Tuesday

Afterwards, he would remember paddocks stroked with light. He would remember the spotted trunks of gum trees; the dog arching past to sniff along the fence.

He cleaned his teeth at the tap on the water tank. The house in the bush had no running water, no electricity. It was only sporadically inhabited and had grown grimy with neglect. But Tom Loxley, spitting into the luxuriant weeds by the tap that November morning, thought, Light, air, space, silence. The Benedictine luxuries.

He placed his toothpaste and brush on a log at the foot of the steps; and later forgot where he had left them. Night would send him blundering about a room where torchlight swung across the wall, and what he could find and what he needed were not the same thing.

On the kitchen table, beside Tom's laptop, was the printout of his book, *Meddlesome Ghosts: Henry James and the Uncanny*. He remembered the elation he had felt the previous evening, drafting the final paragraph; the impression that he had nailed it all down at last. It was to this end that he had rented Nelly Zhang's house for four days, days in which he had written fluently and with conviction; to his surprise, because he was in the habit of proceeding hesitantly, and the book had been years in the making.

He owed this small triumph to Nelly, who had said, 'It's what you need. No distractions, and you won't have to worry about kennels.'

This evidence of her concern had moved Tom. At the same time, he thought, She wants the money. The web of their relations was shot through with these ambivalences, shade and bright twined with such cunning that their pattern never settled.

His jacket hung on the back of a chair. He put it on, then paused: shuffled pages, squared off the stack of paper, touched what he had accomplished. James's dictum caught his eye: *Experience is never limited, and it is never complete.*

When Tom called, raising his voice, the dog went on nosing through leaves and damp grass. It was their last morning there; the territory was no longer new. Yet whenever the dog was allowed outside, he would race to the far end of the yard and start working his way along the fence. Instinct, deepened over centuries, compelled him to check boundaries; drew him to the edges of knowledge.

Afterwards, Tom would remember the dog ignoring him, and the spurt of impatience he had felt. The dog had to be walked and the house packed up before the long drive back to the city. He was keen to get moving while the weather held. So he didn't pat the dog's soft head when he strode to the fence and reached for him.

The dog was standing still, one forepaw raised; listening. Tea-coloured puddles sprawled on the track. A cockatoo flying up from a sapling dislodged a rhinestone spray. It was a wet spring even in the city, and in these green hills, it rained and rained.

The dog's paw-pads were shining jet. He sniffed, and sneezed, and plunged into dithering grass. A twenty-foot rope kept him from farmland and forest while affording him greater freedom than his lead.

The man picking his way through rutted mud at the other end of the rope disliked the cold. Tom Loxley had spent two-thirds of his life in a cool southern city. But his childhood had been measured in monsoons, and the first windows he knew had contained the Arabian Sea. Free hand shoved deep in his pocket, he held himself tight against the morning.

Light rubbed itself over the paddocks. It struck silver from the cockatoo and splintered the windscreen of a toy truck threading up

the mountain where trees went down to steel. But what Tom took from the scene was the thrust and weight of leaves, the season's green upswinging. Over time, his eye had grown accustomed to the bleached pigments of the continent where he had made his life. But love takes shape before we know it. On a damp, plumed coast in India, Tom's first encounter with landscape had been dense with leaves. A faultless place for him would always be a green one.

He glanced back at Nelly's house. Afterwards, he would remember his sense that everything—the pepper tree by the gate, the sloping driveway, the broad blue sky itself—was holding its breath, gathered to the moment. The impression was forceful, but Tom's thoughts were busy with Nelly as he had once seen her: astride a sunny wall in the suburb where they both lived, a striped cat pouring himself through her arms.

In the corner of his eye, something blurred. At the same time, the rope skidded through his fingers. His head snapped around to see grey fur moving fast, and the dog in pursuit, the end to which sinew and nerve and tissue had always been building.

Tom swooped for the rope, and clawed at air. On the hillside above the track, the dog was swallowed by leaves.

Birdsong, and eucalyptus-scented air.

A lean white dog, rust-splotched, springing up a bank.

Things Tom Loxley would remember.

IT HAD begun, seven months earlier, with a painting.

April becalmed in hazy, slanted light. Tom clipped on the dog's lead and they left his flat to walk in streets where houses were packed like wheat. Windows were turning yellow. Dahlias showed off like

sunsets. On an autumn evening in the city, Tom looked sideways at other people's lives.

At a gallery he hadn't entered in the four years since his wife left, long sash windows had been pushed up; there were smokers on the terraces with glasses in their hands. Tom tied the dog to the garden side of the ornate iron railings and went up the steps.

A group show: four young artists. Their friends and relatives were congratulatory and numerous in the two rooms on the ground floor. Tom drank cold wine and looked at paintings. They seemed unremarkable but he knew enough to know he couldn't tell.

From the street it had seemed there were fewer people upstairs. He had his glass refilled by a pierced girl with ruffles of hair parted low on the side, and started up the stairs. But something made him glance back. She was looking up at him, her face gleaming and amused; and he realised, with a little lurch of perception, that she was a boy.

The first-floor room that ran the width of the building contained work unrelated to the exhibition below. A well-fleshed man stood in front of a painting, blocking it from view.

'Eddie's still channelling Peter, it seems.' He had a thin, carrying voice. A dark boy standing beside him snickered.

