

INDELIBLE
INK

FIONA
MCGREGOR



SCRIBE
Melbourne

Scribe Publications Pty Ltd
PO Box 523
Carlton North, Victoria, Australia 3054
Email: info@scribepub.com.au

First published by Scribe 2010

Copyright © Fiona McGregor 2010

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher of this book.

Typeset in 12/15 pt Dante
Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press. Only wood grown from sustainable regrowth forests is used in the manufacture of paper found in this book.

Epigraph taken from *A Magic Mountain* by Czesław Miłosz
© Czesław Miłosz Royalties Inc. 1975
Used with kind permission of HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication data

McGregor, Fiona, 1965-

Indelible Ink

9781921753169 (e-book.)

A823.3

This project has been assisted by the Australian government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body.



Parts of this book, in slightly different form, previously appeared in *HEAT*, *Griffith Review*, *The Best Australian Stories 2006* and *Meanjin*.

www.scribepublications.com.au

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN YEARS, the children were all at Sirius Cove for their mother's birthday. A westerly had been blowing since morning, depositing grit on the deck as the family brought out food and fired up the barbecue. Leon, who hadn't been in Sydney for over a year, was struck by the effects of the drought on the city and the emptiness of the house since his parents' divorce. Ross had taken his most valuable furniture and artworks with him, and Marie as lone inhabitant seemed to have shrunk and the house to have grown. Passing the cabbage tree palm that grew close to the deck, Leon leant out to touch the bark, thick and hard as an elephant's hide. An old habit that comforted him.

Clark moved the seedling that Leon had given their mother away from the heat of the barbecue. It was sinuous and elegant with narrow delicate leaves. 'What's this?'

'*Agonis flexuosa.*' Leon broke a leaf off and crushed it near Clark's face, releasing a sharp peppery smell. 'It needs to be planted soon.'

'We can look after it for you, Mum,' said Blanche.

Clark placed chicken on the griddle. 'Yes, please,' he said to Hugh, who was pouring wine.

Marie was walking back to the kitchen. 'I might have a spot for it down near the banksia,' she said over her shoulder.

Blanche sent Leon a look, which he ignored. She was wearing a hat with a wide floppy brim so her mouth, full and always painted red, was the only thing visible. It was smiling wryly.

The children sat down to eat.

'Where's the wine?' Their mother's vexed voice travelled out. 'Where's my glass?'

‘Here, Mum.’

‘I’ve poured you a glass, Mrs King,’ Hugh said.

‘But I had one in here.’ The wine she’d had in the kitchen was in a bigger glass, and the last of the Queen Adelaide Riesling, which Marie was convinced didn’t sit on her breath as heavily as the Taylors Chardonnay that Blanche and Hugh had brought.

‘Mum. Will you come and sit down, before it gets cold?’

There it was, stashed behind the toaster. Marie returned to the deck, flushed and happy, with her Riesling. ‘This is the first outdoor meal of the season,’ she announced. ‘I think we should drink a toast.’

‘The weather’s beautiful,’ said Hugh.

‘I think it’s sinister,’ said Clark. ‘It’s the last day of August and it feels like summer.’

Dense blue harbour pushed against the canopy of trees below. The flapping of sails from yachts going about was close enough to have come from next door. They had moved the table against the glass doors for maximum shelter, and pinned the napkins down with cutlery.

‘It feels so weird without Pat Hammet,’ Leon said ruefully.

‘She stayed in that house on her own for nearly ten years after Judge Hammet died, you know,’ said Marie.

‘Yeah, and left the place totally run-down,’ said Blanche.

‘I liked it run-down,’ said Clark. ‘I liked Pat. That house was amazing.’

The new neighbours, the Hendersons, had pulled down the Hammets’ one-hundred-year-old Gothic pile shortly before the Kings’ divorce. They had rebuilt so close to the fence that Marie’s winter light was almost gone, and in place of the front garden was a four-car garage for Rupert Henderson’s fleet of vintage Jaguars. There were surveillance cameras on the front wall, and the back garden, facing the harbour, would soon be a swimming pool.

‘Pat’s still around,’ said Marie. ‘I see her up at the Junction sometimes. Salt of the earth.’ She pushed out her chair.

