here. Mop up and eat. I'll refill your drink. Whoever invented chocolate and alcohol is my best friend. I ate two whole packets of chocolate biscuits when I got the sack."

"You got the sack? When? Why?"

"Huh! It was ages ago and I've got a much better job now. I'll tell you about it later. The old bastard tried to touch me up once too often so I kneed him in the balls and that was the end of that."

"Why is life so bloody awful, Heidi? People dying, hurting each other, being mean. People working in shitty jobs they hate." I'm shouting through the kitchen door at Heidi's back as she opens the fridge door. I hope no-one she shares with is in. Heidi hands me another gin and tonic and sits on the back step next to me.

"Come on, it's not all bad. Hand me over that nail polish, will you?"

I reach across to the old table and hand her the bottle. She starts carefully painting her toe nails. I stare at her feet.

"I wonder why we still have toe nails?"

"Because we have toes?" Heidi is intent on her task.

"No. I'm thinking about evolution. I mean we use our finger nails for lots of things. They can even be a pretty good weapon for a woman. But toe nails. We don't use them do we?"

Heidi looks up at me and shakes her head.

"Linda Comben, you are one weird bird. I never know what's going to come out of your mouth."

"I'm just curious."

Heidi inspects her perfectly shaped toe nails which are now a pearly pink.

"I think you're clever."

I can't stop laughing and tears of a different kind are now filling my eyes. I grab more tissues.

"Sorry, Heidi, I'm not laughing at you, or your toe nails. When I was in Perth I couldn't get an office job. As soon as they learn you are from "the Eastern states" as they call it, they won't give you a job 'cos they know you probably won't stay long. So anyway I ended up getting a job in Coles behind the lolly counter."

"No! The *lolly* counter."

"Yeah, that's not the funniest part though. It was really strange. I discovered that people automatically assume you're dumb if you work in Coles, especially behind the lolly counter. Some even talk to you as if you had a screw loose. I didn't last long there."

"Got sick of people thinking you were dumb, eh?"

"Nah. It was the ice cream and milk containers that did me in. Bending down to get the last bits of ice cream out of the bottom, lucky I'm tall or I would have been off the ground. Cleaning out the big milk urns reminded me of working in the biscuit factory. They were huge, heavy things and I'd get wet all over just like I did cleaning out those biscuit tins."

"Don't remind me about that place. Wouldn't you have been better off on the dole?"

"Maybe. I went in one day and started filling out the forms but they wanted to know so much it put me off. I don't like people knowing that much about me. Know what I mean?"

"I certainly do." Heidi grabs the last chocolate biscuit and bites down hard. "It's partly why I'm moving out of here."

"Nosy neighbours?"

"Nosy people I live with! Always asking questions, wanting to know what I'm doing, where I'm going. What I did in a previous life. I'm sick of it. I'm getting a place on my own. I'm going to see a place on Thursday. Want to come with me?"

"Sure. But on your own? Won't that be a bit expensive and won't you get lonely?"

"You don't get lonely if you keep busy, Linda. I can manage the money OK. My new job pays pretty well and I'm earning extra doing some design work on the side. The money for that is peanuts, but it's cash in hand which is worth a lot more."

"God, Heidi, you sound like a real business woman. How do you get on to all this stuff? Is it through your work?"

"Partly. Basically it's all about who you know."

"Well, whoops there goes my career. I don't know anyone remotely important."

"Don't laugh at me, Linda."

"I'm not laughing at you. Honestly. I just don't understand all this knowing people business. I'm really glad it's working for you. Tell me all about your new job. I'll have to start looking for one myself straight away."

As the sun works its way across the sky Heidi tells me about her job designing greeting cards and how they're pushing for her to get some qualifications but she's too impatient. Heidi talks as if three years were a lifetime instead of a beginning. As usual she has me laughing when she describes the people she works with. She still does wonderful imitations of the way people walk and talk and all their little mannerisms. Nothing escapes her. She knows the ones who are worth knowing and those who aren't. She takes me inside to show me the sketches she is making for the overhaul of an old building. This is her work on the side. She has been reading up on architecture but refuses to consider going back to night school. I have to admit I can't picture her sitting there in a classroom to learn. Being one of many, slogging away, just isn't her style. Heidi reminds me of a dragonfly, darting quickly from place to place, her bright wings visible every so often in the night sky.

It's so strange to be back in the flat with Mum and Dad and Julie again. It's a comfort to be with my family again, especially after Nana's funeral, but it's also cramping. Not only physically. Julie and I lie in bed reading a couple of feet away from each other. She has painted the room purple since I've been gone, well mauve really, but I accused her of purple. I need to make a move.

"Linda?"

"Mmm?" I am right in the middle of an Agatha Christie and people are getting murdered all around me. I love murder mysteries, they're so comforting and predictable, not like real life.

"I quit school today."

Hercule Poirot is doing a fine job of rounding up the suspects.

"Don't be ridiculous. Nobody quits school in the middle of sixth form!"

He's going to do a re-enactment of the crime. Julie has always had lousy timing. I mark my place by turning down the corner.

"You shouldn't do that to library books, Linda."

"Oh, leave off Julie. It's not a crystal bloody vase. It's a book. An author would like to see that their books are being read, not just sitting on the shelf." I sit up and give her my full attention.

"Now, what's this rubbish about leaving school?"

"Mr Bissett has offered me a full time job at the supermarket. He says I'm the best worker he ever had. And don't look at me like that, Linda. I've got to earn some real money because Darryl and I are getting married."

"You're not pregnant?" I look at her in horror.

"No. Not yet."

Not yet, indeed! Here is my baby sister throwing her whole career away to work in a supermarket and marry Darryl the butcher. I can't believe I'm hearing this. I try to stay calm and reason with her.

"You could earn more money, much more money, if you stayed on and finished the year at school."

"No I couldn't. All the subjects I've done are only good for going on to University, not for getting a job."

"I don't believe I'm hearing this, Julie. I would kill to go to University and all you have to do is finish the next six months and you get there."

"But I don't *want* to go there. If I finish the year everyone will be pushing me to go and I don't want to. I want to marry Darryl and have a house and babies. That's what *I* want, Linda. That's all I've ever wanted. It doesn't have to be the same as you want."

My sister has never lost her stubborn streak. There's no way I'm going to make her change her mind. She is a very sure and rare person.

"Have you told Mum and Dad?"

"I've told Mum. She whinged a bit about the money they've spent but she couldn't say much. I've been paying for most of my stuff for two years now. *And* I've saved some money."

That is a dig at me, coming home stone motherless broke from Perth. Still I had a good time. I think that's more important than money. Julie and I are so different, it's amazing we have the same parents.

"What about Dad?"

"You know Dad. As long as I'm happy, he is. *He* likes Darryl."

"I like Darryl, Julie. It's just..."

"What? That he's a butcher? People have to eat, Linda. I think you're getting to be a snob and without any reason I might add. You and Heidi are getting a bit up yourselves. She's even talking posh."

"That's unfair. Heidi is doing very nicely. She probably has to talk that way to get on and anyway she's got nothing to do with this. This is about your future and I think you're throwing it away."

Julie turns her face to the wall and pulls the covers up. She can't resist one last dig though.

"Yeah, well, when you're an old maid maybe you'll realise what I've got and what you threw away."

"You think it's a dump, don't you?" Heidi is grinning. I'm confused. Yes, I do think it's a dump but why is she grinning? Heidi produces each empty room of the flat above the old shop, like a magician pulling things out of a hat.

"Look at the space, Linda!" She twirls around the large front room.

It is big. High ceilings, large sash windows letting in plenty of light. I'm looking at the peeling paint, the old faded carpet and the cobwebs on the ceiling. Miss Haversham would have been right at home here.

"Look beyond what's here now, Linda. It's going to be beautiful when I'm finished. A coat of paint, some long curtains, a few rugs."

"What about heating?" The ever practical me asks, eyeing off the open fireplace which I think looks dangerous.

"I'll be too busy to get cold. You're going to *hate* the kitchen and bathroom."

She pulls me gleefully down the narrow hallway. She's right. The kitchen fittings consist of an ancient green Kookaburra gas stove and a dirty stainless steel sink. The only cupboards in the entire kitchen are below the sink. I open them with trepidation. I'm expecting mice in a place like this. There are no mice, but some potatoes which have started to shoot, their white tubers climbing upward and outward seeking the light.

"This window is *perfectly* placed." says Heidi in triumph.

She's right. The window sheds light on to the sink on one side and the stove on the other. How can she see past the dirt and notice things like that? The bathroom is tiny. A bath with a shower in the middle takes up the whole of one side, with a toilet at the end, facing the door.

"What are you going to do for furniture?" I ask, peering into the empty bedroom, which at least looks clean.

"No problem. I've got the girls at work going through their parents' garages. You'd be amazed, Linda, at what people store away. Quite good stuff, some of it."

"Won't the girls want it themselves when they leave home?"

"Most of them won't leave home 'til they get married. *They* don't live in Housing Commission flats, Linda."

"What about when they get married? They would need furniture then."

"Not them. With their 'hubbies' they will buy a brand new house in Mt. Waverley or Melton, put sheets up at the window and buy all new furniture."

"Surely they couldn't afford to have everything new. That would cost a fortune!"

"Oh, they'll probably get a few things from the parents but most of them are saving like crazy now so they can have everything perfectly in place. Before the babies arrive."

"Speaking of marriage and babies, Julie has quit school to work in the supermarket and marry Darryl."

"No! Not Darryl the butcher?"

I can feel my hackles rising. Julie's right. Heidi is beginning to bung on side.

"As Julie said, people have to eat, so he's probably going to be a good provider. And Julie will make a good wife and mother. She's practical and kind and besides this is all she's ever wanted. At least she knows what she wants, she doesn't chase rainbows. Don't *you* want to get married and have babies some day, Heidi?"

Heidi gazes out of the bedroom window. The small rear yard is completely overgrown. Old thorny roses fight to survive among the tall weeds.

"Maybe. But not like that. Not married to some boring fart who snores in front of the telly every night. I don't know about the babies. What if he up and left you?"

"Most people don't get married assuming that their husbands are going to leave them, Heidi."

"More fool them! They have no idea of where they could possibly end up. But you and I, matey," says Heidi, tossing me a can of Ajax and a sponge, "we at least know where we don't want to be. Even if we don't quite know where we're going."

"Speak for yourself," I respond tartly, taking a heavy hand to the sink. "I'm going to be a famous writer *and* get married."

"You'd better marry somebody very rich then. Writers are always poor."

Heidi gives me a running commentary on the colours she will paint the place. I lose half of it because she has her head in the oven, painting on oven cleaner, while she talks. I don't need to respond. Heidi is creating her own new world in her head, just voicing it aloud.

As I struggle with the bath I'm thinking about how crazy life is and how everyone thinks they've got it all worked out. I wonder if it's possible to end up where you want without good luck along the way. Heidi is like an express train, not stopping to pick up any passengers. So sure she can leave behind what she wants to, so sure she can read people like a map. I hope there are no major obstacles along her track. She probably won't let there be. I'm the one who feels awkward, jumps at shadows, reads more into the words than are really there. Maybe Julie is the most sane one of us all.

She must not get paranoid about the little dark things she catches out of the corner of her eye. They always disappear when she looks again. Trying to trick her. She knows they are there. Must be careful not to start, to twitch. Her movements need not reflect theirs. Concentrate on the light and shade creating the depth, the perspective and the substance. Block out the side vision. Like a racehorse with blinkers she will finish in front if she stares straight ahead and doesn't look to see who is behind her.

"What's wrong with his ears?"

Heidi's voice floats down from the top of the ladder where she is putting the finishing touches to the window frame. None too good at heights, I've been relegated to painting the skirting boards.

"They stick out like a taxi with its doors open."

"How come you never noticed them before. You've been going out with him for a couple of months."

"His hair covers them normally. I saw him getting out of the shower."

"You don't like his ears so you're going to drop him?"

"No. That sounds mean. It's not *just* his ears."

"He's got a nice car."

"Yeah, I like the car, and he is a good person. Kind. He's quite considerate, for a bloke."

"He doesn't sound too bad to me, Linda, but then he's not my boyfriend. Are his ears all that important? Maybe he could have plastic surgery."

"Oh, sure thing, Heidi. I'll make a little deal with him. I'll go out with him if he gets his ears fixed."

I slap away with the paint, trying to do a reasonable job. I keep getting little dots of paint on the lino but I can probably clean it up before Heidi gets down from the ladder. She is painting the window frame in two different colours, inside and outside edge. Bold blues that I would never dream of putting together. They look fantastic against the egg-shell white walls.

"I know this is going to sound really stupid, Heidi. Promise you won't laugh?"

"Mmm. Yeah. Go on." Heidi's steady hand guides the brush carefully around the edge of the frame.

"What I liked best about Doug, was his family."

"His family?" Heidi's mouth starts to twitch at the corner and she balances herself more firmly on the ladder.

"You promised you wouldn't laugh."

"I'm not laughing. Go on. What's so good about his family? Does he have a handsome brother with good looking ears?"

"No, he only has a sister. It's his parents I mean. They're so ...normal."

Heidi turns around precariously on the steps of the ladder, opens her mouth, then shuts it again. She puts the lid firmly on the paint tin and starts to climb down the ladder.

"I think we should have a coffee, or something. What do you mean, normal?"

"They live in a brick veneer house where all the furniture matches. They have people over for barbecues. They don't swear or smoke and his mother has little slice things in cake tins. Everything is neat and orderly, and, well, like it should be."

Heidi spoons out instant coffee and rips open a packet of biscuits with her teeth. We

sit in the middle of the kitchen floor. Heidi glances nonchalantly around at our work so far, chews her lip and grimaces. "Neat and orderly, huh?"

"Look, I'm not explaining this very well. But I feel like...someone else, when I'm at their place."

"You feel neat and orderly and normal?"

"Yeah."

"Linda, what are you going to night school for?"

"So I can get a better job. Get somewhere in life."

"Right. Get somewhere in life! Does getting somewhere in life include making little slice things to put in biscuit tins?"

"Are you taking the mickey?"

"No. I'm trying to understand what it is that you want. If you want to be a part of Doug's nice orderly family life, then you'll have to put up with his ears." Heidi pulls her hair back, makes her ears stick out at me and crosses her eyes.

"He's not that bad," I splutter, wiping the laughter tears away with the bottom of my old tee-shirt.

"But not that good, right?"

"Do you think I'm too choosy, Heidi? If I keep on breaking it off because I don't like just one thing about a person I'm never likely to marry anyone. It's not as if I'm any great oil painting myself."

"But you've got to fancy them a bit, physically I mean. Does he turn your crank?"

"No. The thought of having sex with him makes me feel ill."