On the short wall opposite the door was an almost-abstract landscape at which Tom looked for four or five minutes; a long time. Then he went out onto the balcony and saw a couple leaving the gallery stop to fondle the dog's floppy ears. The word Beefmaster passed on the side of a van.

When Tom stepped back through the floor-length window, the large man was in the centre of the room. More people had attached themselves to his group. He gazed out over their heads; his face was round and turnip-white. The pallor made his eyes, which were very dark, appear hollow. He murmured as Tom passed. There was a small explosion of laughter.

Tom gulped wine in front of the picture opposite the door. His

scalp hummed. He thought, I am the wrong kind of thing. He thought, I don't belong here. The adverb having a wide application.

By an act of will, he directed his attention to the landscape in front of him. His formal training in art history was limited to two undergraduate years. They had left him a vocabulary, formal strategies for thinking about images. He believed himself to possess a set of basic analytical tools for operating upon a work of art.

Faced with this picture, he thought only, How beautiful. And relived, at once, the frustration that had edged his youthful efforts, shadowing the pleasure he took in looking at art. Pictures belong to the world of things. They cannot be contained in language. Tom was still susceptible to their immanent hostility. It had persuaded him, as a student, to concentrate on literature. There he was at home in the medium. For all their shifting play, narratives did not exceed his grasp. He paid them the tribute of lucid investigation and they unfolded before him.

An English voice said, 'Isn't it *completely* wonderful?'

A milky woman with crimson pigtails was smiling down at him. 'I was *sure* it was you.' She went up on her toes; she was wearing beaded mesh slippers. Up and down she went again, holding out her hand.

The rocking was a boon. It identified a party in the summer; a long woman rising and falling. 'We met at Esther's, didn't we?' Tom took her cool, boneless fingers. 'I'm sorry, I don't remember . . .?'

'Imogen Halliday. But everyone just says Mogs.'

Mogs was wearing a kimono fashioned from what might have been hessian, slashed here and there to show a silky green undergarment. She said, 'How is Esther? I've been simply *swamped*.'

'I've been out of touch myself.'

Two years earlier, Tom Loxley and Esther Kade had been deputed by their respective university departments, Textual Studies and Art History, to attend a weekend conference on Multimedia and Interactive Teaching Strategies. Under the circumstances, alcohol

and sex had seemed no more than survival mechanisms. Later both regretted the affair, which outlived the conference by only an awkward encounter or two. But Esther now felt obliged to invite Tom to her parties to show there were no hard feelings; for the same reason, he felt obliged to go.

Interactive strategies, he thought.

'Isn't life mad? But I *adore* working here.' Mogs swayed above him, waving a hand on which a green jewel shone.

Christ, thought Tom. It's *real*.

Mogs was, in her own way, catching.

'I was looking at you: you were transfixed. *Isn't* she a marvel?' The slippers rose and fell. 'Nelly *Zhang*,' said Mogs's soft English voice.

Tom nodded. He had read the name, which meant nothing to him, on the list he had picked up at the door. And noted that the picture was not for sale.

'Carson's known her forever. Since before . . . you know, *every*-thing. She's over there with him, actually. In the black . . . tunic, I think you'd say.'

Tom turned his head and saw a woman in a loose, dark dress that fell to mid-calf. Red beads about her neck, her twisted hair secured with a scarlet crayon.

'Really exciting. A *painting*. An early work, of course—she was barely out of art school. From Carson's own collection. Such a privilege just to *see* it now that Nelly only shows photographs of her work.'

Mogs was all right. But Tom wished she would go away. He wanted to be left alone with the picture.

Outside the gallery, a spotlight fell across a strip of grass where Nelly Zhang squatted, scratching the dog's chest.

'Hail dog,' she said. 'You speckled beast.' She peered at his name tag. Her sooty fringe made an almost shocking line against her powdered skin.

The dog wagged his tail. His good looks habitually elicited caresses, titbits. Experience had taught him confidence in his ability to charm.

Nelly stood up. Tom was not a tall man, but her head was scarcely higher than his shoulder.

She said, 'Lovely dog.'

He remembered that his wife used to refer to the dog as a chick magnet.

Nelly was lighting a thin cigarette. The pungency of cloves and behind it—Tom's sense of smell was acute—a bodily aroma.

The dog tilted his spotted muzzle and sniffed. Tom bent to untie his leash.

'That looks professional.'

'Just a quick-release tie.'

'A man who knows his knots. So much rarer than one who knows the ropes.'

He didn't say, I was lonely growing up.

He didn't say, String is cheap.

BUT IT might have begun long, long before that evening in Carson Posner's gallery. It might have been historical.

War took an Englishman called Arthur Loxley to the East and in time returned him with two medals and a shattered knee to ruined Coventry. His mother had been killed in the first raid; to his father he had never had much to say. A trio of sisters inspected him as if their free trial period might expire and leave them stuck with him forever. At some point each took him aside to ask what he had brought her from the Orient. Their blue eyes glittered with the understanding that the world had been made safe for the business of acquisition.

He was twenty-six, and his knee ached all through the winter. But the map was still stained pink. Pink people could move about it as they pleased; could rule a line on it and bring nations into being. Arthur returned to India, where that kind of thing was causing a commotion. He paid no attention to it, having had his fill of history. What he was after, then and for the rest of his life, was a bolt-hole, with drink thrown in. There was also the memory of a twenty-four-hour leave he had spent in the whorehouses of Bombay. A Javanese half-caste with spongy golden thighs was instructing him in the art of cunnilingus when boots thundered past in the street and a Glaswegian voice bellowed that Rangoon had fallen. Thereafter, news of defeat would always induce in him a mild erotic stir.

