

There is geometry in the humming of the strings, there is music in the spacing of the spheres.

– Pythagoras

*Birth or Death? There was Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.*

– T. S. Eliot, *The Journey of the Magi*

*

IT WAS AN INDULGENCE, PERHAPS. A SCATTERING TO THE WIND OF MONEY he might well have dispensed more wisely. But it had evolved into far more than a holiday. It had become a kind of pilgrimage, a journey into healing. Or so he hoped. He might almost be able to believe in something again. In what wasn't yet clear. In humanity? In God? In himself?

He had seen all that he had hoped to see, and more. Stonehenge at dawn on the summer solstice, listening to *Sonnenaufgang* from *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. *The Starry Night* in Amsterdam, in the Van Gogh Museum, when by sheer chance it happened to be on loan from New York for a few months. Holbein's dead, so very dead, Christ at the *Künstmuseum* in Basel. The magnificent *Pietà* in St. Peter's Basilica. This and much, much more. And so it was that he arrived at last in Florence, the final leg of his trip before returning to Rome and flying from Fiumicino back to Australia. Already, that morning, he had stood in awe before Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* in the Uffizi. Now, the Accademia.

He had not expected it, turning the corner. Of course he had expected to see the statue, the magnificent *David*, but he had not expected *this*. Even from this distance, before it loomed above him, before he saw the echoes of light on the smooth marble curves. Before he became aware of the oddly small penis and the too-large head. Even from back here, seeing

it framed by the narrowing perspective of the gallery walls, he felt the tug, the gut-wrenching tug. An enormous hand, perhaps the statue's own overlarge hand, had seized his sinews and begun to pluck, to pluck a melody in which beauty and pain were one. It terrified him. Each vibration killed him, brought him to life, and killed him again. Life and death were just two halves of the same oscillation.

When Alan Carter finally boarded the flight back to Australia, he was hopeful—not certain, but hopeful—that he was again in the lifeward phase of the oscillation. Except that it was no longer quite so easy to tell them apart, life and death.

*

FIRST MOVEMENT

1

FROM THE FIRST, AS A CHILD, ALAN HAD BELIEVED IN EVERYTHING. Unicorns, fairies, goblins, Martians, wizards, ghosts, daleks, platypuses. Six-legged fire-breathing giraffes. Why not? He would draw one if you asked him to.

The house in Dauntsey Rd., his kingdom, had been Alan's home for as long as he could remember, although he was born in a rented apartment in the western suburbs, while his parents were trying to save a deposit for a house. He was born on the fourth of October, 1957, the same day, his father later told him, that the Soviet Union launched Sputnik 1.

'We'll be living on Mars by the time you're all grown up,' his father was fond of saying.

Not long after his birth, his parents had bought this house, a little closer to the city. His father generally preferred to work an afternoon shift at the factory, starting around three in the afternoon. When Alan was around two and a half years old his mother returned to work, covering mornings as a receptionist at a local medical practice. So Alan himself was brought up in shifts, belonging in the mornings to his father, and in the afternoons and evenings to his mother. Each shaped the world for him in their own fashion. They overlapped for an hour or two around lunchtime, and generally on weekends, unless his father worked overtime. He had no brothers or sisters with whom to compete for attention.

Alan had a large back garden in which to play out his life, a space over which he gradually established dominion during the years, giving to

each corner and each feature a particular significance. In the mornings his father would often work a vegetable patch that occupied the upper left hand corner, on raised beds. Depending on the time of year, there would be corn, tomatoes, broccoli, potatoes, beans, peas, carrots, and occasionally something a little more exotic, such as artichokes or bok choy, pushing up through the soil. Alan eagerly awaited the emergence of beanstalks, but none, so far, had lived up to his expectations. As he grew older, his father would encourage him to take responsibility for a particular vegetable.

‘You look after these peas, Son,’ he might say. And together they would dig the furrows and push in the seeds. Alan would check them daily, and his mother or father, whosever shift it was at the time, would patiently allow themselves to be led by the hand to witness the first shoots pushing through the soil, and often every shoot that followed. They would make a celebration of the first harvest, shelling the peas together and making them part of a special meal, a Sunday roast lunch, perhaps—those that survived the shelling process without being eaten, that is.

Other parts of the garden were Alan’s private domain. The large rainwater tank served sometimes as a fortress that he defended valiantly, sometimes as a rocketship that he rode bravely to the moon. The clump of fruit trees in the corner, apricot, peach, almond, became a magical woodland where adventures were played out with his friends. His story book friends, that is. Sometimes he would be Robin Hood, but occasionally he preferred the role of Little John. Sometimes it was Peter Pan who climbed, ever so bravely, into the lower branches. Tinker Bell would flitter in and out of the foliage as the sun caught the surface of the shivering leaves. At other times he would be Bilbo Baggins hiding from the goblins that were always just out of sight behind one of the other trees. His world was peopled with an assortment of potential allies or enemies.