‘Where are you going, Mum?’

‘To get more wine.’

‘You’re not supposed to be moving,’ said Hugh. ‘I’ll go.’

‘No, no, I know where it is.’

‘It’s like this entire city has obsessive-compulsive disorder,’ Clark went on. ‘Nothing’s allowed to be more than ten years old. There’s no *patina*. It’s so philistine.’

‘Remember the Hammets’ before Pat moved out?’ said Blanche. ‘The flagging down the bottom was caving in. I went over there to give her some Christmas cake, and there was this giant bush rat dead in the middle of the path —’

‘Apparently that house could have been heritage listed. It could have been saved.’

‘— it was so foul.’

‘It’s about history, our need to destroy our history.’

‘A lot of the interior timber was cheap and poor quality,’ Hugh said to him.

‘It couldn’t have been.’ Clark spoke with his shoulders hunched, bracing for a sneeze. Bloody cat must have been sleeping on the chairs again. He looked around the room but couldn’t see Mopoke anywhere. He glared at Hugh instead. ‘It wouldn’t have lasted.’

‘I’m afraid it was,’ Hugh said with an insider’s authority. ‘I think we’re often so desperate to look historical that we make these decisions on sentiment, and it’s nonsense.’

‘I was meaning in a bigger sense.’

‘It’s bricks and mortar. It needs to last. Architects in the past weren’t necessarily better. If someone built Gothic in Mosman now, there’d be an outcry.’

Leon lowered his voice and inclined his head to his siblings, subtly avoiding Hugh. ‘I was thinking how much Mum is the house. You know, Dad was all the *stuff*, and now that’s gone you don’t feel his presence much. It’s really just her.’

‘She should replace the furniture before the house goes on the market,’ said Blanche. With the chaise longue and armchairs gone, the bookshelf had become the prominent marker on this side of the room, and most of the books looked tatty.

‘Why buy new things when you’re about to move to a smaller place?’ said Clark.

‘Because it looks like shit?’

‘Why don’t you wait until *she* says she wants to sell,’ said Leon.

Marie returned with another bottle of wine. She handed it to Hugh, then held out her glass.

‘Might help to get a bit more furniture in here,’ Hugh said.

‘I mean, I actually like it with less furniture,’ said Blanche. ‘I like the sense of space. Like what Leon was saying ... I mean *replace*.’

‘So do I,’ Marie agreed. ‘Do you want more chicken, Hugh?’

‘Thanks. That’d be great.’

Marie spooned extra sauce on. Poor Hugh. After all these years the boys still hated him. Even Blanche was embarrassed by him. Marie also thought Hugh was an oaf, but as her children thought she was a drunken fool, she often found herself siding with him, out of guilt as well. She thought that family get-togethers would be better without Ross, but his legacy of carping remained. Even little Nell, if here, would probably be making snide remarks. The physical elements of heredity were inexorable, but the gestures and tones seeding generation after generation seemed more like psychological afflictions that she, as mother, should have thwarted. Then again, as at least half the afflictions had come from her, there wasn’t much she could do apart from sit back and watch them replicate. Yes, actually, Hugh, as oafish as he was, being free of the King afflictions was a relief. Marie never expected Blanche would marry this man with his thinning, colourless hair, his thick rugby neck, yet she liked Hugh for the same reason that she disliked him — his dreary predictability — and assumed her daughter felt similarly. It was also a relief finding things to agree on with Blanche.

Clark offered the wine around.

Blanche shook her head. ‘I’m driving.’

‘Why don’t you come east, Mum? I think you’d like it. It’s less Henderson, more Hammet.’

‘I’ve never lived on that side of the bridge, Clark.’

‘You could actually get more value for money in Kirribilli,’ said Blanche.

Marie sighed. ‘I don’t want to talk about this today, thanks.’

‘We’ll put you on to the people who renovated our kitchen and

bathroom,' said Hugh eagerly. 'They did an excellent job.'

'You could get them done for as little as seventy K, Mum.'

'That's such a con,' said Clark. 'When I was house hunting you'd see these ads saying *Just renovated* and it'd be a slap of paint or a bit of Ikea and they'd double the price. Even a mug like me could see through it.'