Having drifted down the Malabar Coast he fetched up in Mangalore, where he was taken on as an inventory clerk by Mr Ashok Lal, an exporter of cashew nuts with a godown in the port. When Arthur looked up from his ledger, boats rocked on green water.

He rediscovered, with gratitude, the room India granted to casual human theatre. It was there, on every street: in garlanded Ganesh affixed to a radiator grille, in a scabby, naked toddler with liquid jewels at his nostrils, in the man who, possessing no legs, propelled himself on a wheeled plank, advancing on Arthur with a terrible smile. It was not that Arthur idealised the place, for he was a kind man and the daily spectacle was often cruel. But he relished the friendly attention paid here to comedy and tragedy alike; a willingness to be entertained, amused, horrified that he recognised as a form of thanksgiving for the faceted world.

And so, from modest pleasures, Arthur fashioned a happy life. The locally distilled whisky was cheap, the beer cheaper. He ate devilled prawns every Sunday. Once a month he visited a former maharani who had a house with turquoise shutters in the shadow of the cathedral, and five exquisitely skilled girls.

An Indian who had been with the firm for eighteen months was promoted over Arthur, whose congratulations were sincere. He

was as indifferent to distinctions of race as to his own advancement. He drank steadily, sometimes fabulously, but always arrived at his desk sober.

Contentment, being rare, never fails to attract attention. Arthur Loxley, with his veined cheeks and drunkard's careful gait, was increasingly in the thoughts of a beautiful woman. Iris de Souza's father had informed her at the age of six that she was to marry an Englishman, and neither of them had ever lost sight of that goal. Iris's skin was fair, her face ravishing; many a pretty Eurasian was let down by toothpick legs, but Iris's calves were shapely. Her mother, a handsome crow, had had the good sense to die young. Her father—but it would take a separate volume to explore the intricate self-loathing of this man, who despised in others the inadequacies that crawled in his own murk. He was an umbrella, tightly furled. Springing open, he might gouge flesh from your fingers. His rages were unpredictable and inconsistent. Iris acquired early the important female attribute of fear.

Fear, crouched always like an imp under her ribs, leaped out on her thirty-third birthday. She remained in front of the mirror, fingering the treacherous silver thread coiling through her hair. She could still pass for twenty-four but that was hardly the point.

Next door the Ho baby was crying.

It was the war, thought Iris, the war had ruined everything, mixed everything up.

It was the mixing she had loved, at the time. In the WVS she had rolled bandages and mixed with English people. A girl called Babs—a new style of girl, fresh from England—was kind to the Eurasian volunteers. It was rumoured that Babs was a Communist. Iris was able to overlook this—also the way Babs wasted time conversing with tonga drivers, also Babs's blond moustache—because Babs took a shine to her. There were invitations to tea; the loan of a monograph on shanty-dwellers.

In April Babs was offered the use, for a week, of a tin-roofed out-bungalow on a tea-garden in the Nilgiris. It stood on the far side of the valley from the manager's house; his assistants had gone to the war and left their bungalow vacant. Unfortunately Babs had seen fit to invite two Indian sisters as well, the up-to-date kind who had opinions. Even the discovery that the Guptas were connoisseurs of detective fiction could not redeem them in Iris's view. With their homespun saris and dog-eared Agatha Christies, they had a disturbingly ambiguous air.

All was righted by the advent of Captain Lawrence Fitch, Babs's brother. He brought with him one of his fellow officers in the Hussars, a beanpole he addressed as Saunders; but for Iris this second young Englishman remained purely notional. There was only Lawrence: attentive to her every whim, always at hand with a shawl or a fish-paste sandwich, his honey-brown eyes sticky with appreciation. He had a scar just below the hollow at the base of his throat. More than anything in the world Iris wished to press her mouth to it. He gave off a powerful odour of tobacco and leather mingled, mysteriously, with burning sugar.

Ponies were hired. As he helped Iris mount, Lawrence's fingers grazed her thigh.

There were mornings on the spines of ridges clad with rhododendron; a picnic in splotchy light by a stream. There were cards and charades. One evening, with an extravagant sunset spreading itself between mountains, Ayushi, the younger Gupta girl, who wore a diamond nose stud, was persuaded to tell their fortunes. Smoothing Iris's palm with a firm, flexible thumb, she offered her a journey over water. The tiny diamond winked like a code.

Iris was a good dancer. Lawrence enfolded her in his smell and hummed along to 'Embraceable You' as he steered her through the French doors onto the verandah. On their last evening he wore his dress uniform of scarlet, dark blue and gold. Iris got her wish; and much more besides.

It was clear to Iris that she was engaged to Lawrence. Only, nothing was said for the moment. Discretion was her personal sacrifice to the war; she spent twenty months feeling exalted.

In that time he wrote to her twice; the second time, three scrawled lines stating what he would like to do to her when they next met.

In the last December of the war, she went into the WVS canteen and was greeted with the news that Babs's brother was dead. In Babs's sitting-room, on an ugly blond-wood settee, Iris poured out her own sorrow.

Babs stared at her. Then said, in a thick voice, 'How dare you claim a connection.'

Iris, grappling anguish and mucus, made noises.

'The idea of Larry and . . . you.' Babs ground her teeth. 'With your spangles-on-net dresses.'