These creatures came to inhabit his garden thanks to his mother and father, who would read to him before bed every night, and who gradually taught him to recognise the words for himself. Or they would make up stories of their own. He particularly enjoyed the weekends, when his father would bring the characters to life with his range of voices, sometimes declaiming with extravagant gestures as he strode up and

down the room. Long after he could read himself, he continued to enjoy these performances.

He often shared the garden with his other main friends, the family cat, Trisha and the family dog, Shep. These friends went through various incarnations over the years, but always bore the same names. In his earliest memories, Trisha was a ginger and Shep a border collie. He wrote roles for them in his adventures, roles they sometimes, reluctantly, agreed to play. When they diverged from the script he would rewrite it around them. The world was nothing if not malleable.

Until his school days, his physical world was largely delineated by that tall, grey wooden fence, bordering the garden on three sides. There were gaps between the flat wooden planks, through which he would glimpse other worlds, some of which he longed to enter, some of which he feared. The world on the left hand side was inhabited by a man and a woman, older than his parents, and therefore ancient, who spoke with a funny accent. He would sometimes spy on the man working in *his* vegetable patch, but then run away quickly, heart pounding, for fear of being seen. The world at the back of the garden was the domain of a whole tribe of people who worked all the time on the stripped down carcasses of cars. From there would emanate sounds of music and shouting and laughter, and sometimes the roar of resurrected engines. The precise composition of this tribe seemed quite fluid, although Alan could rarely identify individual faces. Sometimes they became the goblins from which it was necessary to flee.

On the right hand side he glimpsed something entirely different. It looked to him like a wild world, a jungle, and he would sometimes think that strange animals were crawling through the undergrowth towards him. One of these strange creatures, it turned out, was Melanie.

2

Crouching by the fence, peering through the gaps, Alan watched, terrified and fascinated, as the bushes on the other side hissed and shivered because of movement within or behind them. He held his breath, eyes wide, ready to flee at the first sign of danger. A head pushed through a

gap in the bushes, and he leapt back. It was surely some Gollum-like creature. He had glimpsed large eyes, and ears that stuck out from the sides of a triangular head. It giggled.

‘I can see you!’ it said, or hissed. And giggled again. He gasped as an eye peered at him through the crack.

‘I’m Melanie,’ it seemed to say. ‘Do you live there?’

He edged nearer, but with the face so close to the fence he could see little of it.

‘We just moved in a coupla weeks ago. I’m almost six,’ the voice continued. ‘Do you talk?’

‘I’m Alan.’ He plucked up his courage. ‘I’m six and a *half*. I’ve lived here *forever*.’

‘Hullo, Alan.’ Some fingers poked between the planks and carried out a little hello jig. He wiggled his fingers back from where he crouched, two feet back from the fence.

‘You’re a *girl*?’ he asked.

‘Of course I am, silly.’

Over the course of the next few days, they hatched a conspiracy. At the bottom of the garden, behind the fruit trees on Alan’s side and a shed on Melanie’s, they found a place where they believed they couldn’t be seen by their respective parents. There they manoeuvred one of the slats of the fence so that they could rotate it to one side. Through this enlarged gap they could see each other properly and exchange items from time to time. One or other would bring an extra biscuit from the house, or they would share a cup of cordial, or a packet of Life Savers, while they invented a world for themselves.

When he could see her more clearly, he acknowledged that she was most probably human, although they agreed she might have some fairy blood.

‘Only you grew big ears instead of wings,’ he laughed. She tried to reach through the gap to punch him, but he was too quick. He held his open palms up to his own ears and flapped them.

They decided that he was a knight of the Round Table, on a quest to save damsels in distress; although sometimes he preferred to be King Arthur himself, or Merlin. He would come to her rescue, but then she

would tell him to go away, and cast a spell on him and turn him into a toad, after which he would hop around on all fours and make what he imagined were toad-like noises.

Sometimes they talked about other things, so-called real things, such as their respective schools, for instance. She went to a Catholic school and he went to a state school. She was being sent to a Catholic school, she explained, because she was going to become a nun or a saint. She confused the two. Or they would talk about stuff they had seen on television. She liked *Mr. Squiggle*, which he thought was for babies. He preferred *Whiplash*, of course. But they agreed that *Mr. Ed* was the best.

It wasn't until some weeks later that they dared to move another paling out of the way and squeeze through from one side to the other. Their respective parents knew about the friendship, of course, almost from the beginning. Alan was not as well hidden as he believed, particularly when his mother came out to hang the washing. And she quickly noticed the extra biscuit or two being pocketed surreptitiously. The mothers met initially over the back fence, then in each other's home, and by the time the fence was breached they were themselves fast friends. Even the children realised it was pointless to maintain the conspiracy any longer, and quickly recognised the advantages of having afterschool snacks in the neighbour's house as often as in their own. Sometimes they managed both on the same day.

