

PART ONE

Gregory

THAT SO MUCH COULD CHANGE IN SUCH A SHORT TIME. HIS LIFE WAS like an alluvial plain, over which a hundred year flood had vented its rage, driving everything before it, but ultimately—he hoped—bringing forth new life. At least let it do that. Driving from Bristol to Birmingham, on his way to visit his mother, Gregory Oldham, Professor of Philosophy, was nothing more than a little boy again. He felt that he needed to live his whole life over, now that the filters had been removed. And just—what, six weeks ago?—he had thought that he was entering the latter, secure, quiet phase of his life: the mature, successful professor: tweeds and a pipe. But then that letter had arrived.

It began to rain, and he turned on the windscreen wipers. The *thunk thunk* of the blades echoed the rhythm of his heart. He noticed an arc of water that extended obstinately on the glass across his field of view, and remarked absently that he should replace the blade.

The letter. It had seemed like nothing much at the time. An amusement, a conversation point between himself and Cheryl.

‘Take a look at this,’ he had said. He had just arrived home from the University and was opening his mail. It was mostly bills and junk, but this was a personal letter. ‘Here.’

Cheryl took it from him, looked at the return address on the envelope. It was from someone in Switzerland.

‘One of your former colleagues, or friends?’ she asked. Cheryl wore her dark hair in a kind of bob, which would tumble across her

face when she looked down. Now, looking at him with that directness that he still, at times, found unnerving, she brushed the strands aside.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Read it.’

Dear Gregory,

You don’t know me. You might know *of* me—I won’t be devastated if you don’t, most people have probably forgotten me by now—but you don’t know me. I am writing because news came to me concerning the death of your father. I knew him a long time ago, but I hadn’t seen him for many years. We exchanged letters occasionally, and he often spoke about you. His last letter came to me a few weeks before he died. He knew that he wasn’t well, and he had things that he needed to say to me. I only wish that we could have met once again in person. He wanted me to contact you when he died. I’m sorry that I have left it for so long. My first excuse is that it took me some time to find you. But, to be truthful, I was a little afraid.

However, I have now found the courage. I would come to you, but my health makes that difficult. I would be delighted—and a little trepidatious—if you would come to visit me here in Switzerland. Your father wanted this, and so do I. You can telephone my assistant on the number below to work out a time that would be suitable for both of us. I don’t use the telephone much myself these days. Also, I would rather that the pleasure of this meeting not be diluted by useless preliminary telephone chatter. I will leave that up to Jane.

Yours in anticipation,
Olivia Beaufort.

‘Do you know her?’ asked Cheryl.

‘No. Well ... I do know *of* her. Have you heard of her? She was an actress. I remember her vaguely from films in the fifties and sixties, I think. She claims to know my father!’ He laughed at this. ‘Seems a little unlikely.’

Gregory loosened his tie, subsided onto the couch and leaned forward to remove his shoes. Still holding one shoe in his right hand, he swept his gaze around the apartment. Mostly Cheryl's personal things, he observed: photographs, an oriental print or two, odd ornaments and knick knacks which, in all this time, he had still never looked at very closely. Some of the books were his. *I don't seem to leave much of an imprint*, he thought. They had been here three years now?

'Your father never mentioned her?' She sat beside him, holding the letter between them. He still enjoyed the way their thighs would touch in a casual, familiar way.

'Well, he may have. He loved the movies, as you know. And I'm sure he would have known this Olivia Beaufort. Not personally, of course!' Again he laughed. It was the nervous laugh that he adopted at times of uncertainty and stress.

'Hmmm. Maybe there's a mystery here worth exploring.' Cheryl rubbed the end of her nose with her index finger, in a gesture he knew well from those occasions when she would return home of an evening preoccupied with a new case. She could never tell him the details, of course, but she would discuss, in a hypothetical fashion, the issues the new client raised for her. Cheryl was a fully trained Jungian analyst, and mystery was her lifeblood. He could sense her interest levels rising.

'Probably a mistake. Or a hoax. A scam of some kind. I would have thought she'd been dead for years.' Mystery, he reflected, was an enjoyable plaything, but not something he relished invading his personal reality.