Word got out.

Matthew Ho, the doctor's son who lived next door to the de Souzas, waited for Iris after mass. She had known him forever. On the way home, he asked her to marry him. Hygiene and his Sunday suit notwithstanding, he went down on one knee on the pavement. A crowd materialised at once to offer advice and encouragement.

Iris, schooled in obedience, relayed the news to her father. 'Damn Ching-Chong cheek,' said Sebastian de Souza. He might have been enraged but chose to be amused instead. After a moment, Iris could see that amusement was what the situation called for. Father and daughter tittered together.

For weeks, a word was enough to set them off. *Chopsticks*. *Pigtail*.

Every four months, for three years, Matthew took Iris to lunch at The Golden Lotus and renewed his proposal. On these occasions he remained seated. It was not the kind of restaurant to tolerate a spectacle.

Then he married a distant cousin, a girl who had been in Nanking when the Japs invaded. It was rumoured that unspeakable things had been done to her.

They did not seem to have caused any lasting damage, thought Iris, plucking the tell-tale hair from her scalp with vicious precision. Matthew Ho's wife had already presented him with three plump yellow sons. The baby was colicky. Iris would wake at night to his screams.

In a sea-stopped street, she passed Arthur Loxley. He peered in under the umbrella Iris carried for her complexion, and lifted his hat.

Change was flexing its claws, snarling the weave of Arthur's days. The maharani had announced that she was emigrating to Cincinnati. She was paying for the girls to retrain as shorthand-typists. Arthur, feeling a brisk pattering across his stomach, had opened his eyes to find the prettiest one practising her finger exercises while fellating him.

He would have been a pushover for Iris in any case. She was beautiful and set herself to be charming. His strength of will could be gauged from the quantities of papier-mâché knick-knacks and gaudy rugs he had amassed, the result of bazaar encounters with liquid-eyed Kashmiri merchants.

Arthur rented a sweltering cell in the house of a government clerk with nine children. It had a concrete verandah overlooking a strip of baked earth, where bold canna lilies, red and fierce yellow, grew in rusty tins. In that narrow place he passed sublime afternoons, dozing with a tumbler at hand and his landlord's mongrel bitch stretched panting beneath his Bombay fornicator. The younger children made a game of him, daring each other to drink the melted ice in his glass or deposit a spider on the hillock of his belly. Once, as he snored, the smallest girl placed a blue flower between his parted lips.

Iris, inspecting the set-up, saw at once that it would not do. There was a swathe of stink from the drains. The dog's teeth worked

furiously at her ticks. The children, intuiting an enemy, gathered at a distance and dug in their noses.

Thus it was settled that Arthur would join the de Souza household. If he faltered at the prospect of his father-in-law's countenance over breakfast, he gave no outward sign of alarm. He was still flooded with gratitude that Iris had chosen to make him the gift of herself; a marvel twenty years of marriage would not quite suffice to dim.

And the house, set on a hill, was wonderful. Like the de Souzas, it had declined over three centuries. First the grounds had shrunk, then the mansion itself had been divided and sold piecemeal and partitioned again. It had suffered concrete outgrowths and bricked-in colonnades. An elderly gentleman lived on a half-landing; a balcony sheltered a family of seven. But the house wore its changes like medals, hung out strings of washing like flags. Flowering creepers fastened it to the earth. In the compound, goats and hens roamed among tall trees and lavish ferns. There was a bed of rangy, perfumed gardenias. The de Souzas' apartment on the ground floor retained a portico, pillars, ceilings that flaked but were plastered with garlands and painted with cherubim, windows that gave onto the puckered blue sea.

Arthur Loxley enjoyed this distinction: he was the sole individual to slip past his father-in-law's guard. The lessons of history notwithstanding, Sebastian de Souza had continued to believe in the supremacy of the English race. But illusions that the fall of Singapore had left intact could not long survive daily proximity to Arthur. Four days after Iris returned from her honeymoon, her father informed her of her mistake. The enumeration of his son-in-law's inadequacies occupied the following half an hour; and then the rest of Sebastian's days.

Yet the marriage was not unhappier than most.

Money was one problem.

Another was the lack of a child. Arthur made no reproach; but Iris, who had lied to him about her age, was frightened that

barrenness would betray her. There was also the dread that Lawrence, fumbling *down there*, had passed on something unmentionable.

She consulted doctors, Western-trained and ayurvedic, two specialists, a soothsayer, a faith healer. A priest exorcised the house. Iris implored Saint Anthony to grant her father the blessing of grandchildren, and sent five rupees to a famous temple in the south.

Finally, when she had exhausted her stratagems, Iris discovered that she was expecting a baby. She was forty-one years old but the pregnancy was uneventful, the delivery easy. They wrapped the infant in clean cloths and presented him to her. She hadn't known that the universe weighed five pounds, eleven ounces.

He was named Thomas Sebastian after his grandfathers. But Iris, preparing a bottle of Cow & Gate infant formula, observed his dark limbs and coarse hair, and beheld her mother the crow.

The danger of a throwback: one reason why respectable whites avoided Eurasians.

Prices went on rising. Arthur cut down his expenditure on drink to a fifth of his salary.

Iris had two barres of different heights installed in her large, rectangular hall and opened a dancing school for children. She felt the shame of it: a married woman obliged to work.