3

Melanie would bring him things. The dead bird, for example, that her cat had killed; or the snakeskin that she had found under the bushes. One day she brought him something which, in her opinion, was probably the skeleton of a Martian. He wasn't so sure, being an expert on such matters. Melanie was always in things, under things, or behind things, in places where human beings rarely ventured. Alan was more interested in crawling into books than into holes. He was quite happy to look at the things she brought him, but not so keen to poke and prod them. Besides, it was more fun to imagine things.

They were in her half of their shared habitat, one day, when they found the box. They had been looking at one of Alan's dinosaur books, and started digging a hole, with the expectation of unearthing a *Tyrannosaurus* skeleton. Melanie was convinced that the small bone she had found the other day was a dinosaur's finger. Alan's suggestion that it might be a chop bone was dismissed with a contemptuous sneer. So they were digging. When the hole was about as deep as the length of Melanie's forearm, the trowel they were using scraped against something.

'See,' she said. 'Told ya.'

However, a little more digging and probing revealed that it was a metal object. Once they cleared around the edges, it revealed itself to be a biscuit tin. Arnott's shortbread biscuits, in fact.

'I bet it was left here by ancient Romans,' she suggested.

He hesitated to express any scepticism concerning whether ancient Romans had ever actually lived in South Australia, or, indeed, indulged in Arnott's biscuits. Scepticism was a new window on the world through which Alan was beginning to peer; especially scepticism about what *other* people believed.

With difficulty they cleared around the tin, and eventually succeeded in dislodging it and bringing it to the surface. Melanie lifted the edge of her dress and used it to wipe away some of the remaining dirt. She looked around the garden, also checking the kitchen window, to see if they were being spied upon. The coast was clear, but as an extra precaution she suggested taking the box into the caravan that occupied one corner of the garden, and opening it in there, away from prying eyes.

'There might be treasure.'

Once inside the caravan, the tin resisted their first attempts to unlock its secrets. It was rusted firmly shut. With patience, Alan used a screwdriver to gradually pry the lid away. Melanie paced the length of the caravan impatiently, of the opinion that a hammer would do the job more quickly and more effectively. Eventually, Alan could feel that the lid was ready to yield to the pressure, and was poised to lift it away. Before he could, Melanie put a hand on his arm.

'Wait,' she insisted, earnestly. 'What if it's full of spells and stuff?'

'Or biscuits.'

‘Million year old biscuits!’ She giggled. ‘OK, open it then.’

With a profound sense of drama, Alan lifted the lid. Inside was a large plastic bag. He tipped the contents onto the bed. There was a silver chain with a crystal pendant – ‘See, treasure!’ she exclaimed –, a small photograph album, containing black and white photographs, and two notebooks. Melanie immediately claimed the silver chain and crystal. The photographs appeared to represent a family, sometimes grouped together, sometimes photographed separately. The pages of the two notebooks were covered with writing, which Alan could make out only with difficulty.

‘We should take these to your mum,’ said Alan, half-heartedly.

‘No!’ protested Melanie. ‘I want this,’ she indicated the crystal. ‘It’s prob’ly magic.’

‘Do you want these?’ he asked, holding up the notebooks and album. They had found them in her garden, after all.

‘Maybe they’re books of spells?’ She looked at the notebooks but couldn’t read the writing. Perhaps it was a secret language. She wrinkled her nose and twisted her mouth. ‘You can have them,’ she said. ‘But if there’re spells, I want to know.’

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘I’m gonna try and figure it out.’ He put the notebooks and album back into the plastic bag and tucked the package into the waistband of his shorts, under his shirt.

That night, after he was tucked away in bed, he turned on his bedside lamp and took out the first notebook. It started with a date: 29 January 1947. After that, there was about half a page of writing, then a space of one line, then another date. It’s a diary, he thought. They used diaries at school to mark down special occasions and keep a record of homework and stuff. On the inside cover there was a name and address. The address was Melanie’s address. The name was ‘Beth Duffield’. He couldn’t read the handwriting very easily. He fell asleep trying.

The next morning he put the notebooks away on the top shelf of his wardrobe, thinking he would read them another time.

Later that day, he informed Melanie that as far as he could tell there were no spells in the notebooks, and that it was just some girl’s diary from

ages ago. The pendant Melanie kept hidden in a drawer in her dressing table.

‘It’s pretty. And it still might be magic.’

