

**REWRITING URBAN NARRATIVES OF THE
AUSTRALIAN GREAT DEPRESSION**

Helen Dinmore

University of Adelaide
School of Humanities
Department of English and Creative Writing

September 2014

VOLUME 1

Table of Contents

VOLUME ONE

Abstract	2
Thesis Declaration.....	4
“Dadaville” by Max Ernst.....	5
Creative work: <i>Dadaville</i> , a novel	6
References.....	185

VOLUME TWO

Exegesis: Rewriting Urban Narratives of the Australian Great Depression

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One Historiographies of the Australian Great Depression	8
Chapter Two Narrative, Fiction, Metahistory	16
Chapter Three Fictions of the Australian Great Depression	25
Chapter Four “Dadaville”: Dada, Resistance and Remaking.....	43
Conclusion	54
Works Cited	56
Bibliography.....	60
Acknowledgments.....	62

Abstract

Rewriting Narratives of the Australian Great Depression is a thesis consisting of a novel, *Dadaville*, and an exegesis. Inspired by a Max Ernst painting of the same name, *Dadaville* is set in Sydney in 1931, a city in the grip of brutal poverty. The unemployed riot as they are evicted from homes in their thousands. Among them are nineteen-year-old Maxine Fraley and her damaged father, Jim. It's a time of looming revolution – on the streets, and in the world of modern art, where Maxine finds work as a life model, and begins a romance with a young radical, Ralph. But the harder Maxine fights the threat of homelessness, the further she is forced downwards and outwards, from the suburbs to slums to the urban perimeter, where in shanty towns of iron and sacking the city is remaking itself in grotesque imitation.

Because of its complex, symbiotic relationship with historiography, the historical novel has always played a key role in supporting, challenging or building ideas of nationhood. The exegesis examines the ways in which both historiographic and fictional narratives of the Australian Great Depression are enlisted in the service of a national mythology. My exegesis pays particular attention to the ways in which revisionist historiographies of the late 1970s and beyond reflect contemporary historiographic debates. These question the availability of historical truth and characterise written “History” as subjective, constructed and ideologically positioned. The exegesis then categorises historical fictions of the Australian Great Depression according to a working definition and considers them as companion pieces to those historiographies, also with varying ideological agendas. This discussion is informed by theories of historical fiction which underline the form’s capacity to interrogate dominant cultural narratives. Further exploration of the tropological function of narrative in history writing opens up possibilities for historical fiction, as an inherently self-conscious form, to either contribute meaningfully to the process of narrativising history, or to question the very enterprise of historical truth-

making.

Fiction has the capacity to interact with historiography and memory to make new meanings out of the past, just as Dada sought, through art, to interrogate the grand narratives that its exponents believed led to WWI. Dada – and Surrealism, in its wake – re-evaluated the object, employing techniques that subverted the act of making. Meanwhile, the radical left of the 1930s saw the Great Depression as an inevitable stage of pre-revolutionary decay and took steps to hasten society's re-making. As an historical novel, *Dadaville* is analysed as a site of resistance and re-making, a fiction which foregrounds the politics of resistance and utilises the art movement Dada as a thematic signpost. *Dadaville* seeks neither to support nor supplant existing narratives of the Australian Great Depression; it suggests instead that a story can be interrogated without the aim of replacing it with another legitimating narrative.

Thesis Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

I also give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

Signature:

Date:



“Dadaville” by Max Ernst, c1924. Photo: © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2015

DADAVILLE

1

Maxine Fraley shoulders open the door and there's Jim, dozing at the table with their one candle burning away to a stub. The dead kerosene lantern casts a shadow across his face. Maxine hurries across to blow the candle out; drops into a chair, and holds her breath when his eyelids flicker at the scrape of its legs on the boards.

He doesn't wake. She exhales. She should have been here to save the candle, instead of walking all the way to the market. She drops the bag of bruised and spotted fruit by her feet and presses her fingertip in the tiny pool of soft wax, through to where it's still viscous and hot enough to hurt. When she pulls away the wax cools, sealing her skin.

Dingy sodium yellows the window, and in the gloom, Jim's face hangs in the empty air, severed from the rest of his body. She mulls over the task of getting him to his bed. If he wakes, he'll start trembling again, and it's a small consolation for the wasted candle, watching him in the stillness. Even though her stomach twists round the fruit she gulped down earlier, even though men are carousing outside and the swell of their voices rocks the flimsy house like a ship.

He must be exhausted to sleep at the table like that. She wishes he'd sit in the armchair, but he never will. It's too much like leisure. It's tough to rant from an armchair, to feel hard done-by. Easier roosting in straight-backed discomfort at the table.

With her thumbnail, Maxine carves through the hardened wax on her fingertip, crumbling it away. The armchair, plump but faded, is the last soft place in the room. Perhaps she can bring it close, shift him into it sideways and

cover him with his coat. Maxine squints through the half-dark, into the armchair's corner. It's not there. She looks around the room. The armchair is missing. They haven't much in the way of either space or belongings, so she soon works out it's not the only thing: the empty meat safe, with its buckled mesh, has vanished too.

Alarmed, Maxine gets up and makes for the curtain that divides the room. Slips under it without moving it on its rail: the brackets holding it up are loose in the plaster. It's dimmer behind the curtain, where the other window is broken and boarded up. She moves in, feeling for edges, scrutinising shadows. Here is the cold iron skeleton of the bedstead. But where she expects to find the dresser, the mirror with its disintegrating silver, there are instead voids that feel bigger than the objects that once occupied them. Her soles are stealthy on the bare floor. She can hear her own breath, smell newly settled dust and the reek of her exertions on her dress. Three days' sweat.

Outside, a bottle shatters on the pavement. A man roars. It's a growl and a shout together, the words unfathomable. Scattered catcalls follow. At the window, Maxine pulls out the rag from the knotted boards, peeks through the hole. A diagonal glimpse of the side door that leads around the back of Farrell's. She can see a lurching shadow but not the drunk who's making it. He still has his hat. Aside from that sharp detail, he's limbless; he could be anyone she knows or doesn't know, a whole man or a man who left his arms in France. A man who looks whole might have had his soul blown out. She can't tell anything from a shadow.

Men spill out of Farrell's and their boots obliterate the solitary shadow. They hoot and stagger close to the house – it's how the window got broken in the first place, Myra reckons – so Maxine pushes the rag back in and ducks back under the curtain, retreats to the main part of the room. She feels safer if she can't see them.

Jim is slouched in the same position, but his eyes are open.

They regard each other through the dim space. He has surfaced now, from wherever sleep took him. He is guessing at her with his wakeful eyes. Her

own eyes have adjusted to the dark, and she can make him out better now, in his seat at the table. The shine of his worn seams. The bones in his jaw.

‘Where have you been?’ he asks.

‘To the market. What happened to the furniture, Dad?’

His eyes drop. He grunts out his answer. ‘It went back to where it came from.’

Maxine pauses, frowns. The furniture was cheap and second-hand, all they could afford to put a deposit on with Auntie Vera’s money. ‘But you’ve been making the payments, haven’t you?’ That’s what he tells her, every week. Why there’s so little left over.

He doesn’t answer her now.

She feels it rising in her, the rage. She’s been so hungry for so long, and for what? ‘What have you been doing with your wages, then?’

‘There aren’t any wages, are there?’ He spits it out, as though she ought to know. As though it’s down to her ignorance, somehow. ‘Not for waiting around at the labour exchange. Or for walking the streets all day with the other mugs.’

Maxine’s jaw hangs open. A moment passes, and she steps forward and puts a hand on his shoulder, meaning to shake him. But he slumps under the slightest pressure and his yielding repels her. Her hand flies to her lips instead.

‘Oh, I’ve had a day here and there,’ he says. ‘What do you think’s been feeding you? You’ve had every penny. That’s all there’s ever been.’

*

The next morning Maxine takes their empty suitcase and walks the length of the city: from home to Circular Quay, then down to Central Station and home again. On the way home the suitcase is full and heavy. The tram she can’t afford to ride clamours back the way she’s come, on another return trip to George Street, bells jeering.

Her weary feet are mute in their rubber soles. She hoists the suitcase onto her hip as though it's a child too big for her arms. The awkward weight of it staggers her sideways, and she's forced to put it down again. Lifts it in a careful movement this time, and sets off. By now each step is a ragdoll's, as though the child she can't carry is prodding her knees from behind, death-dancing her forward.

But at least her heart hasn't shrunk. She's managing a sweat, despite her thin dress. Near home the streets get low and close, the cottages elbowing for room. Here and there, a window clean enough reflects the light. Wood smoke is thick in the air. Drifting through it, a distinct odour: the sizzling fat of a sausage or maybe a chop.

For a moment everything before her eyes begins to drift and flatten, so that there is no way to tell which is nearer, the fronts of the cottages or the high warehouses she thought were behind them. She tries to blink the impression away, but the world has cooked down to surface shapes and shades, a collage of square windows, steep triangulated roofs, the lines and edges of posts and roads and walls.

High shouts and a ringing and skittering, the sound of metal on stone, brings her round. Things become solid again: the cottages three-dimensional, the streets wandering into the distance. The smell of the cooking meat resumes its torment, and Maxine inhales, as though the aroma of someone else's dinner might offer the nourishment she needs to drag her body home. She moves forward. There's a clutter of kids on the corner ahead, seven or eight of them rabbling with sticks around an empty tin. One woman stands on her doorstep with her arms folded, the slant of the sun showing up the thick ridges around her eye sockets. Her hair is so heavy and bluntly cut that it sits in a kind of wedge on the side of her head. The woman looks at Maxine, first in the face and then from the ankles up, taking in the suitcase and the length of her hem.

Maxine has grown used to looks like this. She's grown used to swallowing the insult, and walking on.

‘You’ve no fur coat yourself,’ she calls out, and indignation tightens the circles around the woman’s eyes.

Her shout has caught the attention of the children. A stick clatters to the ground. They’re just a little hump of ragged ghosts in the shadow of the terrace, a dream she’s having, one for each of her worries. Clumped hair and twig legs. Hard to say if that idea’s more frightening than the pack of rat-sharp nippers they really are. Maxine picks up her step and longs even harder for noisy shoes, the kind with clipping heels. Her mum used to have a pair, in polite lilac. They matched the dress Maxine’s wearing now. But unlike the dress, Maxine outgrew them; she has her father’s broad and graceless hands and feet. In any case, lilac wouldn’t cut it here. She needs something sterner, schoolmistress black.

She might as well wish for snow.

Maxine pretends to herself for a minute that she’s not knackered, and strides at the kids, letting the suitcase swing a bit, wide and free, in what she hopes is a kind of swagger.

Most of the kids are barefoot scraps, but there are two older ones who pick up their sticks. Both have cropped hair and shadowed faces, but one wears a skirt under frayed old-man layers: a collarless shirt, a cardigan. If they come at the case, the latches will never hold. She imagines it bursting on the cobbles in a billow of flour and tea and old bloomers. They would see then what she is limping home with like it’s a haul of buried treasure: tins and packets and hand-me-downs, enough to stop her and her dad from starving for another two weeks. And although any one of them could be from a family on the susso, the best way these kids know to beat their own humiliation is to make a meal out of someone else’s. When they start to wallop the case, Maxine lifts it and clutches it to her chest. The sticks rain onto her arms instead.

At first the tears are for the pain in her arms on top of the pain in her feet. She struggles to balance the case and to hold in the fury and shame, all while getting away down Norfolk Street and beyond the kids’ territory. By the time she’s clear of the little buggers, the tears are for unpaid debts and wasted

candles; for the judgement of strangers and worst of all, for the things that Jim will say about what is in the suitcase, when they both know he is the one who should be carrying it.

A man has to clear his debts, no matter what that bastard Lang reckons. That's what her dad always says. He even stays away from Farrell's. He always finds a little bit of tobacco, though. 'A smoke and a drink o' tea is all I need,' he likes to say, as if to imply that Maxine's appetite for regular meals is their real problem, and in a way, she supposes, it is.

This is what she will say to him: that he will never get her to see the dignity in starving. Let him rant about the shame of it. Maxine comes to the very bottom of Barnard Street, and begins the climb. The terrace porches sit like balconies at right angles above the gradient of the street. Below the slope is where the basements open up, burrows in the original hill. She can never picture what the hill would have looked like once, what leap of imagination took place to lay this road and pavement, to dig out and build up, to impose so many lines on that soft incline.

Ahead of her, a small group of neighbours has gathered in the street. There's Jean, taller than the rest, and Myra's blonde bob. They are right outside Maxine's place. Her grip on the suitcase handle slips. They leave Maggie Connolly at number twelve to her husband's fists, for fear of interfering, but they don't mind gathering and gossiping over a spectacle. She can't tell until she comes up to them, until she shoulders through, what it is they have crowded to see.

The Fraleys' pockmarked kitchen table is standing on the footpath, and on it, most of their few small belongings in a heap: the blackened saucepan and frying pan, the washing basin and the tin for matches, Jim's coat. Next to it, in a separate pile, her iron bedstead, her father's mattress, the two chairs.

Maxine puts the suitcase down at her feet. It's obvious what's happened. Her dad is standing on the porch in his vest and braces. No hat on his head.

Maxine raises a hand to her mouth again, as the cool-water warbling of magpies trickles down from the street's lonely jacaranda, backed by the rumble and honk of distant traffic.

Jim Fraley looks at her wordlessly, stumbles from the porch to take one of the chairs, and sits down in the street.

The neighbours' faces are blank and watchful, and Maxine's gut churns with feelings she can't put into order. She can't bring herself to sit down on the other chair. She hovers on the gritty asphalt and watches her dad's face for a sign of what he will do. But when he takes his face out of his hands and stares at the ground in front of him, his expression is clogged, like he's come down with a cold, like there's something in his throat he can't speak past.

Myra's been watching him, too, as he sits there silently in the street. Questions pass over her face but she doesn't ask them. Maxine, who can't open her own mouth for fear of what will come out of it, wishes she *would* ask. Then she'd know the answers herself: why didn't he tell her they were due for eviction; and have they got anywhere to go?

In the end, it's Jim's inaction that seems to decide Myra. She shakes herself alive like a bird. 'You two are bunking in with us tonight, I reckon.' She speaks loud and sharp, as though Jim is buried in some deep or foggy place where he might not hear her. Maxine's eyes flash towards her, brimming with bitter gratitude, but Myra escapes the look; casts about instead for Francis, her whippety twelve-year-old, who has corralled his two younger sisters into a subdued gutter game involving stones of various sizes.

It's only now that anyone else approaches: now that the bailiff has shown his back, now that Myra's made her offer and the Fraleys are no longer quite homeless. One is Jean, Maxine's upstairs neighbour, a tall, broad-faced woman, along with Dot from across the street, who by means of careful configuration squeezes eight children into her three rooms. Jean has somehow got hold of – or held onto – a sewing machine, and often pedals it past midnight making up boys' shorts for a penny a go. The noise it makes through the flimsy boards constitutes the bulk of Maxine's contact with her. Jean has lived in the house for a few years, Myra explained to Maxine once. She's seen a lot of

tenants come and go. If she's not bothering with you, it's because she thinks you won't be staying long.

Maxine wonders what it was about her and Jim, a few months ago, that made Jean conclude that their stay would be short-lived. She was right, that was the thing. Jean's perspicacity dismays her.

'You poor loves,' Jean crows, but keeps her distance, her arms folded in front. Her lips are thin, the sort that wear lipstick badly. Maxine's seen her colouring them all the same, with a licked finger rubbed on the red wallpaper in the downstairs hall.

'It's a terrible thing,' says Dot, shaking her head. Her neck and forearms are as sinewy as a boy's, but under her apron she is lumpy and shapeless around the middle. Grey hairs spring like wires from her unkempt mop of black hair. 'Just awful.'

'I'll take the children up to mine for a bit of tea,' says Jean to Myra, with the air of being the one to offer the afternoon's first real assistance. 'And Dot here'll bring Jim a cuppa, won't you Dot?'

Maxine stares at them. Most of the women in Barnard Street are chained to the spot by houses full of babies, and never get out much beyond the ham and beef shop. And Maxine wonders how long it takes to become like them: believing there will always be trouble, no matter what anyone does; that it's only the type of trouble that ever changes. Perhaps fearing that if they don't manage it this way – each person in charge of her own troubles, beyond a helpful cup of tea or plate of dinner or headache powder – that all of their problems will merge, uncontained, into a roiling sea of outrage big enough to sweep the city away.

Dot crosses the narrow street to her terrace. Francis and his sisters, Annie and Clarabel, bound away after Jean and her promise of tea. Maxine watches them go, then searches Myra's face for a reaction. It's impressive, almost regal, the way she keeps her own counsel. Myra would laugh her head off at that. Yeah, Queen of the basement, she'd say. Queen of the slums.

'We'd better get your things inside,' she says.

She and Maxine make a start on the small stuff. When it becomes clear that Jim isn't about to budge, Myra goes and drags Francis away from Jean's with a wodge of bread in his hand. The two of them stagger down the steps with the table, into Myra's basement rooms, while Maxine goes ahead with the chair Jim's not sitting on. She slides it into place under Myra's own kitchen table, where there are only two chairs to begin with, and it makes her feel better somehow, like she might have something to offer.

As she returns to help the others, there's a voice at the door.

'Hello?' It's Dot, sticking her head into the hall. She surveys the Fraleys' table first, standing on its end, then the three of them, finishing with Myra, whom she addresses as though everyone else is an apparition. 'I've brought that cuppa.'

'Thanks.' Myra accepts the chipped mug from her, and Maxine wonders why she didn't hand it straight to her dad, on the street. Then she sees. The table is blocking Dot's access to the hall, which is a relief to Maxine but also, going by the expression on her face, a point of consternation to Dot. Myra doesn't encourage her, just leans back against the wall with a calm smile.

'Will you be staying here then?' Dot asks Maxine.

'What bloody business is it of yours?' barks Jim behind her in the doorway, so furiously that Dot backs away with the thin, gratified expression of someone who's seen more than she ought to, and will be back later to hear the rest of it.

It's only after the blast of her father's fury has subsided that Maxine realises she's closed her eyes, braced herself against the force of it, holding herself up with a hand on the wall.

Myra has her eyes on her. 'It's good of you coming to give Francis a hand with the table, Jim,' she says, stepping across the room towards him. 'No wonder Maxie's so devoted to you.' And she takes hold of his hands, one by one, unfurls their rigid fingers, and wraps them around the mug of hot tea.

In this country there is no such thing as pale. Everything is bold, as though the sun and sea are shouting out to one another from a far distance. There is none of that shrouding cloud of her childhood, the low sun just above the treetops all day, stony as a winter hearth. Here, Maxine feels like the sunlight is running after her. Like it's liquid, something molten ready to pool around her feet and hold her.

First she has to walk to Circular Quay and queue at the wharf for coupons. The leaves on the trees are so buttered with sunshine they should be edible. But they aren't edible. There are single men living in lean-tos in the Domain. There must be eggs in nests sometimes, if you can climb. There are colonies of bats hanging like small coffins in the sky.

Once she has the coupons, there's another walk all the way down to the depot near Central Station. The ladies who volunteer at the Benevolent Society dress down for the occasion, in cottons and the plainest hats they own. Some are tight-lipped and school-marmish, ever on the alert for the threat of disorder. But a few of the younger ones take off their hats, put on aprons, roll up sleeves, and Maxine thinks it's not the work of handing out rations, of finding and fitting and folding the clothes that flushes their cheeks, but the idea of their own decency, as though privilege is a stifling room, and this fresh air.

The woman Maxine is standing in front of is not one of the apron wearers. She's the one at the desk with the box in which to put the coupons, hair set in neat, dark waves and the alert, slightly doubtful air. She does her job all right, sitting there at a temporary sort of angle, as if to say she wasn't ever meant for a desk job but she'll endure it for the moment. She might be a doctor's wife, thinks Maxine. A manager's wife. The sort of woman who reads *The Home* and does her own baking and goes for Sunday drives in the polished family car, the sort with clean-faced children untroubled by diphtheria and

rickets. Maxine's own mum would have died of shame before she lined up like this in front of her.

There is no chair for dole recipients. The woman examines Maxine's coupons, then looks up and searches her face. Maxine is startled by the sudden intimacy of it.

'I have a daughter your age.'

'Oh,' says Maxine.

It doesn't sound like judgement, but it's not pity either. It seems to be a question of some sort, one tinged with a peculiar sadness, as though the woman thinks Maxine can tell her the answer to something she doesn't understand.

But, thinks Maxine, if she had answers to anything she wouldn't be standing there either.

Faced with Maxine's uncertain silence, the woman smooths the papers of her list. A polite smile passes over her face, erasing the familiarity of moments before. 'You may collect what you need now.'

The volunteers dole out provisions along a line, each woman standing alone in a cubicle of sorts, defined by shallow partitions, where she is responsible for one item. By the time Maxine reaches the end of the line, she has collected a bag of flour, a box of oats, a jar of jam, a packet of currants, a tin of cocoa and one of powdered milk, macaroni, rice, treacle, five spotted apples, mutton in butcher's paper that she expects will be mostly bone and fat, two small loaves, a pumpkin, and a packet of her father's precious tea.

The line of recipients is at least half children, holding out sugar bags for their families' food. The sugar bags look much easier to carry than the suitcase, and Maxine resolves to bring one herself next time, even if it means humping it over her shoulder like a badge of destitution. At the end of the line the kids tie up their sugar bags and hoof it home, and Maxine rests the case on a chair, bending her head to secure the latches. It's a moment at which she wavers. Just one apple, or a torn corner off the loaf. Hunger becomes a kind of tunnel vision in the end.

But it's down to her now, isn't it? No use pretending any more that Jim will lift them out of this. Far from it. She'll haul the food back to Myra's, every crumb of it. She's stood at the entrance to the tunnel and felt its suck of cold air. But she hasn't set foot in that dark place, not yet.

*

Francis is loafing on the steps when she gets to the Walshes'. He looks up at her with steady eyes and she's obliged to wait until he climbs past her and runs to join the gang of kids whooping up and down the street. She knows Francis as a sly little terror, forever coming home with pockets full of sweets lifted from Farrell's, brazen as you like, or a cut on his hand or lip or eyebrow from another scrap. She can't help it, but knowing what she knows about his father adds sinister weight, in her eyes, to his schoolboy delinquency.

In Myra's kitchen, her dad looks permanently ill at ease; he glowers at Maxine when she comes in with the suitcase and stands it up by Myra's feet, an offering. He lets himself cadge tobacco off a mate because he still thinks he'll return the favour, one of these days. A real handout is different though, a surrender. Myra herself is comfortable with charity, given or taken; for her, favours are a known and useful region of the economy, and Maxine has seen how she catalogues them in her head in the same way an accountant keeps the books. But Jim has already cracked under his indebtedness to his sister, to faceless landlords, and Myra's generosity might be enough to finish him off. It's far too humbling.

He goes out for part of the morning, and not even every day now. Once nine o'clock strikes at the labour exchange, he's done. No point waiting around all day, he says. No point wasting shoe leather. Time has shown him. There's no point, he says.

The grimy window is above head height and the room is damp and smoky. Jim fidgets like a caged animal in flea-ridden straw. Until he lost his job the cracks in him were hairline; you had to be looking, had to know, to pick the

marks of the painstaking repair job. He wasn't like this before the war, her mum said. For years, all Maxine knew was that somewhere between enlistment and armistice, between Egypt and England – in the trenches of France, most likely – something had gone wrong. When the war ended, other kids' fathers came home in pieces and some never came home at all. She knew her dad hadn't died, but he hadn't come home yet either. He was still in hospital with his injury. That was the story.

He was there for a long time; so long, to six-year-old Maxine, that he could just as easily have been dead. She didn't remember him; he was an idea, not a real person. At last she was taken to visit him. The hospital was far away, by the sea, in a teetering Victorian boarding house with a sunroom and a view of the pier. So he could take the air, her mum explained, but Maxine didn't know what that meant, experimented herself to see if the seaside air was special, something you could grab handfuls of and keep, while a white-coated doctor spoke to her parents in words she didn't understand: neurasthenia; therapeutic.

A man did a funny dance down the hallway, even though there was no music. Don't stare, Maxine. Before they left, the man that was her father gave her a clay pot he'd made himself. She kept it until the day came, with the accumulated knowledge of years, that she understood what it was. *Therapeutic* – as though the spin of the wheel might soothe a man back to sanity, or the wet clay draw the shock out of him, through the tips of his fingers.

The symptoms resurfaced after her mum died. First the headaches. By the time the steamer from Liverpool docked in Sydney, episodic trembling. It was the bombardment in the trenches that did it to him, and this recent volley of disasters – joblessness, homelessness – is, she supposes, another kind of bombardment. He is helpless under fire. Helpless with shame. It's all right to wave the stumps of your limbs around and down pints at Farrell's like you've earned the privilege. Men wear those injuries like medals. But Jim Fraley would be treated with suspicion, if anyone here knew, as though his affliction is

down to a lack of moral fibre. As though it's no surprise he has no job; he wasn't man enough to withstand a spell in the trenches, either.

This afternoon he is squeezed into a corner seat because there's nowhere else he can be. He has no tea. The kettle isn't on the stove. Maxine wonders if it would be pointed to nudge her way in and make it for him.

She wonders if Myra has noticed the quivering in his hands.

Myra has said very little to Maxine about either Jim or their situation since they moved in. They've turned the place into a rats' nest, squeezing past each other down the narrow, airless hall, in and out of the tiny kitchen at the back, and two other rooms that are a chaos now of beds and bodies. Jim sleeps on Maxine's bedstead in the front room. All three children shared a bed in there, but Francis kicked up a fuss about the spare mattress, and has it to himself, on the floor. Maxine's in with Myra, in the double bed in the sitting room, crammed up against the broken settee.

The kids are out in the street most of the time, and Maxine won't rest, not any day, until Myra says she doesn't need her help with anything else. Myra's not much bigger than Francis, and fine china pale, but she's not known for her delicacy; and every minute Jim sits there, watching the two of them work around him, is a minute Maxine dreads that Myra will say something. If she's called on to take sides, she'll be stuck fast.

But Myra keeps quiet and that's another kind of torment, not knowing what she thinks. Her silence is like a mirror, holding up to Maxine an image she hasn't been able to see before. It's even harder to look at her dad through someone else's eyes; harder still to think the silence is a kindness done to her.

She stands in the doorway of the kitchen, her arms aching after the weight of the suitcase, and the air of the street seems so far away already. She has to get out of the room.

'Wait, Maxie. Did your dad tell you the good news? I've got a job for him.'

Maxine spins around and steps back into the kitchen. Searches Jim's face but can't find any clue there, no gladness, no relief. Beyond the bread

crumbs, she notices now, half the kitchen table is obscured by medicine bottles of varying sizes, unlabelled but shiny and capped. Myra opens one and tips it up against the corner of a rag. ‘Watch this.’ She’s got hold of a brass belt buckle. No belt. Without even a bit of elbow behind it, the rag makes a bright spot in the tarnish.

‘Mercury and nitric acid,’ she says. Maxine has no idea how she gets hold of such recipes, or the ingredients for them. ‘And I told Jim he can sell it for as much as one and six a bottle! It’ll turn black again the next day, but he’ll be long gone by then.’

Maxine almost laughs. Myra wants to turn her dad into a hawker! But then she catches sight of Jim’s expression. It’s clear he doesn’t think that’s any kind of job, nor any kind of joke. He’d better not say anything. He’d better not dare.

But Myra reads the look on Jim’s face, too. ‘Oh go on,’ she says. ‘I can’t do it; me veins can’t hack it, all that walking.’ She turns back to Maxine. ‘Maxie, tell him.’

The swollen, spidery mess of Myra’s legs is hidden most of the time under thick stockings. It’s only in the back yard, when washing day sets her sweating, that she peels the stockings off. Myra Walsh is a good ten years older than Maxine, canny and mysteriously connected. It’s Myra who finds out in which of the big Woollahra houses the domestics have fallen sick, or fled overnight. She sets off, leaving Maxine to mind the children all day until she trudges home, skin raw to the elbows, dragging her feet like sacks of wet washing. If the drivers are sent to her with the laundry bags, Maxine helps Myra fire up a borrowed copper in her backyard.

‘People will tell you there are easier ways for a girl your age to make money,’ Myra warned the first time they worked together. She spoke through a malformed kind of smile, her eyes on the rising, vanishing steam, as she hauled the stick through a tub of soiled bed linen. Myra grew up in Surry Hills. To her, Paddington is a step up.

Maxine looks at Jim. She tries to tell him with desperate eyes: you've got to sell the polish if Myra wants you to. You're not in a position to refuse.

He gazes back. It's one thing about him that's steady.

When he opens his mouth to respond, Maxine cuts in. 'I'll do it.'

A clink as one of Jim's errant hands knocks a shining bottle. It teeters, falls; the stopper is loose and flies out. Maxine lunges forward and catches it before the toxic contents spill. Scrabbles for the stopper and forces it back in.

The house has a name. *Maitland* says the embossed bronze plaque next to the door. It's a villa with a heavy overhang, like hooded eyes, held up by fat, tapered red brick columns, rendered to waist height. The door is glossy black, but only here and there, where fingers have wiped the dust away. The windows are draped, though it's only three o'clock, and are badly in need of a clean. Dying roses nod and fall into overgrown beds. There is the warm, wet smell of decay, a bare-branched magnolia that creaks in the breeze.

Three steps to the tiled verandah. The muffled clanging of the bell. A silence, then soft feet, the shuffle of air moving aside to let somebody through.

The man at the door wears a gold and black smoking jacket in a shabby brocade. It's not tied at the waist, and its hem and cord whip around his knees even as he comes to a standstill. His feet are bare, his toenails manicured. His hair is silvering. He might be her dad's age. His eyes are clear and black behind small, round spectacles.

'Ah! You are here,' he says, speaking with an accent she can't place. 'Late, but here.' He gives her a perfunctory smile, and sets off down the hallway.

Maxine knows she can't be the person the man is expecting. But he might find it harder to turn her away without a sale, once she's in the door.

'You'd better come,' the man turns and calls to her.

She steps into the high dim hall. The doorways to either side are framed with dark wood cut at the same tapering angle as the columns outside. It's a while since she's been inside a real, solid house, one without broken windows and gaps in the floorboards.

The man is almost the length of the hallway ahead of her, calling out at the back of the house. 'We have her!'

A woman's voice answers from a distant corner, the words incomprehensible.

The man proceeds towards the sound and Maxine follows the man. All at once they leave behind the dim brick confines of the hall, and enter a room full of light. Maxine's eyes take a moment to adjust. It's a conservatory, she sees, tinged with the green of the garden outside, but rather than being furnished with cane easy chairs and potted ferns, as she has always imagined conservatories to be, the room is all disorder. Almost immediately Maxine's nose detects the sweet scent of decaying apples, and her eyes spot a bowl of them, piled high, spilling onto a table. The table is cluttered with other things too, tangled in a tablecloth that someone has only half got around to clearing.

There's another strong smell, a blunt, heady aroma that might be more at home in a workshop. And it appears that the conservatory is being used as a workshop of sorts. There is a large table groaning with jars and pots and buckets. Paintbrushes, Maxine notices, and all around the walls, and stacked against chairs, unframed canvasses, bright with paint.

'What kept you?' asks a woman's voice, coming up behind her. Maxine turns, and sees three things: the woman who has just spoken to her; behind her, a screen painted with oriental birds and flowers; and beyond that, visible around its edges, the rest of the conservatory, in which people are arrayed on stools and divans, some clutching large white rectangular books, others peering out from behind easels.

'The students have been waiting for fifteen minutes. We'll have to deduct sixpence. And don't say you'll stay back, because some of them have homes to go to.' The woman is tallish and rich-voiced. She has a stately sort of poise, as though she were wearing sweeping skirts rather than a pair of trousers and a collared shirt. The shirt is unironed and unbuttoned to the breastbone.

'I'm sorry,' says Maxine. She might as well give herself up sooner rather than later, get onto the reason she's here. 'I'm not...have you got me mixed up with someone else?'

The woman narrows shrewd eyes at Maxine. ‘Laszlo,’ she calls over her shoulder. ‘Didn’t you say this was this our model?’

The man in the smoking jacket appears from behind the screen and scrutinises Maxine. ‘Isn’t she?’

Maxine fishes a bottle of the mercury solution out of her bag, and a rag blackened from rubbing. ‘Show me any tarnished metal in your home, and I’ll demonstrate the most incredible new polish you’ve ever seen.’ It’s what Myra has told her to say. She tries to sound cheerful, even though it gives her a bellyache.

The woman hoots with laughter. She must be in her forties; her face is tanned and finely lined all over; decades of sunny afternoons shine in her hair. ‘Ha! Never mind. Laz! You’ve no idea how to treat a lady!’ She’s all mock scandal. Laszlo himself is unabashed; he’s even looking at the bottle in Maxine’s hand like he might be considering buying it. It’s only moments later that quick footsteps approach from the same direction, and a young woman bursts into view like an express train, steaming towards Maxine, alive with suspicion and readiness.

‘Who are you? Did my mother send you?’

She’s dark and delicate. Her hair sits blunt and straight and gleaming across her brow, like a helmet. It’s almost too heavy for her fine cheekbones, her transparent skin, her tiny mouth. Her wrists are slender bones. There’s nothing of her, but she looks to Maxine to have been made that way, unlike Maxine herself, who is only so thin for being in want of a few square meals.

She might even be beautiful, Maxine thinks. She can’t yet decide, not while those two round eyes are sizing her up.

‘Daisy? Don’t be silly, darling.’

Daisy flashes her eyes at the woman. ‘You know it’s happened before!’

‘Yes, but – really. We’re not characters in a detective novel. You can’t have a fit over everyone who comes to the door.’

Laszlo pokes his head around the edge of the screen to look at the people gathered in the conservatory. 'Would you model, though?' he whispers to Maxine. 'We are rather stuck.'

'I don't want her here,' says Daisy, before Maxine can answer. 'She's spying for my mother.'

The woman spits out a dismissive laugh. 'You're being quite ridiculous. Anyway, what do you care?'

'I'll run over to the brothel and hire someone,' says Daisy.

The woman shakes her head. 'Those girls always manage to lift something. They're more trouble than it's worth.'

'We are rather in need of someone now, Amelia,' says Laszlo.

'I'll do it, then.' In front of all three of them, Daisy pulls off her smock, and begins to unbutton the dress underneath.

'Well, I suppose if she is a spy, she's seen it all now.' Amelia turns to Maxine and shrugs. 'Sorry, dear girl. Next time, get your kit off sooner. We pay three shillings a sitting, you know. Not that Daisy here does it for the *money*.'

The jibe is delivered with a sharp grin; Daisy scowls at Amelia for all the world as though she isn't naked to the waist.

Three shillings. Three of anything is foreign to Maxine these days. Nothing is nothing no matter how many times you multiply it. She watches Daisy step out of her dress and underwear and roll her stockings down, one by one. These she drops over the back of a chair with the rest of her clothes.

Then she sidesteps the screen, and strolls out into the room.

Amelia doesn't watch her go; she watches Maxine instead. She purses her lips. 'She's put you off, I can see.'

Maxine blinks. In the middle of the conservatory Daisy is reclining on a chaise longue. Her knee is tilted at a modest angle. The pouring sunlight almost renders her translucent.

