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Late last year, for the first time, Tom had lifted his head from whatever book he happened to be reading at the time, and noticed that there were other people in the world, and that some of them were female. His parents and little brother didn't really count. They were more like furniture: something you expected to find about the house. The other creatures moving around him had no more substance than the characters shifting back and forth on the television screen; and were nowhere near as real as those in the books he read. You could get inside the characters in the books, but those flesh and blood creatures into which he bumped occasionally in the classroom or in the street were thoroughly impenetrable: their solidity testified to that. Sometimes, however, they had an uncanny knack of penetrating him. Solid *and* sharp. Words and looks; no words and no looks—any combination could be dangerous and leave a nasty scar. Better to avoid these creatures altogether. At least the people in his books couldn't hurt him, although he sometimes felt *their* pain. He could share their joys too. Joy was not something he particularly associated with the flesh and blood world.

What was it, then, that made him look up on that particular day? It was an ankle. Or, to be more precise, two ankles; but it was the crossing of the one over the other that triggered this response. He had just read the following lines:

‘Tonight I shall know the little hollow under her ankle, where the blue vein crosses.’ And the thought of it, and the desire for it, made a thick darkness of anticipation.

And there it was, not two feet away from him, the hollow of an ankle, clearly visible as that ankle languidly crossed the other. It was lunchtime, and prior to his next lecture he was lying in the shade on the lawn, reading *The Rainbow*. The movement had snagged his attention. Discarded red shoes lay to one side; toes wriggled in relief. A silver anklet encircled the upper ankle; and tattooed on that foot, following the curve of the instep, were the words 'Stay in step'. At that moment he realised that sensual pleasures may be accessible in the external world, as well as in books. It was all he could do to resist reaching out and touching those ankles. Their owner was oblivious to him, lying on her back, hands behind her head, eyes closed. He had no idea who she was. She had no idea that he existed.

He was distracted throughout the remainder of the day; and from that day his senses awoke. He began to taste his food, feel the movement of the air against his skin, hear the whispering of the leaves in the trees, see the change in the quality of light as the evening approached. And, above all, to detect the scent of the girls and women who passed by. He was driven back to Keats, Shelley and Byron, after a long absence.

He was an empty vessel, waiting to be filled with love. Unfortunately that vessel was rather clumsily constructed.

Tom was not well-suited for being around glass, which was particularly unfortunate when he was working in the chemistry laboratories. He would enter the laboratory on the second floor in a state of nervous tension, knowing that at any moment a vacuum flask, perhaps because of the vagaries of quantum mechanics, could choose to be in precisely that spot where his elbow was destined to be in a millisecond or two. From that point onwards Newtonian mechanics would again take over the management of the Universe. And because he knew this was likely to happen he would walk around the laboratory stiff-limbed, trying to take up as little space as possible, begging this same Universe not to notice him. The task of pipetting a chemical solution from one vessel to another was almost

beyond him. Too much glass involved altogether. As a result of which he would move so terribly slowly, which only served to increase the magnitude of the tremor in his hand.

This clumsiness was not restricted to the laboratory. He was sometimes so little conscious of the world around him that he would bump into objects and people. When Tom came home and mentioned to his mother that he had bumped into so-and-so today, as often as not he meant it literally. Even in the home it was uncanny how many times his shin caught the edge of the coffee table in the lounge room. More than once he had put down his coffee cup where he could have sworn the coffee table *used* to be. His newly discovered sensory awareness of the world did nothing to ameliorate his lack of coordination with it. If anything, he became more acutely aware of it.

Strangely, it was this very clumsiness that precipitated the change in his relationship with Diane McGrath.

Tom first met Diane McGrath one Sunday morning at church. Diane was tiny, perhaps just a shade over one and a half metres tall. She had short brown hair worn in an untidy style, apparently left to its own devices, or else cunningly styled to appear so. Her face was square-ish, with hazel eyes set wide apart. Her top lip seemed permanently drawn upwards, revealing slightly long front teeth. Freckles lightly dusted her face, and could be seen trickling down her exposed arms and shoulders. She stood slightly to one side after the service, in the parish hall, looking at the floor and smiling slightly. Her thumbs were hooked into the pockets of her jeans, and her right foot was slightly raised onto the toes, her heel performing a nervous little jiggle from side to side. Fr Andrew, the assistant curate, approached her, introduced himself, and began presenting her to other members of the congregation.