Her qualifications were four years of ballet at a school run by a Frenchwoman; much was made of this in Iris's prospectus. However, late in life Madame Pauline Duval had taken to appearing at mass draped only in a creamy lace tablecloth. The memory was still vivid in Mangalore. Iris was obliged to lower her fees. Her Academy of Dance attracted only a few dozen children, not all of them from desirable backgrounds. But it covered the cost of St Stephen's Junior College, where Tommy was now an Upper Infant.

Matthew Ho's wife, a bundle with her hair in a knot, turned up

to enrol her twin daughters. Iris was pleased to observe that the doughy little tots were devoid of talent.

Sebastian de Souza died. A grim, protracted death ensuring maximum havoc for Iris and a succession of slovenly nurses.

Shortly before the end he had a bowel movement, fouling the air. Trying not to inhale, Iris approached with basin and sponge. Her father opened his sunken eyes and addressed her: 'Dolt.'

Later, turning it over in her mind, she thought he might have said, Don't. It was in any case his last message to her.

Thirty years earlier, he had sold the apartment. A provision in the settlement granted him life tenancy, rent-free. Sebastian had not considered it necessary to impart these facts to his daughter. A lawyer's letter gave Iris thirty days to vacate the premises.

Abdul Mustafa Hussein, the new owner, received her in the tiny, lentil-smelling office attached to his dry-goods store. 'Kwality Remains When Price Is Forgotten' announced an ominous plaque above his head. But the man in the white cotton skullcap was not unkind, and when Iris began to cry, he was sincerely moved. She was allowed to remain in her ancestral home at a rent that was only mildly scandalous.

The Academy taught only the basics, flat shoe and barefoot dancing. But a parent withdrew her daughter, saying that Iris's marble floor was injurious to a dancer's feet. Iris protested, reasoned, argued, stormed; in vain.

There came a Saturday when the only children waiting on the verandah were the Ho twins, their pigtails secured with stiff red bows.

Old Mr Lal retired, entrusting the export of cashews to his brother's son. Vijay Lal was twenty-nine and had spent two swinging years in Leeds. He had sideburns, and a secretary he called Mini. Vijay summoned all his workers over the age of thirty and explained

what was wrong with India. 'This is a very backward-thinking country. My uncle, for example, went on employing some people for the simple reason he had always done so. I am intending to change all that.' Then he gave them a month's notice. 'For the Age of Aquarius we are needing fresh blood.' He rose from his chair and clicked his fingers. He might have been ordering up the massacre; instead his voice rose in song. He warbled, in a relentless whine, of times that were a'changing. When at last he had finished there was silence. Gradually it dawned on his audience that he expected applause.

Iris took it with remarkable aplomb. 'Now we have to emigrate. What I've been telling you for years.'

At first, Arthur put up a resistance. But history was not on his side.

Every year there were fewer and fewer of those whose hybrid faces branded them the leftovers of Empire. The Pereira boy had gone, the Redden girls were going; the railway Gilberts, all eight of them, had scraped up the fares for Toronto.

Tom walked up to the lighthouse. The sea hurled itself at the land; went away, bared its teeth and renewed the attack. Passed for Canada. Passed for England. People he had known all his life had been scrutinised like cashews and declared fit for export. The past was sliding from under his feet. He glimpsed, for the first time, the flux inherent in human affairs.

The scene struck him as momentous. He felt he was witnessing it from a great height, fixing it in his mind like a memorable passage in a book: the figure in navy shorts on the headland, the turmoil below.

On Iris's settee, Matthew Ho turned a sisal brim in his fingers and declined Arthur's offer of whisky and soda.

He was one of those who had prospered since Independence. But eight months earlier his mother had died, and now Dr Ho had resigned his registrarship at the government hospital. His wife had a cousin in San Diego, and the Hos would be joining his household later that week.

'There are the children to think of,' Matthew said, his thin eyes directed at a vase of plastic roses on a teapoy. Altogether the fellow was a queer fish, as Arthur remarked afterwards. 'Gives the impression he might come out with something neither of you wants to hear.'

Two bookend children had accompanied Matthew Ho, as if he required material evidence for his case. Tom, instructed to 'Go and play' with his guests, led Opal and Pearl onto the verandah. There he scratched a mosquito bite, limp with envy. At the house of a wealthy school friend, he had seen a Coca-Cola bottle. Acquired at a diplomatic sale, the empty bottle was displayed on a cabinet along with other trophies. Tom had coveted it at once: teenage, curvaceous, modern; a glass America. He looked at the twins, whose half-moon upper lips showed no indent, and was compelled to say, 'I'll probably get a transistor radio for Christmas.'

Pearl and Opal inspected him in silence. Then their round little mouths twitched. Side by side on the verandah wall, they kicked their four patent-leather feet and laughed in his face.

'Not America.'

'Not England,' countered Arthur.

'Not England,' agreed Iris. 'Why should we suffer The European Winter?'

Arthur blinked.

'Audrey,' she reminded him, with quiet triumph. 'Australia.'

Audrey, Arthur's youngest sister, was the one who had kept in touch. She was not a trivial correspondent, reserving her flimsy blue aerogrammes for weighty communications: the death of their father, a brother-in-law's appendectomy, the Coronation, her marriage, the decline of England, the prospects that glittered elsewhere.

Iris, the least practical of women, possessed the foresight that is a by-product of fear. Against just such a day, she had found the postage for Christmas cards, birthday greetings, a studio photograph of the three of them taken against a cardboard Taj Mahal.