'Well, we like new faces.' Amelia follows Maxine's gaze. 'And Daisy should be painting, not lying around.' She makes it sound as though this is

nothing more to Daisy than an opportunity to malingering. ‘And she doesn’t own this house! Or run the school. Ignore her.’

The artists in their loose, layered circle look at Daisy, then to their sketchbooks, then back again. There is the sound of pencils sweeping and scratching across paper, and of concentration. There might be ten or more of them; some are women. There are two empty chairs, side by side.

‘Come on, I’ll show you out. But do get in touch if you change your mind. Life drawing classes are Friday afternoons and Tuesday evenings.’

Amelia turns and leads her back past the half-cleared table. Maxine glances around her, then reaches out and swipes an apple from the bowl. As she stuffs it into her bag, Amelia’s offer bounces around in her head. The only part of it that seems to matter is the three shillings, even though she’s conscious of repressing some kind of dread, forcing it down into her chest, which is as far as it will go. Outside, she hurries down the street, thinking up a story to explain the extra money, some domestic job maybe, cleaning or ironing a couple of days a week. Could she pull it off? The fresh air clears her head of the smell of the workshop and she fishes out the stolen apple from her bag. Stops short from biting it, and stares at it, surprised and hotly ashamed.

*

The bailiff is being rough-handled by a group of blokes, eight or ten of them, away from a house in a lane. Maxine watches from the adjacent road. The bailiff stumbles and someone puts the boot in him; he gets up and flees like a dog, rubbing bruises.

There’s furniture piled in the road. Some poor bastards, a bloke and his wife and their two kids, stand next to it, hats on, buttoned up in their coats. That’s what gets her the most, the pitiful sight of them respectably dressed for the outdoors. It reminds her of her father, taken by surprise in his vest. The men who took on the bailiff lift the kitchen table, a bedstead, a washstand, and start down the lane towards her, in procession.

By the time they turn into the road they have a following, a ragged tail of neighbours and kids. The buttoned-up family follow too. The children, a girl and a boy, look mortified, the husband dazed, his wife grim. They're at odds with the mood of the procession, which, as it attracts more people, grows livelier and starts up an angry chant: 'Stop the evictions!'

Maxine trails them at a distance, back the way she's come. They carry the furniture several blocks, picking up numbers all the while, attracting honks and shouts from the disrupted traffic. They come to a stop and dump the furniture on the pavement outside a modest office building. Maxine can't see much, but urgent fists sound on the door of the building. Shouts demand entry, and then, after some time without an answer, call for the family's landlord to meet them outside.

A young man in rolled-up shirt sleeves climbs onto the table and the crowd, perhaps a hundred strong now, press around it. He begins to speak, and Maxine allows herself to drift in closer, right to the outer edge of the gathering.

She catches some of what he says, words about the injustice of empty houses and the greed of landlords and families forced into the street. He can't be much older than Maxine, and he's all angles: sharp elbows, sharp features, narrow face, his hands alive with a nervous kind of energy. She likes that about him, likes that he doesn't drone on stiffly as if he has a right to her attention. It makes her want to listen all the more. He speaks about things she's never considered before, and isn't sure she understands, ideas about property and workers and ending the system. She knows from these few words, and the roiling mood of the onlookers, that it's the sort of talk that aggravates her dad. It's in the papers, it's everywhere, you can't get away from it. Ought to shoot the bloody lot of them, her dad says. Didn't bloody fight for this, he says.

But to Maxine, the fellow on the table doesn't look or sound unreasonable. There is the family, their belongings in the street, and the landlord in hiding. The young man speaks of streets honeycombed with vacant rooms, whole families vanishing overnight, flitting in the dark to escape the

rent collector. The rooms stay empty, and he tells it as bloody-minded, to prefer an empty room to a tenant who'll pay something, at least, when he can.

The light is yellowing, and she knows she's needed at Barnard Street, if only to intervene in some disaster she hasn't yet named. But there is a commotion around the door, and the news travels back to her that a few of the men have been allowed inside. The woman who murmurs it to her is a homely type in a house dress, no different from Maxine's neighbours. She passes it on with raised eyebrows, like a bit of gossip, and turns her face back towards the door. Folds her arms with an air of expectation. Maxine can't leave now. The woman's optimism, replicated in the hush of the crowd, in the craning of many necks, entrances her. She lowers the bag of unsold bottles to the ground and waits.

The sky is rosy when the men emerge. The news of their triumph sweeps the crowd in the form of a righteous cheer. Maxine's heart rises in surprise, pounds with it as the procession retraces its journey, back towards the house. She is part of it now, right there when they land the table and the bedstead and the washstand in the lane, outside the gate. The landlord and the bailiff who carried out the eviction have hurried ahead of the crowd, and are unlocking the front door. The landlord hands the key to the husband without a word, and marches away, the bailiff at his heels. But the crowd cheers again, and the husband looks down at the key in his hand, and takes off his hat.

Dear Jim,

I write to you with news on our situation here and a hope that you will soon see fit to send me the same. First of all you will want to know how your boys are. I can tell you they are growing. This means they like to eat, of course. Ernie's job is the hen house, which he does all right, and so it is not too much to let him have an extra egg now and then. I regret to say that Bert is not as dedicated to the milking. He thinks it unfair to have to rise before dawn when his brother does not. The other morning I had to strip his bed to rouse him and you would have heard the squalling at Matheson's place four miles away. Needless to say I took the strap to his bare legs and he has risen without a word of complaint all this week, but his sullenness is a burden on me and I do worry it will all begin again once the frost is on the ground.

The school would take them now but it is eight miles off and Bill will not drive them, the fuel is too costly. It is hard enough for us to get to church twice a week. I will reveal to you now, as a means of assuaging your worry, that Bill never learnt his letters and it has not stopped him from making a living. Cows and horses are what he knows. I did not know until I got here that the letters he sent me when I applied to his advertisement were written by someone else.

In any case, hard work and gratitude for what God provides are the most valuable lessons these boys can learn at present. Only nine years old and already life in the city has inclined them towards degeneracy. There is no doubt they are better off in the fresh air. I heard two of the Pinkerton children had influenza but aside from church we are very isolated here.

I know you are attached to her company now Patience is gone but do consider again the good a spell on the farm would do for Maxine. She is an extra mouth but at her age she would be useful help with many things,

especially on laundry day and also with the slaughtering. And perhaps do better with the boys than Bill and me. I hardly need to tell you how I worry for her soul. And how are her teeth? You know Bill had me get mine removed when we married. Quite a few of the women we know up here have done same. It saves so much on dental costs later, and will make her a better marriage prospect in these hard times. You can get dentures in the post now, for just a few guineas. Think on it.

And now I have shared news of the boys with you, I come to my own reasons for writing this letter, Jim. Namely, are you finding work? I check for money from you with Gladys at the post office when I go to town. Last Sunday after service I could tell she is beginning to think us desperate, and I fear she will gossip and ruin the pastor's good opinion of us, so please do write to me when you have sent it so that I know it is there and can stop asking for something that is not.

Send word soon.

God bless you

Your sister

Vera

*

Maitland looks different in the twilight. There's a smoky chill in the air. The black front door is a dull rectangle. The drapes in the front window are open this time, despite the failing light, and present a space at once both deep and impervious. Early evening light reflects in the glass, but the dim shape of the room beyond is also visible. If she knocks on that door, it will open. The conservatory is at the back of the house, no doubt looking onto a yard protected by fences, but how high? The prospect of exposing herself not just to a room of strangers, but inside a box of light beyond the confines of which anyone might be looking, is unnerving.

Maxine agreed to this and she is glad to have done so, as long as she thinks only of the money. She will convert the next two hours into three shillings. If she does not take off her clothes and allow herself to be sketched, the two hours will pass anyway, and she will be no better off. There is the simple maths of it.

Daisy did it, anyway, as though it were the most natural thing. Shameless. It's a word that carries judgment but Maxine finds she doesn't mean it that way. Is there a word that would recognize Daisy's lack of moral inhibition, without condemning it? She considers the word 'bold', but she has never thought of boldness as being so elegant and pragmatic. She doesn't know if she admires Daisy. She knows too much, and at the same time too little about her for that. Enough to ask lots of questions; not enough to answer any of them.

It's Daisy herself who answers the door to Maxine this time. She eyes her for a moment on the step as if she can't decide whether to let her in. Then she turns without a word, and simply walks away down the hall, leaving Maxine to invite herself over the threshold and close the heavy door behind her. Daisy's slender form, in a sheeny, grey-blue dress, sashays towards the back of the house. Maxine, immobilised in the cool pocket of air at the front of the hall, watches her for a few seconds before she follows.

At the entrance to the conservatory, she stops. For fear of being late, she is too early. The man called Laszlo, wearing the same black and gold smoking jacket, is arranging chairs. The printed screen stands in the same place, an inadequate nod to privacy in the spacious, glass-walled room. On its silk panels, crimson birds with golden crests sing from branches laden with pink blossom. The black wood that frames them is out of place in the airy room, but as she saw the first time she came, there is no order here, only floor lamps shaded with bold, geometric fabric, a black, embroidered shawl that might be from Spain, untidy piles of novels, still more untidy piles of magazines, a ledge cluttered with all sorts of oriental knick-knacks: a painted fan, a pink statuette of a horse, a conical hat. The sickly smell of overripe fruit still pervades the air. Maxine

looks for the table where she saw the bowl of apples and the crumpled cloth; it has still not been cleared.

There is no sign of where Daisy has got to, at first. Then Maxine spots her in a far corner, arranging flowers in a large, urn-like vase. It is not something for which she appears to have much facility; the long stems go in, and come out again, and the end result is shapeless from this distance. She is carrying it over to the jumbled table – pointedly refusing to look in Maxine’s direction, though Maxine knows she must be visible out of the corner of Daisy’s eye – when the older woman, Amelia, swoops into the room from behind Maxine and descends on Daisy.

‘What on earth do you call that?’ she demands to know, through snorts of laughter. She takes the vase out of Daisy’s hands and sets it on the table, where she immediately, impulsively, begins to undo the arrangement. The table is soon littered with green stems and tender heads. Amelia finds some scissors on the longer table, the one crammed with jars of brushes; she snips and trims and rearranges under Daisy’s indulgently furious eye.

‘You won’t sell a painting of a wreck like that,’ Amelia tells her, at which point Daisy, arms folded, takes a few steps back and appraises the table. ‘Stop,’ she says suddenly, quietly.

‘What?’

‘Come and see.’

Amelia drops the scissors and joins her. They are on the other side of the table to Maxine, scrutinizing it as though the secret of the universe might be visible from that specific vantage point. All Maxine can see is a half-full vase of carnations and a tablecloth littered with cut leaves and bruised heads, the rotting bowl of fruit and vase marooned among them.

‘That’s what you want, is it?’ Amelia asks Daisy.

Daisy purses her lips, and then they form a small, satisfied smile. ‘It could work, couldn’t it?’

‘That’s up to you, my dear.’

Daisy nudges her. ‘You know what I mean.’

Amelia looks up at Maxine then, and says, as though she has been a part of the conversation all along: ‘Well, experimentation is the only way to discover something new. Even if you fail.’

There’s a twinkle in Amelia’s eye, even as Daisy’s left foot flies out to kick her in the shin.

Maxine has no idea what either of them is talking about.

‘I’m going to get it down now,’ says Daisy. ‘Just the outline. The flower heads will be flat by morning.’

At this Amelia heaves a long-suffering sigh, closes her eyes and shakes her head. ‘Three shillings we pay for you girls to be here,’ she tells Maxine, coming towards her. ‘And when you are, she finds something else to do.’ She leans close to Maxine and continues in a stagy whisper: ‘Thinks she knows everything already about the female body.’

Daisy smiles again, into her sketchbook.

‘One other thing,’ Amelia tells Maxine, pinning her with a gaze neither kind nor cold. ‘The apples are for *painting*.’

*

A clock above the door tells Maxine that it is quarter to seven. Still, Laszlo has told her to get herself ready – by which she assumes he means naked and reclining – as soon as she likes. There are five students, three men and two women, seated in front of the chaise longue. From behind the screen, Maxine has taken a good look at each of them. If they are to see the whole of her, she wants to see as much of them as possible, too. And perhaps, she thinks, she will know more about them than they do about her. Clothes speak loud, while her nakedness will tell them very little, other than that she is willing to do what many women would not. But, she considers, since they are all here to draw they must approve in some way of the modelling that takes place. There are cheaper, bolder thrills to be found elsewhere if that’s what one is after.

None of them seems the type, although what types they are is difficult to say. Of course there is a bohemian edge to some of their attire: a printed scarf, a long loop of heavy beads; and among the men, wide open shirts and even wider trousers. But Maxine spies tweed, too, and a grey, tailored skirt, such as any suburban wife might wear window-shopping in the city. Everyone has a secret life, she thinks. Or perhaps it's no secret. Perhaps the point is clothes don't mean half of what people think they do.

Her own clothes tell a story, though. Her mother's lilac dress, the only one that fits her any more, is faded and thin now, and a good few inches shorter than the latest styles. She feels like the sight of her knees, more than the suitcase or her gaunt face or anything else, reveals her circumstances. Her exposed knees feel like a kind of indecency.

Maxine's mother was big on decency. She'd climbed up from a factory floor to a five-room terrace house and a self-employed husband. It wasn't far to fall back down again. Bad language was the enemy, as was scruffiness. Decadence of any kind was the enemy. She disapproved so much of Maxine's friend Marion from the local school, who wore an Eton bob and smelt sometimes of cigarettes, that she tried to forbid Maxine from seeing her. *Louche* was what she called her, although Maxine didn't know how she came across that word, other than that she made it her business to know her enemies. Loucheness was definitely the enemy. If she could see her family now, scattered and penniless, her husband ill in his head and her daughter about to undress herself for money.

The doorbell rings; students trickle in, throw their jackets on a threadbare velvet sofa. They all seem to know each other. There goes the bell again; this time two men come in. They're both of them scruffy. Behind the screen, Maxine freezes as she realises one of their faces is familiar. The recognition floats close to the surface, as though it must be recent. Knowing someone here is the last thing she anticipated. Until she works out who he is – and whether he knows her too – she's not sure whether she can go through with it.

His companion greets Amelia cheerfully with a wave across the room. 'Hello there. I hope you don't mind. I've brought one more.'

'Is he as unschooled as you, Sam?' asks Amelia, crossing the room to meet them.

'Worse! He's not even an artist. He's just here to drink your wine and indoctrinate everyone.'

The younger man holds out his hand to Amelia. 'Ralph Devanny,' he announces. The name means nothing to Maxine. His hair is brown and wavy and needs a lot of slicking, but he hasn't bothered with any of that. His jacket's seen better days, too, and maybe it's because he's about as young as she is, or because he introduced himself with such earnest enthusiasm, that he doesn't wear the shabbiness the way most blokes in the street do. Perhaps there's no woman, no mother or sister or wife to reverse his shiny collar and patch up his elbows. Perhaps he doesn't mind how he's dressed.

Amelia takes his hand and narrows her eyes at him. 'As long as you wait til after class.'

Ralph grins and follows Sam to a seat at the back of the group. It's when he sits down that it comes to Maxine – something in the nimble way he turns. He's the one who gave the speech on the table outside the landlord's office. For a moment, deep relief fills her lungs. She's nothing but a stranger to him, a face in a crowd. But afterwards, a pang of dismay for her own uselessness and desperation, for the misguidedness of her efforts. Everyone will soon be looking at her, but not because she has anything to say. It makes it worse somehow that he will witness it. She'd be bolstered if someone like him saw a kindred soul in her; what he'll see instead is naked flesh and rib bones.

Her eyes catch sight of the clock. It's ticking just past seven.

'It's easier, actually, if you get ready before they all come in,' says Daisy behind her. Her voice is low; Maxine turns, but Daisy hasn't lifted her eyes from her sketching. 'Otherwise you have to walk out in front of them all. Frightful.'

There's that satisfied smile on her lips again. Maxine peeks around the screen. The students are all in place at their books and easels. Daisy's advice has come too late, and Maxine can't help but think that's just what she intended.

*

In the kitchen at Maitland, even the battered pots and pans manage to convey an air of gentility. The china stacked on the shelf is not like the china in Myra's kitchen, for all that it's equally cracked and mismatched. This room is twice the size of that dim chamber, and boasts a tall sash window with a view of the greenery that obscures the neighbour's fence. The ceiling is cavernous by comparison, but the difference is more than dimensional. There is dust here that Myra would never allow to gather. Cobwebs. A delicate teapot holding sticks of brittle, dried herbs that look more like a forgotten posy than an attempt at preservation. The shelf is of rough wood and runs all around the room at head height. It seems that anything can belong on it; no one here values order. Every object sits quietly and is itself, unapologetic, unscrubbed. This is not a cramped and subterranean kitchen where, without vigilance, misery will breed. This is a house where meals are more of an elegant accident than a necessity chased down by the hour.

Maxine reaches for the bread knife. The table is wide, the bread board in the middle, and she has to rise up in her chair. From her own chair on the other side of the table, Daisy watches her through a plume of cigarette smoke. The kitchen is chilly; Daisy has wrapped a soft cardigan around herself.

After the class, Amelia paid Maxine on the spot with three cold coins, then instructed Daisy to get Maxine something to eat. Daisy complied, albeit with a sigh. Dazed – by her own her intactness, by the strangeness of reclothing herself – Maxine followed her. Behind them the students, Sam and Ralph among them, lingered in the conservatory, chattering as a bottle of wine went round. It's clear to Maxine that Amelia runs the school, and that this is probably

her house, and she wonders at how the three of them – Daisy, Amelia and Laszlo – might be connected. There is no family resemblance between any of them, except that Laszlo must have been dark once like Daisy. Nor does either Laszlo or Daisy appear to be in Amelia's employ. Of course these days any kind of arrangement is possible.

The slice Maxine cuts is lopsided. There's cheese, too, a crumbling wedge of it, already well hacked, with a butter knife sticking out of the top of it like circumstantial evidence.

In her old life, the one in which she was a child with a home, if someone had given her food it had meant she could trust them. Friends feed friends; families feed family. It's an uncomplicated way to love. But all manner of people hand out food these days, and it isn't always for the sake of kindness or friendship. Food holds more power than that. What obligation does anyone at Maitland have to feed her? Maxine thinks of the ladies at the Benevolent Society as she bites into the cheese, and as she thinks her eyes meet Daisy's across the table. Daisy's eyes are dark and cool and Maxine can already tell she isn't going to say anything. In another life, Maxine might have lost her appetite for the cheese. But, along with her clothes, Maxine shed a skin this evening, and her old self is another layer behind her, folded over a chair somewhere in a place she doesn't know the way back to.

It's not just Daisy's accent that tells Maxine she went to a good school. She has that thing Maxine's mother called *poise*; something she admired, and aspired to, but never attained herself. As far as Maxine can tell, poise is a place of perfect physical balance, where one is neither stiff nor relaxed. But it's more than physical. It implies a certain sense of entitlement. The right to exist, perhaps. It's unlikely that Daisy has ever been evicted from anywhere.

Maxine can, however, remember how little her own mother trusted her, especially in her friend Marion's company, and feels it a shame that she and Daisy should be at odds with one another. She thinks painfully then of Marion, of how effortlessly she would have disrobed and posed in the conservatory; of how, as an act, it wouldn't have had the power to change her. Afterwards,

Marion would have helped herself to Daisy's cigarettes and neither of their accents would have made a bit of difference.

But, Maxine tells herself, if Daisy thought herself a cut above then she wouldn't be at Maitland, would she? And her mother wouldn't be sending people to find out what she's up to. That's the thing standing between them.

'I'm not spying for your mother,' Maxine says, adding: 'Whoever she is.'

Daisy considers her. 'I'm still making my mind up about that.' As though the truth were down to how she preferred to see it.

'Well, you needn't waste your energy.' At this moment Maxine wishes she herself had some poise to speak of. She can't help but feel flustered, and Daisy's composure is making her feel like a music hall performer in the middle of a song, all waving hands and tricks with hats. You don't have the right, she thinks. You don't have the right to decide what I am.

'You should count yourself lucky that I do suspect you,' counters Daisy. 'It's the only reason Amelia had you back.'

She taps her cigarette in the ashtray and Maxine drops her eyes to the table. The apple had been the flouriest, most tasteless she had ever eaten; not even worth it.

'So until I know your story,' Daisy continues. 'I don't see why I should trust you.'

'I don't have a story,' says Maxine, resenting the implication that she is hiding something.

'Everyone does. What are you, without a story?'

Undressed. Maxine takes a breath. 'I'm making it up as I go along, all right?'

Daisy's laughter tinkles like glass bells before deteriorating into a husky, feminine cough. She considers Maxine with a faint touch of interest, where there was only hostility before. 'That just means you don't know where you're going.'

‘I’m going home.’ Maxine answers as mildly as she can, not wanting to destroy that glimmer by appearing to be offended. She pushes herself back from the heavy table.

But Daisy doesn’t know the half of it, she thinks, getting to her feet. I don’t even know where I am.

*

She was walking home from the shops with their groceries wrapped in brown paper and string. Nothing special to eat – there hadn’t been much but potatoes and cabbage and the fatty off-cuts from the butcher for a while. There was one jar of jam in the cupboard; she’d bought it from a woman with a pram full of the stuff. The woman was wheeling her home-made jam door-to-door, her little girl toddling next to her on weary legs. Hawkers came often – diggers, mostly, in shabby suits, sweating with the effort, smelling of desperation.

The jam was made of apricots. Maxine spread it thinly on bread for the boys, once a day, as a reward for going to school. No school, no jam. She never gave any to her dad. He didn’t know about the jam. She kept it in a splintered nook at the back of the pantry, in a no-place created by the haphazard installation of shelves. Truthfully, she ate most of the jam herself. She knew it was wrong – an abuse of power, in its way – for her to indulge in and withhold such luxury from her family in straitened times. But there was nothing else, that was the thing. There was nothing else just for her. She ate it straight from the jar with a spoon, behind the door. No opportunity to relax with it, or to savour. Just a hurried, syrupy mouthful, the jolt of her heart, the sweeping prickle of shame like the feel of her father’s hot, angry hand on her neck as she replaced the cover and stepped out into the kitchen, composing herself. Anxiety and satisfaction in equal measure. The deepest transgression, one spoonful of jam.

She was walking home from the shops with lamb bones, shrivelled spuds, something dark and curly green from the Italian grocer, who told her she could boil it up like spinach. Mr DeCicco had a son about her age, who helped

in the shop. He wasn't anything special – had rosy cheeks and a cocky air. She didn't know his name. He picked a caterpillar out of the tight crinkles, a green one the exact colour of the stem. She wouldn't have seen it herself until her knife was through it, or until it floated, poached, to the surface of the boiling pot. He flicked the caterpillar onto the floor, squashed it with his heel, and took her money.

She dreamed of being dressed in white, of lying on white sheets and being taken by the grocer's son. She dreamed it as she walked the broken pavers outside DeCicco's with a bag of foreign vegetables. The pavers evened out and then vanished once she crossed Tennant Street. It was asphalt and soft verge from there on, and still she dreamed. The weather was warm and close and her dress – blue, not white – fitted her armpits too tightly. She fitted into everything too tightly. In her dream the dress was tight only in the right places. She guessed at what those might be. Were the right places for her the right ones for him? Would he really get to have the final say?

Of course he would, whoever he turned out to be. There was horror and shame in imagining her desires, once exposed, to be wrong, to be repulsive. Right then she couldn't know. When the opportunity came, she would have to hold herself back, watch and listen carefully, so that she knew what to do for him, how to be. There would always – she supposed, hoped, dreaded – be the pantry door.

There was rain waiting in a low sky as she trod the patchy grass. Some of their neighbours' houses had low walls to show where the verge ended and their yards began. Tiers of hollow bricks, nothing costly. The houses had started out brick not that long before and had grown in odd, weatherboard directions. Outhouses, lean-tos, walled-in verandahs. Truncated front yards of nothing because all the action was at the back, the chooks and sheds and veggies. No one would even have shown off a flowering shrub out there, not one that looked purposefully planted, anyway. There were muted, thirsty things with dry-bright flowers that Maxine didn't know the names for. If there'd been trees, they'd cut them down to make the road. The rain couldn't slake that place.

On the ground outside her own gate, a tiny cone of granules marked the entrance to a nest. Frenzied brown ants around it, guessing at rain. Her house was the only one in the street with a wooden fence, a line of white pickets two feet high. It was her father's handiwork. It struck her then as an unfinished statement of intent. Behind it their front yard was as stony as anyone else's. He'd built it when they first got there, staked the pickets in the ground as though they were flags, and could carry a claim. He'd even set the three of them – Maxine, Bert and Ernie – to picking out the pebbles from the rectangle of dust between the fence and the front door. He was going to plant a lawn. But the pebbles had filled bag after bag and the boys grew mutinous. It was the first of many object lessons, because that was what this place did. It taught you and it taught you and it taught you, but until you felt like you knew less than before, not more.

Maxine was too old for school by then. She might have stayed in Nottingham with Uncle Charlie, or her grandmother near Mansfield, but she hadn't been offered a choice. Things would have been different if her mother had still been alive, but then perhaps none of them would have wanted to go.

The gate was unlatched. Before she could step through, the front door of the house opened, and her father emerged. In his left hand was one of their two suitcases, still bearing the luggage tag from the steamer and their old Midlands address, as though, despite the intervening three years and the picket fence, their emigration remained provisional.

He walked right up to her. Swift strides. He wanted to stop her where she was.

'We're done here,' he said. 'Come on. Turn around.'

'What?'

His hat was on his head but there was no sun to shadow his face. He'd like a shadow now, thought Maxine. She saw in his eyes a readiness to combat anyone who suggested things were not as they should have been. The suitcase strained the sinews in his forearm but he didn't put it down.

'Turn around, and keep walking.'

Maxine turned. When she turned too far, her dad gripped and steered her shoulder with his free hand. They were walking back towards DeCicco's.

'Where are the boys?'

'Put 'em on a train,' he grunted. 'Vera's gonna take 'em.'

Maxine nearly stopped in shock before she thought better of it.

If she looked at her father's face, without scrutinising, just an ordinary laying on of eyes, she had to look away again or squint in pain. So, by and large, she avoided looking at him. Her eyes averted. Downwards. To the right. It was another version of the way she changed the subject on him. She had to let him rattle, she couldn't stop him from saying what it was he liked to say on his favourite, narrow subjects. But she didn't have to answer. This was how she experienced time with him. They didn't have conversations. It was a duck and weave.

His cheeks were soft despite the old ravages of Egypt. Soft and burnt. He screwed his eyes up against the glare and there were lines around them. Under a hat brim, squeezed-up and dissatisfied, buried milk-blue in there, the colour of the English sky as she remembered it. The soft cheeks wearing their bloom of sun. Gappy, boyish teeth. He looked harmless enough. That was the thought that brought her heart out, and letting her heart out was dangerous. His eyes swooped out from their buried place and nailed her down. This was why it was better if she didn't look at his face.

He came up to the gate and turned her around. He'd sent the boys away without imagining that she might want to say goodbye to them. Vera lived a hundred miles away, maybe more. Maxine had no sense of what such numbers really meant, how she might have moved through them. The boys would have still been on the train, insinuating their way across the country miles. Facing each other in the carriage, trying to escape grown-up attention, or hoping for attention, at least from the woman with the baby who was travelling with home-made scones wrapped in a napkin. She gave the baby half a scone and half of that crumbled in its little mouth and hands and onto the floor. Bert saw Ernie

look at the crumbs, and look at the woman. Bert himself looked at the crumbs, then out of the window. He was not as optimistic as his brother.

The scones were plain. Maxine marched, half a step ahead of her father. The jam, she thought. The jam in the pantry.

‘What about our things?’ she asked him.

‘It’s all in here, love.’ He meant the suitcase. He meant she was a hopeful fool to imagine it wouldn’t all fit, everything they could rightfully take with them. The suitcase said everything he thought there was to say. He was giving out his own object lessons.

This was what happened when you saved things, when you tried to eke out pleasure. There was no time for that any more. She should have eaten all the jam, every spoonful, in one go.

It was all she could think about as they walked to the main street and its row of little shops. They had to keep walking, said her father, pass out the other side. The tram didn’t come that far. It was a long way to the city.

*

The door closes and Maitland is asleep at once behind its dark, reflective eyes. The coins in her pocket clink. She has the tram fare home, at last, but there are myriad other things to spend sixpence on. The habit of walking is old now.

It’s a mistake, this time. Not because she’s so weary, but because, having been inside Maitland for the last few hours – having belonged there, briefly, despite how Daisy might have felt about it – she finds she feels more keenly than ever that the houses lining the streets are profoundly shut to her.

Around Paddington the streets are never empty. The homes there, full as nests with children and their beds, can’t accommodate the people who live in them *and* all their business. So it happens on doorsteps, corners, all hours. The ways are narrow and alive. It’s not always life she wants to look at, but still it’s better than this empty geometry, these wide roads peering straight into darkness. Up until this moment she has missed their old house in the suburbs,

but now, with a shock, she sees the missing was simply the inverse of all the hatred she felt for their Paddington hovel and its hopelessness. These houses, though modest in their way, are grander than anywhere she's ever lived, but it is desolate here, with the lights behind the curtains signalling other worlds, ones she has no part in.

Or perhaps it's Maxine herself who is desolate. She both yearns at those windows and hurries through. It cuts her heart. She doesn't know what is beyond those squares of yellow light; the details of the lives inside don't really matter. What matters is the idea of four walls and a door that closes. The idea of having the simple things she needs, the joy of an iron hob, a backyard tap, a door key. A place for the boys, and the kind of shelter that her father needs, a complex structure that only she now knows how to build.

Maxine trudges through the dark and thinks over her family's strange entrapment, for that's what it is. They can't help the fact that they are flesh and bone, that they take up space. Nor was she around when the lines were drawn and all the land of the world was divided up, and claimed by other people. Where does a body go when its owner doesn't have the means – via money or name or connections – to negotiate the right for it to *be* somewhere?

And now all this absurd machinery – bailiffs and eviction notices and protests – to deal with the problem. Myra has not raised the question of how long she and her father are welcome to stay with her, and however long the welcome is, Maxine worries they will wear it out too soon. Of course she can make herself useful in any number of ways. Minding children, helping around the house, selling polish door to door. And now there are three shillings in her pocket. She is buoyed by her own initiative; it will shore up Myra's goodwill.

On the other hand, she's not sure what the money will buy her. Goodwill has no set price; she has no way of knowing how much of it her three shillings will pay for. Giving it all to Myra will be like tossing coins into a well of uncertain depth. These are ungrateful thoughts and Maxine bites her lip as they arise.

There's the question, too of decency. Her dad, of course, must never get wind of what she's just done. And Myra has taken it upon herself to keep Maxine off the streets, in more ways than one. Maxine hasn't told her about the modelling either. Today, unable to lie to her face, she brought out the bag again as an excuse to leave Barnard Street for a few hours. If nothing else feels certain to Maxine, this much does: she's useless at selling things. It's a heady release to open the bag now and take out three of the bottles, one for each of the shillings in her pocket. To walk the silent street and as she does, let them fall and fill up the night with the sound of their destruction: smash, smash, smash.

*

There's a line outside Farrell's when she gets back to Barnard Street, and cars driving slowly around the block. The side door, the shifty doorman, the clandestine manoeuvres, seem absurd on a night like this. Myra reckons the police will only come the day that Farrell doesn't pay. Tonight they might as well light up a sign, throw open the front doors of the grocery shop and let everyone in that way. But then it wouldn't be an adventure, a fairground ride for the dressed-up girls in the circling cars. They're Woollahra daughters, all furs and shining hair.

It's all right for the likes of them to break the rules, she thinks. Girls like them – like Daisy, with her schooled accent – can be careless with their bodies and their four walls, incite the wrath of parents. Maxine's mother was grateful for her tiny measure of hard-won privilege; these girls are free to feel suffocated by it. They drive down with their fellas to slum it at Farrell's just for the thrill. A night where the razors flash, then home to a feather bed to sleep off the sly-grog, and hot breakfast on a tray in the morning.

Maxine limps to the top of the basement steps, her feet blistered in worn soles. There's no light on in the front window; Annie and Clarabel must be asleep. Maybe, if she's lucky, her father is too; she can't imagine that he's gone out.

She can see right through to the kitchen from the front door. There's no one sitting there but Myra, a bit of sewing in her hands, the bare bulb fizzing above her head. It feels like a reprieve; it feels like home. The oppression of her experience at Maitland, the ache in her feet, the noise of the circling traffic, all of it lifts.

Maxine hurries through and sits down opposite. On her way home the three shillings made for an awkward, troublesome weight, but now she can't help a smile as she puts the coins on the table in front of Myra. And she fills suddenly with the desire to tell her all about Maitland and what she did there, as though it was actually kind of thrilling in a harmless sort of way, an adventure of her own.

But Myra eyes the money and doesn't smile. She puts her sewing down and massages the heel of one hand with her fingertips. Looks Maxine in the eye. 'He's gone, Maxie. Went off today.'

'Who?'

'Your dad. Said he's had a tip about some labouring job out west. Didn't take nothing much.'

'Out west where?' Maxine is trembling. 'The whole bloody country's west of here.'

Men are missing all over Paddington. Women wait on doorsteps for them, children out in the streets. At first Myra said her husband Frank was on relief work, although he never sent any money.

'Relief work, my arse,' Jim said one morning. He was shaving, Maxine remembered, with the basin of water she fetched for him from the tap in the lane, so it was during the first of their weeks here, when he still thought his appearance might count for something. 'Frank's doing time in Long Bay.' The blokes at the labour exchange had tipped him off. The razor whispered over his stubbled throat.

Maxine wonders now at the practical difference between a husband in gaol and a father who jumps a west-bound train to look for work. She imagines him half way to the border already. The slow sing of the rails, the funnel's

hollow shriek. Dread fills her, sluicing like icy water into a tin tub. She knows Dot and her husband abandoned their settler farm two years ago, came back to where they started. They were fools, Myra told her with a misshapen smile. Smart people can make money in the city, one way or another. Like her Frank. You think it's rough here. The bush is merciless.

The city has its limits and so does her father, Maxine knows. There's no practical difference between him and a man whose war injuries you can see.

Myra's shaking her head, slowly. 'I told him, Maxie. I told him it was wrong to go off like that without saying goodbye to you.' She pats Maxine's hands, which are clasping each other tight in front of her. 'He didn't abandon you, though, love. He tried to make an arrangement with me – you know, I keep you, he sends money. I told him you could look after yourself.'

Maxine's eyes widen in shock.

'I don't mean you can't stay here,' Myra cackles. 'I meant we don't need nothing from him. God knows there'd be no point waiting for that.'

Maxine gets up from the table. Francis is in the bedroom, the girls are in the front room; there's nowhere in this bloody house to go. So she goes up the steps and stands on the street and the world revolves around her in polished cars and southern constellations and the laughter of crashing glass.

Myra knew; Myra could see him clearly all along. He won't write; he never wrote a word to anyone. She won't know if he's alive or dead. Her fear is he won't remember to stop, that he'll find in movement respite from his troubles like a rickety, chugging dream, and hold on somehow, circling the country in a desperate, infinite loop. She thinks of Bert and Ernie, and they might as well be back in England, for all she's able to reach them. She's done everything she can, things she didn't want to do, and it's been no use to anyone, only left her raw and hollow and ready to fill up with bitterness. She's taken matters into her own hands, but not anything that will make a difference. Not the ones that will solve the whole sorry mess.