"You always were squeamish, Linda." Heidi starts to gather up the mugs. "So, how do you plan on breaking it off? Do you think he'll be really cut?"

"No. It's funny, but I think he'll be more relieved than anything. All his mates are at the getting married age and I reckon he is going out with me just so he is going out with someone, you know what I mean?"

"So he looks as if he is normal? God, Linda this world is really fucked. Let's leave this lot to dry and go down the pub. I noticed this cute little place down the road. We'll go check out the local talent."

"Probably be full of old age pensioners and returned servicemen with form guides in their back pockets."

Thunder growls in the distance, its throaty roar growing louder and more urgent as it travels closer. The jagged strips of light flash through the long sash windows and bounce off the walls. She sits hunched over, knowing in the rational part of her brain that there is nothing to be frightened of, it is just a thunder storm. But her body doesn't listen. The fear consumes her. She notices she is holding her breath in anticipation of the next clap of thunder, the next flash of lightning. She is anticipating the elements in the same way she does people. Always waiting for a criticism, expecting it as her due. Waiting for someone to catch her out with a bolt of truth. The brandy calms her down and the storm calms itself.

I have a new job as a courtesy car driver. It's a hoot. My uniform is a blue mini-skirt, jacket and little cap. Basically I book the cars in for their service and then I drive their owners to work or home. The first couple of days were pretty tricky. After I book their cars in I have to park them in a car park which has poles everywhere and I'm not too good at parking, never have been. When I got my driver's licence the cop didn't make me do parking. He looked like he had an urgent date with a beer. Anyway the end result is I'm not flash on the angles. I got little dints in two cars in the first two days. I really thought I'd had it, would get the sack. But the boss is a nice bloke and has given me a chance. Now I'm fine with the parking but my sense of direction is causing a few problems. I've never been able to tell north from south and I've had a few stuff ups driving people home. One bloke got really irate because I lost my way. He ranted and raved, went red in the face and finally got me to let him out on the freeway. I would have got him there in the end, if only he'd been patient.

The part I like most about this job is the hours. I work from midday until eight o'clock at night which leaves me time to do my other job or to go partying. I have a tea break at about six o'clock and have discovered a small pub down the road with a good juke box and cheap meals. My idea of heaven. I play "Me and Bobby McGee" and drink a few beers. I can sleep in and still do two jobs. Life is pretty good. Sometimes Heidi meets me at the Coffee Lounge, which is my other job, late at night.

"Here's a table, Heidi." I hurry a couple of regulars on their way. They finished ages ago and are just hanging around. Heidi has a new guy in tow. What a hunk! Long black leather coat, blonde hair to his shoulders. I wonder where she got him?

"Have the French Fries," I say, handing them both a menu. "They're the only thing worth eating here. The coffee is OK though."

"What time do you finish, Linda? Can you have a break and join us?"

I look around. It's two a.m. and the place is beginning to thin out. Most people who are here are stoned anyway so time will seem to go very slowly for them.

"I'll just finish the orders I've got and join you."

I go to get their coffees and am waylaid by a couple of regulars who want to talk politics, yet again. Their eyes are red and hanging out of their heads so I know they won't make much sense. The best thing about this place is everyone is too cool to make a pass and I know most of them so well I can tell them to get stuffed if they do get out of line. I even give a couple of them a lift home in my old 1950 Vanguard

sometimes. They keep asking me where the machine guns are. Jerks. I love my old car. It's very solid.

It's three a.m. and I'm beginning to wind down like an old clock. Heidi and Hamlet (that's what he says his name is!) looked like they were having an argument and Heidi appears relieved when I finally sit down with them.

"How is the shared house going, Linda? What are the people like?" She turns to Hamlet. "Linda answered an advertisement in the paper for someone to share a house."

"Sounds like the plot for an American horror movie."

This guy drawls. It's a word I have seen in books but until now I never really understood what it meant. He leans back in his chair and looks around the room. I raise my eyebrows ever so slightly at Heidi. She gives a silly little half laugh and then a frown at me. OK. I get it. Play along and ask her about him later.

"It's great, Heidi." I decide to ignore her gorgeous creep. "It's a beautiful house and we've got it for at least twelve months. The owners have gone overseas. As the last one in I got the smallest bedroom out the back, but it's got plenty of light. I think I'll buy a double bed."

"A bit of hanky panky, eh?" There he goes, drawling again.

"I'm not about to become a root rat, if that's what you mean."

"Linda! Why don't you show me where the ladies is?"

Heidi has me up and out of my seat very quickly. She practically drags me out toward the back of the building.

"Do you have to use such coarse expressions?" she hisses at me.

"He's a wanker, Heidi. What are you doing with him?"

We go right past the toilets and out to the tiny yard at the back of the building. Heidi lights up a cigarette and considers its glowing tip carefully. Laughter and sounds of chairs scraping float out from the cafe.

"I know he's a bit..."

"Up himself?"

"Aloof, Linda. Yes, that's the word, aloof. He's very good looking though, don't you think?"

"He looks fine until he opens his mouth. Don't tell me you *like* him!"

"He is worth knowing, Linda. You have to overlook a few things when somebody is worth knowing. His family is loaded."

"You're not thinking of marrying him!"

"Ssh! No. Don't be silly. This is business, Linda. He has connections in all the right places and he thinks I'm talented. Just be nice to him. Please?"

I grind out my cigarette with my heel.

"I'm surprised you brought him here, if he's that important. Wouldn't think you'd want him to meet your friend the waitress."

"He knows you're only doing it for extra money and besides this is a very in place to be."

"Oh good. I'm glad the place I'm clearing up people's dirty plates in is an *in* place!"

"Don't be so cranky, Linda. You told me you like working here."

We go inside to the toilets where Heidi touches up her still perfect lipstick and sprays on some perfume.

"Is his name really Hamlet?" I run Heidi's comb through my unruly hair.

"No. Poor darling. It's Ernest. He changed it by deed poll."

"Ernie! And he drove the fastest milk cart in the west!"

Heidi's trying not to laugh and I'm trying not to wet myself when a very hippie girl pushes the door open. We stand aside for her and head back into the cafe.

"He's just trying to be exotic. Don't be harsh on him, Linda. He's a baby really."

Knowing his name is Ernie gets me through the rest of the night. And Heidi's right, he is a baby in grown-up clothing. I get him talking about himself and turn off mentally. Words like 'big business' and 'water polo' float past and I give an appreciative murmur every now and then. Heidi has the sweetest smile on her face as she appears to hang on every word, but right in the middle of one of his biggest raves she shields her face with the coffee cup and gives me a huge wink.

Julie looks gorgeous as she enters the church on Dad's arm. Aunty Bet made a good job of her dress. It's white satin and chiffon, no great frills or flounces. My sister has been her usual methodical, stubborn self about this wedding. Everything neat and tidy and no great fuss. Poor Darryl keeps running a finger underneath his tight collar and he's beginning to sweat. I think men get the worst deal from a

wedding. They're the appendages on the big day while everyone raves about how beautiful the bride and bridesmaids look. Julie and I made a deal about the bridesmaid thing. I promised to be a good Aunty so I didn't have to buy a dress I would never wear again and get my hair set. I've only had my hair set a couple of times to go to balls and that was enough. You get water in your ears when the apprentice washes your hair, the rollers pull at your wet hair and then you have to sit under a hot dryer with pins sticking in your scalp. The worst part of all though is the way hairdressers prattle. Must be part of their training.

Mum looks at me in amazement as I mop up some tears. I'm remembering Nana and how she would have loved this wedding with everyone done up in their best clothes. She could have worn her best hat. Nana had a stack of hats in her wardrobe but she never went to many places she could wear her best ones. I give Julie a big grin as she glides slowly past. Dad is concentrating, staring fiercely ahead. He looks great in his new 'case of fruit' as he calls it, with a little white rose in his lapel. I nudge Mum, and whisper.

"Doesn't Dad look smart?"

"Yes. He looks good, but he should have got the brown suit, instead of the blue. He would have got more wear out of it. Bet didn't do a bad job with Julie's dress."

This is high praise indeed from Mum. Compliments and praise are like precious jewels to her. She doesn't get them out often and whips them away quickly before anyone can steal them. It doesn't seem fair though that she has to sit in the pews along with everyone else while Dad is up there being one of the main players. At least I chose not to take part in the ceremony. I think weddings are a bit skew whiff in a lot of ways but I know Mum wouldn't want it played any differently, she likes tradition.

It all goes well apart from Darryl's brother being so nervous he drops the ring and it goes clattering down the aisle. I can tell Julie's trying hard not to giggle and Darryl has to keep mopping his forehead and upper lip. He cracks his first smile after the priest pronounces them man and wife.

The reception is in a room at the pub where Dad works. Darryl's mother was a bit lemon lipped about it being in a pub and not a reception centre. It's all right for her to talk, she doesn't have to pay for it. She didn't like her son being married in a Catholic church either. That was a real battle for Julie but her persistence paid off. And fair enough too. We don't go to church that much these days but we did as little kids and Julie was even in the Children of Mary for a while, whereas Darryl's family never went to any church. I look for her face when she enters the room and am rewarded by her look of surprise. I dragged Heidi along this morning to help me arrange lots of flowers and, thanks to her, it looks beautiful. I wasn't too sure about the red roses but she was right. They look and smell magnificent and the room looks elegant. We even carted over her best rug to cover up the threadbare parts of the carpet. The central table is covered in a white lace cloth and is where we'll put buffet food. The women Dad works with are working for nothing to keep the costs

down and Heidi helped me make little things on sticks to hand around with the sherry. I've borrowed a camera from my boss so I can have something to do while I'm chatting to all the relatives and Julie's friends from school. I'm on my best behaviour until Auntie Win gets her claws out.

"Such a shame it's not your big day, Linda. You being the eldest daughter and all. You'd better try and catch the bouquet when Julie throws it. Our Carol is engaged to be married now you know."

I look over at Carol and her fiance and think yes I could be engaged too if I was content to spend the rest of my life with a man with no chin. I've opened my mouth for a nasty retort when Dad comes over and rescues me.

"Excuse us Win. I need to borrow my beautiful daughter for a while."

He leads me across the room to take some photos.

"Was she having a go at you, Daught? Going on about her Carol, was she? She looks all arse and pockets in that dress."

Carol is a large girl and has on a dress of brightly coloured geometric patterns. The effect is to make her head and feet look disproportionately small to the rest of her body.

The night passes quickly. Because it's not a sit-down affair the speeches are short. I race around snapping photos of everyone. I'm especially careful when I photograph Julie and Darryl. A friend of Darryl's, who's supposed to be a hot shot amateur photographer took some of them in the park before the reception but you never know, mine might turn out better.

I hate the bit at the end. Julie has changed into her 'going away' outfit, a cute little blue suit that matches her eyes, and we form a circle so the bride and groom can say goodbye. I keep reminding myself that they're only going to Lorne but the tears are flowing by the time she kisses me goodbye. It feels like one chapter of her life has closed and maybe one of mine as well. She's leaving our family behind and going to create one of her very own.

Late spring rains help the straggly weeds overtake the plants in our back yard. One of life's reversals. I've finished my exams, English Expression and Literature, nobody throwing me out this time. I won't get A's but I'll pass.

The footy is over for another year, leaving the gap in Saturday afternoons and no Sunday postmortems. Cricket is no replacement. Too long and slow with rare leaps and no swift twists and turns. Footy is a lot like ballet with less expense and more noise.

I'm alone in the house on a peaceful, sunny Sunday. I take an old chair and a book out to the back yard. Sally's dog, Moppet, a half grown labrador brings me her ball and sits begging so I throw it around a few times. Sally likes the idea of having a dog. All those magazine shots of Prue Acton and her poodle. Peter occasionally takes it for walks in the park and I play with it so I suppose it's life isn't so bad. We had a cat when I first moved in, left by the owners while they went overseas, with our promises of looking after it. Poor thing got sick and as a group we got mixed up with it's medication. One day it wouldn't get any tablets and the next three. It died and we buried it in the back yard. Unfortunately Sally bought her dog around the same time and it kept digging the poor cat up. Finally we dug down very deep and put a few bricks in so its been OK since. Peter wrote and told the owners, who are friends of his Uncle, that it had died and what should we do with all the cans of cat food they left? He didn't mention the tablets. We all felt so guilty we were toying with the idea of trying to get an identical cat and pretend it had never happened. Trouble was we would have had to take the corpse along to the Lort Smith to match it up and none of us could stomach that.

Moppet starts barking and someone is yelling down the side drive.

"Julie! What are you doing here? Where's my nephew?"

"I'll get him in a minute. Listen, Darryl's going to help his Dad build a barby so I thought Matty and I could visit you for a while. Is that OK?"

"Of course. Anything to avoid the mother-in-law, eh?"

"I couldn't face any more lectures on how to look after a baby. I'm a very good mother you know, Linda."

"I know. And I'm an excellent Aunty. I'm sure we'll cope for a few hours on our own."

I go out to the car with her and lift out my beautiful five month old nephew.

"Hi Linda. Mum will be disappointed, Julie." Darryl sounds like he's giving it one last try.

"Yeah well, so would my sister be. We hardly see each other any more."

"She's right, Darryl. Say hi to your Mum for me."

I shut the car door firmly on Darryl's conflicting loyalties. Julie waves cheerfully. Matthew is gurgling up at me. I hold him close and feel his warm baby smell as I walk into the house. Julie is busy inspecting everything as she brings up the rear with the bouncinet and all the other baby things in a bag.

"What's the new girl like? Sally isn't it?" She peers curiously into Sally's room.

"She's very sophisticated. Got gorgeous clothes. I think her parent's have got a few quid."

"Do you like her?" As usual Julie goes straight to the heart of the matter.

"She's OK. I don't have much to do with her."

"So you *don't* like her?"

"Julie! It's not a case of like or dislike. We share a house, that's all. I don't expect her to be my second best friend."

"How's Heidi?" Julie's mind is spring loaded.

"There's a postcard from her on the mantelpiece. Do you want a coffee?"

Julie's voice drifts back from the lounge room.

"Better make it tea. Bub gets hiccups if I drink coffee."

Julie comes into the kitchen with the postcard in her hand.

"She doesn't say much."

The baby jiggles up and down in his bouncinet, giving us gummy grins as we drink our tea. Julie fiddles with the postcard showing the new Sydney Opera House. She turns it over and over, frowning at it.

"Surely this isn't all you've heard. She's been up there nearly a year."

"You know what Heidi's like, not one to write letters. I had a phone call one night but she didn't say much. I think she might have been drunk."

"Does she drink a lot?"

"Probably no more than I do." I snap defensively.

"I'm not being nasty, Linda. I like Heidi. I just wonder about her, if she's OK. You know when you and her were in fifth form and even the year after that she used to be around our place all the time. Like she needed a proper family. Remember how she used to make Dad laugh. Even Mum cracked the odd smile when Heidi was around. She was so funny doing all those silly tricks and impersonating people. Is she still like that?"