4

Melanie was almost the only person that Alan ever played with, outside school hours at least. At school he had one or two friends that he hung around with during morning and afternoon recess and lunch hour, but he never went to their homes after school or on weekends; and they never came to his home. So he came to depend very much on Melanie for company. She, however, had other friends that she would sometimes bring home, and then she would ignore him. The wooden slats in the fence would remain closed. He would hear them talking and laughing together. Melanie’s laugh would always stand out, because it sounded to him a bit like a donkey. He would stay on his side of the fence, listening, hoping that the others would leave. He tried to play on his own, the way he had before he met Melanie, but it was never quite the same; eventually he would go inside to watch television or read.

By now – he was nine years old – he had read *The Hobbit* for himself, and was starting on *Lord of the Rings*. A daunting task. Sometimes, as the sun was setting and the stars beginning to come out, along with the mosquitoes, he would lie on his back in the garden and look up and listen. It was easy to imagine that the world of Gandalf and Frodo was just the other side of a thin veil, and that he could step through and enter a world of elves and dwarves and magic. A magical but dangerous world. He thought he could hear the stars moving – a faint hiss and swish like a receding tide. On one such night, with his eyes open only a slit, a figure pounced on him, and his heart leapt into his throat. But it was only Melanie who, very Gollum-like, had snuck through the gap in the fence and crept towards him from behind. Now she rolled about in hysterics. He was a little annoyed at her, not only because she had frightened him, but also because she had ignored him all afternoon while her friends were around.

‘Why don’t you ever want me ’round when your friends are here?’ he asked sulkily.

‘’Cause we’d tease you and you’d hate us – you’d hate me. You’re a boy,’ she added. He wasn’t sure if that was an additional reason or an explanation.

His annoyance slowly dissipated.

‘What ya doin’?’ she asked.

She lay beside him and looked up.

‘Nothing. Just watching the stars.’ He pointed to where Orion could be seen, hanging upside down in the sky. ‘Do you see those three stars? That’s Orion’s belt; and that’s his sword. Down there’s his head.’

‘What’s his head doing down there?’

‘He’s upside down.’

‘Huh?’

‘Never mind.’

‘I can’t see it,’ she said, after a while.

‘Never mind,’ he repeated.

‘My mum’s having another baby,’ she said after a moment.

‘Cool. Do you want a brother or a sister?’

‘I’d prefer a gorilla,’ she said. ‘Or maybe it’s a Martian, with little antennas that pop out of his head. Something interesting.’

‘You’re a nutcase.’

She punched him.

His mother opened the back door and let out the dog, who came and jumped on both of them. By this time Shep had metamorphosed into a black and white cocker spaniel. Alan had developed the theory that Shep was a Time Lord dog, and that when he died he was taken away to a safe place, where he could regenerate.

5

When they were older they went to the same high school, because Melanie’s parents couldn’t afford to send her to the Catholic school.

‘Besides,’ she reflected to him one day, ‘I haven’t shown any nun-like tendencies.’

She more or less ignored him when they were at school, even when they were in the same class. She absolutely *would not* be seen walking home with him, which often led to the ridiculous situation where he would walk about one hundred yards behind her, even if she were on her own.

‘Someone might *see*,’ she insisted.

Alan was starting to grow, his hair was turning darker, and he was breaking out in pimples. Some parts of him grew more quickly than others, it seemed. If Alan had liked to keep to himself before, he now hated to be seen anywhere, by anyone, including, much of the time, by Melanie. And towards the end of the decade, at the conclusion of their second year in high school, his voice began to betray him.

For a time, Melanie remained skinny, and straight up and down. She wore her hair a little longer because she thought her ears stuck out too much. The shape of her face was quite triangular, and Alan still saw something of the elf or fairy – or Gollum, he would say, at his crueller moments – about her. However, over the course of the next year or so he watched her change. She seemed to become rounder, both in her body and in her face.

Alan spent most of his time reading, devouring science fiction novels. He developed an interest in music. Out of his small weekly allowance he managed to buy, once a fortnight or so, a new single to play on his small record player. Another new passion was jigsaw puzzles. They had to have at least two thousand pieces before they would interest him. He would set them out on a wooden board in his bedroom, taking up most of the free floor space. During school holidays he would sometimes be up until two or three o’clock in the morning, completing a section of sea or sky. His fascination with the stars never quite deserted him. For Christmas that year, his parents bought him a reflector telescope. Especially in the warmer months he would sometimes sleep outside, so that when he woke at various times during the night he could explore previously unseen skies. The stars always seemed so much brighter then. It still fascinated him to see a satellite travelling at such an astonishing pace across the sky.

Melanie, in contrast, spent most of her time with friends, going to the movies or the beach, cruising around the local shopping mall; or they

would simply hang around each other's homes. From what he saw of her at school, she didn't seem terribly interested in anything it had to offer.

Early one spring, when Alan was fourteen, he was hanging out the washing for his mother when he heard Melanie, from the other side of the fence.