She feels a tug on the skirt of her dress. Someone has followed her outside, small, bare feet on the steps: Annie. Maxine rests a hand on her knotty

hair, feels the bedtime toastiness of her scalp. It could undo you, at the right moment, a child's warm, soft head. 'Shouldn't you be asleep?'

'You woke me up. Will you sleep with us now your dad's gone?'

'Oh,' says Maxine. 'Depends what your mum wants.'

'Our dad went away.'

'I know.' Maxine realises she isn't sure whether the children know where he is, what delicate tale Myra might have thrown over it. 'You must miss him.'

'No!' replies Annie with force. 'He belts us. He went to gaol because he's a bad man.' She does a little dance on the step. 'Mum doesn't belt us though.'

Maxine starts back down the steps, rubbing her eyes, encouraging Annie gently towards the door. Out of the two of them, she can't decide which of them is more naïve: herself, for imagining a child might ever be protected from the truth; or Annie, with her ability, regardless, to see the world for what it is.

On Union Street, a man in a flat cap rides by on a bicycle, rattling a stick in a tin tied with string to the handlebars.

‘Stop the eviction!’ he shouts. ‘Eviction in Lawson Lane!’

Maxine stops in her tracks. He’s gone before she can ask him anything. She looks around her; there are other people in the street, but it’s unclear what they are planning to do, if anything, with the information.

She doesn’t know Lawson Lane so she heads off after the bicycle, even though it’s turned a corner out of sight now. She keeps her eyes peeled for the chalked signs she’s seen sometimes on the pavement, but she sees nothing. Every street round here is backed by a lane; the narrow streets run disorderly up and down the hill like gully streams, the lanes even more so. There’s one at the back of Barnard Street, filled with dog shit, broken glass, and small, dirty-faced children with stinking nappies. At the back of one or two terraces the landlords have rented out garden sheds and flimsy one-room shacks to the ageing and drunk and desperate.

After asking directions a couple of times, she finds it. Thirty or forty other people are in the lane when she arrives, forming a casual, expectant sort of crowd. The lane itself is a strip of dusty gravel, rotten iron down one side, clapboard hovels lining the other. The gathering is mostly men in fraying suits but there’s a teenage boy in a man’s overalls, too, holding court over a gang of younger ones; to the rear a few housewives stand, arms folded. Small feet skip around them; small hands clutch at the fronts of their aprons.

They are all facing a house where a man waits in the low doorway. Behind him, the flicker of a woman’s face, the howl of a baby, so sudden in the murmuring quiet, so alive and dismayed.

The thing to do, it seems, is stand and wait, so Maxine does. The day’s grown warm, and the flies like this place. A mangy dog, its ribs showing,

appears at the top of the lane, considers the many legs gathered there as though each of them is a potential kick before slinking past as close to the fence as possible.

She's working up to asking someone what's happening when there's a rat-tat-tat-tat and the flat-capped man on the bicycle spins around the corner and into the lane. Except he's wobbling now under the weight of a passenger on the back. Maxine sees right away that it's Ralph Devanny. The cyclist slows, but doesn't stop, to let him off. There's affable laughter at the spectacle of Ralph staggering to a halt on splayed legs. He keeps his balance, and humours them all with a perfunctory bow. A diminishing rat-tat-tat-tat as his friend rides away out of the lane.

Despite the warmth, Ralph is wearing his jacket buttoned up and protruding squarely at the front. Something's stuffed inside it. As he looks over the crowd he catches Maxine's gaze and she looks away, worrying whether or not the light in his eyes is recognition. When she looks back, he's reaching into his jacket; he pulls out a wad of paper sheets and starts handing them around. He comes past her, handing the sheets out left and right, and she accepts one with her face lowered, and he makes no greeting. At the top of the page, a hand-drawn banner reads *TOMORROW*. Underneath it, an ink cartoon shows two men talking over a garden fence. Maxine squints. There are little lines connecting their mouths to neat blocks of words.

'Does that fellow collect your rent?' one is saying.

'No!' replies the other.

And in a drawing below it, almost identical:

'Who is he then?' asks the first.

'The rent collector!' replies the second.

She allows herself a small smile, and begins to read the article that follows.

'Too many people today do not need to imagine what it is like to face eviction from their homes. For the jobless or employed, the spectre of the bailiff hangs over more and more houses, and his work can be seen

in the rows of empty terraces that shame the city, too expensive for the unemployed or under-employed, even at slum prices. These properties stand empty while landlords sit safely in their own homes, happier to see loyal tenants out on the street than extend themselves to a more humane arrangement. It makes no sense – no human sense. And yet consider, friends, what little interest a landlord has in human sense. A landlord is only interested in profit, and that is why the Anti-Eviction Committee looks for business-like outcomes first, even while many men, in their anger at the injustice they see before them, agitate for the use of more violent tactics.’

She doesn’t get a chance to finish reading; at the sound of footsteps, voices rise, and the people begin to move as one towards the house where the man and his shadow family wait. Maxine folds the newsletter and cranes her neck as she too moves with the crowd.

The bailiff is coming down Lawson Lane. No one to assist him. He’s older than her dad, with a trim grey beard. He stops several feet short of the house; he simply can’t get near it with that number of people in the way. He speaks, but before he does, Maxine is sure she sees a look in his eyes like he’d be anywhere else if it wasn’t for a wife and kids and rent of his own. And she finds herself feeling sorry for him, and worried about what those gathered might do. It’s just a uniform he’s got on, she wants to tell everyone. It’s just a suit of clothes.

But they know this already; it’s what gives them the bravado to stand between him and his duty. Simple obstruction, that’s all it is. No one moves towards him.

‘Who’s in charge here?’ Maxine hears him ask.

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ replies one of the men, straightening his jacket. ‘Just neighbours and friends here, paying a visit.’ He’s backed up by a couple of sniggers.

The bailiff ignores him. ‘I have a duty to evict the tenants of this house today.’

‘Oh no you don’t. Not today.’

‘Run along now,’ chimes in someone else. ‘Party’s already a bit crowded, as you can see.’

‘Next one’s at your house!’

The bailiff looks about for a minute, as though there might be some gap he’s missed where he could slip through. Under the trim beard a tender neck, a bobbing throat. Eventually he turns and starts back down the lane the way he came, jeers rising like a tide behind him.

It’s then Maxine notices that Ralph has popped up beside her. He only has a few newsletters left, clutched in one hand, and he stands with his arms folded over his open jacket, listening to the exchange with an intent and thoughtful face.

Her own copy of the newsletter flutters from her fingers, and as she straightens after picking it up, he turns to look right at her. His eyes are two clear drops amid all the brick and dirt and iron and grey clothes. Like leaves reflected in water.

Hot-faced, she returns his gaze. ‘He’ll just come back, won’t he?’ she says quickly. ‘The bailiff.’

He shrugs. ‘We’ll be here.’

‘What, forever?’

Her mockery is defensive, but he’s unprovoked; simply raises his eyebrows. ‘We can outlast *them*. They want a solution. That’s the thing to remember.’

‘So what’ll happen?’ There was a frisson, a murmuring of outrage when the bailiff came, but all is calm again already, almost desultory. She doesn’t know what she expected, but this seems an anti-climax. She can’t see how it solves the problem for the family in the cottage. It’s only now Maxine realises that she was hoping for drama, for somewhere to put her anger. For a fight.

‘Well, he’ll probably bring the landlord, or at least the agent. So then we’ll talk. See if we can make some kind of arrangement. Reduced rent is ideal.’

Maxine thinks of the house she and her dad abandoned in the suburbs, and of their recent eviction, and her belly grows cold with the truth that there might have been something they could have done. ‘But what if they don’t agree to it?’

‘You’d be surprised how often they do, if it’s put to them the right way,’ Ralph says, tapping the sheets in his hand. ‘We talk sense, you see, like the article says. If the rent’s twenty shillings, no one can afford that any more, can they? So five shillings a week and someone looking after your property is better than no rent and the place standing empty. Bad things happen to empty houses.’ He pauses, perhaps to let her imagine what those bad things might be, although it’s not clear whether he approves. ‘And if they *won’t* see sense, there’s other things we can do. Nothing too sinister,’ he assures her. ‘We don’t want anyone to get hurt.’

Maxine thinks about what she’s just read. ‘The Anti-Eviction Committee?’

He nods, and holds out his free hand at a steep angle. ‘Ralph Devanny. Secretary of the local branch.’ His hand is dry and warm. He cocks his head slightly and his eyes grow quizzical. ‘Have we met before?’

Before she can react, a stirring behind Ralph turns his head. A few of the blokes are breaking away from the gathering. They’re starting off down the lane in a crackle of banter.

‘It’s useless waiting here,’ one calls back. He’s leading the break, flanked by two others. ‘We’re more use chasing the bailiff down. That’s where the action is.’

A wave of agreement, and the crowd starts to plume away down the lane, as most of the men fall in. The atmosphere of agitation returns. Ralph is alert. He starts to move off. Maxine looks around for direction.

‘Can you stay?’ Ralph turns and asks her, a little strained. ‘We need people here. But I should go with this lot. Don’t trust their diplomatic skills.’

‘Bugger diplomacy,’ mutters a bloke passing him, and Ralph raises his eyebrows to indicate his point has been proven.

She nods, and he picks up his pace to catch the men as they leave the lane. There are barely a dozen people left behind – the women in aprons, a few of the blokes. By the familiar way they lean on the gate and the front wall of the cottage, they might be neighbours. The teenage boys have gone. The little kids expand into the empty lane, zooming and chasing.

Maxine feels a little lost. There's the emptiness that follows a close call, but nor can she shake a feeling of disappointment, the feeling that she has not found the thing she's come looking for. She could have gone with the crowd, she realises now; she's under no obligation to do as Ralph suggests. But she does want to be useful. A girl no older than Annie Walsh stops in front of her and stares, her eyes wide above a crust of bread she's chewing on. A woman comes out of the cottage that's under threat, onto the front path, clutching her dark-haired baby.

She looks stricken. 'Where is everyone?'

'Don't worry, love,' says one of the other women. 'They've gone to sort it out with the landlord.'

The woman looks around the few remaining people, and her eyes meet Maxine's. She's not even as old as Myra, Maxine reckons, but her face is already dry and lined. A few more years and Maxine's supposed to have a life like that, a husband and baby, no money for rent, maybe, and a heart full of worry.

'We can't lose the house,' she says. 'We've got nowhere else.'

No one answers, as though it's bad luck to state the obvious. But Maxine doesn't feel like she can wander off now, not while the woman's desperation is hung out in the tiny strip of front yard for all to see.

Ralph's newsletter grows damp in her hand. Her head feels light; she wishes she could sit down somewhere, that's all. And that she knew what they were waiting for, or how long it would be.

The men come. Sooner than she thought they would, fewer of them than expected. They march, charged, into the lane, towards the house. Maxine looks for Ralph but he's not among them, and it's then she notices that these are

different men to those who left. Suits a little less frayed. Hats at another angle, low over the eyes, or right back, revealing high and shiny foreheads. Their eyes drill straight ahead, they don't seem to see Maxine – and this, perhaps, or the fact that none among them wears a uniform, is the reason she steps aside.

They don't stop at the gate, or on the path where the woman still stands with her baby, or at the door of the house. Their leader, a man in his thirties in a pale suit, tips his banded hat to her as he barrels past, a gesture more ominous than polite.

Everything erupts. There is shouting; the children scatter to the iron fence as powerful insults emerge from their mothers, as well as battering fists on suited backs. Knocked hats. Torn hair. This new lot bears a hard efficiency; those of them not under direct attack start passing out furniture like a chain gang, more or less slinging it into the street.

It's the few blokes who didn't go to chase down the landlord who spring into action then. As the furniture hits the gravel, they take it up, one man to a chair, two for a dresser, and stagger off around the corner with it as fast as they can.

Maxine doesn't fancy her chances in hand-to-hand combat, but she picks up a stool and runs after them. Down between two houses and through a splintered gate, across the weedy yards of the neighbouring cottages, to the back door of the cottage from which the furniture has just been taken.

There's an outraged roar inside as the men under attack see the things they've removed coming in again behind them. Maxine runs in and sets her stool down with glee. This is more like it, she thinks, and can't stop herself from sticking her tongue out at the pale-suited man as he bears down on her to snatch up the stool again. Then she bolts outside through the door she came in.

She loses track of how long the furniture circles through the house. She takes the stool back in three times, and soon the children are part of the game, too, toting the smaller things with a nimble speed none of the intruders can match.

But it gets too ugly to be a game. The intruders – whoever they are, for if they have announced that in the chaos, she didn't hear – change tactic, directing their efforts to guarding both the back door of the cottage and the few sticks of furniture just placed out in the lane. One of the women has blood on her face, Maxine notices, as she comes to a standstill by the now-wary children. Men shout at the rear of the cottage as they tussle over entry.

The spell of the stand-off is broken by the sound of feet, dozens of them. The first returning protesters spill into the lane, breaking into a run and spurring on those behind them with cries when they spot the trouble outside the cottage.

Maxine backs out of the melee. The cottage is so narrow anyway that the crowd converging there soon obscures the heart of the action, although it's plain from the noise of voices and the jolting, rippling movements of the men visible to her that the meeting of the two parties is not going smoothly. The article in Ralph's newsletter, its exhortation to negotiate rather than fight, doesn't appear to be well heeded. Maxine's lost her own copy, she realises then. It must be underfoot somewhere by now, torn and ground against the dirt.

And there is Ralph himself, emerging into the lane with the pale-suited man, both of them trying to call off the skirmish; although Ralph is putting more effort into this task than his adversary.

'The eviction's off! Stop fighting!'

'New Guard thugs!'

'Commies, the lot o' ya!'

'It's off, I said!'

'It's over, boys,' calls the man in the pale suit. His tone is grudging, unconvinced. 'This one's over.'

The men spread out to a tense but safer distance, shaking feathers back into place, smoothing forelocks.

'I don't know who called you down here,' says Ralph, his hands raised aloft in the tentative quiet. 'But we've got an agreement with the landlord. Just made. This family is staying.'

The returned protestors channel their thwarted aggression into a roar of triumph. In the face of it, the defeated gang pauses a beat before sauntering away, even-paced, right to the end of the lane, where they spin slowly on their heels and away around the corner, as though to say the battle's won but the war is far from over. Even so, Maxine joins in with the outbreak of jubilation, and behind the smeared front window of the cottage, the woman with the baby closes her eyes in relief.

Maxine sits upright in a pose she finds uncomfortable after the first half an hour. It's her weariness. There is nothing to lean on; the sprung cushion of the chaise longue grows hard underneath her and the muscles in her back, already jarred on miles of pavement, begin to ache.

At least it is easier to stay awake. The class is almost empty this afternoon, and the handful of people in the conservatory seem quite intimate with one another. Amelia and Laszlo are here, of course, and Daisy has elected to sketch Maxine today. Maxine doesn't know what has led to Daisy's capitulation, or change of heart, whichever it is, but she tries not to think about what Daisy is making of her, out of the small and concentrated lines she's etching into her book. Maxine can only see her out of the corner of her eye, but she knows that Daisy doesn't look up very often.

In contrast, Amelia is on her third sheet of paper already. The other two she's dropped to the floor. Maxine can see an image in repeat on them, in bold lines. They might be arms. Amelia works fast, making shapes. She doesn't care for details. Before the class began, Maxine – who got herself into position early this time – challenged herself to guess which of the many paintings arrayed around the studio, so different in style, belonged to whom.

She took a punt that Amelia's are the ones covered from corner to corner in square, flat forms and geometric curves, before noticing the initials *AW* at the bottom of one of them. As a confirmation of her powers of deduction, this quietly pleased her. Between the lines, thick brushstrokes on the paintings fill in gradients of muted colour – greens, browns, oranges. Sometimes Maxine can guess at what the picture is supposed to be; others are just collections of shapes. Most of them are somewhere in between – the suggestion of a figure in a tight, almost architectural grid, an oddly depthless environment. She wonders how Amelia came to see the world that way, or why she insists on doing so.

She wants to call the compositions childish, because of their simplicity, but admits that they are not. She has no word to describe what they are.

The ones that might be Daisy's are fewer, and unsigned. These are paintings like Amelia's, but somehow not so complete; beautiful renderings of objects that Maxine can see in the studio with her own eyes. This is a skill she knows how to admire – the making of likenesses. It's a language she speaks. But the objects tend to be lost in sketchy backgrounds, as though Daisy feels obliged to depart in half-hearted imitation of Amelia; or has embarked on something ambitious beyond her own skill or stamina, and lost either courage or interest part of the way there.

Where Laszlo's paintings are, Maxine doesn't know. During the art class he comes and goes in flapping trouser legs and bare feet, taking a seat sometimes when he wants to make conversation, at the rear of the group in a cluttered corner. He doesn't draw her.

Today the only students are a woman perhaps in her thirties with hair far too curly for the shortish cut she's wearing; without its own weight, it springs out from her head in a wild cloud. She has small, snubbish features, and serious, curious eyes. The other student is Sam, the man who brought Ralph last time, and in this more intimate setting it's apparent that he's well acquainted with the Maitland trio, even a friend. He's barrel-chested and ruddy, despite looking a little underfed, and like Ralph's, his scruffiness is a contrast to the careful way so many other men with only one, threadbare suit strive to keep their appearances tidy. Sam's shirt is crumpled and half untucked, his collar crooked. He hasn't shaved for a few days, either. But his eyes are warm and brown and very bright, and he often laughs, and Maxine finds his presence in the room a sort of balm.

Myra let her know – once the shock of Jim's leaving had settled – that she was very pleased for the three shillings. More than pleased, Maxine could tell. Relieved.

‘It’s the rent,’ said Myra. ‘I’m behind. The landlady seems all right if I give her something every week, anything, it stops her from panicking. So keep it up.’

It was meant to be encouragement, but Maxine heard the ruefulness. She felt freshly guilty then for doubting how Myra might calculate the value of her contribution. And she knew she couldn’t make those bottles into shillings. So here she was, reasoning that if the people here had seen her naked once then it couldn’t double the indignity to do it again.

She listens carefully to the conversation, partly to fend off boredom and discomfort, but mostly because she still wonders who they are, these people who come to draw her likeness. Apart from their attire, she only knows about them what she can piece together from their exchanges, and those have so far been impersonal, apart from the odd clue here and there. The students are learning to draw the same flat abstractions as Amelia does, but she harbours a mild anxiety about coming across her recognisable self in a picture somewhere. She wonders if she hopes for it in some way, too. She is being immortalised in graphite planes and blocks and curves, compositions which seem destined for no loftier fate than to be added to a stack of practice sheets. She is outlined in rough, repetitive lines, often dismembered, never perfected.

Today the conversation volleys comfortably between the artists present. The afternoon is warm and stormy, and a bruised and heavy light fills the conservatory. But the atmosphere isn’t stuffy; on the contrary, it’s as though a necktie has been loosened an extra notch, an extra button’s been undone.

‘...Of course I want to go to Europe,’ Daisy is saying. ‘I want to see the surrealists. They hardly rate a mention over here.’

‘You didn’t read the piece in *Stream*,’ says the cloudy-haired woman. ‘The one on De Chirico...’

‘Daisy’s too furious with me to read anything,’ Amelia throws in.

‘How so, Daisy?’

And a burst of good-natured laughter at her refusal to answer.

‘Eddie sent a package. It always makes her jealous.’

‘Oh Daisy. Edwina’s old news. A folly of Amelia’s youth. She’s just handy for Paris journals and gossip.’

‘That’s what I tell her.’

‘And if we’re wrong, well, France is awfully far away, dear.’

‘Genevieve, don’t tease her!’

‘I shall if I like. No one needs teasing more than Daisy.’ Genevieve squints at her.

Daisy pipes up herself. ‘I shall go to France,’ she says. ‘And I shall visit Eddie, and see what she makes of me.’

The room explodes into mirth and exaggerated gasps.

‘Look out, Amelia.’ This from Sam.

‘You’re going to die an old maid after all.’

‘She can always seduce another one of her students.’

‘She could, if anyone would dare send their daughters here any more.’

‘And I did read the piece,’ continues Daisy, after the fresh bout of laughter has died down. ‘I thought he was describing Laz.’

‘That’s rather high praise.’ Laszlo’s voice is a quiet foil to the mood of hilarity, and somewhat protesting.

‘Well, I’ve never seen a De Chirico,’ says Daisy. In Maxine’s peripheral vision Daisy gets up, and walks across her line of sight to the other side of the conservatory, where Maxine can only see her out of the opposite corner of her eye. No floaty dress for her today; she’s wearing knickerbockers, and what looks to be a fisherman’s jersey. She picks a small pamphlet up off of a table by an easy chair, and returns, flicking through it as she walks. ‘Listen to this: “De Chirico...has created a race of shadowy mannequins with fragments of ruins and memories of buildings on their knees. These mannequins represent the impotence of men of spirit crushed beneath the debris of the past: fragments of temples, geometries, traditions, rhetoric – abominable symbols!...Before him we feel suffocated, and long for the open air.”’ⁱ

There are a few seconds of silence, while everyone digests what she’s proposing. No one draws. During this pause, the distinct feeling comes over

Maxine that despite all the eyes that have been on her for the last hour, she is not actually there. It's a feeling at once liberating and depressing. It's not as though she'd know what to say, even if she were included in the conversation. In any case, she's reeling a little from the discovery of what seems to be a public truth – in this circle, anyway – about Daisy and Amelia's particular relationship. You could read it about it, of course, in the scandal sheets. But Maxine had never heard anyone talk about it openly in the real world.

'But Laszlo doesn't paint,' says Sam, at last.

'He used to,' Amelia says. 'Before he decided it was *passé*. Keeps them hidden away now. Very dark canvasses. Warscapes. Nothing like De Chirico, if you ask me, but he exhibited in London, you know.' There is a touch of reproach in her voice, as though Laszlo has abandoned some kind of responsibility.

'But surrealism's not *your* thing, Daisy,' says Genevieve.

A fleeting, awkward silence.

'I'm still working out what my thing is.'

'Don't open that can of worms,' says Sam. 'You'll have Amelia and Laszlo drawing swords. Pardon the pun.'

'Laz thinks the world has fallen apart, and that you can make art out of the debris. But I say if the world's fallen apart, who's to rebuild it? *I'm* teaching Daisy clarity and order,' argues Amelia. 'Necessary tools. Beautiful tools. She's not going to learn them anywhere else. Unless she goes to Europe.'

'Or New York. You could become a Dadaist, Daisy. Like that Baroness who performs her poetry in the nude.'

'Performed,' corrects Laszlo. 'She's dead now. We used to read her work at the cabaret.'

'I can't picture you in a cabaret, Laszlo,' laughs Sam. 'Did you wear suspenders?'

Amelia says: 'Laz was in Berlin just after the War. Have you never heard him go on about Tzara?'

'That was in Paris,' countered Laszlo.

‘How glamorous you are!’

‘Dada was never glamorous,’ said Laszlo. ‘Dada was chaotic. Idiotic. That was the point. It wouldn’t have worked if we’d taken ourselves seriously.’

This last, sharp comment seems to be pointed in Amelia’s direction, although the two of them, and indeed the whole gathering, seem untroubled by their antipathy, the source of which Maxine doesn’t really understand. She tries to shift imperceptibly in her seat. Every muscle in her back screams at her either to stand up or lie down. But she grits her teeth, flicks her eyes to the clock. Ten more minutes.

‘Ah! What proof have you got that it *did* work?’

Laszlo laughs a little at this question from Sam. ‘Well, the public hated us, so we knew we were asking the right questions. We wanted to dismantle things, whole cities if we could; we wanted to show people what things were made of. Get them to laugh at themselves, at art, at power. Glamour, aesthetics, those are just stories. We were saying: any kind of power is just a story that’s taken too seriously. The people who get to say what art is, those are the same people that sent hundreds of thousands of us to our deaths. I could put on a General’s uniform with shiny buttons, but no one would do what *I* say – the real General’s uniform is woven out of history. We went to the battlefield because we believed in it too. All those stories.’

‘It all sounds rather lofty, Laz.’

The doorbell sounds at the front of the house, and Laszlo gets up. ‘It was mockery,’ he says over his shoulder as he heads for the hallway.

The voice of the new arrival travels down the hallway. It’s familiar, not so much that Maxine can name who it belongs to, but enough that her knuckles whiten against the instinct to pull up to her chin the sheet that’s draped over the lower half of her body.

When Laszlo enters with Ralph Devanny, Maxine finds the only way to keep herself still is to stop breathing. The conversation resumes, but its timbre changes. Everyone knows Ralph, at least by name. But the intimate banter has evaporated and a more subdued exchange begins. It’s the most mundane scene

in the world to all of them; Maxine marvels at the banality of her own nakedness, when modesty is the cause of so much fuss everywhere else. Ralph doesn't help himself to a seat; as before, he's not here to draw, only to meet Sam. The scene is perhaps not so mundane to him. Maxine wonders if it is costing him an effort not to look at her.

Within a few minutes it's clear that everyone has abandoned their concentration for the task of drawing and Amelia gives Maxine the nod to get dressed. She begins to pour wine into rough glass goblets and tumblers, and hands them round. Maxine is just fastening the last button on her dress when Amelia hands one of the glasses to her. She stands bewildered for a moment or two, cupping it in her hands, watching the light wink on the glass and the ruby liquid, and eventually reading it for what it is: an invitation to stay.

Amelia wanders off to distribute more wine. She's either oblivious to the position into which she's put Maxine, or it's a cruel test. How is Maxine supposed to make conversation here? Daisy is hostile; the others are indifferent, and know each other well. The only other person who could be considered out of place is Ralph, and he looks comfortable enough sitting with Genevieve and Daisy. She's momentarily, idiotically jealous, whether of Ralph for his social ease or the two women for having his attention, she isn't sure. If he lifted his eyes, would she be able to acknowledge him? In any case, she might miss it if he did; she's trying not to show undue interest in the cosy circle.

She sips the wine. It surprises her; she expected it to be sweeter, like the sherry her mother used to keep locked in the sideboard. She isn't sure if she likes it, but she's not so discriminating these days about what she eats or drinks. In any case, the sooner she empties her glass, the sooner she can leave.

'I've been meaning to ask you,' says Laszlo, quiet at her shoulder. 'Do you still have any of those bottles for sale? The ones you brought with you the first time.'

Sam is with him, listening with interest. Maxine is flustered by the question. She has a few; they are cover for her trip out here. On her way home, she plans to break one or two into the gutter again, or empty them down a drain

and leave the bottles. She doesn't want to leave them anywhere that someone, a child perhaps, or a man too far down on his luck, might find and drink them. When they're all gone she isn't sure what story she'll tell Myra. But she can't sell them to anyone she'll see again, and she's startled that Laszlo has remembered, and also, given the impossible effort it took to sell the bloody things, by being asked for one. So, when she gathers her wits, she lies.

'Pity,' says Laszlo. His disappointment seems genuine. 'I hate to miss an opportunity. It makes the collection seem incomplete.' He sighs, and nods to Sam. 'Come and see it anyway. You can come, too.'

The two men stroll past Maxine towards the cluttered studio corner behind the students' chairs, and she follows, confused, but grateful for the invitation to join them.

'Oh, don't let him take you over there,' Amelia says as she passes behind them, a note of disgust in her voice. 'You'll just encourage him.'

Maxine stops in her tracks, mindful of who it is at Maitland that pays her, but Sam chuckles. 'Don't fret. Amelia and Laz have warring sensibilities, but they are united by their mutual misery about the state of modern art in this country.'

Amelia swigs her last mouthful of wine and refills the glass. 'Five years I spent in France, and not a bloody thing changed here while I was away.'

'Why *did* you come back?' says Sam. 'Surely not a broken heart.'

'My father was dying.'

'...and now you have money, and the school, and you can make your art in peace,' says Laszlo. 'So let me make mine.'

Amelia smirks as she turns to join the others. In the corner, Laszlo waves a hand at the thing he wants them to see. It's a large, glass-fronted cabinet, constructed out of box-shaped wooden shelves. They've been joined without apparent pattern, to make a sort of unsymmetrical hive. As a piece it stands little higher than waist-height, which is why Maxine hasn't noticed it before from her seat in front of the students. She bends now for a better look. Some of the shelves are tiny, others a foot square; each of them has its own

glass door, and the hinges and door handles are all mismatched. And on each shelf of this unusual cabinet is an object of disconcerting ordinariness: a kewpie doll; a card of Kirby grips; a jar of melon jam; a clothes peg; a painted wooden train; a block of laundry blue; an animal skin.

‘They are all things that people have sold to me at my own front door,’ Laszlo explains, as if displaying them in a strange cabinet that looks built for the purpose is an obvious thing to do, not to mention the source of some pride.

‘All right,’ begins Sam, sounding bemused but intrigued, too. ‘So you gave up painting for this.’

‘I no longer see the point of making figurative representations of things, that’s all. However modern the technique. Objects speak for themselves. My job as an artist is to find meaning, not to make it.’

Maxine eyes the objects on the shelves. What meaning could they possibly have, she thinks?

‘But they’re things other people have made,’ says Sam.

Laszlo is nodding. ‘And I elevate the commonplace to the artistic, at the same time as undermining the ego of the Artist, our reverence for him. They become a question, you see? About what art is, about ugliness and usefulness, about what kind of world could have made them. But it’s more than that—’ He reaches out to indicate the cabinet as a whole. ‘As a collection they make no sense, or we can read into them a strange, subconscious kind of sense. Think of Amelia and her love of order. We are always looking for stories. The whole city is like this. A world of machines, where we make absurdities. When you bring them together they make a story a bit like a dream.’

Maxine swallows her last mouthful of wine before becoming conscious that she is swaying. One glass of wine, her very first.

Laszlo looks into the empty glass, and into her eyes, as though he’s reading an old story there, one that others have missed. ‘It’s never a good idea to drink on an empty stomach.’

‘I should go home,’ she breathes, although the journey itself seems, suddenly, an impossibility, or far more than she could ever manage.

‘You’re going my way, aren’t you? I can see you home. If you like.’

It’s Ralph. He’s materialised next to Sam, who’s still examining the cabinet; having made his offer, Ralph allows his own eyes to follow Sam’s gaze but without the same apparent interest.

He must remember her from the Lawson Lane rally, thinks Maxine, or he wouldn’t guess at where she lives. His arms are loosely folded; he unfolds an arm and rubs the back of his neck, letting loose a brief smile in her direction. It’s a nervous gesture that reminds her he’s not one for bravado; she knows that already from the way he intervened in the violence at the rally, and the thoughtful way he answered her questions. So she lets go of any worry that it might not be safe to go with him into the night, that he might have formed an unwholesome idea about her, and lets herself think that he might see her for more than that. And she nods, a small warm surge of thankfulness finding its way up to colour her face. She leaves her glass on a table next to Ralph’s and collects her pay from Amelia.

‘Are you coming?’ Ralph asks Sam before they leave, but Sam wants to stay and see more of Laszlo’s work.

And Maxine discovers that she is relieved to be heading out alone with Ralph. She is glad to step out onto the street for once. The bottle bag clinks as she works to keep up with his long stride.

‘What have you got in there?’ asks Ralph.

She bites her lip and then decides there’s no more shame in it than anything else. And who would Ralph be, as self-appointed crusader for the penniless, to judge her for how she tries to make ends meet? ‘They’re bottles of brass polish – I’m trying to sell them for a friend,’ she explains. ‘But I’ve no talent for it.’ She gives a little laugh and then admits the rest in a rush. ‘I don’t know if that’s because they’re a dodgy homemade recipe. I doubt I’d be any better at selling them if they were the real thing.’

Ralph nods as though what she’s saying makes all kinds of perfect, familiar, unfortunate sense. They arrive at a tram stop and he comes to a halt. A tram is already rumbling towards them round a corner.

Ralph notices the misgiving on her face. ‘We’re not going to pay. Come on, I’ll show you.’

The tram stops and Ralph takes her hand. They climb on at the opposite end of the tram to the conductor. They make it two stops before he works his way round to them. Ralph stalls by rummaging in his pocket for imaginary change, long enough for the tram to slow for a junction.

They leap down, and dart away from the tracks, into the shelter of a twilit lane. It’s not that Maxine has never heard of jumping the tram. It’s just that it seems childish, like something Francis would do. She’s still light-headed, but the fresh air is working on her queasiness. She realises she’s smiling.

Ralph is too. Once the tram rattles off, they wander back out together into the street. ‘Got sixpence you *do* want to spend?’ he asks. ‘I know somewhere near here that does three courses for a shilling. We could share.’

Maxine nods slowly, and follows Ralph, as though he has suggested the most miraculous and innovative idea she has ever heard.

The café is nothing flash – far from it – and the proprietor doesn’t seem to mind that only one meal is to be purchased between them. It’s not so different to a greasy spoon, with its chipped table-tops and murky light, the chalkboard menu, tiled walls and net curtain on a rail covering the lower half of the window. But the clientele aren’t here for strong tea and fatty sausages. She doesn’t know how to read them, they’re such a mixed lot. It’s evening of course, too late for any building shift. There are shirt-sleeves here like you might see in an office. Couples, too, eyeing each other over little bowls of dessert. The owner, who has a swarthy, southern European look about him, nods to Ralph in a way that might or might not be familiar, and Ralph finds them a table with two chairs. Maxine gazes at the grand silver machine behind the counter, spitting steam and black liquid into tiny cups.

The soup arrives, with two spoons even though they haven’t asked, and then the main course of stew, both dishes similar and strange and served with rough bread. ‘I see you’re no stranger to garlic, then,’ smiles Ralph, but she doesn’t answer, not because she’s tried garlic before or even knows which of

the unfamiliar flavours it might be, but because the hunger that the sweet-savoury taste and smell of the food draws out of her will countenance no interruption in her eating. She feels sure she is eating more than half of each dish but she is unable to stop the mechanical dip and lift of her spoon. When both plates are wiped clean and taken away and her fingertips have picked up the last crumbs of bread, she flops back in her chair, almost out of breath. Her face feels hot and flushed and her head is light. She struggles hard against the instant, powerful urge to sleep.

Dessert comes, some kind of pastry layered with fruit. It's almost too much. This time she lets Ralph eat most of it. Afterwards he has icing sugar on his chin. She lets him know with a little nod and a swipe of her own chin, and he puts a napkin to his face and blushes.

She has never had this ability before, that of making a man blush. Boys, yes, but anyone can do that. It brings out a tenderness in her, one that she thinks better of speaking aloud. There is some kind of filigree being constructed between them, a delicate web of understanding, which any clumsy gesture might break.

After the meal they walk through Hyde Park. The shadows and warm, scented air seem theatrical. Large flowers bloom here that make her think of time measured out in aeons. The witterings and scamperings of unseen creatures. She's met possums before, out in the suburbs. Felt like one herself, venturesome and moon-eyed, looking for scraps of fruit. They proliferate like squirrels and behave in much the same way, apart from being nocturnal, but even that makes some sort of childish sense to her, at this upside-down end of the earth.