'Still ...' Cheryl left the word to float and reverberate around the room.

Olivia Beaufort was still very much alive, however, if a quick scan of Google and Wikipedia could be relied upon. Born in England to an upper middle class family, in 1927, the same year as his father, she had moved to the United States some time after the war. There, she began to make something of a name for herself as an actress and singer

in the fifties, sustained this into the early sixties, and faded away in the seventies. She had made some television appearances, the last of which was in 1972. She maintained a profile for a while as a singer, but more or less disappeared in the eighties. Gregory could vaguely remember some of her movies. In fact, they borrowed one or two on DVD after receiving the letter.

‘She’s rather good,’ commented Cheryl. ‘She carries off the whole screwball thing pretty well.’ It was a day or two later, and they were dipping into Chinese takeaway. Cheryl spoke over a piece of honey chicken that sought to escape her tenuous grasp between the chopsticks. Their use was something she had never quite mastered, although she would struggle valiantly.

‘Pretty average movies, but yeah, she’s not bad. And gorgeous,’ he added, preparing himself for the inevitable jab in the ribs with an elbow. The jab was forthcoming. Nevertheless Cheryl was forced to admit that this woman had an undeniable presence, a quality that shone through. ‘As if Dad could ever really have known her!’

Two nights later he phoned his sister Lizzie back in Australia. This generated a host of novel speculations, mostly of a light-hearted nature. They had always wondered about their parents’ apparently loveless marriage. Usually this centred on their mother: she had been involved in an affair, and married their father on the rebound, they would imagine. She had been pregnant before she had met their father, and had given up the child for adoption. There must have been some kind of tragedy, to make their mother so terminally miserable. Now, however, speculation focussed on their father for a change. Perhaps *he* was the one to have had the affair. He was the father of long lost brothers and sisters. The idea seemed a little absurd to both of them.

If nothing else, the letter made Gregory think about his father again, which he hadn’t done for some time. This man who, in the midst of his silence had known so much more of the world than seemed likely, letting out the tiniest snippets occasionally. This man, who could suddenly, out of nowhere, express thoughts, beliefs and emotions that were so much bigger than he himself seemed to be. Yet

Gregory had rarely explored this side of him. Always the figure of their mother would quickly assume centre stage, and these little glimpses into his father were buried and forgotten.

Hoax, mistake, whatever it may have been, the need to meet this woman, this actress—The Actress, as he and Cheryl came to think of her—became overwhelming. He arranged to fly from Bristol to Geneva the following week.

Before going he had visited his mother at the nursing home in Birmingham. This was something he had been putting off, something he always put off. He wondered if she might know anything. He considered asking her directly, but thought better of it. Even if she did know something, it seemed unlikely that she would be willing to discuss it after all these years of silence. Besides, she was more and more confused these days. However, he took along one of the DVDs and played it for her in her room. There was, as always, that slightly unpleasant, if not quite identifiable, smell in the room. Always he had to fight the urge to wrinkle his nose, to ward off the look of distaste that he sensed poised to leak across his face.

‘I thought this might bring back a few memories,’ he said, taking that slight step to one side of the here and now that always helped him through these occasions. He adopted what he recognised as his ‘stage persona’. The fit of that smile upon his features was slightly less uncomfortable than the distaste it held at bay.

His mother’s attention wandered occasionally as she watched the movie, and she fell asleep before the end. But he looked closely for a reaction when she first saw The Actress.

‘Oh, I used to like her,’ she said. ‘Olivia something isn’t it? Not De Havilland. But something French, I think. Or foreign sounding.’

‘Beaufort,’ he said. ‘Olivia Beaufort.’

‘That’s right. Of course it is. Yes, I used to quite like her. I wonder what became of her? I wonder if she’s still going? Probably not, I expect. Most of the old stars have gone by now.’

If she knew anything more about her, or of any connection with his father, she showed no sign. Or had forgotten. He could think of no one else to ask, except The Actress herself.