'I'm bored,' she said.

He walked towards the fence, unsure if she were talking to him. Her head popped up over the top of the railings. She was standing on a chair. Her hair was in two pigtails, one of which she had stuck into her mouth. She pulled it out and pouted.

'I'm bored,' she repeated, trying to blow away the last hairs that stuck stubbornly to her lips.

He shrugged slightly, unsure how to respond.

'No friends to hang around with today?'

'Nope.'

'Aaaaah.'

'Wanna come over for a while?'

He looked at her sceptically.

'Suddenly you want to spend time with me?'

It was her turn to shrug.

'OK. I'll come over for a while. Just let me finish hanging the washing.'

'I'll be in the caravan,' she said, and hopped down.

It had been months since they had spent much time together, possibly even as far back as the previous summer holidays. They may not have exchanged more than two dozen words since. When he had finished hanging the washing he climbed the fence – crawling through the gap had become impractical several years ago. He walked over to where the caravan rested, in the far right hand corner of the garden, and called through the screen door.

'Melanie?'

She came to the door and blew smoke through the screen into his face.

'Are you smoking?' he asked, surprised and strangely disappointed.

‘Duh! Wanna puff?’

‘No thanks.’

‘Come in then.’

As he stepped up into the caravan, she fell back onto the bed. She wore a thin cotton dress that sank down around her body, outlining the shape of her thighs. He stood frozen in the doorway. The hills and valleys of her body stirred him in unfamiliar ways.

‘What are you staring at?’ she asked, blowing smoke towards the ceiling.

‘Nothing,’ he muttered.

‘Well stop standing there like a dork and sit over here.’ She patted the bed.

He felt his face turning scarlet, and cold sweat beaded his forehead.

‘N-no. I have to go to...’ He stepped back out of the caravan and headed for the fence.

‘Weirdo!’ she called after him.

6

Towards the end of their third year at high school a dance was to be held.

Although Melanie and Alan had not seen much of each other lately, he still often followed behind her on the way home from school. She was usually with one or two friends. He would try not to look at them too much, in case they looked back, preferring, instead, to observe the cracks in the paving slabs. Melanie’s hair was growing longer, and was now about one third of the way down her back. She had begun to wear glasses, which he thought suited her face. Occasionally she would glance back, then lean over to a friend, whisper something, and start giggling. He would slow down, then, and let them turn the next corner ahead of him. Once or twice she was alone, and when she glanced back he believed he detected the beginnings of a smile.

A few weeks before the dance, the third year classes undertook a science excursion to the coast, to examine fossil deposits and other geological features. Jagged sedimentary rocks fronted onto a small sandy cove where the classes were presently enjoying a lunch break. It was a

cool, windy, but sunny day. The sea chased excitedly towards the shore, each wave tripping and giggling over the one before it. The wind whipped up little devils of sands that stung the face. While Alan was eating his lunch – a rather warm tuna sandwich –, someone dashed from behind and ran off with his notebook. He jumped to his feet and headed off in pursuit, only then realising that the thief was Melanie. They dodged this way and that, kicking up more sand, splashing in and out of the water, while other groups looked on and cheered. Eventually Alan managed to snag hold of Melanie’s tee-shirt – they were out of uniform for the excursion – and drag her towards him. She resisted momentarily, then suddenly turned to face him, stretched up, and kissed him firmly on the mouth. Then she ran off again, leaving him stranded, towards a group of her friends, who laughed and clapped with great excitement. She dropped his notebook down next to his schoolbag, turned back and, although she was too far away for him to be sure, he thought she poked out her tongue at him. Alan walked back to his things, head down, desperate not to meet anyone’s gaze. To his surprise, a couple of the other boys in his class came up and slapped him on the back. He couldn’t suppress a smile.

One day the following week, when Melanie was walking home alone, he turned a corner to find her waiting for him. Without a word she started walking with him.

‘Do you remember this?’ she asked after a while, and brought out from under her uniform a crystal on a silver chain. ‘I found it the other day when I was going through some stuff.’

‘Yeah,’ he said. He suddenly remembered the notebooks in his wardrobe. ‘So...’

‘I think I’ll prob’ly leave school at the end of this year,’ she said.

‘Uh huh.’

She cast a quick sideways glance at him. There it was again, that half smile.

‘Did you forget how to talk?’ she asked.

He shrugged.

‘You haven’t been interested in talking to me for years, so yeah, I guess I have.’

‘Well, yeah.’ Her eyes darted off to the right, her hand releasing the pendant.

There seemed nothing more to say, and Alan became increasingly uncomfortable as they continued on their way. Their destination seemed to draw no closer. He looked around at the gardens they were passing: dry front lawns, in the middle of which often stood a single large date palm, vicious spines lining the base of the fronds. He distracted himself by wondering why that had become the fashion, way back whenever.