As they walk, Ralph asks Maxine about her family, and she hesitates a moment before telling him her exact situation, down to the last detail, without omission or adornment. It's like throwing off heavy blankets; and when he fails to be shocked by any of it, she glimpses the possibility of a new sort of friendship, one in which there is freedom to move, to throw her arms up, to dance around a little. He in turn tells her he's been out of work for over six

months, since he turned twenty-one and got the sack from his printing job, so that the firm could replace him with someone younger and cheaper. Maxine is outraged but Ralph shrugs and says there are thousands in his situation, men and women, across the city. 'It makes business sense,' he says, echoing the article Maxine read in the newsletter. 'That's the principle we've all enslaved ourselves to.'

In any case, explains Ralph, being out of work has given him time to educate himself. To read. Sam has quite the collection of books and pamphlets, mostly on Marxism and Communism – words that, although not unfamiliar, hold little real meaning to Maxine – and some of them banned. He is quite blasé about telling her this, and she wonders whether this means he trusts her, or simply doubts her ability to make anything of the information.

'Shouldn't you keep that under your hat?' she asks.

'Well,' he says after a moment. 'People need to read them. Even if they disagree with what they read. You're not frightened of ideas, are you? *You* should read them. What's the point of the risk if they're hidden away always in a box?'

No one has ever suggested to Maxine that she extend her knowledge beyond the basics she acquired at school. She's not sure how she feels about it now. Her mother appears in her head, of course, horrified by the indecency, as though in picking up such a book Maxine would be making some sort of scene, and certainly ruining her chances at marriage.

But here is a man encouraging her to open them. See that? she tells the apparition of her mother. And where is the life her parents expected for her, anyway? Everywhere she looks, things are falling apart. She is doing better on her own, finding new ways to manage.

Sam and Ralph share a room in a men's hostel run by the Unemployed Workers Movement, he explains to her as they walk on, which doubles as the Anti-Eviction Committee headquarters. They all live rent-free in an abandoned office building, and pool their funds to buy food in bulk at cheaper prices. In the future everyone will live communally, he tells Maxine, turning his eyes on

her. Sooner than you think. The problem is that most of them want violent revolution, he goes on, kicking the pavement; they think it's the only way. But Ralph isn't convinced, and nor is Sam. Sam thinks modern art is going to change the world, he laughs, won't even go to the eviction rallies. The rest of the time he's the newsletter's cartoonist. It's Ralph who writes the articles, to the disgruntlement of the other committee members. They call him a pacifist. They don't mean it kindly.

Maxine and Ralph leave behind the trees and their vaulted canopy and head towards Darlington. They will part ways soon. She could use some rest, but she doesn't want to go back to Barnard Street, not yet. There's something about Ralph's company that overrides her fatigue. Walking with him, listening to his voice, to its lilting, hopeful animation, reminds her how long it's been since she's done anything just for the pleasure of it.

But she has no suggestions about what they might do. People walk the streets of Darlington, in couples, in knots, pursuing entertainments she's never sampled herself. So it's her turn to blush when Ralph asks: 'How soon d'you have to get back? There's a place I need to visit tonight, and it's on the way. You could come if you want.'

She agrees without asking where. Truthfully it doesn't matter to her. As Ralph leads her into the ordinary back ways of Darlington, he explains that the committee has been picketing a house in the area for weeks, ever since the eviction notice was handed down. The landlord, who owns over twenty local properties, has lately employed some underhanded tactics. The AEC doesn't trust him to stick to the terms of the notice, and they've rostered protestors to stay at the house around the clock.

It's more than protection for the family who lives there, Ralph says. People gather there every day; everyone knows about it. If they can get this happening on every street, no one will fear eviction again.

Maxine hears the singing from the top of Carnation Street. It looks to be terraces on both sides, all the way along, and when they reach the singing it is indeed coming from a house, with a front porch hazy with light from the

curtained window. Ralph thumps the door loudly with his fist and it opens almost the next moment, just a crack. A man peeks out, looks Maxine up and down, grins at Ralph and swings the door back to let them both in.

It's not much of a place, but it's homelier than Myra's, and not just because it's packed to the rafters. People are crammed into the front room, perched on every chair and ledge and a few laps besides; the air is dense with pipe-smoke and laughter. Maxine and Ralph must squeeze past feet and knees, lifted up, or to one side; somehow room is made for them. Ralph returns nods in all directions until it seems that everyone in the room has greeted him.

Still, they both have to stand, by the mantelpiece, and from there Maxine can see that there are little framed pictures on the walls, behind yellowed glass, and that the fringed lampshade matches the cushion covers. It's a touch Victorian, and reminds her of her grandmother's home in Mansfield, full of old, worn things, humble heirlooms.

There are children here, too, looking especially gleeful about the late-hour festivities. A girl of eight or nine basks in the indulgent looks her mother gives her, and Maxine misses Bert and Ernie with a stab to the chest. She misses them, and feels more certain than ever that she has failed them. If there's room in the city for all these other children then there must be room for her brothers, too. But Myra thinks Jim is lucky to have a place in the country to send them; Maxine has Buckley's of convincing her to take them in, especially with money being so stretched already.

It's down to her and her alone. With this thought the place that opens up is dark and cold and yawning, and entirely within her, for her face is warm in the close room and the lights are fizzing like Christmas, and everyone is rousing into song again. Ralph beams at her from far away.

After the song the man who came to the door picks his way through to them.

'All right, Harry,' says Ralph and introduces Maxine, which has the effect of hauling her out of the dark place and into the room, albeit feeling a little shaken, a little empty. 'Good turn out.'

Harry nods. 'So, tomorrow's eviction day. What's the plan?'

'We get here early. Get everyone here who's not already staying on to come back, and send Jack out on the bike as usual.'

Harry listens to this without expression, then says: 'There's been rumours. Word is out we might get a visit from the boys in blue.'

'Evictions aren't a police matter.'

Harry shrugs. 'Things change. Police are just paid thugs, you know that. And they sure as hell don't work for us.'

A few seconds' silence hardens in the coolness between them.

'So let them come,' says Ralph. 'Plan's still the same.'

'A few of the blokes,' begins Harry, leaning into Ralph as though taking him into a confidence. 'They don't want to be sitting ducks, you know what I mean? They're saying if the police come, our only chance is to fight back. Otherwise all this—' he nods to the gathering '—is for nothing.'

'Two wrongs don't make a right,' Ralph says, impassioned. 'That's why we negotiate.'

'They don't like your so-called business sense, Ralph,' he says emphatically, and Maxine gets the impression that maybe Harry doesn't think much of it, either. 'They've had enough of it. Where's it getting us in the long term? That system's broken. All this homelessness, there's your proof. It's used up.'

'And I say: there's no point doing away with an oppressive system if the one you're putting in its place is no better. We raise our fists, and the press will go to town on us. We'll lose our support.'

'Don't be so damn sure. I will tell you once more: there's plenty of blokes here who reckon there's only one way to do away with the system.'

'Are you threatening me, Harry?' Ralph is incredulous, hurt.

'I'm not threatening you. I'm just warning you.' And Harry stands back and straightens his shoulders, and moves away as a fresh song rises to fill the silence.

Ralph sucks on his bottom lip as he watches Harry go. His eyes look tired, suddenly. As if he knows it himself, he turns to Maxine with a rueful sort of smile. 'Had enough? I can take you home.'

'I'll come tomorrow,' she says. 'If you need the help.'

This cheers him up. 'I could,' he says, and it's not until much later, sleepless in bed with Myra snoring next to her, and luxuriating in every remembered detail of the evening, that Maxine notices it's the first time that he hasn't said 'we'.

The atmosphere on Carnation Street is festive. A knot of people, perhaps fifty of them, mills in front of the dilapidated terrace. Behind them, a banner reading 'UNITED WE STAND' festoons the balcony of one of the houses. The lettering is red. Red flags flutter from the posts. There are men on the balcony in shirtsleeves, hatless, hanging their hands over the iron railings. As Maxine gets in closer she can see past the crowd to the front steps. Men lean out of the ground floor windows, too, and fill the tiny front yard. It's mostly women and kids on the street. Some of them she recognises from last night. The women are bright-faced, they're riled up but it's fresh air to them, it makes them hale. One hands around sandwiches.

Many of the children are equipped with both saucepans and spoons, and the result is loud. It brings a smile to her face, all that banging. It echoes something in her own heart, something that needs this kind of release. If you're going to bang your head in frustration, then better to make a racket doing it. Disturb the peace.

More men are coming up the street, a band of them. They strut like an army, but without the orderliness. A cheer starts on the balcony and is echoed by those on the street. The men arrive at the house, swelling the crowd. Theirs is a different energy to that of the waiting women; a charge of expectation crackles through the gathering now. The women move to the periphery. This is the main event. Young teenage boys linger near the core of men, reverence glowing on their faces, their hungry eyes alight. A protest is not a meal or a pair of boots without holes. But to these boys it is something, and something is always better than nothing.

The sandwich she's taken is white bread and fish paste. She chews slowly these days. As she swallows the last bit of crust, Maxine spots Ralph. He comes out of the front door, swapping badinage over his shoulder with those in

the house. He's greeted at the front gate by a number of the men who've just trooped down, and certainly looks at home amongst them. More than that.

'Ready for some action, Ralph?' says one of the men.

He smiles. 'Steady, boys. Bloke in there's got a wife and three young kids. One's just a baby. So easy does it, remember? We're not the thugs.'

'You haven't met my mate Tommo here, have you?'

Laughter, during which Ralph, wearing a noncommittal smile, surveys the turnout. 'But listen, fellas,' he says. 'The thing they'd love most is if we kick off. It won't work, and half of you will end up in gaol.'

'You get three meals a day in gaol.'

More laughter. Ralph leaves them to it, pushing his way out into the street. A fiddle starts up, as though it's some kind of celebration. The boy playing it can't be more than sixteen. Some Irish ditty. A few clap along; the children with saucepans start to caper.

Maxine tries to imagine this scene taking place those weeks ago in Barnard Street, instead of the miserable trampling she and her father got. She finds it hard to picture Jean handing around refreshments, or Dot fired up by radical slogans. Chance would be a fine thing. The Carnation Street gathering amazes her. Perhaps it takes someone like Ralph, she thinks, to get everyone thinking the same way. Perhaps she, Maxine, needs to get hold of some sandwiches and a fiddler.

Ralph moves in her direction, chatting to people as he goes, and peering over their heads towards the great thoroughfare of William Street, where life motors past in the distance, oblivious. He looks down the street, someone requests his attention, he is attentive. But then his eyes travel away down the street again. Maxine doesn't take her eyes off him.

He reaches her eventually, as she is standing between the door of the picketed house and the stretch of empty street that so interests him. 'Hot off the press!' he says, reaching inside his shirt for a stack of newsletters. He's only a foot away but he has to raise his voice above the general hubbub. Holds the whole pile out to her.

She takes them, and they are warm, from being next to his body.

‘Ralph!’

He looks up.

One of the men is calling down to him from the balcony. ‘We’ve got a problem.’

He turns from her and starts for the door of the house.

‘Don’t you want these?’ Maxine waves the papers.

‘No. Hand them out!’

She feels more like she belongs with something to do. As people take the sheets from her, she sees how easy it is to give yourself an air of authority. Most of the people here, she guesses, are just neighbours – housewives, out of work truck drivers and factory workers. They’re hungry for what’s printed on the papers. She can’t fill the outstretched hands fast enough. As soon as she’s given out the last one, she wishes she’d kept one back for herself. Perhaps Ralph has more. He might have a few she can take back to Barnard Street. Would she have the guts to hand them round? Would people read them if she did? Letterboxes might be better. An anonymous messenger. She’d have to wait until well after dark.

There are raised voices in the house and Ralph emerges, surrounded by men, carrying an upright bundle of what look to be broom handles, sawn to the length of bludgeons. From the strain around his neck muscles, they look heavier than they should be. A couple of hot-faced blokes are pursuing him.

‘Who in hell do you think you are?’ demands one.

Ralph’s tone has changed to something grim and sure. ‘These have been filled with lead!’

‘Well, you ain’t going to do much damage with an ordinary wooden one.’

‘No violence today!’

‘Says who? This isn’t the bloody salt march.’

‘It’s not Russia, either. No violence.’

‘You’re a dupe. Revolution at any cost!’

Most of the protesters, especially those who have just trickled in, are ignoring this exchange, or listening in hesitant silence. The fiddler plays on. The children start shouting and banging their saucepans furiously.

‘They’re coming! They’re coming!’

And they are coming, except it’s just one bailiff in a faded uniform, and a man in work clothes. The muscle. He’s a sizeable bloke but his face falters as they walk the length of the street to hooting and whistling from the crowd. The bailiff puts a brave face on it, but he colours when he opens his mouth.

Maxine looks for Ralph, in time to see him vanish back into the house with the makeshift weapons. The fiddle’s gone quiet, but the kids haven’t. They keep moving, weaving and dodging though no-one’s made a grab for them yet, their irregular metal rhythms overlaying a menacing, restless murmur from the crowd.

‘I require access to these premises,’ announces the bailiff.

He’s answered by a wave of heckling.

‘I warn you now, there are police officers on the way,’ the bailiff continues.

Cries go up, supported by jeering cheers. ‘Getting the cops to do your dirty work!’

‘They should be solving bloody murders.’

‘Two cops down for every man hurt!’

‘They’ll arrest the bloody lot of you!’ shouts the bailiff, and pushes in with the other bloke close behind him. But the way to the gate is blocked with jostling bodies, and the front line closes quickly round the two men. They’re shoved and pulled. Maxine surveys the entrance but there’s no sign of Ralph. It’s all very well to preach non-violence and then run inside, she thinks.

He reappears without the broom handles just as the police come, one, two, three, striding down from William Street, heavy-booted, wielding truncheons. The bailiff and his man have retreated by now, scrapped their way out of the mob with their hats knocked off their heads, their collars torn or

askew. They keep well back as the police wade right into the melee with truncheons aloft.

At first Maxine stands her ground. She's in the thick of the gathering; the police haven't got that far yet. Some of the pickets are being slowly beaten back, while trying to protect their heads with raised hands. One man falls to the ground, where his uniformed assailant lays into him with his boots. Two more men come hard at the cop to stop him, taking a shoulder each. One way or another, the tight knot of protestors is unravelling, and the skirmish getting closer to her.

She's bumped and shoved as Ralph pushes through the crowd from behind. He reaches the man on the ground and vanishes again. Moments later he reappears, hauling the bloodied man to his feet. The truncheon's blows rain onto Ralph's head instead but he doesn't retaliate and he doesn't fall. He deflects the blows with his forearm and pulls back, drawing the people near him into some kind of line.

'Stand firm!' he roars, grabbing shirt-fronts, arms. Holding them to their word. 'Stand firm!'

The line pulls together, lengthens as more people link arms with those next to them. The woman to Maxine's left hooks her arm tight, and Maxine in turn reaches out to the woman next to her. She doesn't really see either of these people clearly; but the close press of the mob, the smell and feel of others' hair, clothes, skin and the bones underneath, is somehow miraculous. The task at hand is a pure one. The police are attacking the crowd because they want to get inside the house. The crowd's job is to stop them. Three police, even ones prepared to use their boots and sticks, don't have a chance against this tightly woven wall of protest. How many police would it take to defeat them? Maxine surges and sways with the movement of the crowd, she surrenders to it, even closes her eyes. It is a blissful feeling, like being rocked in a cradle. Human contact, the great sweaty vital mess of it, a kind of nourishment.

When she opens her eyes, one of the policemen is holding a gun.

In an instant the mood of the line alters. The arm to her left tightens around her own; she can almost feel the woman's heart tighten with it, her chest heave into a knot of fear and outrage and determination. To her right, the other woman's arm, hot and damp, slips loose, leaving the sting of foreign sweat on Maxine's skin. Her own gut falters. The police have stepped back, into a jagged line of their own; all three of them are pointing guns at the crowd. Their hands might be shaking; it might be her own vision wavering.

'Hold the line!' calls a voice. But she isn't sure she can. The line is breaking apart; she can feel it flying away, piece by piece, leaving her stranded, vulnerable. No one has pulled a trigger but the pointed guns are firing something all the same: it's fear, an invisible hurricane force strong enough to sweep them away.

The ground has fallen away beneath her. She is cold and hot and her courage plummets. So many people have disbanded that she is utterly without protection; nothing stands between her and the three loaded barrels. Ralph is at the heart of a much-diminished cluster of protestors, still holding his blessed line. They are either brave or stupid, and perhaps she is neither.

In a prickling panic, she feels a hatred for the woman's arm entrapping her, binding her to her place in the firing line. The grip is so tight she has to pull and turn and wrench herself free. As she does so, her eyes meet Ralph's. They hold her anew for a few moments, a fixed, shining point in the stumbling chaos.

The nearby explosion of a shot firing severs their gaze in two, and she is running, running.

*

Maxine has no money for the evening paper. She gave her two and a half shillings to Myra. This is something she did with pleasure at breakfast, but now she is desperate for news about the morning's eviction protest, and the money has already been used to pay off some of the credit they've racked up at

Farrell's. Tomorrow she might find an abandoned paper, but she needs to know now whether the gunshot she heard found a mark.

If you have no wireless, then news is something you find on the street. In the papers, but people talk, too. It is this instinct – that the news is at large, in some intangible way, in public places – that leads her out of the house and back towards Carnation Street. The closer to the location of the news event, she reasons unconsciously, the more abundant the news about it will be.

And she finds it where she expects to find it, in a headline spied on Oxford Street: 'SHOT FIRED AT EVICTION PROTEST'. Maxine considers pretending to buy the paper, just to get a quick look at the front page story while she digs in her pocket for a coin she knows isn't there. But she can't do it to the paper boy, who is thinner and more ragged than her, so that she wonders how he even has the energy to dart the way he does from customer to customer in that shifting, homewards crowd, his arm draped with heavy papers.

By the time she reaches Carnation Street, she is nauseous with anticipation. It's not that she expects to find a body there, or even a slick of blood. She is looking for information, and anyone in the street should be able to tell her. There is something about the act of seeking it though, about walking right up to it and looking at it straight, that pushes her somehow to the edge of herself.

She is still shaken by the incident, but she is also ashamed. When she came home to her own eviction weeks ago, she felt entitled for a moment afterwards to judge the apathy of those who stood and watched. The rally this morning showed her she'd been right, and that she wasn't alone. Except that now she'd shown herself not to be brave enough. It was one thing to carry furniture to the landlord's office, but police with guns changed the naked facts of the situation. There was a different fight going on, a bigger one. The protest this morning wasn't about just one family's house.

People are going about their business in Carnation Street. It's not so narrow as her own street, and as it feeds into the thoroughfare of William Street it seems to draw in a little of its energy, or perhaps it is the residue of the

dramatic morning. There is the sense of coming and going. There are children playing in the gutter and women talking on front steps and every sign of normal life. No one pays Maxine much heed as she proceeds towards the site of the struggle. It's the last moments of true, unfaded daylight before twilight descends.

And then she reaches the house and stops. In truth she doesn't recognize it, but she knows it has to be the one. The banners and flags are gone, but so is the balcony from which they hung. There are signs – raw brick, mangled iron – that it has been torn bodily from the front of the building. Broken boards lie in a heap in the front yard. The front yard itself is only nominal now because the low picket fence has been uprooted, too, every post. The ground floor window is smashed. Maxine looks up. Every window is smashed.

The front door appears to be open, until she looks more closely and realizes that it is gone. The house exerts a kind of magnetic pull on her. Plaster crunches under her feet as she crosses the threshold. Inside the front hall the gas meter lies on the floor, a great long tongue of mildewed wallpaper attached to it where it has been pulled from the wall. Through a doorway to her right, the mantelpiece she stood next to last night with Ralph has also been pulled off and thrown down. The door has been yanked from its hinges and left on the floor. The hall is narrow and she steps over the gas meter. It leads her through the kitchen and out into the yard towards the sound of running water. On the back step she stops short of stepping into an ankle-deep puddle. Across this pool, out of arm's reach, is a tap left running. The whole yard is flooded.

A dusty rabble of feet turns her attention to the front hall. Her eyes meet the dark, round eyes of a child, a girl of about ten in a grubby pinafore. The sight of Maxine has stopped the girl on the threshold of the kitchen. Other faces, younger faces, peep around the girl's sides and from behind her legs. Together they are alert, like rabbits sniffing the air, about to bolt.

It's Maxine who is unnerved. She opens her mouth but can't form the question she came to ask. In any case her small action startles the children into flight.

When they're gone she feels like the house might collapse around her, or trap her somehow into some other kind of suffocating fate. This is not a place to be caught by anyone.

Out in the street, a man in a battered hat and with his hands in his pockets whistles as he wanders by.

The Unemployed Workers' Movement hostel is a small and grimy building with newspaper pasted up in several windows. The green paint on the door is dull, the handle and numbers tarnished. True to Ralph's description, it looks like commercial premises, not like it was built for anyone to live in.

The man called Harry answers the door. He's the one who let them into Carnation Street last night, and who took Ralph to task over the question of their right to fight. She's taken aback to see him, as though it's a bad omen; and he looks her up and down again, this time without moving his head. Looks up and down the street, too, his eyes sliding right and left.

'I need to see Ralph Devanny,' she says, her throat dry. 'Is he here? It's urgent.'

Harry pauses, his tongue pushing at his cheek inside his closed mouth. 'Is it Eviction Committee business?'

He doesn't remember her, or he's making her wait for the sake of it. 'Yes,' she says, exasperated, at the same time shaking the question away like it's water in her ears.

'You'd better see Sam.' He steps back, making room for her to enter the building.

She steps into a cramped sort of lobby, where there's a bank of numbered pigeonholes, thick with dust, and a lettered sign pointing upstairs. Chequered linoleum underfoot. 'I want to see Ralph,' she insists, but stops there, wary of voicing her fears to this man.

Harry chuckles, not unkindly. 'Ralph can't help you now.'

His words turn everything black and weightless. She sways.

'Are you coming, or not?'

Somehow she moves her feet. Passes blindly up a flight of stairs, perhaps two flights, down a hall, through swinging doors. Muted green, the

smell of dust. She's in a room and a man she knows is there. Sam Shade. What has she come to hear?

'One of Ralph's,' Harry tells him from the doorway, before turning on his heel.

'Oh, hello,' says Sam. 'It's you.'

She looks up. Sam's wearing braces for once, and a shirt loose at the collar. Aside from Ralph, she's never seen anyone from the art school outside of Maitland. She might have been a touch embarrassed if she weren't speechless with worry.

'Ralph's not here. I'm afraid he might be gone a few weeks.'

It takes a while for Maxine to process what he's said, for the relief to wash right through her. It's a sensation not unlike pins and needles. 'Oh,' she says in the end. 'To the hospital?'

'No, not the hospital.' He looks at her curiously.

She becomes aware that she has, at some point, sat down. Was she offered a seat? She can't remember. 'Could you please just tell me if he's all right?'

'He's not hurt, if that's what you mean.' Sam sighs. 'No, that bullet went into the air. Did the trick though. Ralph's been arrested.'

'Arrested?'

'Should go up in front of the magistrate tomorrow but I reckon they'll keep him in for a few weeks. Unless you've got bail.' He grins wryly, then notices the shock on her face. 'Don't be surprised. Cops come in to something like that, lay into everyone. Arrest a bunch of blokes for fighting. Next thing you know it's in the paper, what a pack of yobs we are.'

'Ralph wasn't fighting.'

'Obstruction, resistance – it's all the same to them. He was *there*.'

'So was I,' says Maxine, wondering with a shudder whether she'd be in the same predicament as Ralph if she'd had the guts to stick around. She makes her terrible admission. 'But I left when I heard the shot.'

‘Smart girl,’ says Sam, and this is not at all the condemnatory answer she’s expecting from him. She raises her eyebrows, and Sam adds: ‘You’re human, after all.’

It’s meant to make her feel better, but all she can think is that Ralph is human too, and somehow doing a more admirable job of it than the rest of them.

In the wake of her receding fear, Maxine begins to notice things in the room. It looks like an office, and there’s even a typewriter and a sheaf of handwritten papers on a desk made of trestles and planks. But there are two single beds, too, one neatly made, one scruffy with slept-in blankets, and a dry, balding shaving brush on a shelf. There’s nothing dressing the window. The glow of city lights makes a murky rectangle of the deepening dark outside.

It’s then she notices the stack of stiff, large rectangles of paper stacked on end at the foot of the untidy bed. Sketches. On the one facing outwards, a young woman emerges from smudges of charcoal. She sits upright, her breasts visible, her fingers holding a sheet to her belly, almost absently. It’s as though she has woken from the longest, most rejuvenating sleep possible, and is pausing, clear-eyed, to decide what the next moment will hold.

Sam sees her looking and the air grows awkward between them. ‘D’you want a cup of tea?’ he asks. ‘I might even have a biscuit.’

‘Yes please,’ she murmurs, still marvelling at this vision of herself, intimate yet in no way crass, showing her something that a mirror never has, but just as true, maybe more so. For the first time outside of Maitland, she feels all right about what she’s been doing there. Sees, momentarily, the possibility that it might not diminish her.

When Sam burns his fingers on the small spirit stove, she realises he is embarrassed, and his discomfiture tinges her mood with embarrassment, too. She goes reluctantly to the window, where she can no longer stare at the drawing. They’re only three floors up but that’s higher than any other building around. From here she can see the pale specks of peaceful, roosting pigeons.

There's even a sign of the approaching weather, clouds obscuring stars to the east where it's easy to forget the ocean is, just a few miles away.

She turns back into the room. It would be easier if one of them would walk over there and turn the sketch around. At that moment it occurs to her that Sam's embarrassment might be on his own behalf, rather than hers; that in letting her see the picture he has exposed something of himself just as intimate as her nakedness. If this is the case then neither of them can touch the picture – to do so would be to give credence to the mortification of the other.

So her eyes search for somewhere else to rest, and alight on a contraption set up on a table in the corner of the room. A large drum with a handle sits atop a box cased in old, mottled metal. Bolts and arms and workings are visible. There's a dial on the side, and sheets of paper in a tray next to the drum.

Sam sees her looking, and seems grateful that her attention has been diverted. 'That's our mimeograph machine. It was left behind, when the offices in here closed down. Gave us the idea for the newsletter, actually. It's old, but it does a few hundred of 'em if you make the stencil right.'

She touches the handle, imagining Ralph turning it, churning out copies. She could stand here once a week and turn the handle. Every newsletter that spat out might go some small way towards making up for her cowardice.

'I don't suppose you can type?'

'I'm sorry. No.' She's never even touched a typewriter before.

Sam looks baleful. 'Me neither. Ralph makes the stencils – it's his typewriter. He can send articles from inside, but we'll still have to cut the stencils here if we want to print them.'

Maxine's imagination turns now to Ralph sitting at the typewriter, his fingers battering over the keys. She has a wild desire to sit in his seat, to touch the things that he has touched. She wonders, too, if he has ever sat at the desk, typing, and looking up now and then to the stack of drawings, at Sam's latest impression of her. The sketch lingers in the corner of her vision, a third, silent presence in the room. 'Could I learn?'

Sam looks instantly more cheerful, and by way of an answer gives her scalding tea in an enamelled mug, and proffers a dented tin.

*

The sheaf of papers on the desk is Ralph's next batch of articles, Sam tells her, so she might as well start now. First the typewriter ribbon has to come out. Then a sheet of waxed paper, bound at the top to stiff card, goes in. The typewriter keys, when struck, take off the wax in the shape of letters. Sam's already etched the *TOMORROW* masthead and a cartoon into the top half of the waxed paper. Maxine begins the first article underneath.

It's laborious; Sam explains why the keyboard is not arranged in alphabetical order, and Maxine imagines that if she could type quickly she might make a pleasant kind of percussion. But there's no music to her slow, disjointed tapping. When at last the first sheet is full, Sam shows Maxine where to pour the ink into the drum of the mimeograph machine, and how to wrap the stencil around it. He turns the handle and draws a blank sheet between the drum and a roller. The cartoon lines and letter shapes cut out of the wax let the ink through onto the paper.

The newsletter comes out wet and wonky. Sam adjusts the stencil in the roller and lets Maxine turn the handle this time. It's the most thrilling feeling, seeing that printed sheet fly out onto the tray. She can't believe the simplicity, the swiftness, especially after the drudgery of the typewriter. It feels like power. She wants to do it again and again.

She turns the handle until the ink starts to fade and the printed lettering becomes stretched at the corners.

'The stencils don't last,' says Sam, coming over to replenish the ink. 'See how many you can get before it falls to pieces. Then we'll make a stencil for page two and print the other side. Unless you've got somewhere to be.'

The evening is wearing on and Myra doesn't know where she is, but Maxine doesn't want to leave. She wants to see this through, finish making what she's begun. She hasn't felt so purposeful in a long time.

It's after nine when Sam finally sees her out. She follows him back down the hall and the stairs, her belly warm and full with tea and biscuits. This time she notices more of the hostel, peers past gold-lettered office doors ajar to bunks and cots and mattresses on the floor. The place is full of beds, a real boarding house. There are damp socks on the banisters and the hiss of a gas ring from an alcove off the landing. There are men playing cards at a low table improvised from an upturned crate, in a large room on the ground floor with open double doors. It's a common room of sorts; no beds here, just the smell of tobacco smoke, both fresh and stale, the gathered men in rolled-up sleeves, and a few political posters and placards tacked to the walls, their messages becoming familiar to Maxine now. **DOWN WITH CAPITALISM. REVOLUTION MEANS FREEDOM.**

Her thoughts turn back to Ralph, and she wonders where he's being held. Finds it hard to imagine the inside of a prison, though it couldn't be much barer than this place. It's a horrifying thought, Ralph behind bars, and the injustice of it, while these blokes sit here free to play cards, with that agitator Harry among them, makes her see red.

ELEVEN MILLION LIVES LOST 1914-1919, reads a placard nailed to a pole, lying on its side in the corner. **HOW MANY MORE?**

It's not far to walk from the hostel to Barnard Street. An autumn breeze is up, lively, but it can't penetrate the stack of newsletters that Maxine hugs to her chest.

*

Maxine's tired when she gets home, but it's a new sort of tired. The light is on in the basement and she is full of things to tell Myra. About how the two of them should start a vigilance committee in Barnard Street, and how she,

Maxine, is learning to type. She might even tell Myra about Ralph. He might be in gaol, but Myra's not in a position to pass judgement on that.

When she opens the door and looks down the hall to the kitchen, Maxine is dismayed at first to see Jean from next door keeping Myra company at the kitchen table. The two women turn at the sound of the latch, their hands wrapped around mugs, the cracked teapot between them. Myra calls out to her straight away in a soft voice filled with worry, one that won't wake the kids. 'Where you been, Maxie?'

Maxine knows right away that the worry's not just for her, if at all. She moves into the tiny kitchen. Jean stares at the pile of newsletters in her arms, and at once Maxine feels their situation, there in the basement, as a kind of asphyxia. Myra wears the tired wisdom of a mother, and it's no help. Jean, too. Maxine is not a child any more; she knows it suddenly and ruthlessly.

'What's happened?' she asks, dropping the newsletters on the table, with a thud that rattles the lid of the teapot.

Myra, with her eyes on the newsletters, pushes a single slip of paper across to Maxine.

Maxine unfolds it, and reads. Frank and Myra Walsh. Barnard Street premises. Eviction notice. Thirty days.

She folds it back up.

'Sorry, love,' says Myra. She has the nervy, distracted look she gets when she's been making plans, weighing things up. But even Myra can't sort Maxine's problems out forever. Meanwhile, Jean arches her eyebrows as if she thinks Maxine might dispute Myra's right to make plans without her, as if to say she should count herself lucky she's not on the streets already.

The thing is, Maxine tells herself, this isn't going to work, none of it will, if I can't get on with Jean, or others like her.

'Don't pack your bags just yet,' she tells Myra. 'We've got thirty days, haven't we? And I know some people.'

Jean's first response is to laugh, as though Maxine is presenting some precocious yet foolish scheme. As though she requires permission, or approval

from the two older women. She gets it, in any case. Myra pours her a cuppa and asks her all about the AEC, and Jean has to sit there and listen, until she can find a break long enough in Maxine's enthusiastic report to excuse herself on the grounds that she has a great bag of piecework at home that isn't going to sew buttons on itself. She is given a newsletter, although she holds it between two fingers, with some suspicion and distaste.

'Are you one of them Communists?' she asks Maxine, after she's gotten to her feet.

'I don't care what you are, Maxie,' says Myra. 'If you can stop me getting kicked out, it's all the same to me.'

'I just don't want her taking advantage,' Jean says to Myra, although her thin, red lips are set hard at Maxine.

Myra and Maxine make eye contact and both snigger like schoolgirls at the likelihood of anyone taking advantage of Myra, and Jean mutters as she sees herself out.

Maxine has to tell Myra about Ralph, of course, for any of her news to make sense. But still she doesn't mention Maitland; tells Myra she knows Ralph from the eviction protests, which is a partial truth. Myra doesn't examine the details. She's too taken aback by the extent of the secret life Maxine's revealed to her.

'You're made of the dark stuff, aren't you?' she says, with a nod of appreciation, and Maxine fills with the warmth of a smile, from her toes all the way up to her scalp.

'Jean doesn't approve,' she says.

Myra tips her head into an uncomfortable, one-shouldered shrug, as if to say there's more to it than Maxine understands. 'Jean lost her fella in the war, you know.'

'So did a lot of women.' Maxine knows she sounds flippant, but she doesn't see what that's got to do with it. And then the emotion rises in her throat. She's not simply tired; she's exhausted. 'I lost my own mother more recently than that. To the flu, not even for anything with any point to it.'

‘Some people,’ Myra begins. ‘Like you. Like me. We’re adaptable, right? Life brings us what it’s going to bring us, and we work around it, or we try. If one thing doesn’t work we look for another way. But someone like Jean – and there are a lot of people like Jean, not just women whose husbands never came home, but blokes, too, you know—’ here she holds Maxine’s gaze in a way that tells her she counts Jim Fraley among them ‘—they’re better at just hanging on. You can understand it, if you really think about it. What they’ve been through. They don’t want any more change. They just want to wait it out, see if things will go back to the way they were.’

‘They won’t,’ says Maxine, surprised by her own ferocity. ‘They won’t go back. That’s a delusion.’

‘I know it seems awful to you,’ says Myra, and her shrewdness nearly breaks Maxine’s heart. ‘But not everyone’s young, and in love.’

‘I’m not in love!’

Myra is pleased by this outburst. ‘Not yet.’

‘He’s in prison!’ Maxine blurts out. ‘I can’t fall in love with someone if he’s locked away in a cell.’

‘Prison?’ Myra’s mirth vanishes. ‘What’d he do?’

‘Nothing! He was peacefully protesting, that’s all. He shouldn’t be there.’

‘Well. If that’s true he won’t be there for long.’

Both women look at their hands and at the rutted, scarred table top; and Maxine considers how vastly the terrain between them has changed in just a few minutes of conversation. She’s never felt entitled to ask about Frank before, and she wonders if she’s now earned the right. What might she ask, in any case, after what Annie said to her on the step that night? Frank and Ralph have nothing in common. Which means she thinks Myra can’t tell her anything that will lessen the fear for Ralph that’s crackling through her skull, squealing like a wireless tuned between stations.

It’s an unformed fear because she can’t really imagine what it’s like for him, or even what her feelings are. In truth she feels as though, in telling Myra

about him, she's overstepped some mark. As though if she and Ralph had potential, she's destroyed the magic of it by imagining too much. It's a groundless feeling from which she immediately wants to escape, by throwing herself into the work he cannot do while he's incarcerated, by replacing her mistake with a kind of virtue recognisable to him. If there are more of them next time, the police can bring all the guns they like. If every single person gets out on the street, unarmed. The police can't, won't shoot; they'll see it can't be solved that way, not something so big.