Tom held back, hovering somewhere between the coffee and tea facilities and the nearest exit, but he occasionally cast an eye in her direction. A new face was a rarity, particularly a young new face.

Once or twice their eyes made brief contact across the room, but she quickly looked away. As did he.

It was when he was *not* looking in her direction that she must have approached him. He had just made himself a cup of coffee and when he turned he almost walked into her.

‘Sorry,’ she said, taking a quick step back.

‘No, my fault,’ he said.

She held out her hand, the other thumb still firmly hooked into her pocket. ‘I’m Diane McGrath. I probably won’t remember your name.’

His hand felt slightly sweaty, so he wiped it on his jeans and shook her hand awkwardly.

‘Thomas... Tom,’ he replied. ‘Don’t make me say my last name.’

‘How come?’

‘Because it’s dreadful.’ He sighed. ‘Dunkelhof.’

‘Ah.’

‘Told you.’

‘Dunkelhof,’ she thought for a moment. ‘Not sure I would marry a Dunkelhof. Diane Dunkelhof. Not that I plan to marry you,’ she added quickly. ‘Or anyone. Not that I wouldn’t...’ Her words faded away.

He pushed his glasses up towards the bridge of his nose.

‘Sorry,’ she continued, casting her eyes downwards again. ‘I’ve known you all of twenty seconds and already my foot is firmly in my mouth. And I’ve apologised twice. That must be some kind of record. Maybe not.’

He gave a nervous laugh.

She waggled her head, rather like one of those dogs in the back window of a car, and, with a half-smile, wandered off in the general direction of the door.

He saw her again at the service the following Sunday. These were always something of a chore. The Rector in those days was a

strange old bird. He always smelled of cloves, or cinnamon, or something like that, because of some kind of lozenge he was constantly sucking. The congregation became used to this; but the pace at which he moved and spoke was a source of constant irritation. The communion service unfolded like a movie in slow motion. He spoke slowly, stretching words to their breaking point. 'In the naaaaaame of the Faaaaaaather, the Son and the Hoooooooooly Spirit.' Then there were the long, inexplicable pauses, during which Tom sometimes thought, if he happened to be serving at the altar that day, that the old priest may have dozed off. Tom would be a hairsbreadth away from nudging him. He occasionally resorted to coughing noisily. Then the Rector would resume his drawn out recitation. Tom supposed he must be praying during those pauses, or in a deep state of contemplation. He certainly gave off a scent of piety. Or was that just the cinnamon?

His sermons were always far, far too long. He had been known to drone on—that is, preach—for almost forty-five minutes at a time. Even the most hardy and devout amongst the congregation would become restless. There would be a chorus of coughing, and shuffling feet. Anglicans carry a gene that makes them restless once a sermon passes the twelve minute mark, and more than twenty minutes' exposure can be fatal. Perhaps it would have been endurable if the sermons were interesting or instructive. Unfortunately, the Rector didn't write or prepare his sermons, believing himself to be rather good at impromptu delivery. He wasn't.

Still, he seemed a kindly old man. Tom thought of him as 'old', but he couldn't actually have been much more than forty-five. It was his tortoise-like pace that created the impression of age. This tortoise-ness was reinforced by the curvature of his back, and the way his head was always thrust forward on his neck. His eldest son was so completely different from his father, tall, upright, precise and rapid in his movements and thought processes, that it may have caused some to question his paternity. However, the Rector's wife was such a tiny, sweet, timid, bird-like creature that the thought of

her involved in a torrid extra-marital love affair seemed rather ludicrous. Indeed, the thought of her involved in any sexual activity seemed ludicrous; apart from anything else, she was likely to break. This led another portion of the congregation to contemplate the possibility of a divine visitation at the time of the son's conception. Tom, however, privately relished the image of the Rector's sweet wife as a wanton whore in her younger days.