'We're not talking about Ikea, Clark.'

Marie thought of putting ice in the wine, the crack it would make like her arthritic big toe escaping its shoe at the end of the day. The chill emanating from the cubes through the surrounding alcohol to frost the glass, and persuade her she wasn't drinking as much as she really was. But she was aware of how often she had already left the table, so for distraction she unwrapped her remaining presents. Clark had given her a book. Marie read every book she was given. She liked Graham Greene, Inga Clendinnen and Angela Carter. She didn't like Bryce Courtenay or Paul Auster. Clark gave her crime and local history; she drank the latter down oblivious to style, interested only in content. But her favourite books were her gardening ones, the most significant shelf taken up by eight volumes of *The Encyclopedia of Australian Plants*. Today's birthday present was about first contact. She thanked Clark. Blanche and Hugh had given her a bottle of Issey Miyake. 'Oh,' she said, '*perfect*. I've just run out.'

'If you don't like it, I'll get you something else. And I'll have that. Honestly.'

'Thank you!' Marie tilted her head and angled the perfume at her clavicle. Most of it sprayed over her shoulder, in Hugh's direction. Hugh's neck was flushed and dimpled like the skin of a blood orange. He laughed then refilled their glasses.

Blanche dipped her head and Leon guessed she was grimacing. He got up to help her clear.

Clark walked down to the bottom of the garden, a magical place of mysterious plants whose names he mostly didn't know. Pale green spiky heads weighing on thick stems. Low, fleshy things, one of which sprouted a pink flower like a studded club. Magnolia, hibiscus, red grevillea. Tree ferns, palms, their nuts like pebbles

strewn across the path, which grew more indistinct the further down he went. He roared out a sneeze, nearly slipping on the dry leaf cover. Some of the compost slopped out of the bucket he was carrying. Righting himself, he saw Leon arrive and sit beneath the orange tree. He emptied the compost, wiped his hands on the grass, then trudged back up the path to sit next to his brother.

‘Blanche told me you got the sack,’ Leon said.

‘More or less. Restructuring. That’s what they call it these days.’

‘*Collateral damage.*’ Leon used an American accent. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘I don’t know.’ Clark shredded a twig to a point, then began picking his teeth with it. His teeth veered at odd angles, as though trying to avoid whatever he was taking in.

‘Have you applied for any jobs?’

‘There’s no work out there if you haven’t done postgrad. They advertised lots of other positions too. Even for the guides they got about a hundred applications, four of them PhDs.’

Leon felt sorry for his brother, bowed over his shoe, but he wasn’t sure how to talk to him. He was wary of Clark lashing out. Nearly forty, divorced, now the sack. Not that anyone was sorry to see the back of uptight Janice. The fact that his own business was failing didn’t strike Leon as a point of solidarity, let alone something to talk about, probably because it was his own fault. ‘That’s terrible. I thought you were one of their best guides.’

‘I wasn’t a guide.’ Leon had never come to the museum. ‘I worked in publications and archives.’

‘Well, I hope it works out, mate.’

They sat in silence beneath the tree. Tricked by the heat, the jacaranda had begun flowering. The bark on the angophora was growing coarse. Leon recorded the browning of the rhaps and Blanche’s totem magnolia. The sickness, the thirst. He reflected how different it would be working in Sydney in this weather. He would be drought-proofing one garden after another, or creating false economies for clients in Mosman and Woollahra. He would be learning about a whole new biosphere. They didn’t anticipate this in college fifteen years ago. The whole horticulture industry

was scrambling. Meanwhile, the so-called dabblers like his mother were getting by on common sense. The xanthorrhoea she planted as his totem when Leon was born looked robust as a bush native. He could have described its circumference with his arms outstretched. It was a lot to give up, a garden like this. The thought of somebody coming in and destroying it was unbearable.

‘So you think Mum should sell as well,’ Leon said.

‘Yeah. I think the upkeep on a place like this is too much and she needs a fresh start.’

‘Sure. But it’s *such* a big deal. She created this. You reckon Hugh wants to take on the sale?’

‘Of course. A house like this’d pay a massive commission.’