‘Want some Tic-Tacs?’ he asked eventually, fetching a box from his pocket.

‘Thanks.’ She opened her hand and he shook a few into her palm. ‘Thanks,’ she said again.

Sometime during the next century they finally reached their homes.

‘See ya,’ she said, turning in at her gate.

‘Yeah, see ya.’ For no more than a beat he hesitated, before moving on.

The next day, walking with her friends, she ignored him. And the next day. And the next.

About two weeks later, he paced in the back garden, from the veranda to the fence and back; then he sat for a while and picked up the book he was trying to read. But his attention would wander, and he would find himself watching the dog twitching in her dreams – Shep was now a female golden cocker spaniel, but the name stuck despite the obvious discrepancies. Or he might trace the vapour trail of a jet passing high overhead. Even the smallest thing would distract him: a grasshopper leaping from one blade of grass to another; a beetle crawling up the wall. With one ear he listened for sounds from next door. Then he began pacing again, carrying a stick and whipping some of the grass that grew in taller clumps here and there. No one was home next door; his restlessness had already consumed the morning and part of the afternoon. With every passing minute his resolve melted away. If she’s not here within half an hour, he thought to himself, I won’t ask. With the passing of that half hour, he graced himself another. The next half hour, though, that would definitely be the last.

Then, just after three-thirty, he heard a car pull into their driveway; someone opened the back gate, and the car drove in. There were voices, there was the jingling of keys, then the sounds of the back door being unlocked and opened. It closed behind their chatter. He had halted his pacing, frozen to the spot, fearful of being seen through the fence. There he stayed, swaying back and forth slightly on the spot, as though still pacing internally. He searched within to see if he could assemble some fragments of resolve.

Alright, he breathed.

He slipped back into the house. His mother was in the laundry doing something to the washing. His father had fallen asleep in the lounge, watching sport on television. The main front door was open, and he managed to slip through the screen door without waking him. Trying not to think, he made his way around to his neighbours' front entrance. The walk from the gate to the front door was like the running of a marathon. There, at the door, he stood, for what seemed like minutes, with his hand poised, ready to knock. It was in that sculpted posture that Melanie's mother found him, when she opened the front door to let out the cat.

'Alan!' she said, startled. 'What are you doing there?'

Very rarely did either Melanie or Alan use the front door. Alan blushed, swallowed, and spluttered, 'I came to ask Melanie something.'

'OK.' Her mother stretched out the word like a long 'amen' at the end of a prayer. She looked at him quizzically. 'Would you like to come in?'

'Er, no. Could you, um, ask her to come here... please?'

'OK,' she said again. 'Just a tick.'

She moved away from the door and called to Melanie in her room.

'Someone to see you,' he heard her say. She gave one last puzzled glance in his direction.

Melanie skipped to the door, then pulled up abruptly upon seeing who it was. She shook her head slightly and frowned, before coming to the screen.

'What's up? Are you coming in?' She shook her head again.

'Er, no. Could you come out here for a second?'

'OK,' she said, precisely echoing her mother.

When she was outside he took her arm for an instant to lead her a little to one side; he released it almost at once as though scalded. He moved a few steps away, hoping she would follow, which she did.

‘Next Saturday,’ he began. His mouth was very dry, and he licked his lips with the tip of his tongue. ‘There’s the dance this Saturday.’ She waited patiently for him to finish. ‘Would you like to come with me to the dance next Saturday?’ Seconds ticked by. Somewhere, the cooing of doves sought to soothe their own anxieties, and those of the world. While his mouth was devoid of all moisture, other parts of his body seeped like an aquifer. She looked thoughtful, exhaled slowly, met his eyes.

‘OK,’ she said, shrugging a little. Going back inside, she left him standing there.

On Monday, walking home from school alone, she ignored him.

7

Saturday arrived. Alan’s father would drive them to the dance, and Melanie’s father would pick them up at eleven o’clock. Alan wore a plain burgundy shirt, under a cream-coloured sleeveless sweater, with black flared pants, and chunky shoes in black and burgundy leather. When he walked it felt as though his feet were strapped to bricks. His hair in those days was about collar length, with unruly curls and frizzes in random places. He had made several attempts to tame it, but with little success. While he waited at Melanie’s door, he fidgeted, tugging at the shirt, which hugged his armpits, and tugging at the pants, which hugged his crotch. Melanie came to the door wearing a plain blue, mid-thigh length, sleeveless dress, loosely cinched at the waist with a black belt, a white scarf wrapped around her neck, and knee high white boots. Her hair hung loose, with a single white magnolia above her left ear. She carried a white clutch bag in her left hand.