The only relief for the parishioners was that, when the assistant curate, Fr Andrew, took the service, things tended to move along at a swifter pace. His sermons were also short, if occasionally incomprehensible. Unfortunately, if one of the pair took the service, the other preached, and vice versa. Everyone liked the young assistant curate and his young family, although they were disappointed not to see the family at the service more often.

Diane came up to Tom after the service, on her second Sunday, as he again hovered near the urn.

'Tom,' she said, nodding to herself with satisfaction. 'Yours is the only other name I have remembered, apart from the priests' names. I remember both parts. Of your name, that is,' she added.

'So, Diane,' he began and ended. He stuffed his third biscuit into his mouth. 'You're at uni, is that right?' he managed eventually.

'Yep. Just starting my first year. Doing a double degree in arts and education. English literature, history; that kind of stuff. What about you?'

'Starting my second year: maths, physics, chem, computer programming.'

'Very impressive!'

'It might be, if I had any chance of passing anything. I just scraped through last year. I'm likely to be a spectacular failure this year.'

'Well, I suppose it's good to be a spectacular *something*. I'm very average I'm afraid. The chances of meeting someone as average as me are extremely remote. Consider yourself privileged.'

Thus it was that they took pains to demolish themselves before anyone else had the chance.

‘Did you move from the country, or from interstate? Or what?’ he asked.

‘Moved down from the Riverland to study. I’ve moved into an old house in Hyde St, with three guys. One of them I knew from back home.’

‘Three guys?’

‘Yeah. Maybe not a great idea. The smells are getting to me already.’

‘Ah well, yes, sorry, I...’

‘Well, it’s not actually your fault, after all.’

Their meetings at the urn became a regular event, and Tom began to look forward to them.

‘So you read a lot then,’ he said at their third meeting. ‘Books.’

‘It’s kind of expected that you read, if you’re studying literature.’

‘Ah yes. I read too.’

Although Tom was pursuing a very scientific path of study, his real passion was for literature. They discovered that they had read many of the same books, although their preferences differed. Their conversations became quite involved. At the end of the church service they would drift together towards the far corner of the parish hall, where Tom would sit at one end of the old ramshackle couch, with Diane almost opposite him on one of the ancient easy chairs. He would lean forward, elbows on his thighs and hands clasped before him. Every so often he would push his glasses up towards the bridge of his nose and blink nervously. His rounded cheeks would sometimes be unshaven and his short brown hair unkempt. Diane’s petite figure would be almost swallowed by the chair, and from certain angles it would seem that Tom was engaged in intense conversation with the chair itself. Small as she was, she would make

herself smaller still by drawing her legs up beneath her. They were often among the last to leave.

It was perhaps their fifth or sixth meeting. It was getting late and Tom wanted one last coffee. They both stood and stretched, only then realising that just a handful of people remained in the hall. The assistant curate was waiting to lock up.

‘Would you like another coffee?’ Tom asked.

‘No thanks,’ she said. She followed a little way behind to where the urn stood in the other corner. He made coffee and added plenty of milk to cool it down. Then he headed back towards Diane, where she stood a little apart, thumbs hooked in her pockets. She pivoted slightly from side to side. She began to say something as he approached, but her words were cut off. Afterwards he would blame the cleaners. He was sure if they had swept less dirt under the carpet the corner would not have been raised quite so high. As it was, his foot caught that corner with precision, and the contents of his cup arced gracefully through the air, tracing a perfect trajectory towards Diane’s white top. He managed to arrest his own forward and downward momentum by thrusting out his arm and striking her on the breast, his hand arriving just milliseconds after the coffee. The impact almost knocked her to the floor, but she extended an arm of her own and somehow they managed to steady each other.

‘Sorry,’ Tom managed to say.