‘Maybe he’s not so bad, as far as real-estate agents go.’

Blanche was calling from the top of the path. ‘We’re about to have the cake, guys.’

‘Didn’t Blanche just get a promotion?’

‘Yep. Creative Director. Way into six figures.’

Leon whistled. ‘Hugh always seems so genial, kinda harmless, you know? We can at least keep the bastard honest. Can’t we?’

‘Don’t count on me to oversee financial anything.’

‘Are you coming?’ Blanche crunched down the path towards them.

Leon stood and brushed himself down. His voice lowered. ‘D’you think Blanche will?’

‘Who knows? She doesn’t have to be *dishonest* to benefit very nicely. Does she?’

‘We should all get a commission of the commission.’

Blanche stopped a few metres away. ‘Mum said there might be ticks down here now.’

Clark jumped up and shook himself.

‘I can see one in your ear.’

‘Where? Where?’

‘There.’

Terrified, Clark began to burrow into his ear canal.

‘Oh. It’s crawled out the other ear now. Must’ve gone through your brain.’

'*Blood-suckin' freaks,*' Leon said in another accent, half American, half something else.

He walked up to the house laughing. Clark and Blanche dawdled behind.

'I can't believe he gave her a *tree,*' Blanche said. 'Of all things. At this time.'

'I thought it was a shrub.'

'It's a swamp gum, Clark. They're quite beautiful actually. But, like, couldn't he give her an orchid or something in a pot?'

'He's sentimental about the place too. Why are you guys insisting she renovate?'

'You make out like we've got some kind of great power. *Insisting.* God,' Blanche groaned as the path steepened, 'I'm *exhausted.*'

'Working too hard?'

'We didn't sleep. Our neighbour's fighting with his wife.'

'That loud?'

'Their bedroom window's adjacent to ours. It goes on all night. And if we shut the window, we get completely roasted. Hot-blooded Venezuelans.'

Blanche had arrived that day with red eyes and Clark had wanted to interpret them as a sign of marital conflict, a career crisis, something, anything, to make her seem vulnerable. He couldn't help but be disappointed to hear it was someone else's problems. He sharpened at the word *Venezuelan*, waiting for a racial clanger.

'Have you looked in the kitchen?' Blanche went on. 'The grout coming off near the sink and that burn mark next to the stove? Those little things. It can make a real difference.'

'I hadn't even noticed.'

'I wonder what her friends think. Susan, for example.'

Beneath the deck now, they could hear Hugh and Marie singing along to the Ronettes. Blanche glanced sheepishly at her brother. She couldn't imagine being with Hugh at her mother's age, nor could she imagine being alone. She had always assumed these two outcomes but the future cataclysm they implied had never been so clear. She considered her mother's solitary rudderless state, and her elder brother's, and a feeling of dread washed over her.

‘God,’ Clark said. ‘That woman. Mum’s so *submissive* with her or something. You know, Susan buys a yellow straw hat, Mum buys a yellow straw hat.’

‘Mum didn’t get a mobile though. And Susan *lives* on hers.’

‘Yes, she did. She just never uses it.’

‘*Did* she? She never told me. And I’ve been hassling her to and everything. Did she give you her number?’

‘Yep.’ Clark stepped ahead of her as the path narrowed. Blanche fell silent.

Clark said in a low voice, ‘Mum just wants to please everyone. Including us. You know that.’

The next Saturday after lunch at Mario’s, Susan suggested they go to the new homewares shop on Macleay Street. They went in Susan’s car as Marie had had most of the two bottles they’d ordered at lunch. Marie rode with her hand in her bag, palming her wallet. She hummed with excitement. Who knew what she might find out there? All those things waiting for her to give them a home and bring them to life. She remembered her pile of unpaid bills, but she owned a house in Sirius Cove and it was her birthday and spending while in debt had an extra frisson. The casual signature below a sum that could have fed her for months. To be that free and reckless.

She followed Susan into the shop. An assistant at the back noticed them immediately. Marie always liked walking into places with Susan, a tall good-looking blonde with long tanned legs and ankles so tautly defined as to have been carved from wood. Marie was the cute curvaceous side of the partnership, the entry point, and Susan the lure. They browsed with their heads together.