The following morning the newsletters sit on the table, where she dropped them, evidence that things in the Barnard Street basement have changed, although otherwise breakfast proceeds as normal. Myra makes toast and chides the children. Maxine doesn't know what she's done with the eviction notice. Folded it up and hidden it out of sight. Annie and Clarabel have rolled two newsletters up into spyglasses; across the table from them, Francis is making a paper glider. Maxine gently takes the paper tubes from the girls and unrolls them, saying to Francis: 'Do you want to fold them all up like that for me? We could stand at the top of the street and fly them to the houses.'

Francis narrows his eyes at her. He wouldn't know, or care, what the papers are.

Myra is watching them both. The bag holding the remaining bottles of polish hangs on a hook on the wall behind her. Maxine gives a placid smile, then picks up the pile of newsletters. Outside the day is a little sharp and bright, a turn towards winter, no time of year to be homeless.

The following Tuesday, when the class finishes at Maitland, Sam approaches Maxine. An amused kind of camaraderie is emerging between them, brought about by the two very different circumstances – one earnest, one scandalous – in which they find themselves meeting. She’s been back to the hostel once since the first visit, for news of Ralph, and to get Sam’s advice about Myra’s eviction; she presumes he’s coming over now to let her know, as they agreed, that Ralph has sent a new lot of articles for printing. The magistrate gave him four weeks. And he has, according to Sam, sent the articles, but there’s something else, too.

An envelope, with her first name written on it. ‘Ralph asked me to give this to you,’ says Sam.

She finds a seat immediately, and tears the flimsy paper open with clumsy, nervous fingers. There’s no letter inside, just a clipped column of newsprint.

HG WELLS PEEPS INTO THE FUTURE **World Economic System Coming**

Mr. H. G. Wells, the English author who has so often peered into the future, gave an interview recently with a representative of "The Sunday Chronicle," London.

World peace and world organisations, Mr. Wells said, are the biggest questions of the day.

“The world has been split up into separate and contending economic units for too long,” he said. “There has been too much disorder and friction. But the conditions that prevailed a century ago are not the conditions of today. Since then we have had a century of science, of invention. Today our food comes from the ends of the earth. The furniture of our homes, the petrol of our cars, the paper on which newspapers are printed, the metals without which daily life would be impossible come from all over the world. Locality has disappeared. Little, narrow systems are out of date. A world economic system,

whether we like it or not, whether we know it or not, is in being.”

Elaborating the idea, Mr. Wells sketched the rough outline of a picture in which no commodity needed by mankind was held up, cornered, or unfairly exploited from nationalistic or financial motives. One part of the world with a surplus of wheat would supply another which lacked wheat; iron in one corner of the globe would not be hoarded if it were needed elsewhere. There would be world-wide interchange between need and supply, and the gulf between Nature's abundance and man's necessity would be bridged.

Mr. Wells made it plain that there would be a kind of central clearing house governed entirely by economic fact and need. What was legitimately wanted would be legitimately supplied. No artificial dams – erected by rivalry, jealousy, and competitive spite – would check this sane and orderly supply and demand.

“We cannot go back to the old system,” he said. “Civilisation is developing along these lines, and upon no other. And this means that our political thinking must change, too. All modern imperialisms are the more or less conscious efforts of what were national States to become world wide in scope and significance.”

Asked whether he thought that the future would automatically adjust itself on these new lines, he replied:—

“There are two alternatives. There will either be a big fight among the independent sovereign States until a victor emerges, or mankind as a whole will realise the need for a new world-wide organisation to supersede them all. There will have to be a complete change of values: The idea of a succession of destructive wars will have to be abandoned, at whatever cost to those of aggressive and militaristic intention. A tremendous and courageous break with tradition will have to be made.”ⁱⁱ

Maxine holds the clipping in her lap. Tries to fathom the thinking of Ralph, who she knows so little, really.

At the sound of Sam's voice, she looks up and sees him eyeing the envelope and its contents, and the bewilderment, perhaps disappointment, that must be written on her face. ‘That'd be Ralph's version of a love letter, I expect,’ he says. ‘It would be like him to mix up his passions. You'll have to make allowances.’

Maxine's face relaxes then – in gratitude to Sam and his level-headed fondness for Ralph, as much as anything. She tucks the clipping back into the

envelope. Holds it in two hands and looks again at her name on it. Her own name in his hand. That will have to do for romance, for now.

She handed out the newsletters, bold as brass, first thing in the morning, up and down Barnard Street and in the neighbouring streets and lanes, too, until they ran out. Did her best to bail people up on their doorsteps and tell them about Myra's eviction. Ralph's articles are formal-sounding, unlike Ralph himself, and infused with politics and theories, but Maxine hasn't read Sam's books and assumes her neighbours haven't either, so she kept the discussions personal. But some met her with cold looks; they thought that an appeal for sympathy for Myra's plight inferred that they themselves might be struggling to meet the rent. And that even if it were true – and Maxine imagined it must be, for a great number of the households she visited that morning – it was none of her business.

Still, she garnered some interest. The trick, Sam advised her later, was to keep the interest up. She needed to gain some momentum, he said, so that on eviction day everyone in the area not only knew about it, but was riled up and ready to lend a hand.

Maxine has calculated that the date of the eviction falls three days after Ralph is due to be released from gaol. She decides against writing back to him; simply sends him a copy of the latest newsletter, all his hand-written articles transformed into print, in the same envelope with her own name crossed out and his underneath it. She doesn't have another.

Imagining that day, three weeks away now, is how she passes two hours posing in the conservatory at Maitland; now standing, now sitting, now lying on a green chaise longue under dying chlorophyll light. It's how she comes to pass all her hours. That fixed point in the future exerts a kind of druggish pull on her. Waiting is better than drifting, and striving more preferable still. She is intoxicated by the possibility of the eviction protest's success, and not just for its own sake. This she knows subcutaneously; no art student's eye would draw it out of her. She hopes to effect a kind of transformation, not in the lines of a sketch but through Ralph's eyes. These two things combine into a powerful

motivation: her very real enthusiasm for the protest and what it stands for; and her desire to erase her act of cowardice at Carnation Street from Ralph's mind, by presenting him, when they next meet, with a more heroic version of herself. She lies under glass and imagines herself, and the world, remade.

*

When Maxine opens the second envelope from Ralph, she finds another newspaper clipping folded inside it.

H. G. WELLS PEEPS INTO FUTURE

Thinks Towns Will Rebuild Themselves

NO HOUSES 100 YEARS OLD

Mr. H. G. Wells, the English author who has moulded so much of our modern thinking, in a recent speech in England visualised the time when every city in the world would be rebuilt.

'We must,' he declared, 'accept the possibilities of rehousing all mankind, rebuilding every city in the world, and reclaiming the roads and countryside.'

'It is not a Utopian idea,' he continued. 'If we do not engage upon such an enormous collective enterprise I can see nothing but social disaster ahead.'

Mr Wells said he was enormously impressed by the fact that what we used to consider the necessities of mankind were being produced by a smaller and smaller proportion of active workers.

'We have a growing mass of unemployed people for whom work must be found. I do not believe that private buying is going to employ the masses of the people again.'

IMMENSE POSSIBILITIES

'New forms of employment must be found. The obvious thing is to consider the immense architectural possibilities.'

'I think we can well look forward to the time when towns will rebuild themselves as now we go to a tailor for a new suit of clothes.'

'We can look forward to the time when people will no longer think of living in houses 100 to 150 years old, haunted by the ghosts of men and women who lived and died in them.'ⁱⁱⁱ

She leaves it on the desk next to her as she types. Sam comes past and glances at the headline, shakes his head.

This time the sketches have been stacked discreetly where they can't cause any trouble, in the narrow space between the end of the single bed and the wall, and facing in.

Later, after the stencils have disintegrated and the drum has stopped rolling, Sam watches her fold a fresh copy of the latest newsletter into the old envelope, cross out her own name where Ralph wrote it a second time, and re-address it to him.

She hands it to Sam on her way out, wordlessly.

'Young love,' he sighs.

*

'Maxine, this is Frank,' says Myra. She is standing by the stove, barely recognisable. Inches shorter, perhaps. Nervy. There is a quaint posy of flowers in an old jam jar on the table, purple and crimson dimmed in the cast-off light. They're fragile and already dying; one or two bright and tender petals lie on the table top.

Frank himself is too large for the kitchen. *Built* is the word to describe him. He exudes a masculine roughness that Maxine has never seen in the little basement before; there is no way this man will squeeze into their careful domestic routine. She can't imagine him moving around without tipping up furniture.

'Pleased to meet you,' says Maxine, then doesn't know what to do with herself. She can't walk out of the room, but she feels like she needs permission from Frank to sit at the table as she might normally do.

He doesn't invite her to sit, or express any pleasure at meeting her. His fingers are busy with papers and a twist of pungent tobacco. 'Myra says she's had you staying here.' He examines her with pale eyes as he speaks, his practiced fingers working up a neat cigarette without the help of sight.

Maxine nods, wishing he'd spoken about it as something that was still happening.

'We're not after giving out charity,' says Frank, and when Myra moves to speak he lifts a warning finger. 'Paying lodgers is something we can consider.'

'But I told you, Frank. She helps me out with all sorts.'

'Yeah, but I'm home now, aren't I? So you won't be needing to do someone else's washing any more. I'm the breadwinner in this house.'

'But we don't have a room for her, Frank. You can't charge someone rent to sleep in with your kids.'

'Maxine – is that yer name? She knows what choices she's got, I'm sure. You let us know, love.' And he grins, and leans across to light his cigarette on the stove, and doesn't stop staring at her until she has backed away out of the kitchen and taken herself into the front room, the only place in the house she now feels entitled to be.

She sits on the bed. There ought to have been some sign of it. Some miasma, or vibration, emanating from the basement door and up the steps and warning her of what she would find. God knows the air inside the place is palpable.

She has earnings, of course, and no one could charge her six shillings a week for what Frank's proposing. But will he want extra for food? She's subsisted on the Benevolent Society rations before, but that's all it is. And, more to the point, will she be able to stand it? Frank's appeared like a cuckoo in the nest, frightening off the Myra she knows.

He makes Myra laugh in the kitchen, and it sounds like a betrayal.

Maxine can hear Annie's voice and Clarabel's float down from the street. They're going to need their tea soon. Yesterday she would have rounded

them up without a second thought, called back to Myra to put the kettle on. In this house there's always bread and dripping at the least. Apart from the rent, they do all right together, her and Myra and the kids.

Maxine tries not to admit to herself that she feels sad. An eye-stinging, lumpy-throated sort of sad. She's felt so many other things in recent months – fear and desperation, and small moments of elation, because living on the edge can do that to you, make excitement out of so many minor things – that she's had no time for sadness. No room for it. Sadness is undulating and deep, it needs the space of an ocean. Let it go here and they'll all drown.

As she rubs her eyes dry the front door clanks open and shut and boots scuff on the steps. Frank's gone out. Maxine's relieved that she pushed the front room door to, that he didn't see her. It's clear that she needs to stop existing, as far as he's concerned.

In the kitchen Myra's still standing at the stove, smoking the end of Frank's cigarette. Her eyes meet Maxine's but her face is unreadable.

'He's gone out to get a drink. Hasn't had one for months.'

'I didn't know he was coming back. Today, I mean.' Maxine wants to know if Myra knew, but doesn't know how to ask her without sounding accusatory.

'Sorry about all that, Maxie. What can I do, though?' She shrugs and looks abashed, but only a bit. There's hardness there, too. Myra's one for getting on with things, not one for questioning. And for all her generosity to Maxine, of course Myra's going to put her kids before Maxine, and her own self before her too. Everyone has a bottom line, thinks Maxine, and this, right here, is Myra's.

'Does he know about the eviction notice?' she asks Myra.

Myra's eyes glimmer in the dim light as she shakes her head. 'He'll get the rent money, though, Maxie. I just want to give him a day or two, to get back to normal. Before I trouble him, you know.'

So you won't need my help any more, thinks Maxine, but bites her lip. It was the last card she had to play.

‘Sit tight,’ advises Myra, with a last, nervous drag on the cigarette. She stubs it out on the range. ‘Give it a couple of days. You never know, once he sees you in action he might change his mind. You know *I’d love you to stay.*’

Maxine can’t tell if there’s anything hopeful in Myra’s face, or in her tone; whether her hope for Frank’s change of heart is genuine, or even whether Myra’s own desire for her to stay is. She can see how, with a man like Frank around, her own presence might complicate things for Myra.

In other circumstances, she’d accept that what she needs to do is start looking for another bed, even though the reality – that wherever she finds it, she’ll start racking up her own rent arrears, right away – is a heavy one. Every move leads to another potential eviction, another battle. They might peep into the future, but it’s still a long way away.

Anyway, the Barnard Street protest in two weeks is what she’s put her heart into, and she’s more dismayed at the idea of Frank taking that away from her than she is about the prospect of having nowhere to live.

It’s the reason she considers taking Myra’s advice. Not because she thinks Frank will change his mind – he doesn’t strike her as the type – but because she thinks Myra might be wrong about him bringing home the rent. It’s not hard to guess that Frank has ways and means, ones that might land him back in gaol and are all the more lucrative for it. But times have grown harder in the months he’s been away. It’s hard to imagine them getting any worse. As she’s done the rounds with her newsletter, Maxine’s seen her own family’s misery replicated over and over, in one way or another, and she remembers what Harry said that night at Carnation Street, that it’s proof the system is broken, obsolete. And she has to think he’s right, even if the way he wants to fix it isn’t. And her heart twists for Ralph serving time over it all, and with shame, too, because part of her that hopes that Frank won’t find that rent money. It wouldn’t be the right way to fix this, either, wouldn’t solve a thing.

*

Myra doesn't get a chance to tell Frank about the eviction notice, or to let him settle before she breaks the news. He storms back in at eight o'clock that night, buffeting the front door, wind sticking to his boots. Fills the kitchen doorway so that Maxine and Myra, sitting at the table, feel at once like tiny, tender creatures trapped in a hole.

He turns the full force of his gaze on Maxine. 'You,' he says. It's an accusation. 'Been around the neighbours, have you, telling everyone my business?'

Maxine wants to say: it wasn't your business when I told everyone. Myra tries to speak, but Frank silences her with a vicious pointed finger, without releasing Maxine from his stare, even for a second. 'As for you.' He takes a slow breath in through his nostrils, as though to cool his anger before it boils over. 'I had to hear about it from that bastard Munster. Everyone in the hotel knew I was marked for eviction. Except yours truly.'

'I had a scheme, that's all,' says Maxine, trying to describe it in terms that might appeal to him. 'A way to beat the landlord. It's been done before.'

'You had a scheme, did ya?' It's clear he thinks this is preposterous, that in his eyes she's just a little girl with delusions beyond her years, and her sex. So preposterous, in fact, that he affects a kind of patience with her, as though she might be simple minded. It calms him down a bit, at least. 'Well, hear this. *You* don't make schemes in my house. You don't do anything in my house without my say-so.'

Maxine thinks of the guns, then, in the policemen's hands at Carnation Street. It feels like that now, like Frank's intention is the same: to concentrate all his power into one little bolt of fear that he can point anywhere and get what he wants.

She can't back down again. And in knowing that she sees it, for a long enough moment, through Ralph's eyes. How if she gives in to the gun then whoever's holding it has hurt or killed her anyway, by making her live in fear, making her live their way, not her own. And what kind of life is that? She

knows where Ralph finds his courage. The point is no gun, nor Frank and his trembling, angry fists, can take away the part of her that's worth anything.

She squares her gaze with Frank's. 'Or what?' she says, and his whole body tenses at the provocation. 'Go on, loosen a few teeth for me. Save me the dentist's bill.'

Out of the corner of her eye she sees Myra grip the table beside her, ready to spring between them. But Frank lets his jaw drop open, then closes it and sucks the inside of his cheek, considering Maxine all the while. Then he nods. 'Where'd you find this one, Myra?'

Myra's fingers are still white against the table top, but breath is relaxing back into her body, slowly. 'On the street, Frank.' She tells it like an old story they've both heard before, so many times it's comforting.

Frank grunts and pushes through the kitchen to the back door. There's the sound of a stream of urine splashing onto the broken cobbles of the yard. Maxine's and Myra's eyes meet.

'You shouldn't push him like that,' Myra whispers.

Maxine makes a face that demands to know what the harm in it was. She's headily pleased with herself.

Frank comes back in and Myra's lips clamp shut. He doesn't say anything more, just swings past them towards the bedroom. They hear the creak of springs, the thud of boots dropping to the floor. The door's ajar.

When all they can hear is silence, Myra whispers: 'I told you he might change his mind.'

Maxine frowns. Has he? Frank seems to her too volatile, too uncommunicative to know. But fronting up to him seems to have paid off, at least in the immediate. It's not that the idea of him as an ally is a comfortable one. But she wonders if he will let her tell him about her plans for the eviction protest, and what he will make of them if she does.

HG WELLS PEEPS INTO THE FUTURE

Love Will Have New Dignity

...Mr. Wells was asked whether he thought we had made any advance as individuals: whether men and women were more, or less, intelligent and kindly.

“Undoubtedly.” he responded. “We are more tolerant. Our horizons are wider, and there is more understanding. There is more tolerance in religious matters. Truth is more important to us than a particular set of beliefs.

“Life today is so largely an impersonal thing. We are interested in and busy about affairs that belong to the race and the future of the race, not to the individual. The species to which we belong, to which we contribute according to our lights (and our weaknesses), existed before us; it will continue after us; it is a greater thing than we are.

“That is why I believe that man is immortal, but not men, not individuals, not you and I ... Moral standards are changing, and changing for the better. The loss of faith is followed by a deeper virtue – the urge to seek the truth, and to abide by it.

“We are much more courageous in our thinking than our grandparents. There is more sincerity, more frankness, and infinitely less fear. Fear was the dominating power before this emancipation of the mind . . . fear of consequences, fear of social ostracism, fear of the revenges of convention and the bitter malice of conventional people.”

“Do you think this has an effect on sexual morality?” he was asked.

“Undoubtedly. We are much less sexually preoccupied today than when morality was concentrated on sex with a morbid and often disgusting intensity. We are not so ready to rush to mental drugs, and mental drugs are worse than physical.

“The older morality ignored all the dirty, mean, shifty, and vulgar sins against intelligence, self respect, and human values for the sake of a furtive fretfulness about sexual continence – a continence which involved silences and secrecies of a degrading character. It was a kind of dirty purity – a chastity fundamentally unchaste ...”

He was asked what he thought about the admittedly sexual note in modern life – in fiction, films, in drama, and in current talk.

“It is a phase that will pass. I believe it has reached its peak. When people realise how little of life really depends on sex and how much else there is to do and to think about there will be a release from this petty preoccupation.

“Women will grow out of a childish code and outlook. They will become sexually as well as politically emancipated. They will find so much that is big and transcendent to do in co-operation, as equals with men, that the eruptive littleness of sexual competition, and the erotic display of vanity that arises from it will disappear as the unadult silliness of a stage of growth doomed to dwindle away.

“Love will take on a new dignity— the dignity of a partnership, of a human co-operation.

“There will, of course, be sex. It is essential that there should be. It is, in its place, a fructifying, beautiful thing. It will be robbed of furtive, exploited glamor; it will be equally freed from ascetic morbid persecution. It will become what it was meant to be — the fulfilment of the expression of the fine innate gravity of love.”^{iv}

*

It is a simple dress, sprigged with creamy flowers, and was fine once, for whoever wore it first. A girl younger than herself, Maxine thinks, noticing the simple lace on the cuffs. It is demure, but in a childish way, and old-fashioned. There might have been a time when Maxine fancied herself in a dress like that. There might not.

‘It *is* charming,’ concedes the woman helping her, pinning it to Maxine’s shoulders with her hands and letting her eyes travel down the length of her. When they travel back up again, they stop short of her face.

The woman’s name is Mrs Darby, Maxine has discovered today, after so many Fridays meeting her across the desk at the Benevolent Society. Today is not Friday and Maxine does not come bearing coupons or a sugar bag. Today Maxine has come to ask for new clothes.

She is taken by another of the volunteers to join a queue to ‘see Mrs Darby,’ who is at large in the room, rifling through clothes for the first of the three women ahead of her. The desk is unmanned; it’s not dole coupon day. Mrs Darby is very tall, Maxine sees for the first time, looming over her supplicants like a flightless bird.

‘Ah,’ is all she says when Maxine shuffles to the front of the line. Mrs Darby nods once and lifts an index finger. She turns and takes the lid off a flat white box on the shelf behind her. The rooms where the Benevolent Society conduct their charitable operation are heaped with boxes of food and every suitable surface – the backs of chairs, old hatstands, ledges, shelves and the tops of upturned empty boxes – are draped with hand-me-downs. Hats, coats, dresses, pyjamas, underclothes, things for babies and children. None of it matches and the fittings Maxine has witnessed so far are rudimentary. But the white box appears to be separate from the chaos. In Mrs Darby’s hands, the pale blue dress rises up out of it, shoulders first, like an apparition.

‘This will fit you,’ Mrs Darby says, turning back towards Maxine. A polite smile finds its way briefly onto her face, as her eyes flicker to Maxine’s and away again. ‘It’s barely been worn.’

Maxine supposes Mrs Darby intends her to wear it now, even if she’s not sure why she’s been selected for the honour. She wonders whether Mrs Darby remembers her, or whether she treats any young woman of a certain age who comes here to the same maternal wistfulness, as though together they make a substitute for someone who has or had a name of her own, who Mrs Darby loved.

‘Thank you,’ says Maxine, picking up the box and straightening her back. There are hundreds of other garments here, and Maxine came hoping for something more suitable, for a choice. But now she has the urge to hurry away, and the sense that a price has been exacted from her – that the dress is not a gift, but a claim. Or, at least, that the giving of the dress is for Mrs Darby’s benefit, not her own.

The dress might be serviceable if it were shorter, if the lace cuffs were removed. She walks back to Barnard Street with the clean, white box under her arm, feeling conspicuous, fretting over whether she will have a chance to alter it before tomorrow, regretting her hasty exit without being able to see how she might have argued for a different outcome. It is one thing to fight for the roof over your head; charity is something else. It doesn’t invite negotiation. Or so

she tells herself; it's a safe place to hide from the truth. But now she has Frank to contend with. Myra has sewing things, but Frank won't appreciate the urgency, why Maxine needs to sit up in the quiet of the bedroom half the night burning electricity over it. She's not going to tell Frank why she's desperate for a new dress, either.

When she thinks of it, she blushes. Neither Frank nor Mrs Darby has the right to tell her she shouldn't walk out with Ralph. But the point is her intention is not to walk out with him. She has other intentions that, right now, are written all over her face, and she fears she won't hide that from the genteel ladies at the Benevolent Society or from Frank's penetrating, salacious gaze. It's the sort of thing he'd think up, even if it weren't true.

Ralph is to be released from gaol today; he might even, she imagines, be walking now through the gates, making his way back towards Paddington. The idea of his proximity sets her heart beating. She wonders if he is on foot, or riding the bus or the tram; wishes she could know how near he is. Either way, he is journeying out of her imagination and back into her everyday reality.

There is of course the urge to race through the streets, to wait outside the hostel for him to arrive, hopping on the pavement as though it were hot. But somehow, via Sam, Ralph has arranged for them to meet at Maitland first thing tomorrow morning. Amelia, Daisy and Laszlo are away at a friend's house on the coast for a few days; Sam has the key so that he may use the studio. There is no guarantee of privacy at the hostel, Ralph says, no keys for the old interior locks. At Maitland, it will be as though they have their own house.

Except that all she has to wear for the occasion is a faded rag or a child's dress. On the walk back to Barnard Street she avoids the main thoroughfares, scurries like a rat through worn and furtive alleyways where there are no shop fronts to remind her of what she is not.

*

It doesn't take much to barricade a basement, front and back. The Walshes don't share an entrance with their upstairs neighbours, although the sandbags on the street are an imposition, as is the barbed wire. Fortunately, Frank has talked the two families who live above them – the Prestons and the Cassidys – into supporting the cause, on the day at least. The embattled look on Mrs Preston's face each time she waits, shopping bag in hand, for one of Frank's men to open the fortifications for her, suggests that her support may not have come freely. Frank likes to describe himself as persuasive, a term Maxine guesses is euphemistic at best.

The faces at the barricades change daily, and while most of the pickets involved are AEC members, Maxine thinks of them all as Frank's men now. What she doesn't understand is how Ralph held onto his authority for so long, how he kept the violence at bay. They are all of them preparing, not for a struggle, but for combat. Apart from the bag-and-wire barricade that runs the small width of their section of terrace, there are stockpiles of weapons inside, and men stationed permanently at the house. The weapons are knives and bludgeons of various kinds, fashioned out of garden implements. There are missiles, too, piles of broken bricks collected by the children in exchange for a boiled sweet or a glimpse of the excitement.

When Maxine approaches the barricade today, it's Harry from the AEC who gives her the once over. Maxine isn't sure if he's taken up residence; he's often around, and since she's taken to going to bed when the girls go up to Jean's for the night, she never knows who it is that sleeps on the two mattresses in the hallway. By the time she rises, the mattresses are stacked against the wall again, the men out in the street beyond the barricade, their cigarette smoke curling above it. A dawn raid is the expected tactic. Myra knows she won't take up the tea, lets Maxine get on with the kitchen chores while she takes it up herself on her way to collect the kids. The dissatisfaction of compromise has reduced their friendship to a silent, tense routine.

'What's in the box?' says Harry, making no move aside.

Maxine scowls. 'None of your business.'

‘If it’s coming in here, it is my business.’

‘Oh come on, Harry.’ She gives him a searching look, one she hopes will remind him that he’s capable of being rational. Already she’s lost her footing; doesn’t know whether she’s refusing the search on principle, or because of what’s in the box. Either way, if she backs down now, he wins. ‘What could it possibly be?’

‘You tell me.’

‘You’re on the wrong side, you know that?’ she says, grabbing the lid off the box and shoving it right up into his face, so that he has to take a step back. ‘The New Guard would give you a uniform so you can strut about properly telling people what to do. It’s a dress, all right?’ She slams the lid back on.

From the way Harry glares at her, she can tell the insult found its mark. It’s a sour victory. How they’re supposed to achieve anything with bad feeling in the ranks is beyond her. But, she reminds herself, helping Harry to haul two bags aside to make a gap just big enough for her to hoist her skirt and climb through, to insist there’s division in the ranks is an overstatement. Beyond her own censure of these new military tactics, she has Sam’s support, and that’s all. Sam holds little influence, and Harry’s as interested in the dress as he is in what she has to say. They’re all of them, Harry and his cronies, drunk on news of European bloodshed and spoiling for something to happen, something sudden.

It’s hard to blame them. Life in Paddington grinds along; for anyone determined to endure, things are getting worse, not better. Harry was in the war; the way he sees it, if this is what men fought and died for, there’s fighting still to be done. He can’t add it up any other way.

‘Sorry, Harry,’ she calls from the basement stairs, after they’ve fixed up the barricade between them. ‘We’re on the same side, you and me.’

Harry grunts, a response which, since she can’t see his face, she decides to take as her apology returned. None of them know what to do with her – the AEC blokes, Frank and his dodgy mates, even the UWM’s Women’s Committee, who swooped in with home-cooked meals and advice for Myra as

soon as they got wind of the eviction rally, and who now, unexpectedly, count Jean among their most zealous members. Among all of these, Maxine is an anomaly. The committee women are formidable, organised. Most importantly, they stand firm somewhere, cook up billies of soup for the pickets on a family stove, take in children marked for eviction. Community pillars. Maxine has no firm ground under her.

On the other hand, Frank's associates, as he likes to call them, are loose to a fault. They slink one or two at a time into the kitchen and fug up the air with tobacco and sly-grog and something else you can't buy at Farrell's, something that shines up their tarnished hearts for a day like mercury polish. They all seem to have known Frank for a long time, and Myra too, some of them. To them, Maxine is a non-entity; the only evidence she has that she is even visible to them is the code in which they feel compelled to talk. She leaves them to their sinister poetry, the meaning of which she cannot divine, except that it seems to have nothing and everything to do with the eviction protest now being staged at the Walshes'.

The hardest defeat is Harry and the rest of the AEC, because here is where she feels she has failed Ralph. She feels a fraud, printing off his articles and sending them back to him, as though his words are continuing his work for him, as though she has been able to uphold them. The scene that has come to pass at Barnard Street is so different to the one she intended – so different to her romance of the thing – that she has been forced to separate, in her own mind, two imagined triumphs that were previously inextricable. If there is something real between her and Ralph, the eviction protest was to be her statement of it. Now that she's abandoned that ideal, her once-earnest fantasies seem lopsided and unwholesome, for all she can't abandon *them*.

She's still at Barnard Street only by some perverted grace. 'It's not a question of whether I can get the money,' Frank growled at Myra, the day after he found out about the eviction notice. 'If what *she* says is true – we don't have to pay, so why would we? I can think of plenty of things to do with twenty quid.'

Myra spoke carefully. 'The police have been turning up at these things. You only just got out.'

'Let 'em come. They could use a reminder: Frank Walsh doesn't take their orders.'

'It's not a game, Frank.' Myra winced as soon as the words were out of her mouth, before Frank even had a chance to respond.

'That's right,' roared Frank, rising out of his chair. 'Keep your mouth shut. That way you won't put your foot in it.'

Later, huddled over a mug of tea, Myra told Maxine: 'He'll never have things calm or quiet. Frank likes trouble. It's how he's made.'

She was whispering, even though Frank was over at Farrell's. Maxine eyed the new, soft bruises on her neck. There was a shot of whiskey in the tea, from a bottle Frank had procured. A vapour of earth and fire lingered between them. In her mind's eye, Maxine took ten years off the Myra she knew, and saw how she might have been drawn to it once, all that recklessness.

And so Maxine has been allowed to stay, and carry on with her plan for the protest. Nor has Frank suggested again that Maxine pay extra for her lodgings beyond what she already gives Myra, and she finds it easier not to think beyond eviction day, when the rules might change again. In any case, Ralph will be back then. On the other side of that event is possibility, although she doesn't dare give shape to it.

She doesn't pay board to the Walshes, but Frank exacts his price from her all the same, by making her the object of his lascivious attention. He never lays a hand on her; he's capable of economy, and only needs to seem like he might. It is discomfiting for its own sake, but it's meant to rile Myra, too, and foul the air between the two women, and most of all, make Myra regret she ever pleaded for Maxine to stay. It is resounding punishment, more brutal in that cramped space than any fists.

She wakes at dawn when the men stir in the hall, so much earlier than she'd hoped, and the first thing she does is count the hours to fill until nine o'clock, when he will be waiting for her at the house. There are four. She can hear Frank snoring in the next room. What she is unable to calculate exactly is for how long her life has been nothing more than a reverie about Ralph. When did the last tile slip? She has been going through the daily motions of her life in Barnard Street, but her mind is at every moment elsewhere. She has hardly been sparing a thought for her father or the twins. She spares a thought for them now, and it is to feel relieved that they aren't here, so that she is free to go to Maitland today. Free to be gone all day if she pleases. Is it too much to hope that he's set aside the day for her? She is tight-chested and dizzy, she can feel her unsteadiness before she even gets out of bed.

Today she will see Ralph. Talk to him, touch him. She cannot decide which idea excites her more. It's a blissful and nervous feeling, above misery, beyond hunger. This morning bare cupboards cannot disappoint her, for she has no appetite. The thought that, after all this waiting, something might yet happen to prevent them from meeting, has her wanting to claw at her own skin. She has even put aside coins for the tram fare because she wants to reach him as quickly as possible.

She shares the front room with Francis, who won't go to Jean's with his sisters. The big bed the three children once shared has gone with them; Francis still sleeps on her father's old mattress on the floor, and Maxine has the bedstead she brought with her. Since Frank came home and took him out of school to run penny bets for an SP bookie he knows, any sway Myra had over her son has gone; Francis stays up every night until the men take to their beds in the hallway, refuses to miss a minute of the action. Yesterday evening, when the daylight ran out in the front room, she sat on the bed and knew it was too

late to do anything about the dress from Mrs Darby. She considered her lilac rag through Ralph's eyes and it seemed so wretched that she took the blue dress out of its box. And somehow in the darkness, she weighed her two garments against each other and the blue dress came out on top. She would wear it. Above all, it seemed imperative that she wear something new, or new enough. She tried it on, and – to Mrs Darby's credit – it fitted her well, and that seemed to be a sign.

Now it's morning and after carefully washing with a sliver of soap and a basin of icy water on the back step, she climbs into the dress. It surprises her skin with its supple freshness, the trueness of its colours. But as soon as she has it on and buttoned up the side, standing there in the daylight she feels ridiculous. The daylight sees her for what she is. Trussed up in the wrong dress for a day of wrongdoing. It seems like a declaration of intention, cacophonous despite the pale floral pattern, the decorous, childish cut. She cannot possibly wear it. By the time she is out of it she is breathing heavily, as though she has escaped the clutches of something, or a near miss. The familiarity of her old dress comforts her for a moment once she puts it on. She can't fold the blue dress away back into its box fast enough.

Only then does she get back to the business of anticipation. She and Ralph both know what's going to happen, but they don't. Could she persuade him to kiss her? She has a kind of tunnel vision, is only able to see the way straight to him, even though she can't even remember the colour of his eyes.

Three hours to go. Maxine sits at the kitchen table, gripping a cup of scalding black tea. For once she can see how her dad lived on the stuff in their room next door; fleetingly she pictures him as he might be now, under a tree in a paddock somewhere, the new day sparkling on the grass, the brisk air hale in his lungs, drinking hot, black tea from a tin cup, next to a fire. She is so preoccupied that it hardly registers as a fantasy. In her current state of mind, she finds the tea is everything she needs. More would be extravagance, sickening. The hotter the sips, the more they seem to nourish her. A feeling of transcendence comes over her, sitting there. She knows her father is not well in

his head, but she is the sanest woman alive, and Ralph has made her that way. Ralph is like a burning star, a pure source of energy, flowing towards her, and she towards him.

This is the sort of idea at which she would normally laugh. Perhaps the life-drawing class conversation at Maitland has influenced her. There is certainly language knocking around in her head that wasn't there before, and with new words at her disposal she finds she is able to formulate new thoughts. Amelia and Laszlo's cryptic banter has been emerging, week by week, into a pattern of sense, as though she has been spending time in a room full of French speakers and deducing, from the context of their statements, a little of the meaning of their foreign speech. It has accumulated in her head without her noticing, and now it mingles with the content of Ralph's articles and newspaper clippings, read over and over by her until the unfamiliar ideas they hold have, too, accumulated into meaning. This is transformation. An internal process, not visible until it's done.

Will *he* notice, she wonders? She cringes a little at the naivety she has so far presented to him, experiences a miniature storm of panic about it that only enhances her eagerness to get to him. When she sees him, she can explain what she was, what she is. It's not too late. Is it? Or has the penny dropped for him since they last met in person? Her heart founders as she imagines him thinking back over the evening they spent together, a hundred years ago now, an image which heretofore has only given her a frisson of pleasure. She has wished him obsessed with her as she is with him, but obsession is forensic, and might lead to the discovery of her shortcomings. Why must she always be so frank? Mystery, mystery, isn't that supposed to be the greatest of feminine wiles? She has never been mysterious.