I think hard about the last couple of years. Julie picks up Matthew and starts breast feeding him. He sucks hungrily, breaking off every now and then to give her a smile and wave his little hand around.

"Not very often. She's trying hard, Julie, to be someone. Someone different from her family and where she came from."

"Like you with your night school?"

"No. That's just me trying to escape office work because I'm sick of it and I think I could do something better. I haven't changed much in who I am. Heidi goes a lot further."

"What do you mean? She still has you as a friend."

"Yeah, but I don't know if that'll last. She moves in a whole different world from me now, Julie. I'm beginning to feel like a relic from her past."

Julie puts Matty over her shoulder and pats his back gently. He lets out a huge burp. We both laugh at him.

"He sounds just like Dad. I hope he doesn't fart as much."

"He does. He's a little windbag. Isn't he gorgeous, Linda? I can't believe I produced anything as beautiful as him."

She holds him in the air. His little fat legs kicking. The same blue eyes and blonde hair. He'll probably be just as inquisitive and stubborn as she is.

"I can."

She walks confidently into the maze. The box hedges are straight and sure, reaching to above her head height. The corners are sharp. She runs her hands around their stiff edges. Solid walls of meshed green, bright in the sunlight. Small sounds of tinkling laughter from far away. Echoing footsteps on their way out. Symmetry intersects and overrides, each path a replica of the one before and after. She sits on a seat in what seems the middle, but is it? Silence falls heavily, no more laughter, footsteps or bird calls. The clouds overtake the sun and the green becomes darker, enclosing. Time to go. Her walk becomes faster, stumbling, each

corner leading to yet another corner, around and around she goes. Time elongates like the shadows around and within her. She feels herself shrinking as the hedges loom taller, their surety dwarfing her. Her thoughts have edges and corners she doesn't want to explore. Keep to the straight. How can you keep to the straight when you are blocked by the corners and forced back?

Christmas dinner is over for another year. I head home with a full stomach to pack, family noises still ringing in my ears. This time we went to Darryl's parent's house and I'm relieved to have an excuse to get away. There's a veneer of good will that I distrust about Christmas. You can't be yourself. You have to be happy, hungry and pleased with all the gifts - sure that they were given with the best intentions. Darryl's mother gave me a plastic rubber plant.

Sally has already moved out. Smart girl, she avoided the cleaning. Peter is removing science experiments from the fridge while I do battle with the greasy oven. He drops everything when the telephone rings, hoping for a reprieve, but it's for me.

"Linda. Merry Christmas! It's me, Heidi."

She is yelling over background noise of loud music and laughter.

"Merry Christmas, Heidi. You having a party up there?"

"Just a few friends at Chris's place for champagne and lobster. How are you?"

"Oh, fine, except for feeling bilious after too much Christmas pud. Who is Chris? Is he the new love interest?"

The noise becomes more raucous, sounding like someone is falling off a table. I have difficulty catching her next sentence but I think she says something about hoping I never change. The noise subsides momentarily.

"Chris is helping me set up my own business. Well, more of a partnership really, but not in Sydney, too much competition. We're thinking about Newcastle. Chris has been doing some market research."

"So you'll be shifting? I'm shifting too, Heidi. As a matter of fact I'm in the middle of packing now. I'm moving into a place of my own, in Hawthorn."

"Good suburb. Are you having fun down there, Linda? Have you met the love of your life? What are you working at? How's the writing going?"

It doesn't seem worth telling her about David who I really did think was the love of my life. Things I can't explain about that and anyway he is gone now, gone away and not likely to return. A few months of sheer happiness followed by hurt that still

isn't ready to be revealed, certainly not in a telephone call.

"Same old office work for me Heidi, with some writing in my spare time. I'm trying short stories right now. I've finished my exams and I think I'll pass OK."

"Don't do short stories, Linda. Absolutely no money in it. What about journalism? Have you given up on that idea?"

"Too hard. They either want people a lot younger so they can pay them less or those with a degree. I might do another two HSC subjects next year."

"What for?"

"Dunno really. I like studying though. It might lead somewhere. What's this new business about?"

"Design consultancy. I've been involved in some very exciting stuff this year, Linda."

The level of noise at the other end of the line increases dramatically. Voices are calling to Heidi about going somewhere.

"Lovely to talk to you, Linda. Got to go. Give my love to your family. Are they OK?"

"They're fine. I've got a beautiful little nephew and lots more in-laws."

I can tell Heidi's concentration has gone, with a male voice telling her to hurry or she'll miss all the fun.

"That's great, Linda. Got to go. Bye for now."

"Take care, Heidi. Bye."

I go back to the oven with a vengeance. My life is so dull compared to Heidi's. I plod along while she soars, one new adventure after the other. She would hate it that my stories are about the old men with bottles in brown paper bags and sad, bent women. She must have lots of new friends up there, with much more exciting lives than mine. I wonder why she stays in touch.

I am living in a tiny bedsitter in a block of flats in the Richmond end of Hawthorn, which means fewer trees, more factories and therefore lower rent. This is a new experience living by myself, and the flat is so small it's impossible to feel scared. I'm doing the last two subjects of my HSC and I need to study a lot. It's not easy working and doing study at night but if I want to move out of office work it's the only way I can see. With Heidi it's sheer talent and a front as big as Myers that gets her through. I hope to become a journalist if I can stick it. With winter setting in the size of the classes shrink every week.

The block of flats has some weird characters in it. A lot of lost and lonely looking men, some old people and a girl Sandra who is maybe nineteen and has braces on her teeth. Poor thing. She's the round bubbly kind and very proud of her independence. She has Ukrainian parents who cling, so living alone for her is making a statement that she has moved along, broken some ties, whereas for me it's just practical. Her mother drops around on any pretext and brings food which Sandra gives to me as she wants to lose weight.

You walk in through my door and you are right in the bedroom which looks like an invitation to blokes, so I don't bring any here unless they are old friends or relatives. The kitchen is a little alcove to one side and the bathroom is minute. I share a toilet with the next flat but that's OK because we can both lock the door from our own side.

I have made some new friends at night school. Tony is Italian, short, dark and vibrant, unfortunately not handsome. I know he fancies me but I just want him as a friend which is difficult. He buys me presents, and so it doesn't get lopsided I have to buy him things in return which is becoming bloody expensive. It would be fun if I was attracted to him, but I'm not and I can't pretend about things like that, either it's there or it's not.

Tonight I am going out with Alastair, my current boyfriend. He works in the same place I do although I'm in the office and he is out on the road, selling things. I like my job. It's not demanding, but interesting enough. I have a nice boss, Laurie, who is quite young, probably in his thirties. He is the tidiest man I have ever known, and not just in his clothing. Everything about him is so neat and clean and shiny. His hands always look like he just scrubbed them and his nails are perfect - well shaped and immaculately clean. I don't understand how he can stay so clean looking all the time with never an ink spot or stray hair or piece of fluff anywhere. Much as I admire his neatness it also makes me uncomfortable. I feel like my work has to be perfect to make up for my physical presence, my scruffiness. I have to be careful in my speech too, the way I talk with my family and friends is not the way I talk with Laurie. It's funny I admire his neatness, wishing I could naturally be that way but I think his brain runs along the same straight lines as his body, never veering off into a wild, silly thought. I don't admire his brain, it is too caught up on its

straight track to ever look to the sides and see other possibilities. The business letters he writes, and which I type, are correct but somehow stilted, there's no life in them, no sense of him. It's like he's scared of stuffing up so he sticks to the same old phrases because they have never got him into strife. Because he knows I'm studying at night he occasionally lets me write a business letter but seldom do they go out unscathed. I really floored him one day. I was writing a letter which was basically a demand to pay up. I wanted to put 'we will take steps which will cause you the utmost astonishment'. I knew, of course, that one would never get through, but thought it worth a try. I could picture this guy in his business suit at the other end of the letter, clutching his hair and thinking oh my gosh, what are they going to do? I think my boss's correctness makes me want to be outrageous. Still, I keep us both amused.

I try to decide what to wear tonight from my meagre wardrobe. I'm saving up to go overseas so I haven't bought a lot of clothes lately. I'm nervous because we are going out to dinner at a restaurant with a couple who are friends of Alastairs. The bloke is someone he went to school with, which is daunting. Alastair went to a private school and even though he is not stuck up his friend might be, or Alastair might be once he gets with him. People change depending on who they are with, change their speech, their gestures and mannerisms, like Heidi does with her designer friends. I think there must be sets of rules that develop between a group and when you step inside that group you play by their rules for the time you are with them. I have this horrible feeling that I'm not going to understand the rules tonight.

"Giddy Jules, hi ya Matty darling, come in, come in. "

"Gosh, it's small, Lindy." says Julie, standing just inside the door and surveying my entire flat from one spot, her twelve month old son in his pusher. My flat is really a bedsitter with a tiny kitchen tacked on at one end.

"Compact is the word Julie," I say, opening the one interior door to show her the bathroom. It's more of a shower recess than a bathroom really.

"Where's the dunny?" asks Julie in her usual forthright manner.

"Behind this door. I'll just knock to make sure the guy next door isn't in there."

"You share a toilet?"

"Yes, just like you share one with Darryl and Matthew."

"But that's family, my husband and child. This is a stranger!"

"Oh, for God's sake Julie. O.K. it's not the Taj Mahal, but it's all I can afford."

"I'm sorry." Julie gives her old engaging grin and puts Matthew on the bed where

he bounces up and down.

"How's Darryl?" I ask over my shoulder as I put the kettle on.

"Yeah, fine. Always complaining about not having enough money, which is mainly why I'm starting a new job tomorrow."

"Great, what is it?"

"Cleaning a couple of people's houses."

Now it's my turn to be surprised.

"Cleaning houses! But Julie, you hate cleaning your own house."

"Yeah well. Beggars can't be choosers. It's the only sort of job where I can take Matty with me. Otherwise I'd have to pay for child care and it wouldn't be worth it. Besides these are pretty posh houses Lindy. Should be interesting."

Julie has her back to me the whole time she is talking so I know she is not being entirely honest. Julie is so bright, so intelligent, but going straight from school to having babies doesn't give you much employment experience to draw on. Still, having a husband and babies is all Julie ever really wanted and she seems happy enough.

"What are your neighbours like?" asks Julie, changing the subject.

"Mostly strange."

I clear all my school books off the table and set out the coffee cups. Julie hands me Matty's training mug.

"What do you mean?" Julie's eyes light up. There is nothing she likes better than a good bit of gossip. She finds people she has never met fascinating.

"Well, there seem to be a whole lot of ...misfits, I guess. Daggy looking blokes, you know the sort."

"Half mast trousers, usually dressed in brown and look at the ground when they're walking?"

"Yep, that's them."

"Not dangerous though? Any twitches?"

"Nah, harmless really. There is a girl a bit younger than me who seems pretty nice. She is Ukrainian and her parents bring her food which she doesn't want because she's always dieting so she gives it to me. What Dad would call foreign muck,

cabbage rolls and home made doughnuts."

"Yum. Are there any nice looking blokes around?"

As usual Julie goes straight to the subject dearest to her heart. Trying to line me up, get me a husband. I've tried to tell her I'm not that interested but she can't seem to take it in. I delight in telling her there is not one single good looking bloke in the entire block of flats. I should know by now she won't stop there.

"What about that Alastair guy at your work? Are you still seeing him?"

Little Matty comes over and climbs up on my knee. He is the cutest little fellow. Blonde curly hair, big blue eyes and gorgeous soft pale skin. I give him a big hug and think it would be nice to have a kid like him one day.

"Yes, I'm still going out with him, at least I think I am, but I don't know Julie. We're too different, you know?"

"No. How?"

"Well, last night for example. We went out to dinner at a restaurant with another couple, some friend he went to school with and his girlfriend. It was one of those places where they have white starched tablecloths and waiters dressed in black."

"How exciting, I've never been to a real restaurant. Was the food good?"

"It was OK. A bit embarrassing though. Have you ever eaten an avocado, Jules?"

"What's an avocado?"

"I think it's actually a pear but you eat it for an entree, just a half of one with a dressing, like salad dressing in it."

"What does it taste like?"

"Like... nothing really. Sort of pappy. Alastair says it's an acquired taste."

"What? Like if you go on eating it long enough, you'll get to like it? You could say that about tripe. Sounds like garbage to me. Anyway, what was so embarrassing about it? Did you spill it down your front or something?"

"No. You see I thought it was polite if I just ate out most of the middle and left a sort of lining of it around the edges. Well, they all thought that meant I didn't like it, which I didn't really. And they couldn't understand how anyone couldn't like an avocado. It seemed...I don't know. Like some sort of social gaffe. I felt stupid. Heidi would have known how to eat an avocado."

"Have you heard from her? Is she still in Sydney?"

"She rang a couple of weeks ago. She's in Newcastle now. She's gone into business with a couple of people she met in Sydney. Some sort of consultancy thing with big potential, she says, but I don't reckon they're making much money."

"Did she sound happy? Has she got a boyfriend?"

"She sounded very excited. Talked non-stop and fast. I barely got a word in. She's going out with two blokes and can't decide between them. She talked about putting them through some test, whatever that means."

"Good on her. Keep them guessing. So what about you and Alastair. Do you like him still or did the other night put you off?"

"I still like him but I don't feel comfortable with him when we're with other people, his friends. It's all right when we're by ourselves though. I just wish I could be a bit more sophisticated around his friends."

"Huh! Doesn't sound too good to me. You've got to feel comfortable around people, otherwise you're on edge all the time. Take me and Darryl. He's no oil painting but he likes me the way I am. I don't have to pretend about anything. I think that's better."

Julie starts to gather up Matty and all his nappies and toys. As I show them out the door I think about how Julie, my kid sister, seems so sure about life and people. She doesn't seem to complicate her life like I do. Life for Julie is a straight road whereas for me it's got lots of turns. I feel like I'm going somewhere but I'm not sure of the destination and I might end up at the wrong place or back where I started.

She functions well on the outside, during the daylight with other people around. When dusk comes, the streetlights go on, and she is by herself, she feels the emptiness within. A ghost ship in a foreign ocean.

The sheer size of the university puts the wind up me the day I go out to enrol. I wasn't prepared for it to be so big. Imposing structures, unnerving, overwhelming. Purely functional though. I am cheered by the thought of how Heidi would scoff at such utilitarian buildings, not like Melbourne University with its sense of grandeur. Probably just as well I'm not going there. On my first day at High School I had this same feeling of smallness. But this time I feel like an impostor. Someone is surely going to realise that I don't belong in this place. No-one in my family has ever been inside a University, let alone studied in one.