Gregory took the train from Geneva airport to Lausanne and walked the short distance to the hotel. It was just after noon. Too early to check in, so he left his bag and took the Metro down to Ouchy. It was a Saturday, late in spring, and the train was quite full. His French, he realised, listening to the conversations around him, had begun to fray at the edges.

He wandered around Ouchy for a while. It was a lovely day. The mountains were vivid across the lake. One of the boats to France was just leaving. As always the Swiss were responding to the lure of the sun. Hundreds were already enjoying the activities in and around the Place de la Navigation. Market stalls were open, a band was playing on the temporary stage, beer was flowing freely. He bought an ice-cream from Mövenpick and found a spare place on a bench in the shade, from where he could observe the passers-by. Young men on skateboards, inline skates or conventional roller skates were showing off in the more open spaces. A man who seemed too old for such frivolity, but still muscular and deeply tanned, was threading his way on rollerblades between markers laid out on the path. He was good, Gregory was forced to admit. It was just a pity he was so sure of it himself. A part—quite a large part—of Gregory wanted to see him screw up.

Losing interest in this exhibitionism, Gregory's thoughts ranged over the past, and images of those two odd people who had somehow contrived to be his parents, Maggie and Harold, paraded across his vision. His father, dead now for more than a year, his mother lingering in the nursing home in Birmingham. Such ordinary people in so many ways. Yet there had always been something ... not quite right. Now here was this enigmatic figure, this Actress, who claimed an unlikely connection with his father. Gregory was not entirely sure that he wanted this mystery to assume such a proximate and immanent form.

Trying to shake of his uneasiness, an uneasiness that threatened to become queasiness, he strolled over to the Chateau D'Ouchy, sat outside and ordered a beer. He still had the letter in his pocket. He forced himself to read it once more.

Maggie

IT WAS 1946, AND MAGGIE WAS NINETEEN YEARS OLD. IT WAS A GOOD time to be alive. They tingled with life, she and her friends. To be out dancing on a Saturday night. What could be better? She, her two sisters, and her best friend, laughing, dancing, singing along to the jukebox, smoking. Watching the young men, and watching the young women with them, leaning towards each other from time to time to whisper silly and sometimes cruel comments about them to each other.

They attracted some attention themselves. More than one fella sauntered past their table, ostentatiously not looking. Some openly ogled. Others casually looked on from a distance.

‘Hey, I love this song! Come on, girls!’ As a popular number by Betty Hutton blared out of the jukebox, Maggie dragged her friend Irene onto the dance floor and the others followed. Hip swinging, skirt swirling, sidestepping energy swept through the room. While dozens of voices rose together to join in the chorus. Afterwards, they returned, breathless, to their table.

‘You remind me of her.’

She was surprised by the voice that came from over her shoulder. She turned slightly.

‘What? Me? Remind you of who?’

The young man, sitting at the neighbouring table, turned on his chair to face her.

‘Betty Hutton, of course.’

‘Me? Yeah sure, pal. Nice line though.’ Maggie blushed slightly. The others watched on, giggling.

‘You have a head, arms, legs, and a body, don’t ya? You look just like her. And then there’s the hairdo. Nice!’

‘Well, thank you, good sir. But I’m Maggie, not Betty, I’m afraid.’

‘Ted’s the name. Not Gary or Cary or Clark, I’m afraid.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Ted. Squeeze in here. Girls, this is Ted not Gary. These are my sisters. This’, indicating her younger sister Ruth, ‘is not Ingrid; and this,’ her older sister June ‘is not Lauren. Finally, this is my very best friend, not Rita.’

‘Pleased to not meet you all.’

Most of the houses in the street were dark as they sauntered home together. A light mist fuzzed the streetlamps. They joined together in snatches of popular songs, executed an occasional dance step, and gave the evening their carefully considered review. Out of a possible ten, Maggie’s two sisters agreed to rate it about eight and a half.

‘But I bet Maggie would rate it a ten!’ said the younger sister.

The misty darkness hid Maggie’s reaction. The excitement of the evening was still in her eyes. A slightly frenzied excitement that she was unwilling to release. Ted had been nice. They had danced together several times; even slowly. The closeness of his body to her own made her nervous. The joking, the cheeky comments, the bravado: all of this she was comfortable with. But when it was just the two of them, when there was no loud music, or raucous shouting to fill the space and the time ... She might have been naked. She had agreed to see Ted again. And it would be just the two of them next time.