When she hears the big bed creak, she knows two hours with the family are upon her, but does not know how she will bear it. It will mark her in some way, taint the purity of her assignation. Two hours is long enough for the relentless heel of their situation, of Frank's aggression, to grind all her heart's flutterings into pulp.

She starts in on the barricade before the men in the street even realise she's there. When they do, they hurry over with looks of disapprobation on their faces. All she's managed to do is tug one sandbag a few inches to one side. The two men don't want her help; they work together, one with a roll-up dangling from his lip, squinting against the smoke, against the reality of Maxine standing there ready to burst out of her own skin if they don't make an opening in the bloody thing open before Myra sticks her head out of the door.

She hops over before they've even done, forces herself through a narrow crack. One of them swears and stands back. Not until she reaches Oxford Street does she slow to walking pace. She's free; she has started her adventure early. But now she is a little at a loss to know whether to kill the intervening hours here, close to home, or nearer to Maitland. She knows the streets here, knows where she might loiter. The streets around Maitland are the kind of suburban nothingness where people don't appreciate loitering one bit. They are well-trafficked by hawkers, of course, men for the most part who keep their hat brims low and hurry between houses. At the doors, they lift their chins, force a smile, a jaunty tone. After each one the brims go down again, perhaps a little lower. They're not selling anything that anyone needs or wants, even when they undercut the grocer or the hardware store. If they make a sale at Maitland, it's to Laszlo. There are mothers with young children, too, wheeling those rickety prams full of homemade preserves, and older children on their own, pulling billy-carts of kindling and skinned rabbits. No shoes.

She doesn't see it much around Paddington – people who live there haven't a penny between them, and are more likely to be the ones selling, radiating in an ever-widening sweep around the city as they search for the things they need. There are stories of the city as a place of bounty, a place paved with fortune, and Maxine supposes that could be true when opportunity is plentiful. But right now it's scarce, almost absent, and only the most tenacious scavengers win the fight for basic necessities.

It feels like a kind of frontier, Maitland's bit of suburbia. A dry wind blows through the streets, the pinched breath of endurance. The people living

there have been forced to give up certain things – many things – but not the life they have. Not the bricks and mortar of it, or the way it all fits together. It frays and fades and the holes are hard to cover up. But if those people can make it out the other side of this – whenever that will be – they will simply patch the holes and darn and mend, and everything will be restored. Not so for Maxine, or her father and brothers. They don't have anything left to patch. Take away our house, thinks Maxine, our belongings and our livelihood, and see what's left. Their life here was never anything more than an idea, and without all that scaffolding it has slipped into the dust.

With Ralph it's been different from the start. Before him, she was following a dot-to-dot. Join up all the lines and see what you are supposed to have, supposed to want, all you deserve. Ralph feels like some separate piece of herself she's been drifting along without, even though she needs it to make her whole. Ralph makes sense. Ralph makes sense of *her*. But does that make *him* anything more than an idea? She loses herself in the thought and it's a thought that makes her happy; the more she thinks about it, the less she cares what he is. Maybe some ideas are good and some bad, and it's that simple. Some right, some wrong. Perhaps the difference is she *knows* that Ralph is an idea, and there's a freedom in that knowing. It ties her to nothing. Her father and his expectations, or the responsibility she has towards him, are weighted and real, four lead balloons, one on each foot and hand. That's what happens when you believe your own stories, any stories.

She has been walking at the pace of her thoughts, and it has taken her along Oxford Street, past cafés and milliners and pharmacies whose windows are stacked with remedies for everything but that plague upon everyone, poverty; past all of them she goes, to where the number sixteen tram branches away towards the suburbs. It's still early and carts pull up and down the street, loaded up heavy with crates and sacks, their pace and trajectory at odds with the early motor traffic. Later in the morning the cars will take over, but for now there's a freshness to the day that for once makes her feel alive, instead of penetrating her to the bone. All of it – hunger, cold, fatigue – seems like

nothing more than a state of mind. In the back of her mind she knows this is not true – that there are limits to the endurance of even a body in love – but it astounds her that something unrelated to her body’s requirements should imbue it with so much energy, should have the power to override those more basic needs. If it could be bottled, at a time like this, it would rise like mercury in a market flooded with patent medicines.

The tram comes into view and Maxine knows she will be the next person on it.

*

He is watching for her from the front window, twisting the drapes in his hand. At the top of the porch steps she is out of breath, even though there are only three.

And then he lets her in. She comes inside, fumbles with the latch. It seems vital that she secure the door. The hallway with its high ceilings, the strong wood door, the leadlight panels either side. All familiar but never hers before this moment. She has never felt so grown up, or so new.

She leans against the wall in the burnished daylight and puts her hands behind her, an involuntary, girlish gesture. Feels the cool plaster at the small of her back.

His eyes are green.

‘Hello,’ she remembers to say.

‘Hello,’ he smiles.

He bends his head and finds her mouth with his. A seeking, delectable, tender kiss. Holds the back of her neck, his fingertips tangled in the fine, warm hair at her nape. She puts her arms around his neck and after a moment or two he pulls away and takes her face in his hands. Looks her in the eyes, really stares at her.

She stares back.

He seems no better or worse for his spell in prison. She takes him in with a new, cautious sense of entitlement, allows her eyes to explore the details of his face, crosses the threshold where its oddities become his beauty.

He brings his arms right round her then, buries his face in her shoulder. His cheek is cool and smooth from being recently washed and shaved. She inhales the bright smell of soap, and the warmer scent of his hair. It's softer than it looks. Her body is right up against his, she can't get near enough, keeps finding another way to press a fraction of an inch closer.

They kiss again. They kiss, and he walks her down the hall, backwards, awkward. She's too shy to laugh.

'There's no one here, is there?' she thinks to ask, even though she knows the arrangement.

He shakes his head. 'Not til late this afternoon.'

This afternoon is distant; she's giddy with the unfamiliar luxury and expansiveness of the morning. There are hours and hours of it.

She has stepped into a bubble, clear and round and bright, with just the two of them inside it. She cannot say what is outside of the bubble; she is hardly aware that it exists.

And now here is a door through which she has never walked before, and a corridor. Down they go.

*

The smell of him, sharp like fallen eucalypt. Up close, it catches her like a net might. The warmth radiating through his shirt. He has spindly shoulders and a slight hollow in his chest, is thinner than he ought to be, but he still looks strong. His is a wiry sort of strength, and the very thing he is made of, she thinks, all that will be left of him after the rest has withered away. There is something rounded and frog-like about his fingertips. Pale silk skin under his clothes, and short, coarse hairs. She has never paid so much attention to another person's body. Her desire for him is thorough.

They lie together and do not speak. Outside, bare twigs balance droplets of rain. It just keeps coming down, the rain, laying its endless weight on the trees, on the earth below them. Making mush of leaves and dirt, smearing everything grey and brown, even the sky. Dissolving them.

*

When Maxine wakes in the high bed with the lavender sheets, he isn't there.

It takes an effort to lift her head from the dip in the deep, soft pillow. She is naked, and sticky between her thighs. She sits up with the cover clutched to her breastbone, has to heave at it to bring it up high enough.

The light has seeped out of the day and left her underwater. It isn't quite dark but it soon will be, and then she'll be in trouble, because that's when a day grows heavy, and it's all right if the day has been heavy to begin with, been heavy all along – if it's more of the same, she just shifts it on her aching back a little, and keeps shuffling. That's what everybody does and it's most days.

But on a day like today – that weight will come down hard. A panic begins to form inside her, a hot, squirming mouse of worry. Maxine gets out of the bed, her skin goosebumping, and grabs at her clothes. Untangles them with despairing eyes. Despite her efforts, they are all knots and rags, and she's let him see them. Not that his own clothes are much more, but he manages to wear them like a badge of honour. She doesn't know what a man like him likes about women, about her. Does he wish, now he's been up close, that she were softer, prettier, sweeter-smelling? She needs him here, to make sense of what just happened, but she dreads him too. There's a moment when you get to the limit of what you want to know about someone. Finding someone with no such limit, that's love, she thinks suddenly.

Why all this dread, why now? It's crept in under the door like a draught. Stranger's bed, stranger's house, end of day. She's an empty vessel. They talked all right, but what was it about? All fanciful. She didn't tell him yet about Barnard Street. Didn't know what to tell him. She feared a spell-breaker.

In her clothes, in the main hall, she hears voices from the kitchen. Listens. Amelia's scoffing tones. Daisy's high laugh. And there – Ralph, low and measured. She doesn't want to go in. Is this how she has to face him, after the day they've had – in the company of others? She doesn't see why she should have to share him just yet. That doesn't seem fair. She's never been to bed with anyone before today, but already knows it's more than the moments between the sheets, that the act has a beginning and an end outside of that. Theirs is incomplete.

Or perhaps she's showing her naivety. Perhaps it can go any which way, and no one has a right to anything. Maxine stands in the hall and wonders whether it would be better to walk down it and out of the front door. Whether she can bring herself to. It strikes her as a canny move in some great game she has not anticipated starting up. Some struggle between them, between her and what Ralph represents in the world to her. Intimacy seems like some hot, momentary foolishness from this cold, solitary place outside the kitchen door. What idiocy, to expose herself to someone. What absurdity. Being naked with him was nothing like undressing for a room full of art students. She is still naked for him, with her dress on.

If he would come out of the kitchen, find her in the hall. That is a child's tactic, to wait there in hope. She is sick to death of the vagaries of hope.

The kitchen air is close, it balloons right up against the walls, presses against the door. She pushes in. The room is too busy for everyone to notice her. But Ralph notices her. He's standing at the stove, not making anything, just leaning. One arm is crossed over his front, the hand cupping the elbow of the other, holding it up while it in turn supports his chin. His other hand is cupped around his jaw. It's a thoughtful, humble gesture; he is listening to the others, Amelia and Laszlo and Daisy all gassing and laughing around the table, competing to report the adventures of the day in short sentences like bubbles racing to the top of a glass.

When Ralph's eyes move to the door and he sees Maxine come in, it comes down right away, all that scaffolding. Hands and arms unfold and reach

to draw her in, soft as spider silk. His fingers woven into hers and then into her hair. They stand like that, listen together.

And that is shelter. His heart batters in his thin chest. He's warm, and wants her close. She shuts her eyes.

'I wanted to bring you up something to eat,' he murmurs into her ear.

It takes her an extra moment to tally up whether she's eaten today. This morning was days ago. Weeks. She floated above her appetite then; but now she is ravenous. Now, suddenly, it's as though all the bodily hunger she's felt for the last year, and all the other kinds of hunger for the years before that, are converging on her at once. There's no food on the table; just a half bottle of wine under a fug of cigarette smoke.

'Maxine!' says Amelia. 'I was just thinking this morning, we should have taken you with us. Shouldn't we have taken her, Laz?'

Laszlo nods affably, from the safe place of such a thing being impossible now, and Daisy watches Amelia, cool and patient, as though Maxine is a sideshow to the main event of their conversation, a diversion she need only wait out.

'Fred's place, I've never seen anything like it,' Amelia goes on, her cheeks still ruddy from the long drive, or perhaps the more recent wine. '*Beautiful* studio. The most beautiful *light!* And no one to model. Tiny country town, I mean I know too well what they're like, but it's such a waste. I told him he ought to get some city girls up there permanently, go for some housekeeping arrangement, a two-in-one. He's got the cash. Offered Daisy to him but you can't blame him for saying no.'

Laszlo chuckles to himself. 'Girls aren't exactly Fred's thing, though, are they?'

'I know *that*. This is art we're talking about, you reprobate. Jesus, though, I could do with a decent feed. God knows when Fred last fired up that stove. The man lives on bread and cheese. Felt like I was eating a still life every time we sat down.'

Maxine winces at the fleeting memory of a rotting apple. She doesn't know if Amelia still remembers; perhaps she only imagines that the air grows frigid between them for half a second.

In any case, Amelia pours two fresh tumblers of wine and gets to her feet to press them on the lovers. 'Oh, go on,' she says to Ralph, as though he's declined once already. Maxine looks into her glass and recalls the effect of the last one on her empty stomach. Amelia is a good sort, a generous sort, she thinks, wondering at the way she can know this about Amelia without really knowing her at all. And Amelia herself – what does she know of Maxine? Even less. Maxine and Ralph are standing in her kitchen with a whole story behind them now, but it's doubtful Amelia even knows how they met.

Marvellous musical passages. The café is chattering when they arrive – underground, lamp-lit – and take a table hewn out of wood. Maxine watches Daisy's fingernails work the old grooves. More wine, even though it's after six. Food comes eventually, but by then time is liquid. The table is territory, the food stays, half-eaten, spilt wine dries into dark rings, the ashtray fills. Comings and goings. Daisy is up, dancing with a stranger. A man Laszlo seems to know slides onto the bench next to Maxine. The two men talk in a tongue she doesn't recognise.

Emboldened, she leans over and interrupts Laszlo. 'What language are you speaking?'

'Hungarian,' he answers, and then says something to his friend which seems to be an explanation of Maxine's question. The friend smiles mildly at her, and the incomprehensible conversation resumes.

A band of men make rich and soaring sounds with accordion, violin, trumpet, voices. The rhythms pick up her heart and dance it around. Pressed into the corner, she and Ralph make a quiet togetherness, their knees close under the table, their free hands entwined. Instead of having him to herself, she is cast into the world with him, into living. It's a happiness thrown at her, too big to catch. Today too different from yesterday. She's not strong.

Oh, but you are, she tells herself. You are. Stand up.

They dance. The room is darker. Sometimes she thinks that there is only smoke and darkness in the café, that she can't breathe, that she will have to leave. But it's in her imagination.

The food is demolished. The carafe is empty. Someone pays, because they are leaving and no one is stopping them from leaving, no, they are being waved out of the door by a man with peaked eyebrows and a three-piece suit and a craggy, tired face.

The day's rain has cooled the world right down. Night air. What time is it? Everyone is gone, it's just Maxine and Ralph and the traffic that slows but never stops streaming, blood in the city's arteries.

'So,' says Ralph.

'So.'

'I'll walk you home,' says Ralph.

'Home,' repeats Maxine, and the grave reality of what has come to pass at Barnard Street comes down on her with sobering force, like a roof falling in. She has thought only of going to Ralph, not of leaving him, not of what lay beyond this morning. She has not attended to the possibility that she might be homeless again in a few days, after the eviction fight. She has allowed herself to become helpless, and now she doesn't know how to explain any of this to him, or how she will bear to leave him at the door and descend those dismal steps and face what the morning brings.

'What's the matter?' he says, steadying her by the arm. 'Are you feeling sick?'

'I can't go home. I can't.'

'What's wrong?'

'I just can't.' The words are firing out of her like shots from a stubborn little cannon with no range.

'All right. Where shall I take you then?'

She swallows. Looks down the street, where the world blurs into rainy coal grey.

‘You can’t come to the hostel, Maxine. I’m sorry. You know I’d have you, but they won’t. It’d get me slung out. I’m on thin ice as it is.’

She closes her eyes.

‘I wish you’d tell me what the problem is.’

An inhalation, a drawing up of something deep in the echoing well of herself. The well has sounded empty countless times before, and she doesn’t know what it is she hauls up from there, what could be left to make her feet go round, to stop her from lying down on the pavement and surrendering.

The tram’s twin silver tracks arrow down the road and away into the darkness. If she followed them, she reasons, eventually she would come to the end of the line, and where would that be? Perhaps they run right up to the edge of the land, would deliver her into the sea.

She tries to rub the fatigue from her brow, the aching from her temples, but the truth of the matter can’t be rubbed away; it’s plainer than the street she’s standing on when she opens her eyes. When she opens her mouth there are no words for it either, and she speaks the only promise she can make.

‘I’ll show you.’

I know a place we can go.

Maxine stirs in her narrow iron bed. It's the dark hour of the morning, before everything changes.

The movement disturbs Ralph, close along the length of her.

'I was dreaming,' she murmurs. 'I thought you said something.'

'I did. I thought you were awake. I said, I know a place we can go.'

Maxine shifts under the thin blanket. Francis is still, below them on the floor, a little hump in the first grains of dawn light. 'Where?'

'Bloke in prison,' whispers Ralph. 'Told me about an old shack, by the beach. Said it's empty, as far as he knows. Doesn't sound like much. But if we were desperate.'

Beyond Francis, under the window with its threadbare curtain, daybreak draws a line around the rubble stockpiled there. Ralph's options are not tied to the fate of Barnard Street. But here he is, talking as though his fate is tied to hers.

For the last fortnight, she has been running from her dread of tomorrow morning. But the mornings keep coming anyway. The household was asleep when they stole in past the sandbags a few hours ago. Frank and the others will laugh, she knows, when Ralph tries to talk them out of their weapons, their violent intentions. Last night she told him to go home. The basement feels like a place with teeth, and three days out of gaol is no time to provoke the police.

But if Ralph doesn't try, he can't live with himself, even though he's let her know, now, that he's prepared to fail.

There's the sound of movement from the hallway as the men wake, tie bootlaces, shift aside their bedding. She sits up, alert in the gloom.

*

Frank and Ralph meet over rough bread in the kitchen. Frank's eyes slide to Maxine and back to Ralph. 'If it's a brothel we're running now, I want to see the proceeds,' he says.

Ralph sticks out his hand and introduces himself. 'I'm with the AEC.'

'So how come I've never seen you before?'

Ralph levels his gaze at Frank. 'I've been inside.'

Maxine watches, in admiration of how quickly Ralph has Frank pegged for what he is.

Frank himself nods once at this unexpected piece of information. 'So you don't mind getting your hands dirty, then. That's the sort of bloke we need.'

'I'm all for doing what needs to be done,' Ralph begins. 'But I'm here to tell you, you don't need to turn this into a battle.'

'Well now that's funny,' says Frank. 'Because your mates at the AEC have a very different view on the matter.'

'I'm sure they do. But while they've been out here playing soldiers, I've been doing time for their last efforts. If the police come tomorrow and you fight them, someone will go to gaol, and you won't keep the house, either.'

'You sound like her,' Frank spits, flicking his head at Maxine, then fixing a look of disgust on her. 'Now I know where she's been getting it from. What is this?'

'Maxine.' It's Myra, in the kitchen doorway. She grabs Maxine's arm, begins to tug her out of the room.

'You two should be out of here already,' Frank calls after them 'And take Francis with you. The sandbags are going back up, and they're staying up this time.'

Myra closes the bedroom door and blinks once at her, slowly. 'You know, a person could get sick of bailing you out of trouble. Don't you ever think?'

'He's doing what's right.'

‘Bloody hell, Maxine. You’ve got no money, maybe nowhere to live. Summer’s over. What’s “right” isn’t going to feed you and keep you warm.’ The bags under Myra’s eyes make her skin even whiter than usual. In her dream world, Maxine hasn’t noticed her friend’s burden of worry. But she resents being taken to task for her behaviour by someone who puts up with Frank Walsh. She wants to say that’s not a price worth paying for anything, that she’d rather be on the street, but it occurs to her, just in time, that it would be an unkindness too great for Myra to bear, and that their falling out would be nothing but Frank having his way with them at last.

On the double bed lies Maxine’s suitcase. ‘What’s all this about us leaving?’

‘No women and kids in here for the eviction. We’re all going to Jean’s for the night.’

‘Says who?’

‘Who do you think?’

Bastard, thinks Maxine. The protest was her idea in the first place, wasn’t it? But nothing about it belongs to her any more.

When she reaches for the suitcase latches, Myra walks over and stays her hands with her own.

‘I packed it for you,’ she says. ‘All your bits and pieces are in there. I’m not saying any of us are leaving permanently. Just you don’t want them in here while all this is going on.’

‘Thanks,’ mutters Maxine, and she is grateful for Myra’s unfaltering practicality. There can’t have been much to gather – Maxine is wearing most of what she owns. Then she remembers the white box. ‘Did you look under my bed?’

Myra shakes her head, and Maxine hurries into the room next door to retrieve the box from its hiding place. Ralph is still arguing with Frank in the kitchen.

‘Here,’ she says, when the bedroom door is closed behind her again. ‘You can make something for the girls. It’s nearly new.’

Myra peeks at the flowery dress inside the box and surprise brightens her face. Maxine feels bodily relieved, and not just because Myra hasn't looked pleased about anything much in a while, not just because Maxine's glad to do something for her in return.

*

Barnard Street is jammed. Hundreds of people have come to protest the eviction, but from where? It's so many more than she ever hoped for. It's not as though Frank is popular among the neighbours, and the people he mixes with are the kind who only look out for themselves. The crowd is dense and choppy, a stormy sea of expectation crashing up against the confines of the terrace rows.

Dawn, the witching hour for evictions, came and went with no surprises. If a bailiff arrives, he won't get near enough to the house for anyone in it to see him.

From Jean's first floor window, Maxine searches the crowd for Ralph. She's begged him not to come, but there's no comfort in searching for an absence, no point at which it's safe to stop looking.

The others join her at the window, in turn: Annie with her matter-of-fact questions; Clarabel, looking for the comfort of closeness; Jean, with a bustling interest under a veneer of worry. A quarter of an hour ago, Francis ignored his mother's prohibition and escaped downstairs into the throng, Myra on his tail. Maxine can see Myra's fair hair as she presses through the bodies, but nimble Francis is long gone.

Last night the six of them – three women, three children – made a sleeping mosaic that covered all the available floor of Jean's room. The sewing machine is packed away in its table against one wall. Jean doesn't have much, but it's enough, and to Maxine's eyes, seems to count for riches.

The thing is she can't see the entrance to the Walshes' place from up here. They wouldn't let Ralph in, not anyone now, and especially not him. She

has to remind herself of this, over and over, the plain fact of the matter. The basement is a fortress.

She spent a fitful night, wanting to go to him and apologise for doubts he didn't even know she had. Wanting to argue them with him, too. She lay on the floor, wondering about the sky beyond Jean's shuttered window. Couldn't get up and open it for air without the risk of waking the children.

The fact is, a storm is coming and Ralph wants to go out in it without so much as an umbrella. And he wants other people to do the same.

When they left the Walshes' yesterday, there were more than ten men inside, Harry among them, and when Ralph tried to speak to him, Harry raised his chin and his voice. 'I don't want to hear it.' His arms were folded; two others flanked him.

Ralph let it go. Not because he'd given up, far from it. He had other plans. She followed him back to the hostel. Ralph typed the newsletter straight onto the stencil, made the thing up out of his head. Sam made the tea and they stood behind Ralph, he and Maxine, one behind each shoulder, marvelling as he typed as though he were making history out of nothing, before it had even happened. Could you write such a thing into being? It was one page, far too grave and urgent for one of Sam's cartoons, and Maxine turned the drum of the mimeo machine while Ralph sat on the edge of the desk, sipping tea, smiling at her.

They went round the streets together, knocked on every door. People took the newsletter, and some of them listened to Ralph's speech. They were coming to the eviction all right, scores of them – the protest looked set to be a success in numbers. But what Maxine heard in their voices and saw in their faces was the anger they would bring with them when they came. Ralph was deaf or blind to it. She had been herself, when she'd gone round the first time, weeks ago. Now she began to see and hear through the eyes of exhaustion.

Ralph was either deaf and blind or he chose to press on, regardless. His energy was something. She grew quieter, a voice in her head declaring sooner at each door: this one's a lost cause, let it go. It became unbearable, listening to

him, when it was obvious the battle was already lost. Not the battle for Barnard Street; that was in fine health. But did Ralph really think he could stop everyone from fighting?

She voiced this to him when they parted ways in the evening. They hadn't left each other's sides since the previous morning. It was the strangest thing, the ease with which two people could slot themselves together. When he left her at Jean's, she felt his absence like a missing limb, felt carefully around her middle with both hands, couldn't believe that this had been all there was of her before.

She took a deep breath and she did it, just as he was leaving. Told him he'd done all he could. That he should stay away from the protest. Things would get ugly and the police would come.

He looked at her and she saw in his look the first rift in their understanding. And then he was gone.

'I'm going out there.' Maxine leaves the window and heads for the door of Jean's. 'Don't let the girls leave the room, will you?'

'I'll do my best,' says Jean, but it's false drama. Annie and Clarabel don't look like they want to go anywhere.

Downstairs, the energy of the crowd reaches her before she gets outside. It's quivering, dangerous. Out in the thick of it, there's nowhere to move, but the restlessness is palpable, a current that connects and animates. She takes no comfort from the fact that she was right. The barbed wire is a vicious flourish on top of the wall of bags.

There's reality to consider, she thinks, and here is what it looks like. The atmosphere in the Barnard Street crowd this morning is not one of people determined to maintain peace. She's come to understand that most people don't think like Ralph. For one thing, he treats Harry and Frank like they have something in common, when Frank doesn't give a fig about the anti-eviction movement, except that it might benefit him.

But Harry reminds Maxine of her dad, what he might have been if he'd had it in him to be defiant. He wouldn't have listened to Ralph, either.

Thinking about Jim Fraley is painful. When he went away, she buried him deep somewhere. Part of her feared for him, but part of her was ashamed, too, because she was glad to see him go. It would be easier now to exhume a battle-side grave in France and search for him there among the bones, the rotting uniforms.

Her dad's weakness was hard to live with, but it's sickening to imagine that she might have inherited it. Because what Ralph doesn't know, the thing that kept her awake half the night, is that another part of her – the part that's sick of squalor and hunger and hopelessness – wants to stand out here and fight with the rest of them, bunch up her fists, take an iron pipe and defend herself, beat down anyone who says she can't have a simple roof over her head.

'Maxine.'

Near the barricade, a face emerges in front of her. It's Sam Shade. She reaches out to catch his sleeve, draws them together through the shifting bodies. 'What are you doing here?'

'Have you seen Ralph?' he asks.

She swallows. 'I told him not to come.'

'Well, he insisted that I did. He's been rallying pickets since before dawn. Since last night, actually.'

Maxine swears. The shame of it all is that it would be a clever strategy, if the protestors were inclined to be peaceful. Get so many people between the cops and the house that they never get that far, never find out what the AEC has in store for them there.

From further down the street, there's a roar. The two of them look to the sound, then to each other. There is nothing to see, but a few seconds later it hits them, a wave of disturbance that seems to rearrange everything, even though there's nowhere to move.

Voices rise again, and this time Sam and Maxine are hit afterwards by jostling pressure, as the crowd begins to nudge them from the direction of the noise. They still can't see what's happening, only others being pushed, resisting it.

‘Police!’ someone shouts, and others take up the cry, passing the news back. ‘Police! Police!’

All Maxine can do is hold onto Sam in an effort to keep them both upright.

It’s strange to experience the drama at this distance, to feel the effects of a struggle she can’t see. There’s no telling from here how many police have come, or how far down Barnard Street the clash is taking place. She is both safe – for the time being – and helpless.

And then the horizon changes, the line of protestors’ heads broken up by flailing arms and batons. A wedge of crowd breaks away and suddenly there’s a few feet in which to move, and a great aimless surging begins. Within moments she’s lost hold and sight of Sam.

Her only instinct is to stay as close to the Walshes’ as she can. In this chaos, anywhere else is nowhere, and if Ralph does come, there’s every chance that this is where she’ll find him.

The police are breaking through, red-faced and thrashing, dozens of them in a dark, relentless mass. A volley of stones flies overhead towards them, and Maxine lifts a protective arm. She turns to see who threw them but more follow, and she has to turn her face away.

As the police get closer to the barricade, Maxine is shoved by a few men muscling themselves into a defensive position. She recognises faces from the hostel, and from the Walshes’ rostered guard. Still no Ralph. She knows they’re not just here to stand in the way. If she stays put, she’ll be in the middle of a fight before she knows it.

The sound of a gunshot cracks the air open.

In its wake, half a breath of silence. The crowd loosens. The line of police stand before the barricade, revolvers in hand.

‘Stand aside!’ yells one officer.

Maxine holds her ground, even though, like the others, she’s wound as tight as she can go, ready to spring, to bolt.

Between the line of half a dozen armed officers, a stream of cops descends with batons aloft. And it's on. They take on the defenders, three or four cops to a man, beating them with a vigour that can only render them unconscious. One lifts Maxine by the waist and throws her to one side, where she falls to the ground. By the time she's on her feet again, the barricade belongs to the police, who are hauling it down bag by bag.

Until some of them stop and crouch and shout upwards in pain. Men up on the roof are dropping rocks the size of fists. A figure the size of a boy interrupts the line of their silhouettes against the overcast sky. Maxine knows those quick arms. Francis.

Maxine's heart stops when a couple of the armed officers aim up at the roof and begin to fire. The figures all vanish and the rain of stones stops, and the cops at the barricade tear a v-shaped wedge in it and start to pile through.

From where she's standing, Maxine can only imagine the ugliness in the basement, where there are shouts and crunches and the sound of glass breaking. The mass of protestors has peeled right back since the police fired at the rooftop, but there is a gang, of mostly younger men and women, who push and shoulder at the boundary and seem to be ready for any kind of chance. She can't bear to think about Francis, but her eyes scan this group, and it's then she sees Ralph.

When the cops begin to emerge from the Walshes', dragging men with them, bloodied and handcuffed, the gang moves. It's sharp timing; the police can't fire on them with so many of their own in the mix.

'Ralph!' she screams, but he's one of the first to disappear through the sandbags and into the basement.

Within seconds she's pushing her way through after him. Arms and legs. Flying bricks. No glass in the front window. After the street, the basement is oddly quiet, no rumbling of dissent, just the thuds and groans of work being done, something methodical.

She finds him in the front room. There's blood on the wall, on her bed. A cop wrestles Ralph to the floor and pins him there with a boot on his chest. Maxine's surprised at how easily he goes down.

'You're done for this time, Devanny.' The cop raises his baton. 'I'll give you Red Russia, you bastard!'

A bullet hits the wall, smattering plaster all over her face. She's dazed for a few moments, but when the dust clears she sees the cop grappling with a bloke who's leapt onto his back and taken his throat tight in the crook of his arm. Ralph is struggling to his feet.

She rushes over. 'Get out!' She takes him by both arms and pushes him into the hall, towards the back door. He doesn't resist much; something's wrong. Blood. There's a gash in his scalp, a dark, sticky matting of hair. He must have been hit by a brick on his way in.

She'll run him all the way out of here if she has to. Down the street and away forever. It couldn't be clearer to her now, that it's not worth it, this basement, anywhere – it's not worth a rock in the head, blood on your hands. Let the landlord have it back, empty, if he wants it so badly. Let him see, once he's won the bloody fight, the moral price, and decide for himself whether it was worth it.

The boom and echo of another gunshot as they push into the kitchen, past the hallway's tangled chaos. If the barricade is still up at the back, they're stuffed.

And it is. The courtyard is empty, but no one has interfered with the makeshift wall here. They're like animals in a pen. She can't move the sandbags on her own; Ralph is leaning against them, bewildered, looking like he needs all his strength to stay upright.

'Maxine.'

She looks around. The voice was little; the bullet that hit the wall is still reverberating in her ears.

'Maxine!'

Something small hits her shoulder and skitters onto the ground. She looks up. Francis Walsh is peeking out of the Preston's first floor window.

'Climb on the bags,' he says, pointing.

There's a spot near the wall where the sandbags have been stacked at a slight angle, making steps of sorts, enough for urgent feet in any case.

Relief descends on her, and panic too, in a seasick mixture. She doesn't know how much time they have.

'Come on. You have to climb up here, quick,' she instructs Ralph, and he gathers himself and makes a go of it. With Maxine pushing from underneath, and Francis pulling from above, they get him through the window. She climbs up afterwards with an agility she didn't know she had, and only when the window is shut fast behind her does she lie on the floor and breathe.

When she opens her eyes, Ralph's are closed, and Francis is trying to drag him to a sitting position, and slapping his face.

'You can't let him sleep,' he says. 'He might have concussion.'

He speaks with such authority that Maxine scoots over behind Ralph and makes herself into a cradle, supporting his upright weight. 'How do you know something like that?'

'Just 'cause I don't go to school doesn't mean I'm stupid.'

'I've never thought you were stupid, Francis.'

He gives her a look of scorn to show he understands that even so, she's thought he was other things. 'Hey, mate,' he says to Ralph, giving his shoulder a hard shake. 'Keep your bloody eyes open.'

Ralph's voice is gravelly. 'Did anyone get shot on the roof?'

Francis shakes his head, and his eyes light up at the excitement of it. 'We all hit the deck pretty bloody fast. Got a couple of cops first, but.'

'Where's your dad?'

Francis sneers and shrugs as though only an idiot would care. 'I ain't seen him. Buggered off, most likely.'

Maxine is stunned, before she sees it was only to be expected. Frank bloody Walsh. Makes an almighty mess, then leaves them all in it.

She keeps her reaction quiet though, tries for a poker face. Despite his own derision, Francis might still take a slight on his father personally; kids do. 'We have to get out of here,' she says. They're in a back bedroom. She grimaces at the door, feeling suddenly little better off than she was in the courtyard. The hallway leading to Jean's room is only on the other side of the wall, so near, impossible to reach. From there they could make a run for it the back way.

But Francis nods when he sees her looking through the wall, as though he's miles ahead. 'You better look lively, if you want to get next door.' He raises his eyes to the ceiling. 'Gotta go up.'

*

Myra examines Ralph's head, holding it firm in both hands before abruptly letting it go, and declaring it would be better not to touch the wound for the moment, since it has stopped bleeding. Not until he gets to wherever it is he is going.

'It looks pretty awful, though,' says Jean. 'People will notice.'

'Got a man's hat you want to donate?'

When the three of them turned up, Myra fell on Francis with a furious embrace. She looked from Maxine to Ralph as though she was ready at last to blame someone for the danger he'd been in, and for what was happening outside, and it might as well be them.

But Maxine saw her open her mouth, and got in first. 'Any word from Frank? There's no sign of him at your place.'

Myra digested this for a moment before giving one brief, dismissive shake of her head, and Maxine knew she didn't have to say anything else. But she wanted to reach out and catch Myra's hand and say: *he's not here, so why is he still making trouble between us?*

'We'll risk it,' says Ralph, who is pale but more alert after their precipitous journey from next door.

‘We’ll stay off the main roads,’ says Maxine, wishing they had access to a car, a cart, a bicycle, anything.

Outside, Jean reports from the window, a fresh cohort of armed police is pushing the crowd back. In the space they’ve cleared outside the Walshes’, numerous AEC men in handcuffs are under guard. She doesn’t like the state of them.

‘Stay here, love, until Frank turns up and you work out what to do,’ she tells Myra, whose hard expression has crumpled at this news into something more like despair.

Maxine’s own plan is hopeful at best. Just for a couple of nights: she’s practising the line in her head. It repeats like a nervous tic. How to say it so they’ll take her seriously, but won’t think her without resources of any kind. Desperate people quickly become burdens. She rubs at the anxiety in her eyes, her forehead, kisses the children.

‘When will you be back?’ asks Annie.

‘I won’t be coming back, sweetheart.’

Not one for crying, Annie grows quiet and still and looks to her mother for confirmation. Myra nods, and Maxine sees in her face that she’s never thought this would end any other way.

Maxine nods goodbye and thanks to Jean, who she wishes now had the sense to look away, not to scrutinise her most complicated, intimate farewell. She draws herself up, tries for boldness, for a few words that might carry the weight of everything she feels. ‘Thank you,’ she says to Myra. ‘And sorry.’ After the words come out, she wonders if she spoke or mouthed them; they seem hollow, eaten through with sadness, unable to carry anything.