‘Hi,’ she said, simply. Then, ‘Shit,’ as she stumbled over the doorstep. He reached out tentatively to steady her. ‘Not wearing my glasses.’

‘You look nice,’ he said.

‘Thanks. You might look nice, too, if I could actually see you.’

‘Why don’t you put your glasses on? They look good on you.’

‘Ya think?’

‘Sure.’

‘Hmmm. Maybe. If I fall over too many times.’

‘Dad’s waiting out front,’ he said.

As they were walking into the assembly hall, co-opted for the dance, Alan mustered his courage and tried to take hold of Melanie’s hand. But she shook free and gave him a ‘look’. He was preoccupied for several minutes with trying to interpret it, while they took their seats around one of the tables grouped around the edge of an open space. They were quite early, but loud music was already playing, with lights flashing and glittering around the room. A few girls were already dancing in small scattered groups. They sat in silence, Melanie with her chair slightly turned away from him, so that he found himself looking over her left shoulder. The music was too loud for anything but a shouted conversation. He wasn’t sure what he would say, in any case. He tapped his foot in rhythm to the music and tried to look at ease, while others gradually filled their own table and the tables around them.

‘Would you like a drink?’ he shouted into Melanie’s left ear.

‘Coke, please. No ice.’

‘OK.’

He wriggled between chairs and tables, skirted the dance floor, and made his way to the table where drinks were being served. He negotiated the return journey with the drinks held high, trying to avoid jostling bodies and jabbing elbows. Melanie was not in her seat. He searched among the dancers and saw that she had joined one of the groups of girls. He checked his watch.

Melanie returned to the table after two or three songs.

‘Thanks for the drink,’ she said.

When they had finished their drinks he asked her if she would like to dance. ‘With me,’ he added, to avoid any uncertainty. She shook her head, then studied her boots for a while.

‘OK,’ she said.

While he dragged his heavy feet through the dance movements, he observed her. She avoided his eyes, preferring to look at the floor, or somewhere over his right shoulder. She sang along to the music. Her face wore a curiously neutral expression, as though purposely avoiding any particular emotion. They danced through two numbers and sat down again. She danced a few more times with groups of girls, while he continued to sit, drumming his fingers on the table. He looked at his watch again. At last, when she next sat down, he couldn't remain silent any longer.

'Is something wrong?' he asked.

She shook her head distractedly. Then she met his eyes for the first time that evening.

'Let's go outside for a minute,' she said. She led him around a corner of the building, where there were fewer people, took a cigarette from her bag and lit it. The night was quite cool and she hugged herself. He couldn't see her face very clearly, but she seemed to be looking out over the football field towards a row of trees in the distance. The half moon was just rising.

'I have a boyfriend,' she said suddenly. 'He's older. He goes to another school. My parents don't know.'

'Aaaaah.' A silence stretched out between them. 'OK. So why did you come with me tonight?'

She blew smoke towards the stars and sighed.

'I couldn't come with Greg, could I? And saying yes to you avoided awkward questions.' She tapped repeatedly at the cigarette.

'I see.' Greg, he thought. 'And this Greg...?'

She didn't respond. After a while she touched his arm lightly.

'I like you. We were friends. We were kids. It's just different,' she finished quietly.

'Are we still friends?' he asked.

He heard, rather than saw, her shrug in the dark.

'I might walk home, I think.'

'No,' she said. 'Please stay.'

'So that your parents don't ask any awkward questions?'

She turned away, and a tear captured fragments of light from the rising moon.

‘Alright, I’ll stay,’ he said.

8

The school year was drawing to a close. Exams were just two weeks away, and Alan buried himself in his studies. He tried to make sure that he left the school grounds before Melanie and her friends, so that he didn’t have to trail along behind them. That wasn’t always possible, and on the Friday before study week began he saw Melanie and two friends ahead of him on the footpath. They were engaged in a very animated conversation that involved complicated movements resembling martial arts moves, but which were probably meant to be dance steps. They made slow progress. Alan leaned back against the school fence, letting other people pass by, and allowing Melanie to put some distance between them. He ran through a few physics theorems in his head. When he walked on they had passed out of sight around the corner. It was quite hot, and sweat plastered the shirt to his back.

When he turned the corner, Melanie was not very far ahead. They must have stopped for some reason. Now Melanie produced something from her bag and was showing it to her friends, one of whom snatched it away and ran back towards Alan, almost colliding with him. Melanie and the third girl set off in pursuit. The lead girl stopped behind Alan and waved whatever it was above his head. He found himself surrounded by the three girls, using him as a shield. Melanie jumped up to grab the object – it seemed to be a photograph – but she missed, and the wind took it away into the road. Melanie dodged around him and, at a half crouch, she stumbled after it.