As they approached the house, on the left the terraced housing gave way abruptly to a jumble of rubble, girders, twisted wire, and occasional pieces of broken furniture, which could be seen only imperfectly in the misty light. Here a wall rose to jagged shark’s teeth, there a doorstep led nowhere. Further ahead, a blade of light stabbed

the street through a gap in the heavy curtains shrouding the windows of their front room.

‘I guess Mom’s still up.’

‘Yeah, not likely to be Dad.’

June took out the key, but the door was not locked.

‘Hi, Mom. It’s just us.’

Their mother, sleeping in a threadbare armchair, woke with a start. She was a roundish woman, with small eyes. Grey hair was held in place by a hairnet. She wore a heavy, woollen dress, a woollen cardigan, and thick woollen tights, although it was a little too warm in the small, heavy room. The room itself seemed dark, despite the light. The light was absorbed by old pieces of chunky wooden furniture, heavy drapes and grimy wallpaper. Drapes hung, not only at the windows, but also across the doorway at the back of the room, which led, one step down, into the kitchen. The radiogram in the corner was switched on, but, at this hour, could only crackle and hiss.

‘A good night, girls? Maggie, could you put the kettle on please, love? There’s a dear.’

‘An all round humdinger of a night, I’d say. Eh, Ruth? Especially for our Maggie,’ June added too loudly, hoping to provoke her sister, who had disappeared behind the curtain to make tea.

‘Shhhh. Don’t wake y’ father,’ urged the mother.

‘There are some penguins left!’ said Maggie, popping her head through the curtain and placing a plate of biscuits on the lid of the gramophone. ‘Leave one for me!’

‘You’re all talking too loud. Keep it quiet, for heaven’s sake. And I’ve got a headache.’

A few moments later, Maggie swished, swayed and sang her way back into the room, balancing a tray on which she carried the makings of tea.

‘... we’re in or we’re out of the money. But I’m with you always ...’

‘... I’m with you rain or shine,’ the girls finished together, and laughed.

‘Stop the bloody racket!’ Older than his years, their father emerged from the door to the hallway, dishevelled, though still somewhat dressed. That is to say, his shirt was un-tucked and several buttons were undone, or perhaps lost. His belt hung loose from his trousers, which were stained in places. He was several days unshaven, and his hair, almost white, but with grey, greasy patches, looked as though it longed to be somewhere else. ‘Can’t a man have some peace and quiet? You, woman, can’t you keep your pups quiet?’ He would have moved towards the mother but, thankfully, thought better of leaving the support of the door frame. Maggie, almost within reach, stepped back quickly.

‘Sorry, Dad. We’ll keep it down. We’ve had a good night, is all, and we were a bit excited. We’ll be off to bed soon.’

‘A good night, eh? Up to *no* good, I expect.’ He glared at Maggie, but had trouble maintaining his focus. ‘Well, see that you keep the bloody racket down and get yourselves off to bed.’

‘We will, Daddy. ’Night, Daddy.’

Maggie, both of her sisters and most of her friends worked at a local button making factory. They had worked there during the war, when the making of buttons, buckles and military insignia had been a booming business. Business continued to boom for some time afterwards. The war years had brought them closer. It was difficult not to become intimate, packed together into a crowded air-raid shelter: both friendships and enmities were writ large. Maggie and her circle tried to make the most of every minute. Life could change in an instant. Returning home after one raid, to find the houses next door to their own simply gone ...

At times, though, Maggie wouldn’t have minded seeing their own house gone. The house, the street, the factory—all the colour of soot. One neighbour took the time to plant some geraniums in a window box; but in the steep, narrow canyon that was their street, to which the

sun was a stranger, these poor, anaemic things resembled pale, grey fungi rather than plants.

But Maggie, her friends and her sisters made their own sunshine, as much as possible, out of talking, joking, telling stories, sharing dreams. They danced and sang when they could. They chased the actual sunshine into nearby parks, seeking places where they could see no walls. Or pretend that there were none.