The buildings on either side dwarf me as I move slowly along trying very hard to look as if I am familiar with this place and know where I am going. Pairs and groups of students laugh and talk excitedly on the lawns. Squeals of delight and hugs as people recognise each other. I see a couple of other individuals like me, mature age students, but they are mainly older and very determined looking. I try to walk like Heidi at her most impressive on the outside, head tilted upwards, taking long sure strides, straight legs looking tall. I even try on a smile but it slides off my face.

I walk into the Student Union building. What a place! It is a whole world in there with a little cafe, a theatre and a book shop, all in the one building. It makes me feel privileged to be a part of this world. Maybe I will be involved in lots of highly intelligent conversations in this place.

Finally I follow the signs for first year students to enrol. I patiently wait in a queue and as my mouth goes dry I consider bolting for it, just giving up the whole idea and sticking to what I already know. But then I remember the words on my essay in fifth form. Mr. Wilson had written "you are capable of writing at any level." I have held on to that one sentence for a long time.

At last I am seated on one side of a table and asked which subjects I wish to take.

"English," I reply, decisively.

"English 101." he says and writes it down.

"And Australian History and Politics." I add and smile.

"What else?" he asks.

"What else?" I repeat, frowning at him.

"Yes, what else? You are full-time aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Well then, you need to do another subject. All first years have to do four subjects."

"Er. Isn't there another English?"

"No, only one English unit in first year."

What a dill! I obviously didn't read the information properly. I thought there would be at least two English subjects. In H.S.C. we had English Expression and English Literature. We go over the subjects together. He suggests Sociology or Psychology. I don't even know what Sociology is but he explains that Psychology has statistics in it so I know I can't do that. Sociology it is then, whatever it is.

Apart from choosing subjects I feel familiar with I have tried to choose those with the least number of exams. Exams terrify me beyond anything. I don't know whether it's the time thing, having to remember and unload all that information, drag it out of your brain before the whistle blows. It's not so bad if I'm writing an essay, which is basically a story with a beginning, middle and an end. When it's remembering dates and events though the mortar in my brain goes runny.

As I walk off with all my bits of paper I get excited at the thought that I have done it, I am now a university student. Excited and terrified all at once.

Heidi insists on me coming over for champagne when I ring. To toast my new future, as she puts it. Heidi's been back in Melbourne for a couple of months now but with her usual hectic lifestyle we haven't had a chance to catch up properly. She pours champagne into two glasses with black stems and leads me into the lounge room of her small terrace house in South Melbourne.

We click glasses.

"So, what exciting subjects are you going to be studying?"

"English, Politics, Australian History and Sociology, for the first year. And don't ask me what Sociology is, because I'm not sure myself. Something to do with how people behave in society."

"Sounds heavy. And Politics, no less. You're not going to become a mad, left wing radical are you Linda?"

"Maybe. Go on demonstrations, get arrested."

"That sort of thing is hippy and old hat now, Linda."

"For heaven's sake, Heidi, I'm only kidding. I'm looking forward to meeting new people and hearing new ideas, but this is serious. I'm there to learn."

Heidi offers me a cigarette from a silver box on her glass coffee table. When I show her how I roll my own these days she is horrified.

"It's cheaper, Heidi, and anyway I like it. I'm not suggesting you do it. Wouldn't fit with your glamorous image, would it?"

"No, it certainly wouldn't." Heidi crosses one elegant leg over the other and stares out the window. We sit in uncomfortable silence for what seems like forever. I finish my drink and stand up.

"Heidi, listen to me. I'm going to university and it's a dream come true for me. OK I'm going to change a bit, but so have you. Hell, you've always been sophisticated and I've always been daggy. You like to be surrounded by nice things and lead an exciting life. I want something better too, I just don't know what it is yet. We've both moved a long way since the flats, but we can still be friends can't we?"

Heidi looks at me, frowns and looks away. For a minute I think she's going to burst into tears. Then she grins and it's her old smile for a minute. It's the same Heidi who brightened up my dull life for so many years. She gets to her feet and takes my glass.

"Yes, we bloody well can. Sit down, Linda. I'll bring in the bottle. Let's really celebrate."

We buy fish and chips and eat them from the paper on her floor. We talk for hours. She tells me all about her life in Sydney and Newcastle. We laugh and we reminisce until the early hours of the morning. I know there are things she doesn't talk about but that's OK. We are both still here.

She walks around and around the gallery, treading softly on the clean, clear polished floors. Many of the paintings are old friends. Suddenly Dobell's "Tired Lady" confronts her. Its myriad of narrow white lines translucent so the sharp edges of the body are a membrane. She aches at the thin brittle bones of the shoulders. But the head is strong, strengthened by the repetition of the lines, the stark whiteness. Pure bold blue background allows no distraction from the core of the woman exposed to the world by Dobell's deft strokes.

"You're just as clever as they are, probably more so!"

Heidi throws a saucepan in the sink and then holds her head. She pops a couple of aspirin for the hangover. She sinks into a chair opposite me, at the kitchen table.

"Anyway," she says quietly. "You can't quit now. You're a third of the way through."

"It's not the book cleverness I'm worried about. It's more, well...feeling awkward all the time."

"You've always been awkward. It's your build."

"No, Heidi not physically awkward. I feel like they've all got a different way of behaving and thinking than I have. I feel like I'm constantly on edge trying to keep up. It's a bit like when I first learnt to ride a bike. You know how off balance you feel?"

"You did learn to ride a bike though. Maybe this is the same."

"No. There's a gap I've got, something missing. I'm majoring in English and I can't even find the words to describe it properly!"

"So fake it, like I do. I still haven't got any qualifications but you'd be amazed at how people don't want or need to see pieces of paper. They judge me by what I do, the work I've done, and it's good. Well, nearly always."

"It's what I *do* that is wrong, Heidi. Everywhere. The people I live with, the other students at uni. Listen. You know Michael, one of the guys I'm sharing with?"

"The cute one, with the blonde hair?"

"Yeah. Well last week I went out with this friend of his called Max. We went to a party in Doncaster and he didn't take any booze."

"Go on. What happened?"

"What happened was that he didn't take any booze, Heidi. I had this huge fight with him in the car. You have to take booze to a party, otherwise you're a bludger. He had no idea what I was going on about. He laughed and told me not to worry. The more he didn't understand, the madder I got. I just couldn't make him see what I meant. I was practically screaming at him in the end."

"So, *he* didn't take any booze to his friend's party. I don't see why you got so het up about it."

"Because I felt like a bludger. I couldn't do anything. There we were out in bloody Doncaster in his car. I couldn't buy any so I had to go into the party with him and be embarrassed."

"Did it work out okay? Were the people cool about him not bringing anything?"

"They acted like they were. The party was fine. And afterwards I felt like a berk for going off like I did, but there was a principle at stake and I couldn't make him see it."

“Right. So you were embarrassed and he’s a jerk but it all worked out OK. You don’t need to go out with him again. I don’t see what this has got to do with your uni life, Linda.”

“Oh. It’s the same sort of living-on-another-planet feeling I get all the time and it’s hard, you know? I used to like where I lived in my head but everyone I know seems to be shifting things.”

“I’m not shifting anything, except your fat bum from that chair. Come on, we are going shopping. That will cheer you up.”

“I don’t have any money and I don’t want cheering up and I don’t have a fat bum!”

“Don’t be such a grump, Linda. Look at this.”

Heidi goes over to a drawer in her dresser, pulls out a wad of ten dollar bills and waves them in my face.

“Where did you get all that money?”

“I told you. Cash in hand. Don’t worry I worked for it, it’s all mine.”

She looks at my face and throws her hands in the air.

“Don’t tell me you think I’m a bludger for cheating on the taxman?”

“You pay tax in your other job, don’t you?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, that’s all right then.”

Heidi sighs and heads off to her bedroom, calling out to me.

“I’m going to buy us both a present.”

“I don’t need charity.”

“Stop being pigheaded. I’m your friend remember and you’ll be doing me a favour. Spending money makes me happy. Keeps me alive.”

"Do we have to walk through a bloody cemetery, Linda? Gives me the creeps."

Heidi shivers dramatically, pulling her overcoat together and turning up the collar. I have to admit it's not the sort of day most people would choose to walk in a cemetery. There is an arctic feel to the wind and the sky is full of dark heavy clouds.

"Yeah, it is a bit gothic. Jane Eyre or Rochester might emerge from behind a tall looming pine at any moment."

"You read too many books. It's warped your brain."

"It's just a different version of beauty. I've loved cemeteries since I was knee-high to a grasshopper."

"And what, may I ask, is so beautiful about *this* cemetery?" asks Heidi crossly. "Or any cemetery for that matter. All I can see are decaying tombstones, rusted metal surrounds and weeds growing crazy everywhere? Well?" she insists as I gaze around contented.

"It's hard to explain. It's not a physical thing. It's all about lives and...stories, so many stories and you can get glimpses of the stories by some of the inscriptions. And then you can fill out the story yourself - make it sad, a real tear-jerker, or even a happy one."

"A happy one! Linda they're all dead, gone, finished, dust. Where's the happy?"

"In the memories...the memories people carry around in their heads."

Heidi wanders away mumbling to herself. She stands on top of a very old grave and beckons me over.

"What about this one then? Died in 1899 and no other names on the grave, no children, gone and forgotten I reckon."

"What about your ancestors?" I ask her. "Are your grandparents still alive?"

"Wouldn't know, would I? Never knew them."

"What, not even on your mother's side?"

"Nope. Glad I never did, if they were anything like their daughter."

Heidi has never ever mentioned any relatives in all the years I have known her.

None at all. And I have so many. No wonder she can't understand what I'm getting at.

"Let's walk up to Lygon Street and get a coffee?" I see the cemetery through Heidi's eyes and don't enjoy the feeling.

"Check out these two." says Heidi, her coffee cup arrested half way to her mouth.

"Mother and daughter?"

"Yes. Two versions of the one person. Neat and tidy. Never a spontaneous action in their lives, I'll bet."

We watch the two women considering the array of continental cakes and biscuits under the glass counter. The waitress stands there patiently while they point and consider, confer, shake their heads and finally nod in agreement.

"I'll bet they never swear."

"Everyone swears, Heidi. It's a spontaneous reaction."

"Yes, but never in front of anyone. Not even their husbands." she adds emphatically.

"The daughter might not be married." I counter.

"Ah, but she will be. That type always do."

"What type? Come on Heidi, you're stereotyping."

"Linda, most people are stereotypes. They live the life they read in women's magazines, they don't see any other possibilities."

I want to argue against Heidi's notion of people but these two are so subdued and earnest I can't make a good case.

"There is a lot to be said for a comfortable, orderly life." I say wistfully.

"So why didn't you stay at the bank? What are you doing at age twenty-six at university when you could be settled in Glen Waverley in a brick veneer with two kids?"

"Nobody asked me." I respond sadly.

"Nobody asked you what?"

"Nobody asked me to marry them?"
Heidi splutters into her coffee as she laughs very loudly.

"What's so funny?" I ask indignantly.

"Oh, you twit. You never put yourself in the position for anyone to ask you."

"What do you mean?"

"Flitting from one boyfriend to the next. It's not like in the movies you know. Mr. Right doesn't race you off your feet and whammo, you're married, you have to plod along going steady for a number of years, or you have to work seriously at it and make yourself indispensable. You have to flatter their little egos."

"But I never liked any of them enough to marry them. And surely *some* people fall in love."

"What, and live happily ever after? Oh come on Linda!"

I am stung into reminding her about one of hers that got away. One she really fell heavily for. She has the grace to retreat a little.

"Well, maybe, occasionally. Most girls don't though, they just talk themselves into it because of the status of the ring on the finger and being a Mrs. Look at the girls we went to school with." she continues as I look sceptical.

"Such as?" I ask.

"Such as Robyn. Such as Marilyn."

"Well? They're happy aren't they? At least I think Robyn is."

"Yes, but that's not the point. They never wanted anything else."

"And you and I do?"

"Of course we do." Heidi gives a sudden grin. "I am going to be the most famous and wealthy designer in the world and you..."

"Yes, and me?"

"You will never be wealthy, not by hanging around with that university hippy lot. But you," she looks at me strangely, "eventually you will do something huge."

"Yeah, probably to my waistline if I keep eating these cakes."

I open the door to an insistent rapping on a cold, windy Sunday morning and find Heidi hugging herself on my doorstep, mysterious looking in dark glasses and hair hidden under a scarf.

"Bloody hell, Heidi. I thought you were the Mormons. The bastards stalk this street, I swear."

I'm rabbiting on as I lead the way into the kitchen and put the kettle on, but Heidi doesn't say a word. She is sitting at the kitchen table and still hasn't taken the dark glasses off, let alone the head scarf.

"What's up Doc?"

Heidi slowly takes off her glasses, like it's all too much effort. Her eyes are pink and puffy from crying and her mouth is a thin, hard line.

"I had, last night," states Heidi, drawing out each word for emphasis, "one of *the* worst experiences of my entire life."

Heidi is being dramatic as she pulls the scarf off with a flourish, but I can see she is very upset and angry, fiercely angry. I'm glad it's not me who is the object of that anger.

When I ask her if she wants tea or coffee and she asks for something stronger I know this is some sort of crisis. It's 10.30 in the morning but I go and get the whisky wondering if I can possibly stomach it myself this early. Some tests of friendship are hard.

"I thought you went to a wedding with Matthew?" I hazard as she takes a long swallow of whisky, neat. I make mine mostly coke.

"Correct." she says, taking out her smokes and lighting up.

"And it was at that beautiful new reception place with all the gardens?"

"Indeed." She states emphatically, tapping her cigarette so hard I think she's going to break it.

"And you wore that gorgeous new dress, with the full skirt and bow at the back?"

"I did."

"Shit, Heidi, this is like drawing teeth. What happened?"

"I have never been so humiliated Linda. When we arrived we all had aperitifs and the ubiquitous sherry." Heidi grimaces.

"Yes, I know you don't like sherry Heidi, but go on."

"After the sherry a man started to read out people's names and which table they should go to. Well, Lindy, they all filed off in two's as their names were called."

Heidi stops and pours herself another drink.

"Yes, go on, what happened?" I am having visions of Heidi tripping over, ripping her new dress or the elastic going in her knickers.

"My name wasn't called."

"What do you mean your name wasn't called? Why wasn't it called?"

"It wasn't called because that bastard hadn't told them he was bringing anyone."

"What? Was *his* name called?"

"Oh yes, *his* name was called. Straight after his friends. I was the only one whose name wasn't called. The bride's mother was embarrassed and tried to pretend it was a mistake with the listing, but I knew it wasn't. I was the uninvited guest. Linda, they had to get an extra chair from the *kitchen* for me and squash it between the proper chairs."

Tears have formed in Heidi's eyes and she shakes her head as if she still can't believe it.