Diane pursed her lips, flicking the front of her top with her free hand in a futile gesture. With the other hand she continued to hold Tom’s arm. With his own free hand he reached out and almost matched her gesture, flicking her top, until he suddenly became conscious of her breast beneath the material. He blushed vividly as she grabbed his hand. There was a fleeting eye contact that lasted but a millisecond, but seemed to contain gigabytes of information. It would take much longer to decode it. It was one of those moments that Tom had sometimes imagined: that instant of recognition in the eyes, triggering chemical reactions in the brain and leading to... the kiss. At least, that is what he had imagined might happen. He made a

tentative movement of his head downwards, without committing himself too decisively. But then one of the women who yet remained in the hall came towards them with a cloth to see if anything could be done about the mess. The mood snapped with an almost audible 'ping'. Nevertheless there was a slight delay before they released their holds on each other.

'Can I drive you home?' he asked.

'It's only a short walk.'

'Yes but with... um...' he made brushing gestures up and down his own chest. 'I just thought...'

'Oh, alright. Why not?'

'I was thinking,' he began, as he pulled up at the curb where she directed, no more than five minutes later. He drove a battered old Hyundai Excel which frequently smelled of stale pizza; at least, that was the most favourable interpretation of the odour. 'I don't have your telephone number...'

'True.' At first he thought she would leave it at that, but then she seemed to make a decision. 'Why don't you come in for a minute and have that cup of coffee you didn't have earlier. If you can be trusted with another, that is. And we can exchange numbers.'

He entered the house and was introduced to the two young men drinking beer on the couch in front of the television. He didn't register their names and they didn't register him. He stood uncomfortably in the kitchen while Diane made the coffee.

'Let's take it outside,' she suggested.

They sat on the back veranda for a while, saying nothing.

'Here's my number.' She wrote it on a scrap of paper and handed it to him. 'Call me now and I'll program you into my phone.'

That done, they sat again in silence. The backyard, laid out a few steps below them, was large and untidy, with an old tumbling down shed in one corner, several peach or apricot trees marching down one side, and on the opposite side several rose bushes that badly needed pruning. An old ironwork garden setting, once white, stood exposed to the weather on what constituted the back lawn,

which consisted mostly of weeds and dust. He was struck by the presence of a sundial, which he had taken at first to be a birdbath. As he was starting to get hungry, he rose to take his leave.

‘I’d better get home for lunch,’ he said. He still lived with his parents. Then, on a sudden impulse, he added, ‘Say. Just a thought. Would you... Would you like to go to a movie this afternoon?’

He gazed somewhere over her head, taking in the large lemon-scented gum growing in the neighbour’s yard, preferring not to see her reaction.

‘Okay. Shall we look to see what’s on?’

Not letting his surprise and pleasure show, he followed her into her room, where she brought her computer to life. He tried not to look around the room too much, for fear of seeing something he shouldn’t. They settled on a movie and a session time.

At the front door he leaned down and gave her an awkward peck on the cheek, then left before his embarrassment became too obvious.

Interlude

In a small dark room, on the first floor of the hotel, a figure brooded. He switched on the bedside lamp, which emitted a dim yellow light, and took the photograph from the pocket of his wallet once more. The light revealed a single bed, sagging in the middle, a bedside table, marked with circular stains, and a cheap and badly warped Renoir print on the wall above the bed. The rest of the room remained crowded with shadows.

The figure's face, too, remained shadowed, with the light behind illuminating the small photograph of the two girls, one perhaps fifteen, the other eleven, years old. They were sitting side by side on the lower step of a veranda, the elder with her arm around the shoulders of the younger. They had lived here in Queensland at that time, just outside Mareeba. Happier days. Working on the mango and coffee plantations.

He put his half-empty stubby on the small table, adding a new wet ring, and lit a cigarette. His eyes glittered briefly in the flame from the lighter. A thin, sallow face, heavily lined, stood out for an instant from the shadows.

Then he had gone his way and lost touch with them. First out to Mt Isa, then on to the Northern Territory for some more mango work. He had drifted his way over to The Kimberley after that, picking up whatever work he could. Fuck, he thought, where've the fucking years gone?