After the War, when men began to appear on the scene, dreams and conversations took a new turn. Maggie could flirt and joke and laugh with men as easily as any of them. She could outmatch most of them, except perhaps Irene. But anything beyond that, Maggie came to know only via gossip and innuendo. Except for that one time, when she had been eleven or twelve, just before the War.

One night she had been desperate to go the toilet, so she slipped quietly from her room, which she shared with June, into the passage. The toilet was almost directly opposite. A little further down, light shone through the doorway from the front room. Someone was up and about, so she tried not to be heard. She didn't flush. As she came out of the toilet she became aware of strange sounds emanating from the front room. It sounded like someone in pain, something between a groan and a grunt. Curious, and a little afraid, she crept down the passage and peered around the edge of the door.

At first, she couldn't quite understand what she was seeing, but the scene wouldn't let go of her. Just a few feet away, her father lay face down on the sofa, his trousers pulled down around his ankles. This was not a view of her father that she had ever experienced before, but the way his buttocks moved up and down and back and forth both fascinated and revolted her. She thought, perhaps, he was being sick, because that was what it sounded like. Strange, gulping, guttural sounds in the back of his throat. It would not be the first time he had come home and been sick. But why there, on the sofa, half-naked? She wondered where her mother was. In the kitchen perhaps? It was only then that she noticed her mother, lying beneath him on her back, her

skirt gathered around her waist, head turned to one side, eyes slightly glazed. Maggie knew enough then to have a vague understanding of what her father was doing. Maggie's movement caught her mother's eye, and she gestured, with her left hand, above her husband's back, with a kind of shooing motion. Before Maggie managed to drag herself away the image burnt itself photographically into her mind. Her father's pale buttocks pumping up and down on the grimy sofa in the grimy room. Her mother lying passively distant, beneath him.

The really strange thing was, and she lay awake for what seemed hours after returning to her room ... The strange, frightening and slightly horrifying thing was, that despite her revulsion, despite her disgust, she had felt slightly excited and aroused by the scene.

But that was years ago, all but forgotten, surely. There had been a whole War since then. With the ending of that War, Maggie began to dream of places that were not the colour of soot.

'How is it with your Ted, then?' Irene kicked off her shoes and stretched out her legs. She and Maggie were sitting in the small garden at the back of Irene's house, where she lived with her parents. They had just come back from a morning's shopping. Tall, brick walls surrounded the garden on three sides. Little sunlight ever managed to find its way there, except around midday, and even then only from late spring to early autumn. It was the middle of May, the sun was high in the sky, and one edge of the garden was actually in sunshine. Irene had dragged her deckchair and a small table over to that side, where she hoped her legs might catch a little sun. To that end she hoisted her skirt past mid thigh. 'Is Pervert Pete watching?' she asked. This was her elderly neighbour, in the house at the back of their property, who had a way of appearing at an upper bedroom window at times like these.

'Not that I can see,' Maggie laughed.

‘Next time he shows himself I’ll flash my knickers at ’im,’ said Irene. ‘Give him a heart attack. So,’ she continued, ‘you and Ted?’

‘We’re going to his parents’ for Sunday lunch tomorrow. You know they live way over in St. Neots? What does one wear to St. Neots, darling?’ She put on her poshest accent. ‘Actually they’re not real snobby. I quite like them.’

‘OK, but what about the two of you. How are you getting on? What’s ... What’s, you know, happening between the two of you?’

Maggie and Ted had been seeing each other for almost ten months now, and Irene was always after something juicy. ‘There’s more juice in a potato,’ she had commented once.

‘We’re getting along just fine,’ said Maggie.

‘Cripes, girl, do I have to spell it out?’

‘We, you know, kiss and cuddle.’

‘And?’

Maggie blushed.

‘Nothing much else really. Not ... I don’t like to talk about it. You know that.’

‘Well, I wish you would get a move on, the two of you. I bet *he* wants to get a move on.’