Passed for Australia.

At the thought of a New World, Arthur felt great weariness. He was not sure he could be dusted off for it. But there was his son's face, etched with excitement. He had realised, in the first week of his marriage, that his wife was vain, capable of pettiness and not in love with him. In all that concerned the boy, however, her faculty for selflessness outstripped his own. She would willingly plough herself into the dust for the sake of the future quivering in their son. Arthur thought of rain falling in a far country; one day, turning to grain.

Old Mr Lal sent his ancient, gleaming Bentley to take them to the station. Friends and neighbours gathered on the steps. At the last moment, with faces already arranged for farewells and all the luggage squeezed in, Tom said he had to use the lavatory.

In the yawning rooms of childhood he raced hither and thither, touching a doorframe, a tile; thinking, The last time, the last time. Glancing through a window to fix a view forever—the last time, the last time—he saw a dog on the shadowed edge of the lawn: a tiny, heraldic beast, one forepaw raised; milky as marble. Then it was gone. Fear opened its wings under Tom's heart. Already a neighbour had acquired a dog he didn't recognise. It was a glimpse of the terrible future: a world he knew as well as his own face altering by degrees, never entirely alien but riddled with strangeness. One day he would pass through these scenes like a ghost, everywhere encountering proof of his irrelevance.

In 1972 in Australia there was work even for a man of fifty-three. Even for Arthur Loxley.

When he left the pub that Thursday evening, Arthur's breast pocket contained what was left of his second week's wages from the bottling plant where he had been taken on for a month's trial.

Any number of things might have been on his mind as he approached the tram tracks. The need to find a flat, as they could not

stay with Audrey forever. The discovery that Australia, or at least this southern corner of it, was not a warm place. The certainty that he would not keep his job, as the senior accountant didn't like Poms and had told him so.

In fact, Arthur was gazing at the sky, and remembering a Sunday School picnic on a manored estate where there were blue pools under trees. Then he wondered why violets look purple close up but blue at a distance. There came into his mind something barely remembered, and perhaps, after all, only dreamed: the discovery of blue petals on his tongue.

He heard a shout, and the wild tinging of a bell, but did not immediately understand their significance. When he saw the tram swaying above him, he hopped smartly back. There was time to register surprise and pleasure at his nimbleness; then the car hit him. He heard his knee crack as he went down.

AT FIRST Tom was not afraid. The dog was given to running off. In parks, beside creeks, over waste ground: tracking a scent, he vanished; emerged as a white band glimpsed among trees or on a plunging hillside; disappeared again. In time—half an hour or so—he would turn up, grinning.

But this was the bush: a site constructed from narratives of disaster. Tom thought of dogs forcing their way into wombat holes, where they stuck fast and starved. He thought of snakes. He thought of sheep, and guns.

There came the sound of barking.

Twenty yards away, a track led up to the ridge. Tom took it at a run, air tearing in his chest. The pale trunks of saplings reeled past.

Away to his right it went on: a high consistent barking designed to attract the pack's attention. So the dog barked when dancing around a tree where a cat or a possum clung among leaves. After a while, it would be borne in on him that he was alone in his venture; that the man would not assist in capturing the prey he had gone to the effort of flushing out. Like marriage, their relations had entailed the downward adjustment of expectations. A dog: Tom had pictured a faithful presence at his heel, an obedient head pressed to his knee. And the dog, thought Tom, arms hanging loose, breathing hard on a bush track, what had the dog hoped for from him? Something more than the recurrence of food in a dish, surely; surely some untrammelled dream of loping camaraderie.

Over the years, with patient repetition and bribes of raw flesh, he had taught the dog to fetch. But when he picked up the ball and threw it a second time, Tom would feel the dog's gaze on him. He tried to imagine how his actions might appear from the dog's point of view: the man had thrown the ball away, the dog had obligingly sought out this object the man desired and dropped it at his feet; and behold, the man hurled it away again. How long could this stupidity go on?

'Anthropomorphism,' Karen would have said, his wife being the kind of person who mistrusted emotions that had not been assigned a name. But what was apparent to Tom in all their dealings was the otherness of the dog: the expanse each had to cover to arrive at a corridor of common ground.

Where the bushes fanned less densely, he pushed his way through and found himself on an overgrown path. There was a smell: leafy, aromatic.

The barking now sounded higher up the hill; somewhere to his left, where a wall of grey-green undergrowth barred the way. He pressed on ahead, hoping to loop around behind the dog. His jacket grew damp from the branches that reached across his face. Water found the place between his collar and his skin.

He was so intent on moving forward that at first he didn't notice the silence. When he did, he stopped. Silence meant the dog had given up hope that the pack would come to his assistance; and with it, the chase. Silence meant he was making his way back.

Tom Loxley returned, under a thickening sky, to the place where the wallaby had bounded across the track. Well after the rain came he was still standing there, a slight man in large wet sneakers, calling, calling.

By lunchtime the dog had been gone five hours and the rain over the trees had fined to drizzle. Tom remembered Nelly's raincoat, hanging from a hook behind the bedroom door; it would be too short in the arms, but the hood was the thing. When he took it down, he discovered a promotional calendar from a stock agent stuck to the door. May 2001: no one had torn off a leaf in six months.