He drained the stubby and dropped his cigarette butt into the bottle.

He had walked out to the house earlier that day. It could use a paint job, he noticed. The front garden was dry and untended. The letterbox leaned at an angle. An aboriginal woman was sitting on the veranda. She eyed him as he walked up the overgrown driveway.

'G'day,' he said. 'The name's Styles, Frank Styles.'

She was silent.

‘You wouldn’t ’appen to know what became of the people who used to live ’ere back a few years, would ya? Same name as me, “Styles”.’

‘Nah, mate,’ she said, shaking her head and brushing away a fly from her mouth. ‘On’y been ’ere a few months meself, mate.’

He nodded and moved away. He hadn’t expected to find them that easily.

2

This was Andrew's second year as an assistant curate in the parish, and he was bored. There were a few highlights, but, in general, he was mind-numbingly bored. The 'highlights' were usually the tragedies in other people's lives: a death in the family, an illness, an accident. Even these events could, at times, fill him with a sense of *ennui* which felt like a tumour growing in his gut. Perhaps if he felt more empathy with the people whose lives he shared at these critical moments... Often, though, he didn't. A numbness would invade his cells, like the effect of a local anaesthetic. Only very rarely did something genuinely touch him. The funeral of Vanessa towards the end of last year was one such occasion.

Vanessa was a seventeen-year-old girl whose brain had been invaded by a 'benign' tumour. A benign tumour that, nevertheless, slowly killed her, after first robbing her body of all its functions. In the end it stole her capacity to breathe and the capacity of her heart to beat. For a time he had been able to speak with her. She would laugh. Such a simple, astonishing thing to observe. He would sit with her and her mother in the hospital, and later at home—there appeared to be no father on the scene. And this girl, whose body was failing her, who was slowly losing the capacity for speech, would laugh. The mother astounded him with her bravery. She was a plump but attractive woman in her late thirties, running her own business from home. She was always immaculately dressed; there was a profound dignity about her as she sat holding her daughter's hand. While Vanessa was still able to speak, she had encouraged her daughter to discuss the funeral arrangements with herself and Fr Andrew.

‘I want everything to be the way she wants it,’ she had explained calmly. ‘We both know what is going to happen. Why waste our time pretending it isn’t?’

She was wiser and stronger than he was. There were times when Vanessa and her mother, sitting there together, speaking with their eyes and with touch when Vanessa’s voice failed, actually looked happy.

They rarely discussed issues of faith, which made Andrew more comfortable with them. They did not attend church. It was friends in the parish who had first brought them to the Rector’s, and then Andrew’s, attention. He visited at least once a week, and often twice. He had, he realised, fallen slightly in love with the mother.

The funeral was one of those real highlights. The hearse had been escorted to the church by four riders on Harley Davidsons. Vanessa’s favourite music had been played during the service, and some of her girlfriends from school sang along and danced in the aisles. The mother and one of Vanessa’s friends spoke courageously and with humour. Andrew himself gave a brief, inspired address. Tears and laughter flowed in equal measure. Afterwards, Andrew felt flat for many days.

The day-to-day visits to parishioners, and the weekly rounds at the various nursing homes in the parish, gave Andrew no pleasure. Worse, he dreaded them. The visits to parishioners were routine affairs, based on a roster of sorts. Because most people were not home during the day, these visits often took place during the evening or on weekends. He could think of little to say on such occasions, which usually ended fairly quickly once the uncomfortable, silent, tea drinking was concluded. Daytime visits were usually with elderly people, and occasionally with stay-at-home mothers. Most of these, while technically on the parish role—perhaps there had been a marriage or baptism in the family at some time—were rarely regular churchgoers. His visit often mystified them.

Andrew did enjoy preaching. He liked to play with ideas. However, his sermons were often wasted on the congregation, although they politely thanked him for his words. Occasionally, when someone commented that they had really enjoyed his sermon, he would ask what it was they had particularly liked. They would generally look away and venture a suitably vague response. It was cruelty that made Andrew ask the question, a cruelty that arose from his profound dissatisfaction with his own life.