Myra smooths the front of her dress and asks, as though it is simply a matter of practicality, as though she anticipates redirecting mail: ‘Can you tell me where, Maxie? In case I ever need to find you?’

But despite her briskness, Maxine hears something small and vulnerable in the question. She hesitates, then takes Myra’s two warm, dry hands in her

own, and looks into her face. Senses the others looking away at last. ‘You have to swear to keep this secret.’ Her voice is hardly audible.

‘You know I will.’

Maxine lets her friend’s hands go and picks up the suitcase. It’s as unwieldy as it ever was. The last thing she does before she leaves is whisper to Myra the address of Maitland. They aren’t expecting her; but then, they never were.

Shallow brown sea. Small waves are churning up the sand close to shore. Francis keeps bringing more coal for Maxine to take down to the boat. She can't row off without him – apart from anything, he's the one who can manoeuvre the leaky bloody thing – but he won't listen to her. Runs back up every time to bundle a few more lumps in the front of his filthy shirt.

'We'll get caught,' she tells him through the wire diamonds of the fence.

But Francis doesn't care about that. He's only thirteen.

'We'll sink.'

The only boat Maxine's ever been on before now is the liner that brought her to Sydney. She has no idea what kind of load would sink a small wooden row boat like this one. Every time they come, Francis gets a little greedier. It's hard to blame him. The huts are cold enough; the Walshes are in a tent. But it's better, stealthier surely, to take just enough coal for a few days, an amount that won't be missed, and come back when it's gone. The ease of the pickings – the overlooked hole under the wire where Francis wriggles into and out of the coal yard on his stomach, as if he wasn't grimy enough – might continue that way.

If Maxine's learnt one thing during the Depression, it's that bounty is a mixed blessing. A windfall of pumpkins that the Chinese market gardeners can't sell might feed a body for a month, but it will put you off pumpkin for the rest of your life.

The sky makes her mind up for her in the end. It's as murky and roiling as the sea. She holds the sack up to the fence so Francis can drop his latest load of coal into it, one lump at a time, and when he's done she hurries down to the boat. Flings the sack over the side and instead of heading back up the beach, leans against it and digs her heels into the sand.

The tide's come right in and by the time Francis gets there she's up to her knees in the water – to her thighs when the waves chop past – and they're already aching with cold. Soon they'll be numb, which is more than she can say for the rest of her body, protected against the blustery wind by a thin dress and Ralph's jacket. The dress is drenched to the waist anyway, the jacket draughty. When she feels the water take the boat, she grips the side and lifts a leg in, as Francis hops across the waves to join her.

He stands atop their black heap of plunder, showering coal. It fills the hull, so that they both have to perch on the slat bench with their knees up, bare feet and lower legs streaked all over. The boat bobs wildly. Francis takes the oars and starts to plough through the water with his wiry arms.

Twenty yards out from the shore the first drops of rain fall. This is no mist, no sprinkling – these drops are fat and cold and mean to make things wet. They set in with a roll of distant thunder.

Maxine lifts her face to the rain. It's the only way to keep her eyes clear, and anyway, she's learnt not to fight the elements. Wind, dirt, sand flies – surrender is the only way to stay sane. In summer, she expects, they'll all be as hot as they are cold now, and there won't be a thing to do but lie down and take it.

It rains. They're just beyond the breakers now, but it's slow going. Francis is stronger than he looks but all the same, there's not much to him. So they aren't very far from the shore when the boat begins to sink under the weight of the wet coal.

Francis drops the oars and they both start throwing their cargo over the side. Maxine watches the dark lumps swimming in the dark grey brine – every bit of it wasted energy, twice over now. And then the boat tips, and the hull goes under on one side. The sea swirls in; coal pieces spread and pattern the surface. Maxine can feel the boat falling out from under her, knows the weight of it, knows it's useless. When her feet touch the sandy bed, the sea is up to her armpits. She can't swim, looks around for Francis, wondering if he can. He's come off the other side of the boat and is splashing towards the shore like an

eager dog. It's not far down, the boat. She'd see it in calmer water; they should be able to rescue it at low tide. The circle of coal has expanded around them. There looks to be so much of it, spread out like this. More than they need, and no use to them now. Maxine's arms sweep it aside as she points her toes and begins a slow, balletic underwater walk back to the beach.

*

The row around the point to the power station takes twenty minutes or so, and an hour on foot. Longer in the rain, or perhaps it just feels that way. Rain puts them in a bubble a few feet wide. The steps in front, the steps behind. No long view here. They trudge. Eventually the lights of the camp show in the dunes, like glowing insects clustered in the dark cave of the weather. Night comes in early under cloud.

There are the yellow windows of huts, and the tents all lit up from inside. From here they look like a dream of warmth. Lanterns make shadows of sheltering families. The Walshes' tent is like a puppet show, the outline of bent heads framed by the seams of sacks sewn together for the walls. A shadow figure looms in the corner as they approach, its oversized head folding where the wall pitches into a roof.

Maxine sees Francis to his door and hurries away to the shack before Myra can stick her head out and get a look at her. Francis can explain about the boat on his own, and there's nothing to be done about it now. And Ralph will be worried. Despite her near-hypothermic state, she manages a small, private smile at the truth of this, as warming as any coal fire. He'll rescue her from out of her wet clothes and cocoon her in their one blanket. Boil the kettle. If there's no tea, he'll feed her sips of hot water from an enamel mug.

She comes up to the shack through rivulets of water, falls sandy-toed through the door. Ralph looks up from the bed, where he's reading on his back. He jumps up and rushes over and the only thing she knows after that is that she can't stop shaking. Not shivering – great, wracking shudders as though she is

having some kind of fit. Then somehow she is under the covers on their narrow bed, naked, with Ralph naked beside her. There's a cloud of numbness between her and him; there's the warm beating core of her heart, and arctic miles between it and Ralph's fierce, intensive embrace. This is a strange time to make love, she thinks; later she becomes aware of woollen socks on her feet and something wrapped around her head, and the confining weight of piled-up covers.

By then she's still cold, but she can feel her limbs and the friction of Ralph's dry palms up and down her thighs. She's shivering.

'The boat sank,' she chatters.

Her eyes close. When she opens them, Ralph is snapping pieces of wood and feeding them into the stove. Her eyeballs feel warm, watching the blaze. They didn't have any wood this afternoon when she left with Francis, and driftwood is hard to come by these days with the camp getting so crowded.

'Where'd you get that?'

He doesn't say anything. The lengths of wood are joined at angles. Ralph's wrenching them apart, putting nails aside, snapping glue. It's a chair. They only had one.

The Depression gives people nothing to do, she thinks, and nowhere to sit down and do nothing.

*

This afternoon she was the coldest she's ever been. Now she's burning like it's her Ralph's broken up and put in the stove.

He brings her a drink. It's not cold enough. She makes a face.

'It's just water,' he says.

'Get Myra.'

'Myra'll kill you with some quack remedy.'

‘Then put the bloody fire out.’ She thrashes feebly, vainly at the blankets and coats pinning her down, then collapses on the damp sacking they’ve filled and joined for a mattress.

‘It’s already out,’ he says.

The night is endless. She can’t sleep, but when she does, time loops back on itself, begins again. The night goes nowhere. Ralph kneels by the bed forever. He’s in despair, she thinks. There are two boys coming and he knows they can’t feed them. In the morning, if it comes, when they get off this ship, she’ll tell them to leave again, for their own good. There must be an orphanage somewhere. Asylum. Otherwise they’ll have to chase the boys into the sea.

*

There’s a blessed normality to the dawn cold. She feels it the same way she feels it every morning. Ralph has slipped into bed beside her, sometime in the night. She wants water, but doesn’t have it in her to wake him.

She feels scourged. If she’s been clinging onto any vestiges of vigour, if there’s been any fat left on her bones, the night’s fever has stripped her of it. There’s something peaceful, though, about giving into frailty. She lies for a while as easily as a baby in a cradle.

It’s struggle that makes the day long. Without it, time drifts like clouds. And she’s not frail, in the way a baby isn’t frail. She’s at the beginning of herself. That’s what the lightness feels like. She’s empty of sweat and food and desire.

Frank comes by mid-morning about the boat.

‘Is Francis all right?’ she says. It comes out as a whisper.

Frank moves stiffly. He studies her in bed, as though he doesn’t connect her horizontal position, her pale face and weak voice with any kind of sickness.

‘He was before I saw to him. Cocky little bugger.’

Frank is still a man of ways and means. The boat was one of these. Without it, his is just another family in a flour sack tent, and it's clear he won't stand long for that.

But jeez, thinks Maxine, a faint smile on her lips. That Francis is a rugged one.

'Do you want a hand hauling her out of the water?' Ralph asks Frank, and Maxine knows what it costs him to do it.

'I'm not hauling anything,' starts up Frank, and Maxine swallows back a weary sigh. He will get the boat – he won't know how to stay out of it. But before he does there has to be a bit of theatre, a stage on which Frank can tell his favourite story about himself, one way or another.

'The rain filled the boat,' she says, hoping to head him off. 'It wasn't anybody's fault. Let's all go over there, and be done with it.'

'Not you,' Frank tells her. 'Myra's got something for you.'

It takes all her strength to hold his gaze. How she loathes his games, his insatiable need for the upper hand. But she is curious, and he knows it. He grins.

*

'Oh, go on Maxie, it's a one-off. I'd sell it myself, only I need my repeat customers.'

Like most women at the camp, Myra cooks for the family on an outdoor fire. Today, Maxine finds her there, making jars out of old beer bottles, and Maxine sits down to help. Myra heats a wire ring in the fire and places it over the neck of a bottle, then dips it in a tin of cold water. The sudden change in temperature makes a crack, and the top of the bottle comes right away. Maxine dries the glass and rubs the break smooth with a piece of sandpaper while Myra heats the ring for the next one. When she's sterilised and filled them with whatever concoction she cooks up next, she'll seal the jars, tight as anything, with brown paper and a flour and water paste.

Myra runs quite the cottage industry these days. She'll have a try at cooking up anything: homemade cough syrup, peculiar tonics, an ointment for bruises made out of a green weed one of the other women put her onto, although it doesn't work so well on Myra herself.

She's lied about Annie's age and got her into the local school, sends her tramping three and a half miles there and back, every day. In cold weather Annie comes home with her feet blue from the freezing creek she has to wade through, but she doesn't complain. The Walsh kids never do. Myra darns Annie's sandshoes as best she can, and at least she doesn't have to walk the suburban miles door to door with her mother, like Clarabel does. Myra's forgotten the pain in her legs, or at least it seems to her a lesser pain, perhaps, than waiting around at home for what Frank might dish out. And she won't leave Clarabel anywhere he might get to her. She's good for sales, anyway, Myra tells Maxine, with her hungry little face. Sight of her shakes out the purses of them tight old bitches in their neat houses.

Francis isn't at school; if Frank's not got some scheme to keep him busy, he goes with a gang of other kids to collect and bag horse manure, and sell it for sixpence a bag to the gardeners outside the camp. There's a biscuit factory, a couple of miles back towards the city, and if he and the other kids can cadge enough broken ones they bag and sell those, too, to the houses roundabout.

Myra has made up another batch of mercury polish.

'You did a good job of selling it last time,' she tells Maxine, by way of persuasion.

Maxine is dismayed. Myra still knows nothing about how she got rid of the first lot. 'I couldn't,' is all she manages to say.

But Myra reads this as a kind of unnecessary graciousness, because she looks Maxine clear in the face, and says: 'I thought you might need the money, that's all. You can keep all the takings, only don't tell Frank that.'

It's Myra's way of saying she's made them especially for her. It's painful when Maxine's heart fills, and when she leans over to embrace her

friend, it might be to show love or it might be because she needs the comfort of it. It's the only time she's ever held her close. Myra smells of salt and sweat and smoke and something else, some mingled witch's brew, things plucked from stone and sand.

'Thanks. I'll go when I'm a bit stronger,' she says.

*

'What are those?' Ralph asks when she returns to the shack. He's stripped the bed, put the mattress outside in the sun, returned the borrowed coats and blankets.

She sways in the doorway, unsure where to sit down.

'You need to rest,' says Ralph, coming over and taking the bag of bottles from her hand. He steers her to the bed frame and she perches on the edge. He looks inside the bag. 'You're not well enough to go anywhere.'

'I'm not going anywhere. I'm just letting her be kind.'

'She should try being kind to herself.'

'We should all do a lot of things, no doubt.'

Ralph smiles, showing the weariness around his eyes. He must think she's gibing him, but she isn't sure she has the energy.

'Well, we won't be leaving for a while. Not until you've recovered.'

Maxine squints at Ralph; he has gone, briefly, out of focus. 'Were we about to?' Did they decide on it while she was feverish, she wonders, or worse – did the fever erase from her mind some part of the days preceding it?

They've talked about it, many times. Ralph is always looking ahead. It's the thing that animates him, Maxine's learnt. He opens his eyes in the morning and looks straight at the future, and lately, the future always seems to lie elsewhere, anywhere but at the camp.

But their talk never comes to anything, because the truth is they don't have many options, and those they do have, like going on the road, don't promise anything better than this.

‘No,’ Ralph admits with a grim laugh. ‘But I’d like to know how bad it has to get.’

After Maxine has missed two sessions at Maitland, Laszlo comes to visit. It's Saturday morning. He takes the tram to the end of the line, then walks four miles in the direction pointed out to him by the Aboriginal children at the stop. He tells Maxine this when he arrives. It's the first time she's ever seen him wearing shoes.

Ralph's been attentive since the fever. She's hardly left the shack, except when the sun shines. If Ralph goes anywhere, he comes back with something for her. The typewriter gathers dust, as does the half-typed sheet of paper on the roll. Funny that dust should be the same old problem it's always been, in a hut with a bag floor.

'I'm sorry to let you down,' Maxine tells Laszlo. 'I was sick.'

She is not sure why he's here. She knows him to be kind – she knew that before he opened the door at Maitland and saw the two of them standing there, Maxine with her suitcase, Ralph with a line of blood weeping down his neck. The explanation she'd fretted over was unnecessary; he simply let them in.

She's made him tea with milk that Ralph got hold of for her, somehow. It feels like an extravagance, but the milk won't keep in the milder weather. Laszlo drinks the tea as though he's in a polished drawing room with silk drapes and a garden view. He's even taken off his coat and let her hang it on a corner of the door. Underneath, his suit is crumpled. 'And now?'

Maxine puts down her tea. It's almost too rich. 'I'm all right.'

'But?'

How can she explain to him the drift, the slide of tides, the roll of dunes? How they've got hold of her, and not laid her down, but lifted her up, so that all she has to do is float and rock.

'I'd love a tour,' says Laszlo.

Maxine looks once around the one-room shack, and shrugs.
'Of the camp.'

*

Ralph found the shack and Maxine pushed the door open. Less than a week out of gaol, Ralph was in need of a shave, a haircut, except where the hair was matted into the thick crust of his cleaned wound. Maxine didn't mind. She didn't mind what he looked like, what he wore. She wanted to hear his voice; every time he spoke it was a small astonishment, one that tingled up the back of her neck and exploded like a miniature firework. Multi-coloured happinesses. There was the idea of him, and then Ralph himself, with a touch of a cold in his throat adding a softness to his voice that she could hardly bear.

The hut wasn't what the bloke had described to Ralph; there wasn't a stick of furniture in it. It was clean as a bone on a beach. Just a stove made out of an old tin drum, in need of such repair that whoever took the rest of it hadn't thought it worth the effort of ripping out and carrying. It was too warm that day to light it. They didn't need to cook the food they'd brought but they lit a fire anyway, that night, outside in the dunes. A ritual as old as home. The wood they used all lay about nearby, and Maxine had matches, because Myra hadn't let her go with nothing. In the suitcase, along with the things that belonged to Maxine – a few bits of cutlery and the one plate and cup her father hadn't taken on the wallaby – she'd packed a wrapped parcel with matches and candle, a cake of soap, a few provisions. There was a shawl, too. Maxine didn't know where it came from, but draped over her thin and faded dress it felt luxurious as a ball gown.

They didn't sleep in the hut that night, either, but on Ralph's overcoat under the stars. Woke before dawn drenched with dew. Got inside the hut then, salvaged sticks and coals and embers from the campfire and choked up the stove with it. Coughed and shivered and laughed through the awful smoke. 'Place needs fumigating anyway,' said Ralph.

The state of them, already, and they'd only slept rough one night. Ash-smearred and smoky and damp round the edges.

Maxine found a rusty kero tin in the dunes and they spent the day taking it in turns to walk to the sports club half a mile away and sneak water from the tap. They heated it in the tin and washed themselves and their clothes, tawny flecks replacing the streaks and grime. The sun was warm that afternoon and there was the all-day closeness of Ralph's bare skin, the dunes like cloisters, the simple purpose of water, washing; the twin scents, sharp and clean, of soap suds and the sea. The dunes about the hut were soft and scrubby, but between there and the club house they were low lying and swampy, alive with invisible insects that stung their ankles and the stench of things that live and die in stagnant water. There'd be snakes, Ralph reckoned, and they would later find out he was right. Towards evening the low wet gullies filled with the hollow throb of frogs, and every stick looked like a snake in the coming dark.

It takes a while to stop struggling, but that's how it felt after a while. Not because they had any better idea where their next meal was coming from. But the whirl of the city makes a hum, and the hum sings always of what might be, and out there they couldn't hear it any more. Out there what was became just that. They started making furniture, slowly, out of things they scavenged and it reminded Maxine less of the industry of her father, with his initial-etched tools, than it did of Laszlo constructing quiet sculptures out of the nonsense of the world.

The hut was built out of corrugated iron and palings. It had holes for windows with no glass, but with covers made from the sides of packing crates that could be removed and stacked on the ground. A tin door a little too short for the frame, a dirt floor. Blobs of pitch to fill in rusting holes. Early in their stay, the roof came off in a sudden storm. The first brown snake got in; they came in to see its tail trailing out from under the bed.

The thing was they couldn't stop anyone from coming.

The first family of strangers was bedraggled, not even hopeful. Three children and their mother and father, something a bit like determination in his

eyes, but clouded. They took turns sheltering under a coat held up with sticks while they gathered junk and flotsam to make walls and roof. In this they let Ralph and Maxine help them, and accepted the site Ralph chose for their hut.

Word got around and other families came. There was nothing for it but to plan for the influx. They laid the first part of the camp out neatly, with areas given over to sanitation. Ralph even let himself enthuse: if they could get their hands on a horse and cart, they'd be able to pool their money and carry down bulk supplies, eat much more cheaply. There was enough space. Til then they had all day to fish and trawl the tideline for driftwood and other useful debris.

More families came and they were not so suggestible. This wasn't Ralph's land any more than theirs, and they wouldn't take direction from him. They'd had enough authority. Working for boss-men and landlords hadn't got them anywhere, had it? Huts sprang up like the unpredictable sores of some new disease.

But I'm not in charge, Ralph protested. Only look. If we plan it properly, it will work. We need to agree.

They did not agree. Ralph thought people would see sense as he saw it; if a part of the dunes didn't drain in heavy rain then you didn't build a hut there on a sunny day. You didn't empty your bowels in a bush ten feet from where you cooked and slept, or from where someone else did. He didn't think sense was subjective. He learnt otherwise.

Myra and Frank and the kids turned up in the early cold. They'd been lying low, was all either of them would say. Maxine guessed Myra had found out their whereabouts from Maitland; Myra only gazed at her in silent apology. All five of them bunked in Maxine and Ralph's hut until enough flour bags could be gathered and treated with lime and fat and sewn into walls. Frank did not care for their suggestion as to where to raise his tent, and Maxine whispered a plea to Ralph not to argue the point, this time. In her stomach was the cold dread that Frank brought with him, among other things, the risk of discovery. But they both knew he couldn't be made to leave. The snake would coil and lie

sleeping. Ralph became silent and industrious for the time it took to source and cut poles and help build a frame for the Walshes' tent.

People came, dim-witted and sad as cattle. People came who knew better, who knew best. Some of them were ingenious. The huts and tents went up in higgledy rows, and this regimentation led in turn to some parts of the camp being well-maintained and orderly while other parts dwindled down to a hellish arrangement of half-built humpies and people who only had the energy or nous to drift so far before they laid down sacks and slept. The lice and the sores started there and crept up, tent by tent, shack by shack, all the way to that part of the camp where vigilant mothers doused their kids' heads with preventative kerosene. There were clean kids with kero blisters on their faces and necks. There were veggie gardens and little picket fences.

Neighbourly help was plentiful and haphazard. People think as long as they help, they can have things as they like them, ranted Ralph. Not change the things that create the need for help in the first place. He wanted to kick the fences down.

Deputations came. Rich women talking about contraception. Ladies from the church with cast-off clothes. They always pulled a crowd, whether due to need or curiosity. No one had money for entertainments. Family dramas played out in silhouette on sacking walls, lit from within, the closest thing to the pictures for miles around, and free. Kids giggled and crept about between the tents at night, watching for the shape of an embrace, for the shadow of intimacy.

The walk to water became a talking point, a point of complaint. It wasn't easy, walking that distance with a full four-gallon tin. Somehow it hadn't seemed so bad to Maxine before the camp grew into the scavenging, many-legged insect it became. She'd walked in peace. Now, in the company of so many others trudging back and forth, it seemed more like a chore, she a part of that long, weary line of misery. When the winter came, she and Ralph set up tanks to catch the run-off from the roof of their hut. Kids from other huts and tents and humpies with no tanks came in the dark to take it. It wasn't that

Maxine thought the water belonged to her and Ralph. It was just that when it ran, it sounded like their collective dream trickling away into battered, individual buckets in the night.

*

‘A water tank for a chimney,’ muses Laszlo, a look of fascination on his face. As they wander, he stares at the huts, peers through their doorways where he can, oblivious to the people guarding them. Men in singlets and women with babies on their hips. ‘A crate for a cupboard! A drum for an oven.’

Small children gaggle past them like geese, on their way to a game in the dunes.

‘I’ll confess,’ he says. ‘I didn’t come here just to see how you were. Sam sent me with bad news, I’m afraid. Maitland is finished.’

‘The school?’ says Maxine. ‘But Amelia has so many students.’

‘Not just the school – the house! We’ve all of us got to leave. She’s only been there by the grace of her brother – he’s the one who inherited everything. He’s a grazier, you know, and now the property’s not doing so well. She’s been called home.’

The idea of Amelia being summoned like an errant child, of her heeding the call, is a bizarre one. ‘She doesn’t have to go, surely?’

‘She does if there’s no money for rent. The students aren’t enough to cover that. Half of them are friends, Maxine. They don’t even pay.’

‘Will you go, too?’ Maxine panics, suddenly, at the thought of the house disbanding. There’s the money she won’t earn, but Maitland has come to mean more to both her and Ralph than six shillings a week.

A week or two after they went into hiding at the shack, Sam brought Ralph’s typewriter to Maitland; after class he gave it to Maxine with a message. The police had been to the hostel looking for both Ralph and Maxine. They knew she was involved in organising the Barnard Street protest. They had questions. Maxine’s heart plummeted at the thought of what they might be.

Now, every time Maxine looks at the typewriter, she recalls the effort of jumping the tram with it to the end of the line, then her attempt at the four mile walk, and the small boy who rolled up with the billy cart when she was panting at the side of the road, rubbing her arms, and asked what she'd give him to cart it all the way to the camp. She paid him in fish. Now Ralph writes the newsletter, and once a week, Maxine takes the stencils he makes up to Maitland to give to Sam. Neither of them can go up to the hostel, or to any evictions, or hand out the newsletters. But Maitland keeps them both connected to the world that brought them together. They are an outpost, she tells Ralph, reporting back to the centre.

'We are exiles,' he says.

Getting back from Maitland alone is hardest on a Friday night. She comes into the hut so late, so quietly, not knowing if he'll be asleep, although he's almost always reading in the lantern's gloom. And there isn't a thing different about him that she can put her finger on, other than that there's the feeling that he is swallowing some utterance. He is holding back some tiny thing, perhaps even from himself, some worm in the rose. He isn't guarded in love – it's something else. The four walls.

Later, after they have unravelled back into the comfort of togetherness, comes the talk of leaving. A careful, almost reluctant revision of the week: has anything changed? Nothing has. Their question answers itself; they withdraw, defeated, into sleep.

Laszlo chokes on his own laughter. 'Oh yes,' he says. 'I can just picture that. Me on the farm, rounding up sheep.' He shakes his head. 'He'd never have me there. But Sam says I can have Ralph's old bed.'

Maxine expected that Ralph's bed would have been claimed long ago; the thought that Sam has saved it for him all this time warms her, a small melt of gladness against the chill of loss. She does find it hard to picture dignified, eccentric Laszlo and his cabinet of curios in residence at the UWM hostel, though she supposes he and Sam will make good companions. It will certainly

suit him better than sheep grazing. ‘I can’t picture Daisy on a farm, either,’ she says.

‘Oh, she won’t go,’ he says, worry creeping into his voice. ‘Even if it were possible. She and Amelia have fallen out.’

‘Over what?’

‘Lots of things. It wasn’t ever going to last. Couldn’t you see that? They are both of them far too headstrong. Amelia’s capitulation to her brother was the final straw. Daisy expressed her disgust, and Amelia called Daisy a naïve, spoilt little fool. And now Daisy sleeps in the conservatory, and the air is like ice all through the house.’ Laszlo rolls his eyes. ‘Well, she has a week to make arrangements for herself. Amelia has already started packing.’

‘You sound so anxious for her,’ says Maxine. ‘Daisy probably has scores of places she can go.’

‘But will she go to any of them? Being principled is a fast track to destitution. You of all people should know that.’

Maxine cannot take offence at this, when every word of it is true, and the evidence all around them.

Ralph is at the hut when they return. Two small fish gleam on the worn wooden bench, smears of blood on their mouths. So slick and cold, like broken-off shards of the sea.

He is startled by the incongruous sight of Laszlo. ‘You’re here with news, I hope?’ he asks, after shaking his hand.

‘Yes, but I doubt it’s the sort you’d like to hear,’ says Laszlo, and begins the story of Maitland’s demise.

Ralph doesn’t care, Maxine realises, watching his face as he listens. Any news will do; news means change, if nothing else. There’s a hunger in his eyes that has nothing to do with the fish.

He forgets to commiserate; describes to Laszlo instead the café where he and Maxine shared dinner one night, a lifetime ago, and says: ‘Tell Sam that you and Maxine will be having lunch together once a week, on Fridays. Tell him you’ll need a shilling.’

Laszlo shrugs at Maxine before Ralph walks him out to the road home.
'At least there's a meal in it.'

*

'Laz said it was like a village,' says Daisy. 'Or an impression of one, with neat little houses, made out of other things. He said it was like a three-dimensional collage of another world.'

It's three days after Laszlo's visit. Daisy arrives by the same means that Laszlo did, and looks quite lost by the time she reaches the camp, despite having found what she came looking for. Hers is a disorientation outside of the map, that much is clear. Maxine surprises herself with a wave of pity for her. Nearly everywhere is uncharted territory for Daisy, she thinks.

At first, Daisy behaves as though it's the most natural thing for her to drop in on Maxine, an old friend shackled up in a dole camp. Maxine presumes this is because, despite her long-held hostility and the obvious absurdity of their small-talk, Daisy's breeding prevents her from charging headlong into the reason for her visit.

Maxine brews black tea – the milk's all gone – and expresses polite condolences about the closure of Maitland. It's like peeking under the lid of a vessel containing any number of complicated subjects: Daisy's break-up with Amelia, her own attachment to the place. Instead she asks what Daisy will do next.

'I'm going to Europe,' she says, with lofty determination. 'As soon as I can afford a ticket. Mother has a sister there who hates her, so I expect we'll get on.'

'Have you any money?' says Maxine. It's not a question she could ever have imagined asking Daisy before this moment. Too personal, too presumptuous. The line between them was drawn early, but by Daisy, Maxine realises, when she had the power to do so. Maxine doesn't need to step lightly

around her now. The thought's a startling one. Daisy transforms in front of her eyes into an odd and rare bird, come somehow a vulnerable distance from its natural habitat.

'I'll get a job. As a shop girl! Anything.'

Only someone like Daisy can have such confidence about getting a job at the moment, thinks Maxine. And at the same time, she can picture it happening, as clearly as Daisy can. That's the magic of privilege, of entitlement.

'But where will you live?' asks Maxine. 'Will your parents have you back?'

'I wouldn't go back there for any price,' says Daisy, and after Maxine's wondered again at Daisy's uncompromised sense of her own choices, she realises that Daisy is looking around the hut in a particular way.

A choked sort of laugh escapes her. 'You want to live here? Oh, Daisy.'

Daisy cuts her with a look. 'I don't think I'm too good for it, if that's what you're getting at.'

There are three sorts of people in the camp. The ones in the humpies were always poor, even before the Depression. No-hopers, Myra calls them. She judges them the most savagely, for being what she herself has managed not to be, despite the odds. All the other camp families have come from proper homes and steady jobs, however modest. A proportion of these are bizarrely energised by their circumstances. They're swimming as fast and as hard as they can, improving their huts, baking bread in makeshift camp ovens, packing their kids off to the local school with combed hair and instructions to stick their chins up and play fair, no matter what their classmates might say about dirty camp kids. And the women in these families make flour sacks and newspapers into warm blankets and pumpkins into pies, and take them over to those other families, that third sort, the ones who are just like them except for the fact that when they lost their jobs and their homes they lost something else, too. The thousand-yarders, Ralph calls them, and Maxine thinks of her father and what the war tore out of the inside of him. Don't make light of that horror, she wants

to say at first, but then wonders if it matters where the shock falls from, out of an enemy mortar or from the hand of the man serving your notice, if it hits you just the same.

But Daisy. There aren't any like her around here. Does she even know how to make her own bed? She might have learnt a few things living with Amelia, Maxine supposes. No servants at Maitland. But love goes a long way. Love is blanket and roof and meal and pain relief, all rolled into one.

'What about...?' Maxine struggles a moment to remember the name. 'That place you visited together. Where the bloke needed models.'

'Oh, *Fred's*? Amelia already suggested it, but I'd rather die. It's in the middle of nowhere, Maxine,' says Daisy, in a desperate half-whisper. 'If I go up there I will never get out, I'm sure of it.'

This is a fear to which Maxine can relate, although she doesn't like being reminded of her brothers, whose plight she is further than ever from being able to solve. It might also be the first time that Daisy has uttered her name.

How incongruous she looks in the shack, in her soft clothes brought from another life, their colours still true. 'You know, Laszlo calls this place Dadaville,' she says. 'Isn't that clever? It's after a painting.'

'Don't be fooled by any fancy name of Laszlo's,' Maxine says, bitterness in her throat, and astonishment, too, at how easily one person's insight becomes another's fantasy. And all in a word. 'This place is no painting, Daisy, it's not for you. It shouldn't be for anyone.'

She can stop Daisy coming as much as she can stop anyone, which is to say not at all, but she's guessing that Daisy won't have the wherewithal to turn up under her own steam and build a shelter in the virgin sand. Of course, there's a chance she underestimates her. Since when, she thinks with a rueful smile, remembering a conversation in a kitchen long ago, does she have the right to decide what Daisy is?

But Daisy drinks up the last of her tea and looks into the bottom of her mug, as though she might find there the direction Maxine has failed to give her.

Maxine sees her back out to the road. For a stranger, it's as easy to get lost in the camp as it is in the back streets of Paddington.

*

After her uninterrupted weeks at the camp, the café's interior, with its built-in tables and tiled floor, seems more substantial than she remembers it, better-appointed. She sits uncomfortably, ready to leave, until Laszlo wanders in. 'I was worried I'd got the wrong place,' she tells him, passing over the newsletter stencil right away, allowing herself to settle into her seat. 'I've only been here once, and it looks different.'

'When I got home to my parents' house after the war, it was so long since I'd been inside a solid, furnished building that I thought they'd redecorated.' He smiles and blinks. 'Everything seemed new.'

With his words, the world expands. Maxine isn't used to hearing about the war from anyone with a foreign accent. She wonders, uneasily, which side he was on. She was an infant when it happened, knows only that central Europe is a mess of new and contested borders.

'Where are your parents now?'

'I left them in Hungary. What was left of it. My two brothers were killed in the war. My parents refused to leave, White Terror or no. Too old, too much grief to fit in a suitcase, but it couldn't be left behind either.'

'What's the White Terror?'

Laszlo leans in. 'These New Guard boys, they don't know what they're doing. Drilling in Hyde Park like an army. You know they're actually preparing to take military control in the event of a revolution?' He laughs, heartily – Maxine doesn't know whether at the idea of them taking control, or the idea of revolution.

He goes on: 'And all they really do is go around starting up the national anthem at rallies, then knocking the hats off people as an excuse to start a fight.' He shakes his head. 'Poor boys. They know *nothing* about terror.'

A waiter comes. Laszlo orders coffee with the food, and it comes almost instantly, black and thick in a miniature white cup. He sips, and goes on. In chaotic Hungary after the war there was no help available for a man in his condition.

‘What condition?’ Maxine asks.

‘I was shell-shocked,’ Laszlo says, quite openly. ‘I was a ruin of a man. Hysterical blindness was my main symptom, but there were others. Nightmares, insomnia. A friend saved my life by sending me away, to artist friends in Berlin. My family was wealthy, you understand, well-connected. So began the wandering years. But I got treatment in Berlin, psychoanalysis and art training. A potent combination.’ He smiles. ‘There was the cabaret, too – that was catharsis – but it was the talking and painting that healed me. Very therapeutic.’

Maxine finds she is staring at his hands, looking for a tremor. For a trace of his suffering. He lifts the tiny white cup, smoothly, to his lips. Puts it down in its saucer with a clink, not a rattle.

She looks at his face for a trace of the shame that disfigured her father, but finds none.

The bowl of soup arrives. There are two spoons, but when Maxine picks hers up and nods towards the other, Laszlo declines with waving fingers.

‘Amelia doesn’t know this, but Daisy’s still at Maitland. Hiding from the landlord. Don’t know what she’ll do if he finds her there, or finds another tenant. I’ll ask her to meet you next time. At least this way she’ll get a square meal.’

A ghost in the empty house. It’s hard to imagine. Maxine finds she has begun to pity Daisy, even as she baulks at the idea of sharing lunch with her once a week. ‘You shouldn’t have sent her down to the camp,’ she tells Laszlo, between mouthfuls.

‘I didn’t. Daisy does whatever she likes, as you know.’

‘But what you told her about it...she got the wrong idea.’ Even as she’s saying these words, Maxine feels wrong-footed. ‘It’s a real place, Laszlo. A

ghastly, real place. Not made-up, not a painting. Not a story you can tell to suit whatever it is you think about the world.'

Laszlo shrugs, and downs the last of his coffee. 'If you say so. But I'm surprised. Ralph's got the idea – he knows all those little imitation houses are nothing more than proof of denial. A story, you see? And I thought you were the open-minded one.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Well. Ralph has already made his mind up about many things. He doesn't have your capacity for doubt.'