The forested crest of the hill was hemmed on the east by the track that ran down from Nelly's house past paddocks and a farmhouse. To the north was the trail Tom had followed that morning; another led up the hill to the south. Both came out on the ridge road that curved around the top of the hill and turned down into the valley, where it met the muddy farm track. Tom set out along the perimeter of this bush trapezoid, calling and whistling and calling.

He told himself the dog was making the most of freedom, running where his nose led, through the crags and troughs of unimaginable scentscapes.

He reminded himself of the time when two children selling chocolate to raise money for their school left a gate open and the dog escaped into the street. Karen and Tom ran along pavements, checked parks, trespassed, knocked on doors, called animal shelters. Then the phone rang. A woman who lived half a mile away had returned from work to find the dog asleep on her step and her cat's bowl licked clean.

The dog was still hard-muscled, swift and strong. But he was twelve now; old for a dog his size. He spent less time darting after swallows and more snoozing in his basket, dream-paws scrabbling. He would not willingly be out in this rain.

The ridge road was deserted. But it was the route taken by the logging trucks. The drivers, quota-ruled, were always in a hurry. The dog had no traffic sense. With the wind in his face, Tom tried not to think of these things.

He followed a path that led into the bush from the southern track. It took him to a clearing where a treadless tractor tyre held the charred traces of a fire. There were crushed cans; cigarette butts and balled-up tissues disintegrating in the scrub.

The past four days were already assuming the unreal glaze of an idyll: a time of rain broken up by windy sun, the soft, mad chatter of Tom's keyboard, the dog curled like a medallion before the fire.

In the evening he walked down to the adjoining farm.

Turning off the ridge road on Thursday evening, he had pulled over to let a mud-freckled Land Cruiser pass. It slowed; the driver leaned across the passenger seat. Tom saw a man with sparse grey hair and eyes half as old as the rest of his face: Nelly's neighbour, Jack Feeney.

There was a trailer to one side of Jack's drive, and a prevailing air of practical untidiness: old seedling trays loosely stacked, lengths of pipe covered with a plastic sheet, lax coils of wire netting. But the farmhouse clad in biscuit-brown bricks was a suburban box, neat with window awnings and potted plants; as incongruous in that setting as if aliens had placed it among the paddocks, and left a flying saucer disguised as a satellite dish on the roof.

The man who came out of the door raised his voice over the racket of dogs who lived a dog's life on the end of a chain. 'Help you?'

When the Australian desire to provide assistance meshed with

the Australian dread of appearing unmanly, it produced the bluff menace that was Mick Corrigan's default setting:

'Yeah, I reckon this wallaby would've kicked your dog's brains out for sure, mate.'

'Tell you what, he's dead meat if he goes after sheep.'

'Saw a kangaroo hold this kelpie down and drown it in a dam one time.'

'Can't blame a bloke that shoots a stray first and asks questions later.'

Tom had seen those helpful blue eyes in schoolyards: 'What about you fuck off back to the other black bastards?'

The Land Cruiser was in the carport, but Mick said his wife had driven Jack to the medical centre in town. 'He'll be tucking into a counter tea by now while Nees finishes up work.'

'Nothing serious, then?'

'Nah, check-up. He's got a crook heart. Tough as shit, but. Got to hand it to these old bastards,' said Jack's son-in-law magnanimously.

He insisted on accompanying Tom to the gate, contriving to suggest, under the guise of courtesy, that he was seeing off an intruder. He walked on the balls of his feet, the fingertips of one hand jammed in his pocket. There was something heroic—at once absurd and touching—about his gait.

When there were bars between them, he looked at Tom. Who saw looped gold in a lobeless ear, a bracelet of coppery blue tattoos; a handsome face that had started to melt under a cap of dull yellow curls.

'Known Nelly long?'

Tom shrugged.

Mick leaned in. 'Tell you what, mate, you want to watch how you go. Look what happened to the poor bloody husband, eh.'

Tom walked back up the hill in the dirty light of a day that had gone on and on, despair dragging through him like a chain.

In April, a week or so after he first met Nelly Zhang, Tom was driving home from work when a storm broke. In Swan Street golden-eyed tramfish glided through tinsel rain. There were the oily dabs of streetlights; pedestrian doubles fleeing through shop windows.

The traffic trickled past a travel agency plastered with images plucked from dreams. *Sorry*, said the bone-white script on the hoarding next door, graffiti being only the residue of a larger story.

A woman dashing between awnings crossed her bare arms over her chest. Tom put his hand on the horn.

Nelly said, 'But you're going the other way.' Water was running off her hair and her arms. It glistened on her cheekbones, which were broad as a cat's.

He turned up the hill, into the monumental sky.

She directed him through post-industrial streets, factories reinvented as offices, cafés, galleries, apartments. In a cul-de-sac behind the train station were four grimy brick storeys, the remains of a painted advertisement still visible on a wall whose lower reaches were covered in tags. Tom's headlights revealed corrugated iron nailed over windows; bins and sodden cardboard in a concreted yard.

The building, a minor landmark in the area, was known as the Preserve, said Nelly, after the old ad for marmalade on the wall. 'The Fat Orange. Who needs the Big Apple?' She had lived there for thirteen years, she told him; illegally, because her lease was non-residential.

'There used to be a printing works on the ground floor. They held out until Christmas. Now there's only us.' Nelly indicated an estate agent's board: *Your own slice of history*. She had small, creaturely hands. 'Not for much longer.'

Posner, he thought. *Us*. He noticed that she had a way of pausing between sentences that rendered her talk mechanical. It was faintly disconcerting; he found himself tensing for the grind of levers.