As in all Anglican parishes, it was a dwindling and aging congregation. It gave him a disproportional sense of delight, therefore, whenever a new young face appeared. Such was the case when Diane McGrath appeared one Sunday. He made a point of introducing himself to her, and introducing her to some other members of the congregation.

‘Have you just moved into the area?’ he asked. She explained to him about leaving Renmark to come to Adelaide to study, and moving into a shared house.

‘It must be tough without family around.’ He hated himself for saying things like this. It was like fishing for business. Let’s find the problem in people’s lives. Let’s find the weakness. What needs fixing?

Nevertheless, there was something fragile and vulnerable in Diane that immediately touched him. He watched as she later introduced herself to that young man, Tom. He didn’t particularly like Tom; he was difficult to talk to. But he was the only other person present around Diane’s own age, so she could hardly be blamed for gravitating towards him. She won’t stay for long, he imagined.

3

Diane found the words on a page much easier to comprehend than the words vibrating through the air around her. On the page the relationships between words were clear and fixed. Words in the air followed each other sequentially, and if you missed one it was gone forever, and its successor would shrivel and die like a pruned branch. For this reason she found that attending to a conversation required much more effort than reading a book. And often, she found, it wasn't worth that effort. With Tom it was different.

Her first thought, when she glanced across at him on that first Sunday, was that she was looking at an impressionist painting of a human being, rather than at an actual human being. His form appeared indefinite to her, lacking clear lines and contours. Yet she had the strong impression that there, between the coffee cups and the door, was a person. Once she had the opportunity, she drifted in his direction in order to confirm it. Even up close his contours remained blurred, as though he were not quite in phase with the world around him. He was elusive.

She had always considered herself to have a rather sharp, angular presence in the world. She thought this when she observed herself naked in the mirror. If she had been a computer font, she might have described herself as Arial, made up of lines set at various angles, but without unnecessary curves or flourishes. Thomas on the other hand, was like one of those more fancy fonts, like *Künstler script*, for instance: much more difficult to read.

She was initially drawn to him because he stood out among the congregation in some way. He stood apart, quite literally. Then she realised that he stood out... by not standing out. Most other people made firm ticks in the air to declare their presence. His tick looked as though it had been erased, replaced by a cross, then the cross

transformed into a tick, so that what remained was an ambiguous smudge.

After their first conversation she began to think that the smudging was terminal. But, then, during their third conversation, she began to recognise firmer brushstrokes. If his physical outlines were blurred and hard to read, the words he expressed, when he became enthusiastic about a topic, were sharp and clear. It seemed to her that his words took visible form, imprinting themselves upon the space between them, so that she could clearly see the relationships among them. This was less true of their more casual moments. At those times she might easily lose the drift. But their real conversations rendered these lesser moments enduring.

She wasn't quite sure what had happened that day when she and Tom exchanged telephone numbers. She had found it disconcerting when he had unwittingly touched her breast, during the coffee-spilling incident. Then there had been that brief look between them. She had thought for a moment that he was going to kiss her. Now, about that look...

She approached that look, in reflecting upon it, via a very circuitous route, which began somewhere in the more comfortable realms of literature. She always found that reading books was much easier than reading people. But, whereas Tom seemed to connect easily with characters in a book, and could frequently see something of himself in them, Diane rarely recognised herself in the words. To date, as far as she was aware, no one had written her life, or any fragment of it. She read for rather different reasons than Tom. While he was obsessed with the inner life, what fascinated her were events and ideas. This explained their differences in literary tastes. For example, he would read D. H. Lawrence, and other books in which, as far as she was concerned, nothing ever happened. Whereas she preferred an author like George Orwell, who tackled political themes and offered a critique of political events. She sought intellectual rather than emotional or psychological stimulation.

As in books, so in real life, she had difficulty understanding what other people were thinking and feeling. In books the reader was often told this by the author, but even then she would sometimes express an inner 'Huh?', failing to quite grasp the idea. How much more difficult, then, to infer inner thought processes and feelings from outward gestures and actions!