‘Why don’t you get a lounge suite?’ said Susan.

‘I thought I’d just get a new chair and a lamp or something.’

‘You should start with a lounge suite, then work your way down. If you start with the small things, it just ends up higgledy piggledy and nothing matches.’

Marie barked her shin on a chair and stumbled against Susan, who tipped forward then righted herself on the back of a couch. They giggled tipsily. ‘Not this ugly thing,’ Marie hissed at the couch.

'Out of my way!' Susan gave the next couch a little whack.

They forged on.

'What about these?' Marie stopped before a pair of Chinese vases.

'Oh no, you don't want those.'

'Why not?'

'Ross has a pair just like them.'

They continued towards the centre of the shop. Something sour released in Marie at the mention of Ross's name.

'Furniture traps memories like odours, Marie. It's bad feng shui for you to hang on to that couch of yours. Isn't this a lovely shop? You have to get something here. Gina's managing Mosmania now, you know, and I can tell you there's absolutely nothing in there. *No-thing.*'

The svelte, bearded assistant approached. 'Can I help you?'

'Yes,' said Susan. 'We're interested in lounge suites. For my friend here. Let's have a look at those.' She set sail across the floor towards some lumps the colour of ice. 'I like that one, Marie. It's timeless. Versatile.'

'Excellent choice.' The assistant nodded. 'It also comes in navy, slate, jade and coral. The covers are washable.'

Susan sat on one of the couches and looked over at Marie, eyes bright. 'It's comfortable, you know. And *I'll* get you a lamp, to go with this, for your birthday.'

Marie could feel acid rising up the back of her throat. She sat obediently next to Susan. Interesting to see the revisitation of styles in the light-filled, glass-fronted shop. Off to one side stepped the functional elegance of Scandinavian couches, with their narrow wooden arms and slim cushions. Ross had had some couches like that taken to the tip less than a decade after buying them. And now they sold for thousands of dollars.

Marie bounced up and down, testing it out. The couch *was* comfortable. She could have lain down and fallen asleep.

'How do you like it?' said the assistant.

'It's very comfortable but I'm not sure about the colour.'

A man in beige chinos sat on the other icy lump, hands flat

either side. He moved around, smiling at the woman standing over him, urging her to join him. She had a fringe that dipped in a melancholy curve below her brow. 'I still prefer the one on eBay,' she said, pouting.

'But you can't *sit* on your eBay couch, sweetheart.' He patted the cushion beside him. 'It could be Sag City and you won't know till you get it. Come on. Try this out.'

She sat next to him, expressionless, staring straight ahead.

'You might change your mind, but the best things will go,' Susan said into Marie's ear. 'Everybody thinks there's an endless supply just because it's furniture. But you wait, they will go!'

Marie looked at the colour chart. Navy and slate would be too dark. Coral reminded her of the 1970s. 'Is there any jade in stock?' she asked the assistant.

'I'll go and check.'

'Don't you think jade looks drab?' said Susan. 'It always ends up looking grey.'

Jade. Chinese. Marie's mind wandered as Susan answered her mobile. She couldn't remember Ross's Chinese vases. What shocked her after he had left with his things wasn't so much the loss as how quickly her mind papered it over. Where is this? What happened to that? her children would say. Marie would have no idea what they were talking about. Oh, *Dad*, they would answer themselves. She worried about the holes beneath this paper, the day it would give way and she would fall through into the dark abyss of reality. No such thing as a free lunch, Marie thought, in her fug, on the glacial lounge suite. Around her wheeled the endless cycle of acquisition and rejection, the costly stink of yesterday's garbage. She slid through it like a stain.

Susan was braying into her phone, 'Hal-lo! No, I'm out. Yes, you must!'

Marie straightened her spine, thought of her wallet and felt a power enter her. It seemed to come from her posture and her credit. These things emanated into the room, alchemised, then returned as this strange and thrilling power. Susan was snapping her phone shut with a clatter of bracelets, fling it into her jacket pocket. Marie

turned to her, shoulders thrust back. 'What's his new house like?'