The driver of the car – a red Cortina he would always remember –, turning the corner, could not have anticipated Melanie’s movement. Alan, in the stretched out moment, saw Melanie stumble slightly and put her right hand on the bitumen to steady herself; caught sight of the driver’s face, saw the widening of her eyes, the opening of her mouth, the word ‘God’ half-formed on her lips; watched Melanie, having just enough time

to turn her head a fraction to the left, begin to realise the danger. But the driver barely had time to apply her brakes before colliding with Melanie's still crouching form, and dragging her for several feet along the road.

The photograph fluttered and flickered away into the distance.

The next week, Alan visited Melanie in the Royal Adelaide Hospital. Her mother was there, and he entered the ward timidly. He was glad to find none of her friends present.

'I'm just going to get a coffee,' said her mother on seeing him. She lightly touched his arm and smiled as she left.

'I hope you don't mind...' he said to Melanie.

'Nah, it's okay.' She waved her left arm and leg, both heavily plastered, up and down a little. 'Not bad, eh. The worst thing's all the scraping down my other side. It's sore. The doctor says it will leave scars.'

'Glad you're okay, anyway. It was bloody scary.'

'No kidding.'

He sat on the only chair, and they were silent for a while. Someone else in the ward had a television playing, and he allowed himself to be distracted by the voices. There were unpleasant smells that he tried not to notice. Melanie was surrounded by magazines on the bed. She picked one at random and flicked through it distractedly. Then she tossed it aside.

'Listen,' Melanie began. 'About the dance the other night. I'm sorry.'

'It's okay.' He shrugged.

Unexpectedly, she started crying.

'Does it hurt?' he asked.

'Yeah, a bit. But it's not that.'

'What then...?' He glanced around and handed her a box of tissues that was lying on the table beside the bed.

She beckoned for him to come closer. When she was sure no one was watching, she whispered to him.

'The nurse... The nurse told me I lost a baby.' She choked suddenly, before being able to go on. 'I wasn't entirely sure that I was pregnant, but...' She cried, trying to hide the fact behind the sleeve of her hospital gown.

Baby? Alan lacked the tools with which to construct an adequate response. The concept and implications left him speechless. *A baby?*

‘And I’m glad I lost it,’ she added, fuelling her tears. She blew her nose loudly. ‘No one else knows. Mum and Dad must never know. I had to tell someone.’

And it had to be me? The world was changing in ways that Alan found difficult to grasp.

9

Melanie’s confession both moved and confused Alan. That she trusted their friendship enough to confide in him was moving, but at the same time he was wracked with jealousy. He ached at the thought of her with someone else. He was disappointed in her, yet found her more alluring than ever. Her confidence expressed her closeness to him. Yet he saw her as from a great distance. She had crossed a threshold into another country. She was beyond his reach.

He visited occasionally while she was housebound during the long summer break. She confirmed her decision not to return to school. She would find a job, and possibly take night classes in secretarial school. They met in the back room of her house, used as an informal family room. It was an older enclosed veranda, with a wall of windows letting in the light from the new veranda. She smoked quite openly now, propped up in various positions to make herself as comfortable as possible. Sometimes, he would detect the elfin child he had grown up with, glimpsed in the sparkle of an eye, heard in her slightly wicked laugh. But at other times, a soft sensual woman sat or reclined before him, someone he scarcely knew. Usually, the visits were brief. The conflicting emotions could not be borne for long.

At one point she showed him her upper right thigh, where the worst scarring was forming. He assured her that it didn’t look too bad. She had hoisted up her skirt in a perfectly natural way, as she might have done when they were children. Again, he was touched by the friendship and trust that the gesture revealed. But she may have been less willing to

make the gesture had she been privy to his thoughts and feelings, aware of the erection stirring in his pants.

School recommenced, and a short time later Melanie started at night school. Once she was sufficiently recovered, she took a job as an usher at a cinema. Life became busy enough that it did not seem strange to either of them that he stopped visiting. It was around this time that Alan began to think again about the notebooks and photograph album that he and Melanie had found all those years earlier. Melanie wore the pendant all the time now, and it served as a constant reminder. One evening in March, before he went to bed, he reached up to the top shelf of his wardrobe and pulled down the plastic bag in which they still waited. He took out the notebooks and glanced through them. They covered a period of about five years. It fascinated him to think that she had lived next door, and that, but for an accident of time, he might have known her. He looked at the photographs in the album. There was one of a young teenage girl, about his and Melanie's age, standing on the steps of a church. She was dressed as a bridesmaid in a long dress, with a small wreath of flowers in her hair, a garland of flowers around her waist, and a small bouquet of flowers in her left hand. She was gazing just to the left and slightly downwards, looking slightly wistful. That must be her. She reminded him of a painting he had once seen of Ophelia. Over the next several weeks, for a short time each night before he went to sleep, he read through her notebooks.