So, what had that look meant? Taken on its own she hadn't a clue. It could have been guilt or fear or love. Or indigestion.

But then there followed the invitation and the kiss on the cheek. It was just a friendly kiss, certainly. A brotherly-sisterly kiss. But now it seemed they were going to the movies. They would be sitting together; not talking, but sitting side by side and watching something together. Sharing an actual experience. So, she concluded, I suppose this must be a date. What else did that change between them? And to what else had she become signatory in accepting this invitation?

She stood in her room for a moment. Then she removed her coffee-stained top and sniffed her armpits. A shower, she recommended to herself. He would be picking her up in just under two hours. After her shower she faced an unusual challenge: what should she wear? She had rarely bothered with such thoughts before. Either she just wore the first item her hand encountered in the wardrobe, or the decision had been made for her: her school uniform, her work clothes, her bridesmaid's dress at her sister's wedding. She would wear the same jeans, she decided, then trusted her hands to draw out a top. They extracted a blue T-shirt with the words 'Dunder Mifflin Paper Company Inc.' printed across the front. She was a huge fan of *The Office* and her sister had bought this for her a couple of years ago. It would do. Then she pulled on her better pair of sneakers. Ready, she thought. She sat on the bed and waited. When her stomach began to growl and try to digest itself she realised she had forgotten to eat. Too late now. There was the doorbell.

When she opened the door to him she was relieved to find that he was also dressed in his usual clothes. She was also surprised by

that sense of relief. But she continued to be plagued by irritating questions. Yesterday at this hour she would never have asked herself how to behave; but now she was thrown into doubt. Were there things she should do in this new situation? She found herself irritated with Tom for having cast her into such confusion.

They said little while he drove into the city. She stared out of the window at unfamiliar sites. She was still a stranger to Adelaide, and usually went into the city centre on the train, so many of the streets and buildings were quite new to her. The multitude of old churches, many of them converted into shops or even nightclubs, interested her: their stained glass windows—the shape of them, rather than their content; little could be seen of that from the exterior—and their ivy covered walls. Autumn was well under way and the plane trees were casting off their leaves with reckless abandon. She suddenly felt a touch of homesickness.

There were no plane trees where she came from. Everything at home looked drier and more spread out. Between buildings you might glimpse paddocks or scrub. Down here, between buildings you glimpsed... buildings. But it wasn't the place she missed so much; it was her family, specifically her big sister, Selena. But she had partly lost Selena already when she was married last year. Diane's mother had long since lost contact with her, even though they shared the same house. Diane preferred not to think about her father. Other than that, there had been no real friends to say goodbye to. Just the odd cousin or two, odd being the appropriate word. But, then, who was she to comment?

Her teachers, she knew, had found her odd also. They couldn't fault her grades. They couldn't really fault *her*. But they didn't *like* her. There are animals in the zoo which, whenever people pass by, elicit responses such as 'ooh' and 'aaah'. There are others over which the gaze passes without really noticing. Finally, there are those which give rise to expressions of disgust. She sensed that she fell somewhere between the latter two categories: not completely invisible, but not sufficiently repulsive to elicit a strong response.

There were times when she wanted to do something to change that, but she lacked the courage.

Boys had demonstrated little or no interest in her. There had been one boy, after the school prom, who had tried to touch her up. But he was too drunk and desperate to count for much. A few girls had professed friendship for her, but they were easily distracted by others.

Only her sister... She had become more of a mother to her over the years than her mother had ever been. But now she had moved on. Diane didn't really resent that. It was just another demonstration of the relentless march of an indifferent universe.

Another irritating thought struck her as she emerged from her reverie. She had never before been in a situation with Tom when she could not simply get up and walk away if she wished. She began to feel trapped. All this kept her firmly silent in the car. Tom made a few half-hearted attempts at conversation, but he was powerless against such obstinate resistance.

Eventually, as they were walking towards the cinema, he managed to ask, 'Have I done something wrong?' When she still did not reply, he continued, 'I shouldn't have asked you out.'

'Why did you?' she snapped at him suddenly.