'You can imagine.' Susan rolled her eyes. 'Full of clutter. He's gone completely Chinese, which is why I warned you off those vases. He doesn't have very good taste, you know.' She drew in her chin and looked Marie in the eye.

'Do you and Jonesy go there very often?'

'No.'

The man in beige chinos and his partner moved over to the dining section.

Marie looked straight ahead, confused. So the vases were new. So much for her amnesia. Or were they there already? She pulled the tag around to look at the price of the lounge suite. Nine thousand dollars. She could have got a rainwater tank for that.

'Why do you have to torture yourself, Marie? You should be *treating* yourself.'

'What's she like? She's young, isn't she?' Marie could hear the belligerence in her tone. She didn't like the sound of herself after a few glasses of wine. Her voice emerged louder than she intended, with the exaggerated enunciation of a person for whom clear speech was difficult: a stroke victim, a deaf mute. A drunk.

Susan's irritation was evident. She stood and straightened her skirt. 'Okay, she's plump and plain. An interior designer. Not that you'd know it, looking at all that *clutter*. She fusses over him.'

A little bark of amusement from Marie. 'Short and blonde? Big tits?'

'There's nothing I can say when you're like this. Listen, why don't I buy you a lamp. Let's go and get a lamp to go with the lounge suite.'

'He's got himself another me. I suppose I should be flattered!'

'I didn't mean it like that.'

Susan moved away; Marie followed her. They ebbed towards an uninhabited corner of the shop, bright with scores of lights. They had entered during the last hour of daylight and the street outside was growing dark. Again Marie recognised items from her past — a mushroom-shaped lamp with orange head and white stalk; others on stands sprouting lights at intervals, like lilies. One of those

would come in handy. She was again confused by similarities with furniture from the history of her home, as though her home had only ever been a retail outlet. The air became progressively still and muggy. Susan began to fan herself with a catalogue. The catalogue whirred louder and louder, inside Marie's ears a giddy thrumming, then she was tripping over an electrical cord, grabbing on to a lamp, on her hands and knees, skirt up her thighs and Susan was saying, 'Oh god, Marie, oh god,' and the assistant was rushing towards them as Marie vomited her lunch of Pinot Grigio and scampi linguine across the floor.

When she looked up, she saw Susan scarlet-faced, tearing tissues from a small packet. Marie struggled to her feet and wiped her face, clouded with shame. But in the distance glimmered a feeling of levity, even exultation. The man in beige chinos looked at her in horror then left the shop, steering his woman in front of him. The assistant was frozen, hand over mouth. Desire for the lounge suite slaked Marie: she couldn't imagine leaving the shop without it. Her house would be empty, bereft, and she would have nowhere to rest.

Susan fluttered some tissues over the winey vomit. 'Don't worry about the lamp,' she was saying to the assistant. 'I'll pay for the lamp.'

Marie got out her Visa card and walked towards him determinedly. 'I'll sign for that lounge suite now.'

'And then,' Susan whispered, 'I'm putting you straight into a taxi.'

It was Saturday night out there. She was fifty-nine, divorced, with money in her wallet, and she had never been out alone on a Saturday night. She told the taxi driver to head back up to the Cross instead of over the bridge. She had gone to a bar there years ago, on top of a building, with a view across the city and harbour. She was angry, bored, and her mouth was dry. Marie needed a drink.

Halfway up William Street, the traffic slowed to a crawl and Marie looked out the window, fascinated by the gaudy scene. A woman as big as a man stood near a building's entrance like a fruit vendor, offering her enormous breasts to the passing cars.

A prostitute half her age and size teetered past in spike heels to a companion propped against a pylon, head lolling. They leant against one another, slivers of cardboard with fluff for hair, trying not to blow over in the wind. Part of the road had been torn up and construction barriers lined each block. A group of English boys lurched down the footpath, shouting drunken songs. All of this had to be endured like a thicket of lantana grown across the path. The taxi struggled onwards. The rawness of the street, not two blocks from that sumptuous bar with deep chocolate lounges and tinkling piano, amazed Marie. As the taxi paused at a red light, some Aborigines sauntered up from Woolloomooloo screaming with laughter, then stopped to stare directly through the window at her.