‘He has big plans, you know. He’s hoping for a promotion soon,’ Maggie said, changing the subject. She sometimes dreamed of living in a nice house somewhere, like in Edgbaston, for instance. There were trees in Edgbaston. ‘What about you and your Ron? Any plans?’

‘Weeeeell,’ Irene stretched the syllable out to breaking point and stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray on the table next to her. ‘Not next weekend, but the weekend after, we’re going to Brighton for the weekend. Hey, how would you and Ted like to come down with us? We could have a great time together, the four of us. If your Ted doesn’t mind slumming it a bit.’

‘I couldn’t do that.’

‘Course you could!’

Maggie couldn’t say ‘I’m not that kind of girl’ without implying that Irene was. Which she was, she supposed. In a strange way, she

envied her. Instead, she whispered, 'I just saw your neighbour peering from behind the curtain!'

Irene stood and turned to face in that direction. She couldn't see him at the moment, but she was willing to bet that he was there. She lifted her skirt in front of her and waved it about, in the style of the Can-Can.

'You can look, but you can't touch,' she called, sassily. 'And you,' she added, turning back to Maggie. 'You're going to have to let him touch you one day. Ted, that is, not Pervert Pete.'

'Mom 'n Dad'd kill me if they knew I was doing this.'

'No reason they should know, though, is there, Hon.'

Maggie set her small suitcase down on the bed and moved to the window. The room looked out over an open field towards the not-so-distant hills.

'This must be costing you a pretty penny.'

'Don't you worry about that. It's there to be spent. You're worth it.' He came over and held her from behind by the waist. She turned in his arms and looked up into his face. A kind if slightly weary face, marked here and there by old chicken pox scars. His upper lip bore a narrow moustache *à la* Ronald Coleman. They had been seeing each other for almost a year now, since the night of the dance. She was aware of, and a little frightened by, his desire. He had been very patient with her. But the time had come, she decided. In this she had been encouraged not only by Irene, but also her little sister Ruth. Now that the moment had, indeed, arrived, she felt terribly nervous, and a little ashamed. But she owed him this.

'It's still early. Shall we go for a walk, and maybe get some lunch in town?' She needed a little more time.

'Why not?'

It was already very warm outside, so they walked up the steep, tree-lined street, he in shirt sleeves, she in a light cotton dress bought

especially for this weekend. The neckline plunged a little lower than she was accustomed to, and she wished for a moment that she had worn her cardigan after all. They held hands and walked on without speaking. The street ended at an open field, and they crossed the stile, she a little awkwardly, while he helped from the other side. On either side of a narrow path the grass was quite long, and bees and other critters buzzed and flitted from flower to flower. A field further up the hillside was awash with poppies.

‘Let’s prepare a picnic for tomorrow,’ he said, ‘and head up a little further. See that clump of trees? With some luck we can have it all to ourselves. We can each bring a book and pretend that we’re idle Edwardians.’

Maggie didn’t read much, but she was moved by the image. His education was one of the things she most admired about him. Sometimes, though, she became very self-conscious when he talked about books or places or people that she had never heard of.

‘Ted,’ she ventured, after a while, ‘does it worry you at all that I am just an uneducated fact’ry girl from the Midlands?’ Even as she spoke she was acutely aware of her accent. He spoke, not exactly with a London accent, but certainly not Brummie either. Something of a hybrid because of the different places in which he had been brought up and educated. After demobbing—he had been a Sapper—he had taken a position with a large engineering firm based in Birmingham.

‘Sweetheart, of course not. We’re not really Edwardians, after all.’

Nevertheless, as much as possible she had steered him away from her home and from meetings with her parents. This weekend, they thought that she and Irene had gone to stay with an aunt of Irene’s in the country. Irene was more than willing to provide cover for her friend. ‘Go get him, girl,’ she had said.

They had stopped walking, without being conscious of it. He pulled her towards him and kissed her. Through the thin cotton of her dress she felt the warmth of his hands at her waist, sensed their assuredness and confidence. He moved them slightly, enjoying the

sensation as the thin material slid across her flesh. The kiss became more intense, his right hand sliding down towards her thigh.

‘We should get some lunch,’ she breathed.

‘Of course.’