"Oh Heidi, that's awful. How could he? What did he say?"

"He tried to make a joke of it! The joke was on me. I had to sit in the bloody kitchen chair. All his friends from his bloody cricket club trying to be so jolly and taking extra care to include me in their conversation. I felt like I was this big Lindy."

Heidi holds out her hand, a couple of inches above the table. Her hand is shaking, the tears are running down her face. She brushes them away angrily and her face contorts as she remembers.

"I was squashed in a kitchen chair for everyone to see, everyone to see that I hadn't been invited, been expected."

"I'm surprised you didn't run away." I say, thinking I probably would have.

"That would have made me look even more stupid. If that is possible."

"So, what did you say Heidi? What did you do?"

"Oh you would have been proud of me. I smiled, I answered questions politely, even laughed with everyone at the stupid jokes of the best man. I think I got away with it, with them thinking I didn't care, that I was too cool, too sophisticated to let a silly little thing like being uninvited worry me. I don't think anyone knew how sick and small I felt. That's the beauty of feelings. They happen inside you, you don't have to let them show."

"Not very healthy for you though." I respond sadly.

"I won't be pitied Linda. I won't let anyone humiliate me. I had enough of that at home with Mum. I was a kid then so I couldn't hide how I felt, but I can now. If I'm going to get anywhere in this life I have to take the shit and throw it back at them when they're not looking. You should have seen me at the party afterwards. They all thought I was having a great night."

"What about when Matthew took you home. What did you say to him? Did you let him have it?"

"Nah. He's a dickhead. A stupid public school boy who doesn't think, can only see what is in front of him. But I want him around for now. He's useful. I didn't say anything much because I didn't want him thinking he's got any... power over me, you know?"

"No. I don't think I do really. I'm just glad you're here now telling me about it, telling someone about it."

Heidi picks up her scarf and sways a little as she stands up. She kisses me on the cheek and pats my arm.

"Thanks for listening. Don't know what I would do without you Lindy."

I stand at the front door watching her walk away, glad she is not driving and hoping she doesn't keep drinking all day. Drinking to drown out the feelings she wants to hide from the world.

She is on a mission to seek out the bits of grime that try to hide themselves behind cavities and in subtle corners. The skirting boards are always the sly ones, building up tiny pieces of dust, ever so slowly. You could almost miss it if you were not vigilant. Especially in the bathroom and toilet. They are like the edges of her mind where dark thoughts lodge themselves, hiding in the angles between her goals and dreams, hoping to remain undetected so they can flourish and grow. They are no match for her though. She knows they are there, even when silent. If she gradually keeps them under control they won't have a chance to take over.

Sometimes, in the middle of the night she lets go of trying, of pushing herself, and feels her body lighten. It's a sense of weightlessness and freedom. But it can only be allowed to emerge when she is alone, when no-one is watching. And it is brief, becoming less frequent as time goes on. Perhaps one day it will disappear altogether, never to return.

The restaurant is all subdued lighting and quiet voices. It's Heidi's shout, the result of a bonus payment for her latest building make over. I fiddle with the cutlery and down half my glass of wine in one go.

"What's up?" asks Heidi, as I almost miss my mouth.

"I'm pregnant."

I'm trying very hard not to burst into tears, which is all I seem to have done in the last week. The waiter comes over and Heidi orders for both of us. After he has gone she leans across the table, opens her mouth several times but closes it without saying anything. Finally she rolls her eyes and folds her arms.

"Shit, Linda. How? Why? What are you going to do? I assume it's Mark's?"

"Yes, it's Mark's and I don't have a clue what I'm going to do. How and why don't matter, Heidi. I'm pregnant. I can't go back in time and have a think about it first."

"What does Mark say? You have told him?"

"Yeah, I've told him and he refuses to discuss it. He's always been an ostrich. What am I saying, *always*, I've only been going out with him for about six months."

"Do you love him?"

"I don't honestly know. I love some of the things about him but I hate some others."

"Sounds normal. But more to the point, is he working? Has he got any money?"

"No, on both counts. Oh, he might have a secret hoard somewhere, he's a secretive sort of person. He's very creative, Heidi, but pretty lazy. He...he doesn't talk or even want to think about things that are hard, difficult. He wants to have a nice life, I guess."

"Don't we all! But it's your life we've got to think about now. Yours and ...well."

"Yeah, *it!* I don't want to think about it either, but it's in my body so I have to."

The meal arrives. I try to eat it but my mouth can't taste anything. Heidi looks as if she's lost her appetite too. She orders another bottle of wine.

"He's a university drop out, isn't he?" Heidi jabs at her chicken viciously. "I knew you shouldn't have gone to that place."

I start to laugh but recognise an edge of hysteria. I want to believe this conversation isn't happening, want to wake up back in the normal world. Heidi lights us both a cigarette and leans back in her chair.

"You know you don't have any real choices, Linda. You're living on that government allowance thing, you don't have a job and you need to finish your degree if you're ever going to get anywhere."

I want to argue against what she is suggesting. I want to find another way.

"Women have babies all the time and manage. Money isn't everything."

Heidi's anger hits across at me in waves. The sarcasm in her voice slices like a knife.

"Yes. They do indeed. They live on a single mother's pension and live in a Housing Commission flat! For Christ's sake, Linda, your parents still live there! Do you want to go back to that?"

"I could get a part-time job. Go back to office work."

My suggestions have no credibility, even to myself. The images are bleak, I don't want the reality.

"You're right. I don't have a choice. I can't believe I've been so stupid to get myself in this situation."

Heidi leans across and squeezes my hand.

"You wouldn't believe how many women it happens to. Just thank your lucky stars you're living in 1977 and not twenty or thirty years ago. How far gone are you?"

"Not far. Only about five or six weeks, I think." I try to block out the images from old text books. "How big would it be? Would anything be ...formed?"

"You need to act straight away, tomorrow." Heidi is emphatic. She reaches into her handbag and pulls out her diary. "You ring up first thing and make an appointment. I believe they are required to do some counselling. All you need to tell them is where you don't want to end up. Tell them you want a termination straight...What are you laughing at?"

"Termination. Such a nice polite word." I can feel the bitterness seeping through me. "Not a horrid word, like abortion. But that's what it is!"

“Linda, calm down. You don’t *have* a choice. There is no other option and there’s no point in beating yourself up about it. You weren’t careful enough but you will be from now on. You could certainly become more discerning in your choice of lovers. But the point is, you’ve got to get on with your life in the best way you can. I can move around any of my appointments to go with you, so just do it. OK?”

She can feel the adrenelin rise up from her toes, surging through her innards until it reaches her head. The colours and form have come together, under her very hands, through her vision. The mirror tells her she is beautiful and clever. Her eyes shine. The surety of her movements as she dresses. A smooth, confident transition to her public self this time, a smile not forced.

"Linda, darling! So glad you could come."

After searching furiously for Heidi in the nightclub I'm now not so sure I should have. She steps forward, blocking my look at such a greeting and blows a kiss toward my left ear. She gives me a look that says just shut up and go along with it, so I do. Darling indeed, she's never called me that in her life. Glad I could come! She knew I was coming, I rang her this afternoon.

Heidi is severely perfect in black and red, smooth straight but expensive lines, relieved by sparkling pendant earrings which bounce around catching the light and glimmering with each twist and turn of her neck. I had never noticed her long neck before.

"Come and meet Nick, he is the owner and such a wag."

I don't say anything, just allow myself to be led along. Heidi is talking like she has a whole jar of plums in her mouth. In the old days she would have said dag, not wag. She hauls me through the crowd jostling for position at the bar, toward a tall, impressive looking man who places an arm proprietorially around her waist as she introduces us.

"So what do you think of my new club Linda?" Nick asks, with one elegant eyebrow raised and a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Hasn't my little Heidi done a wonderful job?"

I realise I'm staring at him. I have never been able to figure out how you raise just one eyebrow.

"It looks ... magnificent!"

It is a genuine compliment to both of them. The nightclub is designed as the interior of an aeroplane complete with a cockpit bar. Tiny green and red lights reflect against the glass and chrome. The interior of the club is a concave tunnel, airline seats on either side running right down to the stage. Beside every second seat is a small round window-shaped painting, a night sky complete with stars and

constellations.

Nick's partner, George, comes up and I sip my cocktail and feel out of place as they discuss the club's potential and some other venture they have in mind. They obviously value Heidi's opinion yet their manner toward her irks me. They are being subtly patronising and I wonder if she knows. I am listening to Heidi's voice, how she is rounding her vowels and sounding almost posh. I realise this has been a gradual process, I just hadn't noticed it so obviously before. I have an urge to tell her to stop binging on side but I know this is very much a part of the new, professional Heidi, the respected interior designer. For some reason though, it makes me feel sad.

"Come with me Linda," says Heidi as their conversation draws to an end. "I'll introduce you to some people."

"Howard, Daniel, meet Linda."

Howard reaches out of hand weighed down with gold jewellery and gives me a strong handshake. Daniel flutters both a hand and his eyelashes in my direction.

"Are you in the club business too, Linda?" asks Howard politely, smoothing down his sparse hair. Crisp white cuffs protrude from the end of his immaculate business suit.

"Too brainy for that," Heidi replies for me. "Linda is studying at university. Doing her Honours year."

"Not so brainy," I respond. "Just hard slog for me, I'm afraid."

"And are you a radical, sweetie?" asks Howard, with what looks suspiciously like a sneer to me.

"Nothing wrong with being a radical, sweetheart." says Daniel with a genuine grin at me. I can't help reflect that my Dad would have called him a ponce. He is in leathers and a frilled shirt, yet he seems like a really nice bloke. Far nicer than Howard who is making jerky little motions with his fancy cigarette.

"Do you have sit-ins and marches and all those frightfully strenuous things?"

I decide he is taking the mickey but play along.

"Yeah, I regularly lie in front of tractors and bash policemen with my handbag."

"Enough, Howard, love," says Daniel, patting his hand. "What are you studying to be, Linda?"

"I'm not sure yet. Maybe journalism or teaching."

"No money in those dear. Better off going for something in the business world. Computers! That's where it's all going, you know." Daniel waves his hands around like a fairy godmother.

Nick and George commandeer Heidi with gestures from across the room. Heidi leans down and whispers.

"Mingle, Linda. There are some *very* influential people here tonight." She moves off quickly, blowing kisses all around.

I'm mouthing replies and smiling a lot while I wish I was down my local pub, drinking beers, playing pool and talking bullshit with people I know and like. My toes are beginning to cramp. They're not used to high heels. Excusing myself to use the Ladies is the only way I can think of to gracefully exit. I fight my way through throngs of people, voices getting louder, more shrill, as the drinks disappear.

Behind the goal posts in the outer at the Collingwood footy ground, hunched into our overcoats with the wind howling and the clouds threatening. Hard concrete sloping down to the rails holding in the ground and the players. And holding the supporters out. Heidi is hissing in my ear.

"I never should have let you talk me into this. Just look at all these...people!"

The plum in Heidi's mouth ripens as she surveys the motley little crowd of diehards.

"Tit for tat, Heidi. I hate cocktail parties and your crowd. You hate the footy and mine."

"Want to guess at the I.Q. of that one?"

She is looking at a ferrety little bloke who is laughing, mouth open, showing the spaces where his teeth used to be.

"Drop kick."

"What?"

"Drop kicks, you call them drop kicks, as in the footy."

I grin at her but realise she doesn't have a clue what I'm on about. I'm not about to tell her that standing in the outer at Victoria Park, when you are barracking for the opposition, scares the shit out of me.

"I just can't understand what you see in this rubbish Linda. Here you are an intelligent woman watching those stupid men out there kicking a ball and all these other moronic men looking at them and yelling. What's the point?"

"The point is the game Heidi, watch the game. That's what we're here for ."

"Oh yes, the game! Grown men wrestling and fighting, kicking and punching, like little kids in a school yard. It's so immature!"

"Yeah, but it's gutsy. Although I suspect the game is beginning to tame itself." I sigh. "But just watch. There are two teams of players out there, watch the way they operate, the moves, the tactics. It's a beautiful process when it works. You don't notice it's planned, it just flows."

"Oh so it's planned is it? But I don't understand any of it. I don't know any of the rules, so it doesn't make sense. It does *have* rules, doesn't it?"

She asks this as one player lays a perfect hip and shoulder tackle on another, right in front of us. It's a Geelong player. I gasp and the crowd around us roar. I can understand how to her it's just fighting.

"Look over there Heidi, see, the one with number five on his back? He is outmanoeuvring his opponent, selling the dummy. See? He makes like he is going to hand pass to his team mate running along side, then at the last moment he ducks and weaves around his opponent, takes off and kicks straight up into the forward line...gorgeous!" I clap my hands.

"Instinct, basic rat cunning," says Heidi. "I can't see anything very clever in that."

Heidi has raised her voice above the roar and instantly gets nods of agreement from around us. If only she realised they think she is one of them!

"No Heidi, it's not just instinct, well, not all of it. Those moves have been practised. Some might not work on a certain day or against a particular opponent. Look, the whole thing is planned some of the way, the rest is sheer chance, opportunity. One day you get the free kicks where you need them, right in front of the goal square."

A Collingwood player has just received what I consider to be a soft free kick and he is lining up about 30 feet out on a 45 degree angle.

Heidi is looking blank.

"You do understand that the object of the game is to kick goals don't you? See that bloke right in front of goal?"

"The barrel chested, hairy one?"

"That's the one. He's a full forward. Able to muscle out an opponent, take a good strong mark, or fake it, and kick straight. That's his job. See that smaller one over there, No.8?"

"The one with little fat legs and a neanderthal face?"

"Yep. He's a rover, a runner, a tackler. The full forward couldn't get any goals without his help. He ferrets around in the middle of packs, scratching and burrowing through until he gets the ball. He knows his job."

"Knows his place you mean? What if he wants to take a big mark?"

"Sometimes, occasionally, he might. But if he tried to do that all the time he couldn't and his team would lose because he wasn't doing his job properly."

"Then they're all stereotypes, they're all stuck in the one role."

"That's one way of looking at it. The way I see it is they all have a role and all the roles are important."

"Oh, an egalitarian approach to football, very high minded. But what about the stars? The ones who always get their picture in the papers? Don't tell me they're not more important."

"Yeah well sometimes they have a special ability, a unique talent, like say Polly Farmer. He *invented* the hand pass."

"Polly! There is a footballer called Polly!"

"Yeah well, I'll explain that later, but the thing is even he would be nothing without the rest of the team. And some of those stars turn out to be real show ponies. A few beautiful, faultless moves every now and again, but if they are doing it for themselves, not the team, they don't last."

"Like a one hit wonder."

"Exactly! See the big ones right in the middle now when they are bouncing the ball?"

"The lumbering ones who lurch around?"