Inside the bar, safely seated before the million-dollar view, Marie ordered a glass of Cape Mentelle. It was hours since her last drink. She swallowed the wine quickly and ordered another, then noticed a man at the bar staring at her. Tall and slim with thick grey hair, he was picking peanuts out of a dish and tossing them into his mouth with languid precision. Marie sat facing the window, watching his reflection in the glass. She turned to catch the waiter's eye, meeting those of the man at the bar in the elegant suit.

He turned away to exchange a word with the barman. She hoped he was ordering another drink; he could have been paying for hers. She was the only single woman over here; a party of loud shiny Americans and Australians spread across the couches beside her. She uncrossed and recrossed her legs around the cut she had sustained in the homewares shop. Checked the angle of her face in the glass, sucking in her cheeks for more bone structure as she ordered her wine.

Oh, we love coming here, said one of the Americans. It's so beautiful, and the people are so friendly.

Marie moved into their meeting, the first touch of his hand, the shape of him seated in the chair opposite, as the waiter gave her order to the barman. She went into the first months, the initial electric offering of bodies, discovery, compromise. They argued

and reconciled, settling into companionable silence by the time her wine arrived, thinking so far into their life together that she only noticed at the last minute the man paying his bill then leaving, shattering an ancient intimacy. She sat there humiliated, sipping her wine, staring at the city lights.

Have you been to Bondi? said one of the Australians. *Oh yeah,* came the reply. *It's beautiful.*

Why would he have been looking at her anyway? The homage of glances she had once known had been withdrawn. Menopause seemed to have hit overnight, dragging down her comely jowls. Marie couldn't avoid the sight of herself in the lift mirrors, repeated in nightmare triptych. Her navy skirt and linen jacket, lipstick cracking off dry lips. She wasn't exactly dressed for a night on the town. How much could she have improved this body anyway? These sagging breasts, this broadened arse, hands cracked with fish emulsion and years of confinement inside the hardened pigskin of gardening gloves. She exited onto Darlinghurst Road.

So here she was, on the street, an object of scrutiny just like those she had scrutinised an hour before. She stood on the corner waiting for the lights to change, a snake of cars sliding past. A finned red Pontiac paused before her, engine throbbing. Inside were four swarthy youths, a screen hanging over the front seat. None of them was paying much attention to the movie. They were looking out at her, smirking. One of them wound down the window, just as Marie realised the movie was a close-up of frantic copulation. The car took off and a yell hung in the air. *Faggot!*

Next to Marie, waiting to cross, was a man in a leather waistcoat, staring at the sky. The lights went red and Marie stomped across the road. At the entrance to the train station a busker was playing 'Blowin' in the Wind'. A couple unnervingly similar to her, in age and dress, smiled as they walked past. Marie had thought that a walk through the Cross would be a testing odyssey, but the street was surprisingly bright and short. She slowed down to make it last. There was a 7-Eleven from which spilt travellers garbling in a Nordic language. Cars cruised in both directions, bumper to bumper. She passed a disco with a luridly lit façade, manned by a huge Islander

who looked at her blankly. A woman in track pants staggered across the footpath, nearly crashing into Marie. Everywhere was the blare of music, car horns, sirens, spruikers.

‘Hey sis!’ someone was shouting in the plaza to the left. ‘Sista girl!’

Marie turned to see a large black woman in a black t-shirt with *Treaty!* emblazoned across it in red.

Catching her eye, the woman started enthusiastically towards her. ‘Got a smoke, sis?’

‘Sorry, I don’t smoke,’ said Marie, hurrying away, handbag clutched tight to her side.

She rounded the corner past a Deco apartment building, brass nameplates gleaming. You would have to be quite wealthy to own something there, thought Marie. So much for the seedy Cross, the people here aren’t exactly *poor*. She marched over to the fountain, a floating ball of liquid light. A boy and girl were sitting on its edge and, as Marie passed, the girl turned to throw up in the water. A parmesan smell of vomit arose, reminding her of the shopping trip, and she wondered if it was on her clothes. Rock’n’roll charged out of a bar. Suburban teenagers stood outside, the girls in stilettos nervously smoking and flicking their hair. Aren’t they too *young*? But wasn’t I their age when I met Ross? Nothing returns, thought Marie, walking on. Nothing twice.