They ate at a small café in the main street of town, which was quite abuzz at the height of summer. When they came out it was uncomfortably hot, so they decided to return to the hotel, collected some newspapers and sat for a while in the shade on the hotel terrace, drinking ginger beer. Most of the news concerned Princess Elizabeth’s engagement. There was an abundance of stories about this unknown Greek chap and his family.

‘I’m suddenly very tired,’ she said through the remnants of a profound yawn. ‘Think I might go upstairs and lie down for a while.’ Then, as she stood, she added, ‘Will you be coming up too?’

‘Why not?’

They became engaged at last in September, with plans to marry in June or July the following year. Her friend Irene as maid of honour, her sisters as bridesmaids. A wedding at the height of summer. A wonderful man at her side. What more could she possibly ask for? They began planning immediately for a wedding that would never take place.

Gregory

GREGORY'S MOTHER AND FATHER HAD DIVORCED WHEN THEY WERE both in their early sixties. His father had decided to remain in Australia, but his mother had finally returned to England, after hating her life in Australia for almost thirty years. She had expected to find things as she remembered them when she returned 'home'. They weren't, of course, but at least she had been reunited with her sisters and friends. They were all dead now. Only she remained.

When his parents divorced he had been living in Melbourne. He had no inkling of it until Lizzie phoned to give him the news. It came as no surprise in some respects, and yet was completely unexpected in others. For years, now, they had lived together under the same roof, undertaking some kind of ritualised version of life that required no thought and little conversation. His father had retired early because of an injury at work. There seemed no reason why this life would not continue until one of them died. Neither Lizzie nor he had any idea what might have brought about this decision, and neither parent was forthcoming. Again, it was both completely unexpected and not the least surprising when their mother decided to return to England. Unexpected, because she hated flying; but more so because she had never shown any inclination to be decisive. On the other hand, it was not at all surprising, because she had hated Australia from almost the moment she had set foot there.

Gregory flew across to Adelaide to see his mother before she left, and to see his father because he was worried about how he would cope. He needn't have been concerned. His mother had moved in with

Lizzie for the week or two before she was due to leave, and his father remained alone in their small rented home. He stayed with him there for a few days. As far as he could tell he was ‘happy as a pig in shit’, as they say. In most ways he simply carried on as he always had: watching recorded television shows, reading, making simple meals. If the vacancy of the other lounge chair, twin to his own, on the far side of the coffee table, affected him in any way, Gregory could not sense it. The only difference that he did notice was that he talked more. Usually he had taken a secondary role in all familial conversations, but on this occasion, at least, he was quite voluble. He chatted extensively about the books he was reading, and those he planned to read. He discussed an old movie that he had watched the night before. Gregory asked him what he intended to do now. His father looked a little puzzled by the question, and perhaps a little wary.

‘What do you mean?’ he asked.

Gregory realised that he didn’t know exactly what he meant. Was he wondering if his father would rush off on a round the world trip? Did he think he had another woman waiting in the wings? Did he think he had suicidal tendencies? The afternoon sun was beginning to penetrate deeper into the front room, where Gregory sat on the lounge, across the room from his father. It was a beautiful afternoon in the middle of spring. About now, he thought, his mother would have been drawing the curtains. She didn’t like the sun. His father seemed in no hurry to continue the practice.

‘I don’t know,’ Gregory shrugged. ‘Do you have any plans?’

‘Not really. I’m happy to carry on doing what I like doing. I can’t see why that should change.’

With their mother it was a different matter. It always was. She resented the fact that Gregory was spending so much time with his father. He could tell she wanted to hear that he was missing her, or not coping in some way. He refused to give her that satisfaction. He was sure that in her case the whole divorce and return to England scenario was intended as one giant offensive gesture towards their father: in short, she was giving him the finger.

As always, he left his encounters with her with a bad taste in his mouth.

Gregory didn't see her then for several years, until his work finally took him from Australia to Bristol. Now he saw her when he could, which wasn't very often.

He looked at his watch. It was only twelve-forty. His meeting with The Actress wasn't until two-thirty, so he decided to walk west along the lake, searching for somewhere nice for lunch.