"The ruckmen. They start the play, get the ball out of the middle, punch it out so someone else can grab it and run with it. They're slow but sturdy, sort of tortoises. They have to be dependable."

"See yourself as a ruckman, do you Linda? Dependable?"

"Nah, I'm a tagger. I run around annoying the shit out of everyone, never giving up. No special talent, just determination."

"I would be a full forward. Leaping high taking the big mark, impressing the crowd. At least they have some style."

"Yeah it looks good, but they can't do it alone. They have to make the right leads,

put themselves in the right place for people to reach them. And their life as a player is more limited. They have more falls and more people trying to push them out of the way. They can look spectacular but on a bad day they are bloody ordinary. Plus the crowd bag them more than anyone else.”

“Ball!” yell the crowd as the full forward is tackled heavily and the ball trapped beneath him.

“O.K. I think I’ve got this worked out now. You just get the right people for the right places in the team, you kick more goals and so you win.”

“Mmm, not exactly. The coach and the selectors pick the best team for the day but once they are out there it’s up to the players and they can be unpredictable and so much is dependent upon confidence. Some days it all hangs together and it flows. It’s sure and swift and it looks like symmetry. But another day with the same group of players, it just doesn’t work. It’s frustrating, it’s rewarding, it’s magical or it’s ordinary - you never know which it’s going to be.”

“Mm, OK, theatre is like that, I guess, and bands. Any performance. But I can’t understand why you come to this all the time when it’s the same game, the same rules. Don’t you ever get sick of it?”

I try a mental picture of my life without footy and shake my head vigorously.

“No. I can’t imagine ever getting sick of footy. When you understand the game it makes it more exciting. I learn more and more every year and it gets better. Plus I feel really comfortable here, like I belong and those players are playing for me. I go to the footy by myself sometimes but I would never go to the theatre by myself. At the theatre, or in a band, it’s just one gig and then they go on. They perform again but maybe with different people and to a different audience. There’s no sense of ...continuity I guess. They are being paid to perform and people pay to see that. This is different.”

“Footballers get paid though, don’t they?”

“Yeah. They get paid and we pay to watch them, but it’s more than that. Geelong is my team, they play for me and all the other Geelong supporters who go on and on, over generations. The very best part for me is that it goes on. It doesn’t finish with one win or loss, even the grand final. Even when my team finishes on the bottom of the ladder there is always the next year when they might come out on top, might win the grand final and that would be fantastic.”

“So how many grand finals has your team won?”

“In my lifetime, only two so far. But one was the year I was born so I don’t remember that.”

“What? You’ve seen one big win in nearly thirty years?” Why don’t you just pick a

new team. Why stick with one that doesn't win?"

"Because next year they just might and it would have been worth the wait. Changing teams is like ...changing your identity. It's a part of who you are, who I am anyway. It's a bit like a family, an extended family."

Heidi snorts in disgust, nudges me and jerks her head toward a young bloke behind us. He has a beanie pulled down low over his forehead, a big beer belly and is screaming obscenities at all the players. His beanie is in Geelong colours.

"And just like your family," I say. "You can't choose who is in it. Some of them you like and some you don't. I wouldn't change my family because of one aunt or uncle I didn't like."

"Well, I think the whole idea is incredibly stupid. If I could actually enjoy the game I would support whoever was on top. That way you could follow the game but always be a winner."

"Yeah but you wouldn't have a bloody clue who you were, you'd just be a hanger on."

"It's only a *game* Linda and a game played entirely by men. I would have thought that would have gone against your beliefs."

"It's not the men I'm watching Heidi, and it's not *just* a game. It's my team out there and there will be people barracking for them long after I'm gone. There aren't many things like that, things that last."

"What about this, or this?" Heidi holds up a gold velvet slinky dress and a black bolero."

"Nah! Too dressy, too formal. What about that bone linen one over there?"

I point at a simple A-line dress on the wall.

"Oh come on, Linda. What? You want to look insignificant?"

"I want smart, Heidi, not tart."

"This would look fantastic on you."

"It's red!"

"So?"

"Redheads can't wear red."

"I am really looking forward to the day you break out, Linda Comben."

With a sniff she takes off around the shop, pulling out skirts, blazers, scarves, and shoves them back any old which way. The shop assistant looks annoyed but too timid to stop her. She emerges triumphant. A bright yellow dress with a blue jagged slash like lightning.

"Well, you want to be noticed, don't you?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know if you want to be noticed?"

"If you are noticed, then you have to live up to it. Do something, say something significant."

"No, you don't, Linda. For Christ's sake stop anticipating. What? You think models are wildly intelligent? Trust me, girl. Try it on."

I emerge from the change room and I survey myself in the long mirrors. Heidi stands to one side. We both shake our heads and sigh. It's a bleak Melbourne day, all grey and sharp angles, but for an instant the sun breaks through. A thin beam of sunlight falls on gold taffeta, catching my eye and my memory.

"Oh Heidi, look!"

I reach across and pull out the dress with a full, swirling skirt. I move it from side to side, listening to the swooshing noise the fabric makes. Heidi folds her arms and her mouth.

"I know, I know," I protest. "It's not right for a wedding. But it is beautiful."

I start to put it back on the rack.

"If you like it so much," says Heidi, patiently, as to a child, "then try it on. See if it is you."

"No point. I would never go anywhere to wear it."

A great sadness suddenly overwhelms me and I need to get out of this shop. I do a rapid change, motion to Heidi and we head out the door. The shop assistant looks relieved.

Heidi's old MG splutters to life and we leave Glenferrie Road behind.

"What's up?" Heidi has to yell to be heard above the combined clatter of the engine and the rattling body.

"Nothing much. Tell you later." I yell back. "Will you loan me something to wear?"

"Of course."

Heidi grins at me and takes off at a rate of knots from a standing start at the traffic lights, waving gaily to a startled old couple in a Morris Minor. She turns the radio on with a flourish and, as if on cue, Skyhooks are belting out "Women in Uniform". We sing along and Heidi beats time on the steering wheel.

Heidi squeezes the car into a little parking space outside the Fawkner Club in Toorak Road. It's currently her favourite place. A place to be seen. I feel uncomfortable but Heidi has enough aplomb to carry the both of us. The sun has temporarily won its battle with the clouds so we head out to the beer garden. A scotch for Heidi. A beer for me. I'm conscious of my old jeans and chipped nail polish. I try to look casual. Heidi doesn't have to try. Her old jeans are faded to exactly the right shade and her lipstick perfectly matches one of the colours in her bright floral shirt.

"Feeling better?" she asks, dark eyes following the movements around us.

"Yeah. Silly really, getting sad about a dress I had years ago."

"Why sad?" asks Heidi, swirling the ice in her glass. "Did it get ruined?"

"No. I don't remember what happened to it. I guess Mum finally threw it out. The thing was I never got to wear it."

"Rubbish!" Heidi looks incredulous. "I can't see your Mum buying you something you would never wear."

"She didn't buy it. It was a hand-me-down from my cousin Angela. It was beautiful, Heidi, I wish you could have seen it. It had puffed sleeves, a sash at the waist and a big full skirt, with a frill at the bottom."

At the look on Heidi's face I have to laugh.

"Well, I was only about twelve at the time."

"Thank God your notions of beautiful have changed. What was your cousin doing with a dress like that? Did she ever wear it, or was it just a poor dress doomed never to be worn?"

"Stop taking the mickey. Angela did wear it, at least once. She went to the most expensive school in Melbourne. They had debutante balls and formal dances, all that kind of stuff."

"You have wealthy relations? I never knew that. Do you still see them? What are they like?"

"Only at funerals. They are incredibly...refined. They used to *buy* the sandwiches they had for afternoon tea."

"Oh. Don't suppose they ever went with you and your family to the trots on a Saturday night?"

"Or to the pub for a counter meal. No, I don't remember them ever coming to our place. We always went there and I always felt like they were putting up with us because we were related."

"They probably were. This is getting depressing, Linda. How about another drink?"

I go up to the bar. While I'm waiting to be served I can see a gorgeous looking guy greeting Heidi like a long lost friend. She is animated, her hands drawing pictures in the air as she talks. I am duly introduced to Hans who is an architect. He and Heidi cross paths regularly through their work. I hide my chipped nails in my lap, smile and nod as they chatter across me. My head still won't let go of that taffeta dress. I can still feel the stiff shiny skirt on that twelve-year-old girl who used to wander around the flat pretending to waltz. She must have looked a sight in that beautiful dress and her black school shoes.

Some days she has to cover up all the mirrors and be very careful of shop windows. She has learnt how to put on her make-up without seeing her own image clearly. She isolates each part. The cheeks, neck, mouth and hair are easy. The eyes are always the problem but her deft hands work so fast with the mascara wand she need only catch tiny glimpses. The dressing-table mirror is adjusted permanently downwards for the clothing check.

Lying barefoot on the floor we rub the carpet with our toes and fingers and breathe in its new smell. Masses of sunlight stream through the large windows and double glass doors, warming the fresh cream walls.

I dance through to the kitchen and laugh at the pristine bench top, gleaming sink and shining taps.

"Isn't it great? Isn't it beautiful?"

I spread my arms and do a slow circle, my full skirt billowing around me. I fling open all the cupboard doors in the kitchen.

"No-one else's dirt Heidi, no-one else's left over grime, no lurking mould in here. Look at this stove. It's never been used!" I wander into the bathroom and revel in

the pure whiteness. "Come and look at the bathroom, Heidi. It's even got a bath."

Heidi's voice echoes back at me.

"I know what a bathroom looks like, Linda."

"Stop raining on my parade. I've just realised it's missing something though."

"They forgot a toilet? You're going to have to pee in the bath?"

"Don't be silly. No. There's no mirror."

Suddenly Heidi is standing right there beside me laughing. She's laughing so much she's crying. I can't figure out what she's laughing at and she won't tell me. The laughter stops and she's just crying. Suddenly she stops and sits there on the edge of my bath looking at me strangely.

"You OK, Heidi? What is it? What's wrong?"

Heidi bites her lips. Opens her mouth and shuts it again. She takes a big breath, smoothes back her hair and slowly levers herself off the bath edge.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. I'm just tired and emotional, probably need a holiday. Let's open that bottle of wine and toast your new abode."

I follow her back to the kitchen, feeling like I've missed something. Something important.

"Can you afford the rent?" Heidi asks briskly, pulling the cork from the bottle with one deft movement.

"Yeah. I'm going to do some tutoring."

"What? School kids? Do you want to do that?"

"No, but it's better than waitressing."

"You could rent out the second bedroom."

"I will if I have to, eventually. Right now I just want to enjoy this by myself."

We sit in the empty loungeroom, on the floor, the bottle between us, our backs resting against the wall, looking out at the tops of trees beyond the balcony door. I remember Julie sitting in the middle of the lawn at the flats all those years ago. I wonder if any little girl is sitting there now. It's another life. One that Heidi doesn't talk about. Heidi is looking more like her old self now and starts to tell me about the hotel she is working on, renovating the whole thing, inside and out.

“Do you have a picture in your head of how it will look at the end?” I ask her, fascinated by this gift of hers to be able to make something beautiful from practically nothing.

“Mm, yes, but it changes.”

As usual Heidi's hands are drawing shapes in the air as her brain searches for the words to explain. I notice that the small cherry plum creeps into her mouth as she talks about her work.

“What I would like, and how it *has* to be. I have to try and ... bring those two together.”

She brings her hands together gently and makes a steeple.

“How does it have to be? Does the owner know what he wants?”

I am assuming the owner is a he. All big buildings are owned by men as far as I can see.

“No, silly fool thinks he does. That is the most difficult part. Making him think all the good ideas are really his. Otherwise he gets cranky. He has absolutely no imagination so every time he sees something somewhere that he thinks looks great, he wants it. Thinks he can transfer colours and images to a building that is a different shape altogether, let alone a different era. Ah! Drives me nuts at times.”

“But surely he respects your opinions. I mean you are the designer.”

“Ah yes, but remember Linda he is getting me cheap, or thinks he is, because I have nothing on paper. No *real* qualifications, only my experience. Nick sold him the idea of taking me on, he wouldn't have otherwise. So he thinks he is doing me a favour, and Nick of course.”

At the mention of Nick I decide to turn the conversation a bit. I don't like Nick, I don't trust him but Heidi won't hear a word against him.

“How do you fit a shape with a colour?” I ask. “Is that what you do?”

“No, with older buildings like this pub, its more the features, which ones you want to highlight and which ones you want to disguise. That's if you can't rip them out altogether - which is what we often can't do. The man is a real tight arse.”

“So it's a bit like choosing a special dress?”

“Pardon?”

“You know. If you've got a flat chest or fat knees then you choose something, or make something, to highlight the parts of you that are your best bits, rather than the

flat chest or the fat knees.”

Heidi is laughing so hard, she’s holding her stomach. This time it’s the real laughter of happiness. As usual I start laughing too even though I don’t see what’s so funny. The sounds of our hilarity bounce off the bare walls and float out the open windows.

“Oh Linda,” Heidi splutters at last. “I spend hours seriously discussing, trying to explain to toffy nosed architects and wealthy old owners what I am trying to do. I use their language and half the time I don’t understand what I’m saying, let alone what they are. I have to bluff my way because I don’t have their training but you get across the exact concept with a pair of fat knees and a flat chest. How do you do it?”

“It’s the only way I learn anything, take anything in. By comparing it to something else. Which is why, I guess, I could never learn Maths. I couldn’t compare x to anything. It never meant anything to me.”

“Well,” says Heidi seriously. “I wish you had told me all this back in school. Maybe I would have stayed on and got all those bits of paper I need.”

“I would have, if I had known. I only just figured it out recently. Maybe you could go back to night school like I did Heidi.” I slowly pick myself up off the floor, take a final look around and grab the keys.

“No, not now. Too much time and effort and too long to wait. I’ll just have to figure out another way.”

I reach down a hand to pull her up.

“Come on. We’ll go to the estate agents and I’ll sign a lease. This is the start of something new, I can feel it. Let’s go conquer the world.”

During the day she swims the ocean and collapses, exhausted, on the warm sand . The sea in Bali can be treacherous, the undertow catching and scooping her up before spewing her out, bashing her against giant waves. The same waves carry her back to the beach each time though. She would not mind if it won and took her away. She is ready to go. He told her the pills would work a miracle cure, along with the trip. It hasn't. But it seems the sea is not ready to take her and so again she collapses exhausted on the sand. She knows the locals have decided she is barmy or evil or both. No more cries of "You buy! You buy! follow her along the beach.

At night she lies awake in her sparse hut, staring into the darkness. The same darkness that is there if she shuts her eyes. She hears the sound of the water and the snatches of voices that float across in pieces, never connecting. She has stilled her thoughts so no forms are attached to the words, they are an accompaniment to the waves.