Maxine pauses in her eating, frowning at her spoon in the bowl. She owes Laszlo, but that doesn't give him the right to be presumptuous. As if he knows the two of them any better than she knows him. He has insulted Ralph, but his observation, in the same breath, that she is inclined towards doubt, is not one from which she readily takes comfort, as he seems to suppose she will. 'Actually, I wish I had Ralph's dedication,' she says. 'Perhaps if more of us did, we wouldn't be stuck in that place.'

'True, but they don't, do they? And you are stuck, and Ralph's zeal makes him miserable. It can be a handicap. Like blindness.'

Maxine wishes he were as clear on what is making *her* miserable. How she wants to give up, sometimes. Throw the typewriter into the sea. 'You think he can't see when he's defeated.'

'I'm saying perhaps he can't alter his vision, because he thinks that's a kind of defeat. It's what happens when you always look at how you want the world to be, and forget to look at how it is. Dada was against the future, you know.'

Maxine rolls her eyes. 'That's nonsense. The future is inevitable.'

'Inevitable? But the moment it becomes a reality, it's no longer the future. Do you see what I'm saying? It's no more substantial than a dream.'

The doctor has come all the way from Rydalmere with his assistant, a nurse in a clean uniform. Maxine doesn't know where Rydalmere is but those in the camp who do indicate, with the tone of their voices and nods of the head, that it lies at an impressive distance. This must mean the doctor is a dedicated sort, is the general conclusion. They are lining up in the winter sun to see him, flicking at sand flies.

It might not be such a distance in a car, and charitable visitors to the camp arrive exactly that way. The doctor and nurse are no exception. After sending some camp kids ahead to spread the word about the free examinations they've come to do, they walked through the camp, the nurse carrying a folding table, the doctor his black bag, their gait brisk but for the sand piling around their polished shoes.

Maxine has lined up to humour Ralph. She can't imagine what any doctor might tell her that she doesn't know already: that whatever ravaged her has passed and left her weak.

'Name?' asks the nurse, when she reaches the front of the line.

'Daisy,' she says, without thinking. She is unprepared for the question, however, and realises she doesn't know Daisy's last name. Because she doesn't want to hesitate too long, she blurts out her own surname. 'Daisy Fraley.'

While the nurse takes down Maxine's other false particulars in a wind-ruffled ledger, the doctor begins his examination.

'Fraley?' he says with conversational interest. His clean, dry hands exert exploratory pressure on the sides of her neck. 'I know a Mr Fraley at the hospital. No relation of yours, I suppose?'

'There's only my father by that name,' Maxine replies. 'But he's a carpenter.'

‘This is a patient I’m talking about, not a colleague. Age would be about right. Have you been well?’

The sun seems to grow a degree or two warmer. It casts a painful glare over the dunes. Perhaps she is not as recovered as she thought. ‘No. I had a bad fever, but it’s passed now.’

‘Any rash or cough following the fever?’

She shakes her head. The stethoscope makes cold contact with the skin exposed at her breast. She wants to know, and she doesn’t. ‘My father’s name is James.’

‘Jim Fraley! That’s him.’ The doctor listens. ‘Breathe in for me. Now out. Now in again. Good.’ He unplugs the stethoscope from his ears. ‘Your heartbeat’s a little more rapid than it should be. But the good news is there’s no sign of any virus. Rest is what you need, and plenty to eat.’ He raises his eyebrows as if to say he knows his prescription is fanciful.

‘Is he all right? The man called Jim Fraley, I mean?’

‘Well, it’s difficult to say at this stage. He was picked up from somewhere. Malnourished, but otherwise in bodily health.’

Maxine frowns. ‘So...’

‘It takes time to diagnose these things. And we’re somewhat stretched, at a time like this, as you can imagine. In any case, I can’t discuss a patient’s medical condition with a stranger.’

‘No, of course,’ says Maxine. ‘It’s just—’

‘I’m assuming you’ve lost touch with your father? Best to give them a call, if you want to be sure.’ The doctor glances around the camp, acknowledges the lack of telephones. ‘Better still, visit yourself, if you think it might be him. There’s a train from the city, stops nearby. Rydalmere Psychiatric Centre.’

*

She has to borrow money from Myra for the train ticket; there's no getting around it. On the journey she pushes from her mind, periodically, lists of other things she could have bought with the fare. It's such a habit now, this endless tallying, this futile matching of money in the hand to items on the list, a jigsaw with pieces always missing. It feels like its own madness.

And she's feeble, still. She got up at dawn to walk from the hut to the road to the tram stop, jumped the line in three goes all the way to Central Station. The morning delivered her into the city and she can't say the throngs of people, walking with purpose in the clear winter sun, didn't stir part of her up. It's energy, the city in the morning. Possibility. She knows that possibility, how easily its promises are broken, how any amount of bustle and sunshine is no use to you in a dingy terrace room with empty cupboards and the bailiff banging at the door. It moves her all the same. It's brand new every day, just for an hour, the city.

But the surge of feeling wears her out and she collapses into her seat on the train, huddles in a corner with her head on the window. The cold outside permeates her skull; she's not substantial enough to warm the window. The tracks and bushes wobble past in her lowered sightline; the smell of milky tea drifts through the carriage. It's the first time she's left the camp in weeks and her mind travels back to it, plaiting up road and rail in a long rope she can grab hold of and use to haul herself back. The place itself is just an idea though, at this distance, like any mark on any map. Details blur as she travels farther away, and she picks them over in her mind. They have the strangeness of beach objects. It is strange to her that they exist: the rusted latch on the hut door; that odd knotted stick that hasn't burnt through after two days; the minute flecks of ash on the stick, the contours of charcoal. Flies exploring the tiny cratered landscape of the bench, then buzzing out to the latrines, perhaps back again, or to some other shack, some other bench, finding a crumb like a boulder there. To them the world is big enough, the camp is big enough, and she wonders why it hurts her to think about that. Wonders why the idea of coming to rest somewhere is the most painful feeling she can have. She wants to be rid of it

all, then, seaweed fronds that catch her ankles in the shallows, tin that holds the heat.

Except the tin came from far away, from the ground; has been transformed once and might be transformed again. In any case it will last. No, it's the living things that pain her. A shrub in the dunes with its intricate, succulent leaves, its silent flowering – it shrieks some kind of horror at her. Some terrible sadness. Perhaps it's her desperation, come face to face with the simplicity of being. What does a little plant clinging to sand on the unnamed outskirts of a city at the end of the earth want for itself? It wants nothing; it's a detail. But such detail. All that effort just to live with your roots in the ground, with your grave marked out on the very spot you were born. The humility of it is unbearable. She was once oblivious to the trifling size of her particular world. Where she came from, land-locked, there weren't any sailors, no callers from foreign ports except those at the high end of business, and what would they have ever had to do with her? She was born to a terrace row and a place running errands for her dad's business, until she married out of it – and that was meant to be the end of it. The map in her classroom had been there to remind her that the people in charge of her were in charge of the rest of the world, too; it wasn't there to give her ideas.

It is simple, but not easy, to travel to the other side of the world. Up to the time they left England, time had moved in a straight line, marked by the points of passing years, but her territory had been small and circular. She always returned to the centre. Emigrating to Australia flung that radius so far beyond what she knew that it seem less like a widening of the circle than a breaching of it; she, her brothers and her father arrowing out and away across the oceans to a distant sphere from which history, for one reason or another, had not returned many of those it had received.

That distance was a task, something to be dealt with. First in the imagination: to undertake the journey from *here* to *there* required them to believe that *there* existed, even though it was nothing more than hearsay. The work of traversing the space between Liverpool and Sydney took six weeks,

and Maxine was nauseous for every day of every one of them. Her arm hung over the edge of the lower bunk. Her face sought refuge in the flat, hard pillow. The three other young women in the cabin took concern for her in turns, and so made it last, in one thin but unbroken stream of saved meals, water glasses and emptied basins, until the liner docked.

The boys visited. Ernie climbed all over the other bunks while Bert sat, disconsolate, out of reach at the end of her bed. She divided her energy between calling to Ernie to get his feet off her cabin-mates' bedclothes, and trying every tactic to get at the cause of Bert's distant mood. Things washed over Ernie. A tidal wave could go over the ship and Ernie would shake himself off like a dog. But Bert was always sensitive, and she worried now that the two of them had been abandoned by their father in some way. Bert pouted and kept dark and quiet in a way intended to say, she was sure, what use to anyone are *you* lying there, anyway?

Her dad visited. Maxine heard the triple tap of his knuckles, the greeting – bright, droll, shy, depending on who opened the door to him – and then the discernible whoosh of absence as her cabin-mate stepped out of the room, left them to it.

He would sit on the very edge of the narrow bed. 'How're you going then?'

If he'd felt her brow, picked up her hand, it would have been different. But he didn't touch her, and all she heard in his enquiry was the desire for a reprieve from the necessary show of caring. Something else she would have to find the energy for. She'd sick up a smile, lift her head, try her best to look just well enough to be left alone. Her own relief when he left the room – the knowledge that it would be twenty-four hours before she had to do anything for him again – would leave her feeling revived enough, briefly, to sit up in bed and apply herself to a magazine. As though she'd gotten away with something.

She didn't know what was worse, the nausea or not being allowed to surrender to it. It was hard to make someone feel better about so many things when she felt so rotten herself.

*

The train disgorges its passengers at Rydalmere station, and she searches until she finds a sign to direct her; she'd rather not ask anyone the way. Picked up from somewhere, the young doctor said. Perhaps her dad will be able to tell her where, but does it really matter? Will the name mean anything to her? The names of places here are hostile. It might tell her how remotely he has travelled, but it will never tell her he was welcome.

She would have thought that the police don't bother much with vagrants any more – their numbers making it an impossibility – so he must have been doing something to attract their attention. If it were violence to anyone, she supposes, then she'd be visiting a cell now, not an asylum. She wonders if he or anyone else will be able to tell her that, and if she wants to know, wants to bear witness to the shame and sadness of it. Better to leave it, perhaps, in the place where it happened, in the record books of a small-town police station, behind the meaningless mark on the map.

The hospital at Rydalmere is a grand Victorian institution of the kind that loomed in the skyline of her childhood town. Its dimensions are ominous after the low and makeshift environs of the camp. A vast building to house a vast, collective madness. She gives her father's name at a desk of polished wood. The nurse is indifferent to the power of a name; when Maxine utters her father out loud in this place it is the end of a kind of muteness, an admission that alarms her, but the nurse to whom she makes it shows no sign of being affected. Perhaps his illness is unremarkable in this place. Perhaps he is unknown to this nurse, nothing more than a name among many names, on a list among many lists.

'You don't have long,' says the nurse, checking the fob watch pinned to her breast pocket. 'Dinner is at midday, sharp.' She does Maxine the service of opening one of the heavy double doors, then lets her take the weight of it, leaves her standing in the threshold of the large room into which they lead.

Maxine surveys the room, a hall of sorts turned sitting room, with tall windows at wide intervals. There are forty or fifty men inside, dressed alike in an array of shirts and pyjamas in shades of white and faded blue and grey, whose captive milling seems to alter the gravity of the room, inducing a kind of seasickness. Her hand slips minutely on the painted door.

Was this how it was for her mother, the first time she visited Jim at the sanatorium? It might have been years, not months, since she'd laid eyes on him. And what did she know about where he'd been, except what reached her via the brutal parataxis of bulletins and other people's telegrams? Did she check her hair for fallen tendrils before she stepped into the room and its wash of sea-light?

Maxine's mother would have wanted to know how soon she could have her husband back, exactly as he was before. How soon she could let the story go, like an embroidered handkerchief dropped from the pier, into the wind. There was a child and a business to build and every good reason for him to get well. She would not go back to the factory, and neither would her daughter.

And England was not France and the war was over. Whatever it was that haunted him, it was unseemly to remember it with such persistence. Maxine could hear her say it: he always was bloody-minded.

Rydalmere is nowhere near the sea and the light is weak and gloomy. And when she spots her dad sitting under one of the near windows – fragile and bony, blunt-whiskered shave a day or two old, shirt too big across the shoulders, the collar up nudging his chin – the question that sounds in her head startles her: *Is that all you are?*

Easier to imagine her mother's feelings than to know her own. Confusion, since always. A father wasn't supposed to need her like that, was he? Why did he ever have to bring her into it? She was only ten. And the boys – he put himself first, his own weakness. He should have been looking after them all.

All that buried anger. She could face up to a policeman with a gun in the street, for the sake of a stranger's house. But her own father.

And now she crosses the room to him.

‘Maxine.’ His eyes are lucid blue in the gloom, bright with surprise.

He comes up out of his chair and grips her with his upper arms, right to his chest. That old embrace, tight as a trap. She pushes herself back, tries to bring him into focus. The window surrounds him like a picture frame. He looks altered, diminished even; but when she studies him she sees he is not altered, it’s just the effect of seeing him in this strange, cold place.

And there are the hands in spasm, as though there are two eager children, one on the end of each arm, shaking his whole body. *Come on, come on.*

She stands with her own arms folded around her, remembering the fits, the black anger. When he shook like that he couldn’t work, and it was their fault he needed to work, their four hungry mouths. She learnt it was easier to be sorry for something she hadn’t done than to aggravate. Easier, too, after a while, to imagine she had done something after all.

They all colluded. Her mother dispatched her to the front line, knowing she was the only one with a chance of soothing him. And God help them all if he wasn’t soothed. It wasn’t hard – a song or a smile would do it, her head on his belly while he rested, until its rise and fall found an even rhythm. Her mother pulled the drapes across any windows that faced the street. The spasms themselves were never, ever mentioned.

‘Did you try to get in touch with me at Myra’s?’ she asks. ‘I haven’t been there for a while.’

He hesitates, then shakes his head. ‘I didn’t want...I’m no good to you. I couldn’t show my face there.’

She isn’t going to comfort him, not this time. She’ll make him say it. They can both wish all they like for him to be strong, to be well, but he isn’t. There is the fact of it.

Between them, his hands flap out a second, silent conversation.

‘I never sent you anything,’ he says, trying again.

‘I never thought you would,’ she replies, with a harsh, short laugh.

‘There wasn’t anything to send.’

‘It doesn’t matter.’ She draws breath. ‘You’re not well, Dad.’

‘I’m no madder than I was.’

Her anger can’t stand up then, against his utterance of the thing. It hits her like a falling building: that his illness and the shame of it are two different kinds of suffering; that she’s never been able to tell where the illness ends and the shame begins. She’ll help him with the first thing, if she can, but the shame is not hers to bear.

She sits down next to him, on a bench that runs the width of the window. Outside, a severe lawn is edged with palms and unfamiliar flowering bushes. ‘Are they treating you?’

‘There’s no treatment here. Not for me. It’s a bloody holding cell. Bloke over there’s got nothing wrong with him except he’s blind and his family can’t keep him. I’m only here because they didn’t have anywhere else to put me.’ His eyes widen. ‘Have you got a place, Maxine? Oh God, don’t you go and bloody leave me here.’

This is a reality she has only half contemplated up to now: that finding her dad would not be the end of it. Her eyes travel the room, up to the high ceiling and down again, to the patients sitting, talking, playing cards. It’s bleak, but clean. Dinner is every day. Is there any more suffering here than at the camp, is it any less sane a place? Are the shacks and tents and humpies any more than holding cells?

She can’t take him to that place. And how will they ever hope to leave, with Jim in tow? She pictures Ralph’s face, the expression that would appear on it if she turned up with him. Of what he would keep to himself out of love for her.

A loud bell sounds in another room. It reminds Maxine again of the ocean liner, of all the meals she missed. The men begin to shuffle towards the door, as two nurses appear to hurry them along. One claps her hands. ‘Dinner time, gentlemen!’

‘You should eat,’ Maxine says.

‘What,’ says Jim, ‘so you can scarper?’ There’s no rancour or accusation in it, just grim acknowledgement. ‘I don’t blame you. I’m on the scrapheap, aren’t I?’

Maxine allows herself a wry, silent laugh. But people fight over the scrapheap these days, she thinks. Crawl over what is discarded, imagining its potential. In the right eyes, anything might be transformed: into something useful; or even into something that attempts a strange, new meaning.

‘Get some food in your belly,’ she says, after a few more moments’ thought. ‘There might not be any, where I’m taking you.’

*

‘Bert and Ernie,’ says Jim, on the train. ‘Now there’s a story. I went to Vera’s, a few months back.’

‘You saw them?’

He nods. ‘When I got to the gate of the farm, boy rode over on a horse, to see who I was. Bugger me if it wasn’t Ernie.’

Maxine’s eyes widen.

‘He doesn’t recognise me at first. I says, Ernie, it’s me, it’s your dad. Where’s your brother? And he looks at me strange and I says, don’t sit there looking at me like I’m mad.’

His telling dies away then, for a few moments, while he and Maxine regard each other over the carriage’s rattle and sway.

Jim picks up. ‘And I know I look a bit rough and ragged, from living on the road, so I tell him, take me to see your Auntie Vera. And he rides off just like that, and I don’t know whether I’m supposed to follow him or what. So I start off down the dirt track after him. But he’s long gone, all the way to the house. And when I get there, my own sister’s on the verandah, ready to give me what-for. “What kind of low trick is that?” she says, and she’s waving her arms around and all that, “pretending to be a boy’s father?” So I shout out “It’s me, Vera, it’s Jim.” And she marches over and when she gets close enough for a

proper look she doesn't know what to do for a minute, and then she says "What kind of father doesn't recognise his own son?" Jim leans back in his seat, nods to Maxine. 'It was Bert, would you believe it. Your brother Bert can ride a bloody horse.'

*

The man who answers the door to them at the UWM hostel is unfamiliar.

'We've come to see Sam Shade,' Maxine says, moving to step past him into the foyer.

'Steady on,' replies the man, who won't stand aside. 'I'll have to see if he's in. Wait here.' He tries to shut the door on them.

But Maxine catches it. She glances up and down the street. She's come to ask a favour, not to bring trouble, and is desperate not to be seen.

'What do you think you're doing?' The man's full weight is on the door; Maxine's foot is wedging it open. He glares at them through the gap.

'For God's sake,' says Jim, behind Maxine. 'Look at the bloody state of us, would you, and use your head.'

Together they do make quite a sight: Maxine, pale as a phantom, whittled down to the bone by salt and sun and fever; and her dad, faded hospital hand-me-downs drawn around him. They had to burn his things, the nurse who discharged him said. She gave him a certificate and a shilling from a locked box, for the train. The wild shaking in his hands subsided on the journey, but only a little, to a violent tremble.

Maxine feels the weight on her foot give way a fraction, and takes advantage of the man's moment of wavering to shoulder inside.

'Now look here—'

Maxine raises a hand to halt him, without breaking stride across the tiny foyer. 'I know the way.' She takes to the stairs and Jim hurries to keep up with her.

No one answers her knock, but the door to Sam's room is not locked. When they first step inside, it's not that she has the sense of stepping back in time – the room is too changed for that. It's quite the opposite. She is made immediately, acutely aware of time having passed since she last stood in this place. There was all that hope, all her expectation. Ralph and his newspaper clippings. The protest that might yet have been a success. She recalls the strangeness of the café where she dined with Ralph and then met Laszlo, so many months afterwards, and his story of return to his parents' home.

'Should we be in here?' asks Jim.

'It's fine.'

The mimeograph machine is still on its table in the corner. Maxine walks straight over to it, rests her fingertips on its solid, mechanical curves. Tests the handle. It's as though it takes her weight, somehow, like a point of rest, a rock in the ocean reached by means of a long, exhausting swim. She treads water, catches her breath.

Sam shares the room with Laszlo now, of course. A holdall spills clothes at the end of Ralph's old bed. There is the irregular cabinet filled with oddities, brought from Maitland, and the space is cluttered with objects that might be from an attic or a workshop or a bargain bin, that Maxine can't pick for junk or art. There's even a shop mannequin in one corner, missing an arm. It's wearing Laszlo's smoking jacket.

And on the floor against one wall leans an enormous canvas perhaps eight feet wide, dark with blue and brown and grey-hued paint, cross-hatched with ravaged lines and shadowed with holes reminiscent of eye sockets or mouths gaping in anguish or horror. Out of the blocks of dirty colour emerge forms that might be aircraft wreckage, the trunks of immolated trees, gunmetal waves against a black horizon. The painting is all these things and yet it is hard to say what it is.

Her father has come to a standstill before it, as if he has seen a ghost.

Maxine searches the canvas until she finds the signature. Warscapes – that was the word Amelia used for Laszlo's old work.

‘I’ve brought you to meet the man who painted that,’ she tells her father carefully. ‘He might be able to help you.’

‘Is he a doctor?’

‘No.’ She is going to say that he’s an artist, but realises how silly it will sound, as though one is a reasonable substitute for the other. Perhaps Laszlo can’t help her dad. But being here will be better than waiting, in a room without visitors, for this endless weather to pass. Here, at least, there is the possibility of change. ‘This is where you’re going to stay for a while.’

‘I thought I’d be staying with you.’

‘You’re not well enough to live where I live.’ She takes her father’s hands, but can’t still them; they shake her own as she steers him to sit on Laszlo’s bed. ‘Now, Dad. I’m afraid you’ll have to wait on your own.’

‘What?’

‘There’s no time now for the whole story. But I need to go.’

‘You can’t just—’

‘It’s no good to anyone, me being here, all right? So sit tight, and when Laszlo and Sam come back—’

‘Who’s the other bloke?’

‘Calm down.’ She pushes her hair back with her fingers.

‘Where will I sleep? There’s only two beds.’

‘On the floor, I expect. You’ve slept in worse places, haven’t you?’

When he starts with another question, she raises a hand, requesting his silence, his patience.

And it’s into this silence that the noise from downstairs shifts and clatters. Maxine frowns, turns her ear to the door. There are voices, speaking blunt, indeterminate things, and a barrage of scuffling. Footsteps, boots. Coming up the stairs.

She straightens up to standing as four policemen burst into the room, an influx of muscle and uniform. After a brief moment of impasse, during which they regard the tableau of Maxine and her father as if the two of them are not quite what they expected to find, three of them, officers, take to different

corners of the room, and begin turning things out, turning things over. One makes a swift mess of Laszlo's cabinet, another pulls his jacket off the mannequin and throws it onto the floor. The third upends Sam's mattress. The sergeant, a thick-necked man with hair shorn to bristles below the line of his cap, looks from Maxine to her father and back again several times before his gaze settles on Jim, still sitting on the bed.

'We have a warrant to search these premises for seditious material. Are you Samuel Shade?' His voice is level; there's a pink, sleepless look around his eyes.

'No.'

'Name?'

'Fraley.' Her father digs in a pocket, with painstaking slowness, for his hospital certificate.

At the sound of her surname being uttered to the sergeant, Maxine cringes. But he doesn't appear to make any connection. Perhaps she is not of such great interest after all.

The sergeant's eyes linger on Jim's shaking hands before he reaches over to relieve them of the proffered hospital papers. 'Got out today, did you?' he says, after reading them. 'You must be better than you look.'

'He's a returned man,' says Maxine, trying to keep the disgust out of her voice.

'Found something, Sir!'

The third officer has the giant canvas by one end and is holding it upright, away from the wall. He points to the floor behind it. The sergeant squeezes in and retrieves a squarish bundle tied up in sacking. He unwraps it on the desk, and scatters the collection of books and pamphlets it holds, glances over each title. Then he stacks them back up. 'This is the stuff, boys.'

The officers, whose searching has slowed while the sergeant examines the find, come to a standstill, awaiting instruction.

The sergeant turns, surveys the room, and spots the mimeograph machine in the corner. 'We'll take that, too,' he tells them.

‘No!’ shouts Maxine, leaping up to put herself between the officers and the table. ‘You’ve got no right!’

An officer steps forward and grabs her upper arm; she kicks him in the shin as hard as she can.

‘Maxine!’ says her father, fear in his voice.

‘Mr Fraley,’ warns the sergeant, and Maxine’s eyes meet his in time to see the very moment when the penny drops.

Sergeant Brown scrutinises Maxine from across the table, in the subterranean room at the station. The calmness of his voice is disconcerting. ‘We know you organised that eviction protest. We know you went door to door, round the whole neighbourhood, giving out your bloody propaganda.’

‘Frank Walsh took the whole thing over, when he came out of gaol. That battle – the rocks, the barricade – I was against it.’

‘But you were seen there on the day of the protest.’

‘I lived there. I didn’t have anywhere else to go.’

Sergeant Brown folds his arms and leans back. ‘So if it’s Frank Walsh we need to talk to, where is he?’

‘I don’t know. I haven’t seen him since then.’

‘What about your boyfriend, Ralph Devanny?’

Maxine bites her lip. It’s not that she has any desire to protect Frank. But she can’t send the police to the camp. ‘I haven’t seen him either.’

‘Very elusive, your friends, aren’t they? But you’re still in touch with Sam Shade.’

‘I haven’t seen him for months. I went today to ask if he’d take my dad in. He’s not well. My dad, I mean.’

The sergeant comes forward in his chair, leaning right over the table and eyeballing her. ‘I don’t think you appreciate the kind of trouble you’re in, Miss Fraley. Why don’t you think about it for a while?’ He gets up and leaves the windowless room. She hears the door lock behind him.

The bitter truth is, he’s right. What is there to appreciate, when he’s told her so little? She has been arrested, and will be questioned until they either charge her with something, or let her go. This is all she knows.

She doesn’t know much about the law, except for a lot of trumpeting about innocence and evidence and justice. Well, if that’s the kind of system that

can declare a man like Ralph a criminal, she can't trust it. She'll go down herself before she sees him back in gaol over the Barnard Street protest.

Hours pass, at a guess, before the lock turns. It's not the sergeant, just a young constable with high colour in his soft, white cheeks. 'You can go,' he sighs, as though the powers that be have finally given in to some tenacious petitioning on her part for freedom.

'What?'

'You are free to go,' he repeats, enunciating each word. He's holding the door open for her with an impatient hand. It seems she might as well be just another Paddington drunk, as far as he's concerned.

She gets to her feet and shuffles past him into the corridor.

'That way.' He points.

He walks behind her to the end of the corridor, up a flight of stairs, along another corridor. On the way she looks out for Sergeant Brown, expecting to be apprehended, or offered an explanation, or processed in some further way. But the young constable delivers her to the front desk and turns on his heel without a word. The officer at the counter is attending to an enquiry, and doesn't notice that she's there, with nothing between her and the door swinging open to the street.

There's nothing for it but to step out, shivering, into the night.

*

Maitland has always looked uninhabited from the front yard, and Maxine will not know whether she is in luck until she tries the doorbell.

There is no answer. Stupid, she thinks. As if someone in hiding would answer the front door in the middle of the night.

She starts to move around the house, tapping on windows. 'Daisy!' she calls, at each one. When she gets around the back, she cups her hands around her eyes and tries to peer through the conservatory glass. There's little

moonlight. Shadows, empty floor. A person wouldn't hide in a conservatory, either.

It's not until she gets to the window of the spare room – the room where she and Ralph once spent a day – that Daisy appears like a spectre out of the darkness inside, giving Maxine the fright of her life.

The sash window rumbles open a few inches. 'You scared me,' says Maxine.

'I scared you?'

Daisy heaves the window up further and helps Maxine climb through into the bedroom. She latches the window and pulls the drapes tight, then fumbles in a corner of the dark room. A flame sputters to life and candlelight balloons around them.

The high bed is gone. There's no furniture left in the room at all. Daisy appears to have made a bed for herself out of a blanket and a coat. The coat, Maxine notices, has a fur trim. She still has a pillow, stark white, an absurd island of comfort on the bare boards. There are drawings arrayed along the skirtings, around the entire perimeter of the room, so that each of them can be seen. The candlestick sits up on a small tower of books and journals; the topmost one is smattered with droplets of wax.

'As you can see,' says Daisy. 'I am quite reduced.'

'Have you got anything to eat?'

Daisy nods, and gets to her feet, lifting the topmost book with the candle on it. She leaves the room. The boards creak in the hall. In the darkness, Maxine guesses her way to the makeshift bed, kneels down and reaches for the coat, draws it around her. Buries her cheek in the fur and closes her eyes, surrendering at last to the embrace of warmth.

The sound of the door signals Daisy's return. She brings light and a crumbling segment of shop-bought pie in greasy paper. Maxine adjusts the coat around her shoulders, and bites into it.

'You know, I never thought I'd say this,' says Daisy, returning the candle to its place on the pile of books. 'But I'm quite pleased to see you.'

Maxine swallows. If she weren't so busy eating, she might have allowed herself a smile. 'Hear me out before you make your mind up about that,' she says, through another mouthful. 'I've come with a proposition.'

Daisy lowers herself to the floor. Watches Maxine from the corner, as still as the settling night. If she's cold without her coat, she doesn't show it.

'Here's the thing. I need to get a message to Ralph at the camp.'

'What's the message?'

'That I've been in trouble with the police, and he needs to go. Away from Sydney, anywhere. I've told them I don't know where he is, but I'm worried they're following me. So, if I go back there...'

'The police? If that's the case, won't they have followed you here?'

'Well, yes. But if I stay, and you go, in the morning I mean. It's all I can think of.'

Daisy's eyes glint in the dim light. 'And then they'll know someone's in here. Thanks a bunch, Maxine.'

Maxine only has one plan, and only one thing with which to bargain. 'It doesn't matter. If you do it, the shack is yours, Daisy. I'll come down for my things in a couple of days, when it's safe, and bring the rest of yours.'

Daisy is silent for a long time. Maxine finishes the pie, and folds up the paper. Lays it to one side in case it is needed again.

'And then what will you do?' asks Daisy at last.

Maxine doesn't answer because she can't. Daisy doesn't understand yet how far life simplifies, into footfalls: one thing, then another after it. She thinks she is reduced, but that is a journey she's only just begun.

'Are these Amelia's?' she asks instead of the drawings on display.

'Yes. She took all of her finished canvasses with her. These are all I've got.'

'I'm sorry.'

Daisy's skin is opalescent. She speaks with a certain feverishness. 'You enter a dream of togetherness, and then you wake up eventually inside it, and remember that you started out as two separate people.'

Maxine considers this, remembering a door pushed open on rusted hinges, cracks that sprinkled sunlight, whorls of dust. 'But even after you wake up. You can still love someone.'

Daisy stares at the row of sketches, ankles crossed, chin on her hands, elbows on her knees. 'I should blow out the candle,' she says, leaning towards it. 'It's my only one.'

*

Daisy dresses up as smartly as she can the next morning, and leaves Maitland early with a select bundle of sketches under her arm. Her intention is to lay a false trail, right into the city, to a dealer she knows, some art-world acquaintance with an interest in the avant-garde. She chose the drawings carefully, although Maxine suspects that this has more to do with her own attachment to some of them than with the dealer's particular taste. She plans to leave the drawings there, double back and make her way to the camp.

She seems enlivened by the idea. Maxine is not to worry, she insists. 'I've more experience than you at being duplicitous.'

It isn't a game, Maxine wants to say, but thinks better of it. So what if it's a game to Daisy? Perhaps that's the only thing she's able to take seriously. She's always thought of Laszlo as eccentric, but that's a costume woven easily, out of his foreignness, his bohemian past. Daisy on the other hand will be out of place wherever she goes, no matter what she's wearing.

Maxine repeats everything she said last night. Ralph can't tell anyone where or why he's going, not a soul. And if Myra comes round, which she will, with questions. Tell her I'm with my father. Tell Ralph I'm all right. And give him this. He'll know what it's for.

She slips a hand inside her clothes, retrieves and unfolds the most valuable thing she owns: an empty envelope with two names written on it, three times each; repeated, crossed out, repeated. A six-word story, the truth of which

only she and Ralph can decipher; but she supposes there are other truths to be read there, if reading is also a kind of guessing.

After Daisy goes, Maxine ghosts the house, her breath echoing on the floorboards, the bare walls. The rooms, stripped of objects, seem smaller and more ordinary. She doesn't dare step into the conservatory, into that tempting bath of warm light, but from the door she can smell the faint residue of turpentine.

Somewhere above her, out of sight, the sun tracks across the sky. All the drapes are closed, all day. In the cloistered rooms, she keeps time by the infinitesimal changes in the quality of light.

When the light is gone, she tries to sleep, wrapped in the blanket on the floor, surrounded by those sketches of herself in which she is rendered unrecognisable, into parts.

The morning wakes her, colder in the big house than any she's known in her draughty hut by the sea. There's no wood in the fireplaces, no gas in the kitchen, no electricity. She drinks icy water. When she goes out, she leaves the sash window open an inch, as Daisy has shown her to do.

She reaches the station by footfalls, one in front of the other.

'I want to speak to Sergeant Brown,' she tells the officer on duty at the counter. 'On the matter of Frank Walsh's whereabouts.'

*

Maxine puts a handful of items into the suitcase, which has long been stripped of the tags that showed where it has been and to whom it belongs.

Daisy's clothes, her bearing, have already attracted attention at the camp. While Maxine packs, children dart to the door of the shack, pause, and run away to giggle at a near distance if either she or Daisy turns to look. They buzz, settle and fly again; their eyes know all the gaps in the walls.

'You should sell that coat, and get yourself a cheaper one' Maxine suggests. 'Before someone else does it for you, and keeps the proceeds.'

There's never been a problem with theft at the camp, but no one here has ever had a fur-trimmed coat, either.

She finds the bottles of mercury polish and explains to Daisy what they are. Daisy listens with a look of fascination, her eyes wandering now and then around the shack, as though it is all some kind of fantasy from which she expects to awaken, but which she will take the opportunity to explore in full, while she is here. There is no way to know whether Daisy will be all right, but that is true for everyone, and perhaps the safest place to be is in a dream, where Daisy seems to be, where hurts don't stick and hunger fades with the morning.

There's no one at the Walshes' tent. Maxine is about to give it up, and leave, when she spots Myra on the beach below, near the mouth of the storm-filled creek. The play of rain in gutters and drains flushes out what the city doesn't want, and it all meets the sea here, under a crust of yellow foam. Annie and Clarabel poke around in it with sticks.

Maxine starts towards her, but she makes little progress before Myra turns. Maxine lifts a hand. Myra's own arms remain wrapped around her; her face is inscrutable at this distance. But her sharp call to the girls is audible, before she coaxes them away up the beach, towards the power station. Above their dwindling figures, smoke from the chimneys smudges the sky into an infinitude of greys.

Time to go.

Maxine strikes up a pace on the road out of the camp. The suitcase, almost empty, has little weight of its own. It is only made of cardboard, after all.

At the end of the road, she waits. The tram lumbers in from a distance, slows and loops to face back the way it has come. This is the end of the line. Maxine climbs on. The ticket inspector, alert to the proliferation of fare jumpers on this route, accosts her straight away.

'George Street,' she says, and hands him her last sixpence, and finds a seat at the back, where she can see the rails pay out behind the tram, towards the camp, like long lines into the sea of the past. She's not afraid of where she's

been. The bell sounds and the tram begins to speed and shudder, carrying her back, towards the heart of the city.

REFERENCES

ⁱ Nibbi, Gino. "Some Modern Masters." *Stream* 1.2 (1931): 5-8.

ⁱⁱ "HG Wells Peeps into the Future: World Economic System Coming – Love Will Have New Dignity." *The Mail*, Saturday 20 June 1931: 8.

ⁱⁱⁱ "HG Wells Peeps into the Future: Thinks Towns Will Rebuild Themselves." *The Mail*, Saturday 30 May 1931: 27.

^{iv} "HG Wells Peeps into the Future: World Economic System Coming – Love Will Have New Dignity." *The Mail*, Saturday 20 June 1931: 8.