There was a lump of rags in a doorway, slumped forward at an acute angle as though trying to lick his shoe. My god, is he alive? Is he a he? A group of bikies stood around their Harleys, fat oozing between waistcoat and jeans. One with white hair, slurping on a can of Solo, looked like their leader. Outside Stripperama stood a girl in tight jeans, sports bag slung over her shoulder. *Nooo*, she was saying into a mobile. *You’re joking*. Marie stopped at a fast-food place and bought a piece of pizza that tasted like melted plastic on cardboard. She ate it walking, realising soon that she had left the Cross, and nothing had happened. She tripped on the kerb. She turned down William Street.

She walked looking over her shoulder for a taxi, but all the vacant ones were streaming up the other side of the hill into the

Cross. She continued down, gnawed by disappointment, pawing with aggression. Why should she have to go home anyway, when the rest of the world was just warming up? She felt like she had been sloughed off and washed away. And isn't it just like you, Marie, to give up and go home? Ahead was the serpentine signage of a tattoo parlour. Marie paused to look through the window. The room was empty. And why shouldn't she be allowed into places like this? she thought, checking over her shoulder with furious resentment. But nobody had looked at her the entire night.

She pushed the door open and walked in. Surrounded by walls of designs, she felt for a minute like she was inside a giant comic book. A tall man with small eyes and long grey-brown hair emerged. A drooping moustache covered his mouth, and stubble the rest of his face. He had a tentative, distracted air. It was him in the photograph on the corkboard behind the counter, straddling a motorbike, two toddlers perched on the chrome body between his thighs, his inked arms stretched around them to the handlebars. He stood in front of her expectantly.

'I want to get a tattoo,' Marie said.

'Righto. Know what you want?'

'I have absolutely no idea!' She hung on to the counter and laughed.

He pushed some portfolios towards her and indicated the walls. 'Plenty of choice.'

She didn't want to put on her glasses. She felt idiotic enough in here as it was. Too old, too fat, definitely too dowdy. There was thrashing guitar music coming from the back room, strangled by a tiny speaker. Marie wanted to be away from the window so nobody could see her. Impatiently, she flicked through the portfolio, chose a red rose, then placed her credit card on the counter.

'Cash only.'

She emptied her wallet with five dollars to spare.

'Neil.' He pointed to himself as he led her through.

'I'm Marie.'

'My sister's called Marie!' His voice was high, with a slight quiver, as though he were trying not to get upset.

On the vinyl couch in the back room, it occurred to Marie for the first time that tattoos hurt, and she began to be afraid. The music crescendoed to a chorus, Neil whistling something unrelated over the top. A sudden desire to laugh hysterically racked Marie. She braced her stomach and looked at the pictures on the walls. A busty girl in denim, a Chinese dragon, a rock band. Body parts livid with fresh designs like offcuts in a forensics laboratory. The tattooist was busying himself with stainless steel dishes and sealed packages. Her heart began to flutter like a moth against the light.

‘Where’re we gonna put it?’ Neil turned to her.

‘I don’t know,’ Marie replied, almost indignant.

‘Want people to see it?’

He had placed gold-rimmed glasses on the end of his nose and rolled up his flannelette sleeves. She supposed he saw all sorts in here. A cavalcade of criminals, sluts and rock stars sauntered through her mind. A look of impatience ran across his face. She said, ‘Somewhere on my back?’

The door of the parlour burst open and voices filled the shopfront. Neil walked out, said, ‘Twenny minutes,’ then walked back in. ‘Shoulder blade?’

‘Alright then.’

She unbuttoned her shirt. There was the cool sting of a swab, then something pressed to her skin. A wave of nerves washed through her, leaving her gelid and sweaty. ‘Is it sterile?’ she barked.

‘You kidding?’ He laughed. ‘Get sued for farting in public toilets these days.’

Well, that was a detail she didn’t need to hear. A whirring began behind her ear.

‘So what’s the occasion?’ Neil asked.

Marie had to think. ‘I don’t know. My freedom. I’m free for the first time in forty years.’

‘To your freedom, then.’

The needles entered her skin.