She walks one night into the town. She is dazed by so many coloured lights and the noise. Loud, cacophonous noise. Booming voices fight the music to be heard. The Balinese girls toss back their shiny black hair as they perch on bar stools estimating the worth of the paunchy men who strut around, slapping backs, laughing and stumbling from one bar to the next.

In the heat her swollen, mosquito-bitten feet plod along carrying her as they always have. Her body is a machine. The joints keep moving, though the central mechanism no longer functions. There are not enough thoughts in her head to make her face move, just barely enough to mouth the words to buy a drink, a piece of fruit to help the feet complete the journey.

After a week or it could be two, she starts to hear, to notice, wonder. She sees the locals seeing her start to see. They follow her along the beach. "You buy! You buy!" they chant, scrambling after her on their short legs.

It is time to go now. Time to leave Bali to those who work here and those who bring them work. The people are so poor, now she can see their poverty and must leave.

"Get your litmus test brain over here Linda. I need you."

I'm trying to clean out the plastics cupboard in my kitchen when Heidi rings. I'm tired of holding them in with one hand and shoving shut the cupboard door with the other. Plastic containers never stack. Different shapes refusing to sit evenly, always threatening to fly out and hit you on the shin. They follow each other like lemmings. Am I really going to use ten old ice-cream containers? Probably not, I don't even

have a freezer, but you never know. I leave them precariously balanced like so many limpets on a rock.

Heidi's kitchen table and floor are an avalanche of papers with half formed designs. Coloured pencils, marking pens and paint pots jockey for position on every available surface. Heidi herself is flushed and restless, still in her old blue dressing gown. I don't think anyone except me would ever see her in that get up. She ferrets around in kitchen drawers, throwing out balls of string, scissors and old photographs.

"Bloody sticky tape, never there when you need it," she mutters furiously.

"So how was the trip?"

"Eh? Oh yes, fine. Just fine."

Heidi emerges from the hall cupboard with a roll of black insulation tape. She proceeds to stick up four sketches on the door, then stands back and glares at them.

"Well, what do you think?" she finally asks.

"It would help if I knew what I was looking at. Or for." I add, matching her glare for glare.

"Stained glass windows for the pub." she announces succinctly.

"Can't you just buy them? To fit the building?"

"No, no. I'm not trying to restore it. I'm trying to ...reinvent it."

"Then why have stained glass windows?"

"Because the bloody fool of an owner insists. Believe me Linda, I tried to reason with him. The building needs all the light it can get and we have enough colour, but no, he has gone nostalgic on me, insists it will provide character. Character, I ask you, the building has more character and personality than he ever will. It tells a story and it will tell an even better story when I finish it. If I can finish it." she adds gloomily.

"If I'm here for a litmus test I guess you want something not too outrageous?"

"Exactly. Something that won't offend but just might inspire anyone with half a brain."

"Oh Heidi, they're all different. I can't compare. What is most important - the lines,

the shapes, the colours?"

"Shit, if I knew that I'd be laughing." She lets out a slightly hysterical giggle, grabs a bottle of scotch from the dresser and raises an eyebrow at me.

"How much of that have you had already?" I ask crossly.

"For Christ's sake Linda. This is an emergency situation."

"Your life is one big emergency situation Heidi. I'm surprised you don't put a casualty sign on your front door."

"Please Linda, don't go crook at me now. I really need your help."

Heidi's hand is shaking, she looks pale and desperate. Surely the job can't be that important.

"Are you all right, Heidi. I mean, really all right?"

I look long and hard at her. She looks away, shrugs her thin shoulders and looks back at me.

"I just had a holiday, didn't I? Of course I'm all right. It's just this job. Please help me one more time, Linda."

"OK, OK. I'll tell you what I see in all of them, all right?"

"Yeah, yeah, that's great." Heidi sits cross legged on the floor, leans against the wall and beams up at me.

I look at the first one from every angle, especially at a distance.

"This one reminds me of something almost...religious, but not quite. More like a primitive religion, modernised. Does that make any sense?"

"Yeah, yeah. Great. Go on, go on."

"The second one is too busy."

"Too busy? What? Too loud, too flamboyant?"

"No, just too many bits and pieces. As my Dad would say, nothing to hang your hat on."

"Oh spare me your Dad's little homilies. They're so pedestrian."

"Pedestrian! Heidi, you asked me to come here and help. I do have other things to do you know." I actually sniff at this point.

I'm hoping I sound more irritated than I really am. I certainly don't want to go back to the plastics cupboard but I don't want to fight either, or let her get away with poking mullock at my family. Heidi puts me into this bind often. I am there to provide the litmus test for what Mr and Mrs Average will accept, to keep Heidi from something too outrageous but it gets personal when she tags me by what she is asking me to offer.

"Sorry Linda, I didn't mean it. You go on and I'll make us a cup of tea."

Heidi must be desperate, probably has a deadline to meet.

"The next one is good Heidi. It suggests some sort of plant or flower, but it's not, is it? I like the curves. It's gentler than the others. Maybe that's the colours though. The last one is too cold, too square or something."

"Yeah, that one is shitful, I agree. Chuck it."

I take that one off the door and place it carefully on the table. It is severe but it's beautifully drawn and would surely fit some other purpose. Heidi and Julie mock me for never throwing anything out but I hate to think anything is useless.

Sipping mugs of hot tea we sit on the couch, leaning back, considering the two remaining sketches.

"Can you use both?" I ask hopefully.

"No, 'fraid not," says Heidi, giving me an over-the-top look of sorrow. "One will just have to go. Seriously though," Heidi continues, "he wants two windows done and they are on the one wall, so we'll have to decide and I'll just make a variation on the same theme for the other window. It's O.K. Linda," she adds seeing my expression, "that's the easy bit."

I envy Heidi this talent for whipping up things out of nowhere. It takes me hours to dredge up and construct one worthwhile opening for a story. To have a product so quickly would be fantastic.

We weigh up the pro's and cons of each, curved versus linear, inspiration versus comfort.

"I suppose," I say carefully, "the owner would go for the curves."

"Uh, huh." says Heidi.

"But we prefer the other one."

"We do."

"And he hasn't got much taste."

"Not a lot, no."

"Is there any chance he would go for either of those?" I ask, pointing to the ones we have rejected.

"Absolutely no chance. Even he is not *completely* stupid."

"So, why don't you just show him the one we want plus those two and ask him to choose?"

"Linda!" shouts Heidi, clinking mugs with me. "You are indeed a brilliant woman. I'll let him think he is making the decision. Maybe I'll even argue in favour of the rejects and be annoyed at his decision."

"Yes, but don't over do it. He may not be quite as stupid or unperceptive as you think."

"Don't worry, I'll be careful. He can't resist having his ego stroked, so I'll come around slowly to agreeing with him. It will be like a conquest for him. He sees himself as a kind of Magellan in a business suit."

"Circumnavigating the world of paper and telephones?"

"Yes! Emerging triumphant from long hard lunches."

"Rushing into battle with stocks and shares."

"Seeking out and relentlessly pursuing options, deals, mergers."

"Ah! The man is a modern hero."

"A legend before his time."

The doorbell interrupts our hilarity, its strident peal bringing us both back to the present with a jolt.

"Oh shit!" yelps Heidi. "That will be Nick. We are going out to lunch with some friends of his. He can't possibly see me like this. Be a darling and keep him amused for five minutes."

Heidi races off to the bathroom and I hear the shower on full pelt as I go to open the door to Nick. Without consciously knowing why I rapidly remove the sketch we have chosen from the door, leave the curved one and stick up the two rejects beside it.

"Hi Nick. Heidi's in the shower. She won't be a minute."

Nick oozes charm as he tries to hide his annoyance, but it's there in the way he squares his shoulders even if it doesn't show on his face. He is very good looking. I wouldn't mind being seen out with him but he makes me feel uncomfortable. Heidi obviously doesn't feel like that or she wouldn't go out with him, would she?

Nick settles himself on the couch, takes a long hard look at the door, but doesn't comment. He invites me to tell him what I have been up to. Every single thing I think of saying sounds boring. Haven't I done anything exciting lately?

"Oh, just getting on with my studies...and life, you know." I cross one leg over the other to hide the stain on my jeans and wish I had at least some mascara on.

"So, you and Heidi are friends from way back I gather. Went to school together, didn't you?"

"Er, yes, that's right." I must change the subject. I have no idea what Heidi has told him of her background but experience tells me it would not have included Housing Commission flats.

"Do you still see anyone from your school days, Nick." I ask, desperately trying to lob the ball back into his court.

"Not much. They are all in Sydney of course." He throws his arms expansively across the top of the couch. "I find that as you mature you grow away from people. Your tastes change as well as your goals. Funny, you and Heidi still being friends," he continues, scrutinising me. "I mean I wouldn't think you had much in common these days."

Now I really don't know what to say. I can't exactly say that we spend most of our time putting shit on, and laughing at, members of his own sex. That would really go down like a lead balloon. Luckily he doesn't seem to notice I'm not responding, beyond a kind of simper. Perhaps it was a rhetorical question.

"What are your goals, Linda? You planning to get married, have babies, or are you a career girl like my Heidi?"

His Heidi indeed! And 'career girl' sounds like some advertisement for a new brassiere. I mutter something about taking life as it comes, sounding utterly mindless, even to my own ears, gather up the empty mugs and take them out to the kitchen.

Heidi sticks her head around the bathroom door at Nick. "Won't be long, darling."

I poke a face at her and she smiles sweetly back.

"Get a move on please Heidi," says Nick. "I don't want to be late."

I have the distinct feeling the words would have been stronger had I not been there.

I can feel locked-in aggression around this bloke, but hell, maybe I'm just imagining it because I don't like him.

"Are these for the hotel?" he asks, just before Heidi can disappear again. Heidi's voice floats back from the bedroom.

"Yes, Linda has been helping me get my ideas together. You know, two heads, better than one?"

The look I catch fleetingly on Nick's face assures me he doubts Heidi's sanity on this one, but he smiles benignly at me.

"So, what was your advice Linda?"

"Oh, it's really up to Heidi. I'm not very artistic. What do you think?"

Thank God I've picked up how to play tennis at uni.

Nick strides nonchalantly over to the door and stabs a finger at the curved one.

"Definitely this one. The others wouldn't suit the decor or the ambience. I'm not even sure she has it right yet, but she's a clever little cookie. I'm sure she will get there in the end. Edwards is a very important client. She'll have to get this one exactly right. The man is a multi-millionaire and he's not yet thirty-five. Very smart, very astute. And he is well connected, if you understand what I mean."

I instantly have a mental picture of this man, Edwards, with hinged knees and elbows, but I keep a solemn face as I mutter a suitable reply. Bloody hell, hurry up Heidi, I plead mentally. Every minute in this man's company makes me feel more gauche and less comfortable.

"My goodness," I say, glancing at my watch, "is that the time? I really must fly. Excuse me Nick."

I stick my head into the bedroom and hiss at Heidi.

"I'm going now. Hurry up."

Heidi emerges looking radiant as I grab my handbag and coat. You wouldn't believe this is the same person who was in the old blue dressing gown. Maybe it isn't.

We walk outside together.

"Speak to you soon Heidi." I say. "Bye Nick."

"Nice to see you again Linda." Nick replies.

Yeah right, I think. You don't approve of me and I sure as hell don't like or trust you.

She wonders if he knows she knows him, can see through the veneer to his hollow centre. The rising damp of his ego, his assumed confidence built on shaky foundations. She helps to paper over his doubts. Sometimes facades need saving.

Heidi is cleaning out her wardrobe while I pack her kitchen things into boxes. She drapes herself around the door frame, striking a Monroe pose and pouting.

“You’re meant to be packing Heidi, not putting on a fashion show.”

I have newsprint streaked all over and the heat is making me cranky.

“Yeah, but I need to try them on to decide which ones to keep. What do you think of this?”

This is a long slinky black dress with shoestring straps and silver inserts in the bodice.

“Why try that on, you know it looks great. Of course you’ll keep it.”

“Tricked you. Get a load of this!”

Heidi pivots on one heel and gives me her back view. There, right on her bum is a huge outline of an iron, sketched in sharp relief.

“What did you do, sit on the bloody thing? Oh, Heidi, you’ve ruined it!”

I scramble up off the floor for a closer inspection.

“Maybe you could put a big bow on it.”

“Don’t be silly. Anyway I think I’ve found something which would look perfect on you. Come on.”

She grabs me by the elbow and propels me into the bedroom.

“De dah. De dah!”

With a flourish she pulls from the wardrobe the most beautiful dress I have ever seen. It is simple, straight, plain and oh so elegant.

“It’s red.” I start to walk off.

“Go on Linda, at least try it on.”

I tentatively touch the soft fabric which hangs in sculptured folds. It's a light wool, incredibly soft.

"Why don't you want it? Does it have a burn mark too?" I ask suspiciously.

"Come off it Linda. As if I would offer you something damaged. No, I have lost a bit of weight and it looks daggy on me now. Also, you need height to wear something like this."

"You also need non-red hair. And don't frown at me Heidi. It's not just a *red* dress, it's fire engine red."

"It's got concealed pockets. Look!"

This woman really knows me and my idiosyncrasies. I love pockets, well, anywhere I can hide my hands or keep a hanky or stray earring. I shake my head.

"No. It's no good. I would never wear it. Not ever."

"OK," she says calmly, laying the dress on the bed. "It goes to the Op Shop."

"No! Sell it, if you won't wear it."

"Oh sure Linda. What? Put an ad. in the paper, maybe have a garage sale? Too common. No, it's the Op Shop for the red dress."

"All right then! I'll take it, but don't blame me if it never gets worn."

"One day Linda, you are going to wake up and realise you can wear whatever you want. I hope I'm around to celebrate."

"Why wouldn't you be?"

"Because you'll probably be ninety-five years old."

"And you'll be ninety-six."

"People like me don't live until they are ninety-six. Who wants to hang around on a walking frame waiting to die anyway? Come on, let's get on with this rubbish."

She starts throwing things into suitcases.

"Are you sure you should move in with Nick?" I ask cautiously. "I know, I know." Her dark eyebrows are contracting ominously. "It's none of my business. I just want you to be happy."

"Are you kidding? How could I *not* be happy? It's a beautiful house in Brighton.

Brighton is class Linda, real class. People over there have been rich forever. Even just having an address in Brighton will bring me more clients. You have to demonstrate who you are and what you do, by where you live, not just how you dress and talk. And think of all the contacts I'll make in one local hairdresser's." Heidi throws a designer label dress in a suitcase with the deft flick of a wrist.

"Why don't you like Nick?"

Oh Shit! Here we go. The trouble is I don't have a good solid reason for my dislike of the man. It's just a feeling I have that he barely controls something. I don't know if it's violence or tears. He is determined to succeed at any cost and I fear Heidi will end up a casualty of his reckless drive. Heidi is just as ambitious as he is but for her it is an escape from the past and a way of proving something to the world, but mainly herself. I guess they are two of a kind. Maybe I'm just scared we will drift apart, that I will lose her friendship.

"I dunno." I finally answer. "Just not my sort of person I guess."

"I could say the same of Mitch." Heidi says mischievously, darting me a look.

Mitch is a sore point. He is an academic, very intelligent but stuffy. He likes to think he is a man of the people, a committed socialist, but he hasn't got a clue. I don't think he has ever been broke. He also uses all these expansive gestures and rubs his chin which annoys the hell out of me.

"Is he any good in bed?"

"Heidi!"

"Well, is he?" She peers annoyingly into my face like Julie used to do when we were kids. "Those stuffed shirts can have a passionate interior, can't they?"

"Huh! Anyway we were talking about *your* love life not mine."

"Nick is a very good lover." She says, archly surveying her fingernails.

"Do you like him though? Do you...respect him?"

"Linda you ask the weirdest questions. Would I be moving in with him if I didn't like him. As for respect...I don't think I know what that means."

Turning Heidi's multi-coloured bowl in my hands I wonder about like and respect and how come she doesn't understand. I like this bowl. It is pretty. When I hold it up to the window it traps the light and throws out prisms of colour against the white walls in the kitchen. But I don't respect it. I could smash it right now on the tiled floor. It would shatter into tiny pieces and be irretrievably broken and I would be in no way diminished. Heidi would call me a philistine, maybe she's right, but I know what I value. Will she be another pretty piece to complement the big house in

Brighton? I carefully wrap the bowl. It's a thing of beauty which brings pleasure to the eye, to touch. With care, it will last a very long time.

"Linda!" Heidi calls out. "I've left the red dress next to your handbag. Don't forget to take it."

She pokes her head around the kitchen door and grins wickedly.

"I've put a pair of red shoes in the bag too. I thought you might like to work your way up from the bottom."

The hairdresser's is a five vodka trip. She catches a taxi, manages not to stumble or fumble with the door. Stresses she doesn't have much time. Busy. Busy. Tries to relax as they wash her hair, feeling the gentle pressure of their fingers on her scalp. The warm soothing water. She tells him to do his usual good job. She has an allergy, must keep her dark glasses on. He won't know she has her eyes closed against the mirrors waiting to catch her out.

Heidi and I are taking a walk along Albert Park beach, down to the St. Kilda Pier for drinks and to watch the sun setting behind the water. Heidi is in a strange mood, alternatively pensive, gloomy, funny and distracted.

"What's up, Heidi," I venture, as we lean over the pier staring out to sea at the container ships moored waiting out of Port Melbourne.

"Oh, I don't know," sighs Heidi. "I...I just can't seem to find *me* any more."

Heidi makes rapid blinking motions with her eyes and plays with a strand of hair, twirling it round and around.

"I feel like I try on other people's mannerisms, speech, but nothing fits. Nothing fits *me*. Then I discard them because they *don't* fit, like clothes for somebody who isn't my shape and never will be. But I'm not left with anything. You know? It's like soon I won't have any more to try on and then what am I going to do?"

"Shit eh?" I give a lop sided grin as of old. "What about your job, your swish house, Nick? There must be *something* that feels like it's yours.

"Oh, sure, there are *things*, possessions that are mine, and I do my job OK. Nick doesn't know me, he thinks he does. I know all of his faults, but it's *me* that feels like a screwed up old hanky!"

Heidi eyeballs me seriously and points.

"Now, *you* Linda, you *know* who you are."

"Yeah, well, some of the time, but it depends on who I'm with. Sometimes other people make me feel sure of myself, other times they make me feel left out and alone. Clothes too, you know. Sometimes I feel I look a million dollars and other days I just know I am big and ugly."

"But that's moods," counters Heidi triumphantly.

"Well, isn't that what you mean?"

"No, no." Heidi scratches her head in annoyance. "This is a permanent thing I'm talking about, not just day to day or week to week stuff and not depending on who I'm with. It's like there is one me, the outer me, that goes on living, working and all that, and looking gorgeous."

Heidi cups the back of her head with one hand and struts. Suddenly she collapses on a bench seat and clasps her knees up against her chest, her head down. I have

to strain to hear her.

"But, there is the other me, the inside me, and it feels like it's getting smaller. It's hiding there, all the horrible stuff, like,well like some sort of black rash that will one day come out and everyone will see what I am really like."

Heidi quickly looks up and screws up her face.

"My mother is a nut case Lindy. Do you think I'm going nuts too?"

I have never been able to figure out whether Heidi's mother had a screw loose or was just permanently angry.

Suddenly Heidi pokes out her tongue at this poor old bloke walking past, just like she used to do when we were at school. I can't help laughing out loud.

We get up and continue walking and, as often in the past, we seem to be sharing the same memories.

"You know Lindy I thought that when I grew up and got away from the flats and Mum everything would change. I would change. That's the difference between us you know, you never needed to change, you never hated that life the way I did."

"Oh yes I did!"

I'm remembering vividly now, the grey concrete blocks that were home and the way they defined us, stereotyped us in other people's eyes. The rough kids from the flats.

"I don't think I ever told you about this Heidi. My friend Jo from Perth was staying. We must have been 18, maybe 19. Well, one night we went into the city to a dance and Jo met this guy, Peter I think his name was. Anyway he had a car and he drove us home. As we turned off Warrigal Road into Batesford Road coming up the hill he said, 'Aren't these housing commission houses revolting? They're not as bad as the flats though.' Jo was in the front seat and she turned around to me and raised her eyebrows. I shook my head at her and neither of us said anything until we came near my place and I said pull in here thanks, this is where I live. The poor bloke started mumbling away, trying to apologise. I just thanked him for the lift and hopped out, leaving Jo to say her goodbyes. We laughed about it when she came inside and I said it didn't matter, he wasn't to know."

We both stop again and stare out at the sea. Heidi is listening to the bitterness in my voice after all these years.

"But it did matter, didn't it?"

"Oh yeah, it mattered all right, at the time. But after that I started to think well bugger them, bugger them all. All those people who think they're better than me just

because they live in a real house. The feeling never leaves you though, it just takes different forms in coming out.”

“So where does it come out for you? I have the black rash inside me, what have you got Lindy?”

“I bloody well clean everything in sight. I am the completely obsessive house cleaner. You could eat your dinner off my toilet seat.”

We collapse laughing about what sort of meals you would eat off a toilet seat and Heidi’s black rash being flushed down the toilet bowl, followed by my disinfectant.

She tries to talk herself through it, through the fear that comes out of nowhere, yet again, for no reason she can fathom. It is a cloudless night, bare feet on the verandah. The cold air. She sucks it in and waits to shiver. Out in the dark with no walls it is easier to breathe. Just breathe in and out and maybe the fear will go, at least for a while. If it is living inside her like the anger before and will not release its hold. She is sick of fighting against an unknown attacker, lying constantly in wait.

It’s late afternoon when my typewriter ribbon finally gives up the ghost. I’ve made it last way beyond its time. Heidi and the way she sounded at the pier has been worrying away at the edges of my consciousness. Bloody hell, it’s her birthday today. Good friend that I am, I’d almost forgotten. I snatch up the receiver and dial her number.

“Happy Birthday, Heidi! How are you?”

“I’m fine, Linda. You’ve just caught me. I’m going away for a while.”

Heidi sounds calm and in control, almost happy.

“Great. Is Nick going with you?”

“No, I’m going by myself in a new outfit. It’s beautiful. I’ve decided I deserve some place special. I’m going to have the best birthday ever.”

“Good on you. Give me a ring when you get back. I’m off into town to get a new ribbon for old faithful. Have a terrific time, Heidi.”

“Oh, I will, you can be sure. Take care of yourself Linda.”

The usual old Heidi, creating some mystery for me. She didn’t tell me where she was going or how long for. Strange for her to be going away again so soon after Bali. Maybe she has a new man someplace.

The insistent shrill of the telephone interrupts my writing for the second time and it's only eleven a.m.

"Linda? This is Nick. Do you know where Heidi is?"

God, how I hate this man. He makes Heidi sound like pair of socks, his voice peevish and abrupt.

"She told me she was going away for a few days."

"When did she tell you that? Did she tell you where she was going?"

I breathe deeply and evenly. Trying to control my temper.

"No, Nick, Heidi didn't say where she was going, only that it was somewhere expensive and she deserved it. I rang her yesterday morning, to wish her happy birthday."

"Shit. The bitch has taken my credit card. You're sure you don't know where she is?"

I turn my burst of laughter into a cough and excuse myself. Good on you, Heidi. I hope you spend all his stupid money. Give yourself a good present. Obviously he's forgotten.

"No, sorry Nick, I haven't a clue."

"Well, make sure you ring me if you hear from her, won't you?"

"Yeah, sure, Nick. See you."

I'm finally in the middle of my story and the words are flowing so fast my fingers are struggling to keep pace when the 'phone goes again. Shit!

"Hello. Yes?"

"You sound grumpy, Linda. What's up?"

"Julie. Sorry love, I'm right in the middle of a story that's working for once and I keep getting interrupted. How are you? How's my nephew?"

"He's beautiful as ever. I won't keep you. Just wanted to let you know the good news. I'm going to have another baby. I'm so happy, Linda. I want to give Matty a brother or a sister and after all that trouble with my tubes I was beginning to think I wouldn't be able to."

"That's great, fantastic. I'm happy for you. Are you OK physically? Did the doctor give you the all clear?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Blood pressure and all that stuff is good. I feel so lucky. You go get on with your story. I hope it's a winner."

I've finished my first draft and feel the first sense of elation I always get. I give myself a break and make a cup of tea before the serious business of starting the second draft. That's usually a depressing time when I'm not sure if it's brilliant or crap. I take my mug out to the balcony, surprised to find that it's late afternoon already and people in the other flats are arriving home from work. I feel so happy for Julie. She was born to be a mother, probably got the knitting books out already.

This person's timing is better, I think, as I hear the telephone ringing yet again.

"Linda speaking."

"Linda, this is Nick."

Voices convey meaning. His voice is flat, emotionless.

"What's wrong. Something's wrong with Heidi, isn't it?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, Linda. She..."

I never thought I'd hear Nick sound like this. There's a catch in his voice.

"Has she had an accident? *Where* is she Nick?"

"Heidi's dead, Linda. She suicided in the penthouse suite of that new hotel in the city last night. The police have just left."

"No! She can't have. Heidi wouldn't *do* that. She always bounced back. She *can't* be dead!"

"I'm sorry, Linda. I know you two were close. Look, I've got to go now, got to make arrangements and ring people. I'll let you know about the funeral. OK?"

"Wait! Nick. Did she leave a note?"

I'm too late. The dial tone buzzes in my ear.

Why, Heidi, why? I'm still here. Why couldn't you tell me? I thought we told each other everything.

I write and write and then rip them up, page after page. I squash the paper into tiny balls, squeezing so hard it hurts. There's a furious argument I'm having with Heidi, but she refuses to answer me. I know what you did Heidi but I need to know why. Was she depressed, the cops asked Nick. How the hell would he know? What? They think happy, contented people suicide? Hey, it's such a lovely day, I think I'll go top myself.

When someone dies after a long illness you have the inevitability and a sense of peace for the one who finally died. When it is through an accident it is an act of fate, chance. A cruel fate to be cheated of life. Why did you cheat yourself, Heidi?

Suicide, that horrible word meaning you chose to end your life. A very definite wish in Heidi's case, she planned it, bought the new clothes, rented the suite. And left me right out. I'm still here and she's not coming back. Not ever. The anger leaves me and all that's left is this strange feeling, like a huge pipe that's hollow on the inside.

I sit in the comforting winter sun on my balcony. The sky is big and blue. A tiny new shoot in my pot plant, it has survived many moves. It is renewing itself. It won't deliberately give up. It will fight it's way through the soil. You always fought, Heidi, you taught me to fight, to rail against injustice, not to accept what wasn't fair. How could you be so unfair? Leave me not knowing why? Perhaps you didn't know why either. Perhaps you got sick of fighting.

If Heidi's spirit is living on somewhere, she knows and I know. Nobody can take away my memories and what I know. I *will* hear her laughter and see her heavy frown, the indignant toss of her dark hair. No-one can take that away from me. Not Heidi, not anyone. I'll hold on to that for the rest of my life.

It is the perfect Melbourne day for a funeral. I bet you deliberately went in winter, Heidi, so your funeral could have all the atmospherics it needed. God hasn't let you down. A thin grey drizzle, bare leafless trees as I gaze out my bedroom window.

I stand for a long time under the shower, letting the warm water soothe and prepare me. I use the expensive soap I have been saving and condition my hair well. My new underwear is laid out on the bed. You would have loved these white lacy knickers and bra. The first I have ever had which matched, were made to be worn together. The lace is soft and delicate. I take the panty hose out of their packaging and roll them carefully down to the feet so I can pull them on slowly, to fit firm and snug. I have filed my nails so as not to snag and ladder them. Not only have I filed my nails, Heidi, but I have varnished them. Clear nail polish though. You know me. Never one to go too boldly at first. One toe in the water on any new venture. I sit at my dressing table and pluck out a couple of stray eyebrows, the way you taught me. I smooth on the moisturiser, like you said, with upward movements to work against the forces of gravity. I check out the fine lines at the corners of my

eyes. Are they getting deeper? At least you will be spared the indignity of well-formed wrinkles, carving into your face as time takes control of your skin. Would it have been so bad though? We would have had them together? No getting maudlin, Linda, you'll make your mascara run. Black mascara, no more brown for me. Not anywhere. Ever.

I search through my wardrobe for something dark and appropriate. I flick through the hangers impatiently, discarding, rejecting. My hand stills. The red dress. I take it from the wardrobe, still in the dry cleaner's plastic wrapping, take it off the hanger and put it on before I can change my mind.

You were right, Heidi. The red dress looks wonderful as you said it would. The wool crepe falls softly, the fitted sleeves are a little short on my long arms but the padded shoulders make me look a confident woman. It fits so well I wonder if you bought this dress for me, not yourself.

I stand in front of the full length mirror on the wardrobe door as I slip on the matching red shoes. Tiny heels so my height isn't radically increased.

As I move from side to side, catching myself from all angles, I slip my hands into the pockets. You knew my love for pockets would get me into it some time. In the right-hand pocket I touch something. A small piece of folded paper. Did you hide money in pockets, Heidi, the way I hide notes around my flat for a "just in case" situation? Can't imagine you doing that. I pull it out, unfold it and read your hasty scrawl.

Congratulations Linda! You finally did it! Leave it on ,wherever you're off to. Enjoy the new you.