Nelly was saying, 'No one actually makes things any more. It's all lawyers in lofts around here.'

The complaint of trains, and wind lifting like a voice. Carapaced in steel, Tom Loxley was lashed about by sentiments as large as weather.

Among other things, he was disturbed—aroused, intrigued, repelled—by her spoor of spice and sweat.

She was fumbling for keys. He switched on the overhead light, and saw, in her gaping bag, a little cardboard folder that fastened across the corners with elastic.

'Come up and have a drink,' said Nelly.

A hundred years earlier the Preserve had been a textile mill. By the 1970s, it was housing several small industries. On the top floor, before Nelly's time, children's shoes had been manufactured. She showed him a box, retrieved from the rubbish on a landing, that contained wooden shoe moulds. 'Brendon's after them for an installation but I can't bear to give them up.' She set them along the edge of the tall, scarred bench that served as a kitchen counter.

Brendon, Rory, Yelena: the artists who rented studios from Nelly. The Preserve was huge. An echoing central space included a kitchen corner: sink, ancient stove, microwave, ramshackle cupboards. There were two cavernous studios and two merely large ones; a cubicle in which Nelly slept, another she used for storage. Five lavatories side by side. Each artist had claimed one, with a spare for visitors. On the facing wall someone had stencilled *Cannery Row*.

Tom sat in a vinyl armchair and drank whisky from a glass that had once held Vegemite. Rain rollicked against the grid of frosted panes that filled one wall. A game of Go was set out on a table. He noticed things on that stormy autumn evening that he would not notice again as familiarity blunted attention: an orange-glazed lamp base, grubby grey walls whose grazes showed blue. The heavy folds of a Pompeian red curtain which, partly drawn back, exposed a door

set halfway along a passage. Tom looked twice before realising that both curtain and door were painted on the wall.

The other thing that struck him was the makeshift air of the place. It was cheaply and carelessly furnished with disparate items. People had come and gone from here, leaving marks of their passing: a lampshade that was too small for its base, mismatched cups on a mug-tree, assorted chairs.

Nelly was draping the plum-coloured towel she had used to dry her hair around the wire shoulders of a dressmaker's dummy. It stood behind a long table on a dais by the window. A *Concise Oxford* with a peeling spine had fetched up under a couch. A plant pot displayed Barbie and Ken's heads impaled on rulers marked off in inches.

One reason these things would stand out in Tom's memory was that the Preserve was brightly—in fact glaringly—lit that first evening. That was unusual. He would grow accustomed to seeing the room velvety with shadows, in which a lamp or a string of tulip-shaped lights acquired dramatic force.

Nelly Zhang under flat strip lighting with damp hair falling about her face was older than she had appeared at the gallery. Tom saw the loosening skin on her neck; the hips thickened by ill-fitting trousers.

A great draught of rain-smelling air entered with a girl in a slick yellow jacket. 'Oh, oh,' shrieked Yelena. She swooped on the row of little wooden feet. 'Oh, Nelly, they look so sad. Like something left by a war.'

She had waves of golden and bright brown hair, a wide red mouth. On her feet, below long, bare legs, she wore lacy orange ankle socks and peep-toed golden stilettos. From a bag she drew plastic containers that snapped open to fill the room with the scent of coriander and lemongrass and rice cooked with coconut.

Tom saw the legs, the face made for the camera. It was inevitable perhaps that such perfection would throw up a kind of smoke-screen in his mind. Consequently, in those first few weeks, images of

luminous flesh and a geranium-red mouth accompanied Tom Loxley's self-administered pleasure. He would believe, during this interval, that it was for Yelena he returned.

That initial misdirection led to others. So that months later, when he said, 'Why didn't you tell me?' Nelly answered, 'But I thought you knew.'

'How could I have known?'

'Didn't Yelena tell you? You were always hanging around her.' Nelly's tone was severe, and bubbles of joy effervesced in Tom.

Reproached in turn, Yelena stared. 'You're Nelly's friend.'

'Yes, but at the start . . . I'd only just met her.'

Yelena shrugged. She was the kind of female who shrugs superbly. Men circled her like moons. The beam of her attention might alight now and then on their affairs, but only a fool expected sustained illumination.

What Tom misconstrued was mostly trivial. Like Brendon and Nelly's talk. 'Did you know Dan Kopensky?' one might ask, and the other reply, 'The completely undetectable hairpiece?' Then they would be off, their conversation splicing student houses in Darlinghurst, rip-off art dealers, Cyn Riley's film, dancing to The Sports, assorted bastards, that Canadian girl with the amazing tits, a waiter in a café in Glebe Point Road, someone called Freddie.

Tom concluded, not unreasonably, that these two were old friends. Until a chance remark revealed that they had met at a millennium party.

'Brendon's from Sydney,' explained Osman. He kept his voice low, reaching under the rackety music. 'Nelly and he knew the same crowd when she spent a year there so long ago. But'—his broad hands fell open—'they never connected.'

He smiled at Tom. That slow smile was what people remembered of Brendon's lover, who had the kind of face that hasn't set itself a plan. 'Look at Brendon dancing, so terrible,' said Osman, who did

not know, on that June evening in the Preserve, where they were holding a party to mark the winter solstice, that he would die on New Year's Day. His mind had reverted to an afternoon in Istanbul in 1993: heavy bees fumbling the lavender outside his window while he translated an Australian poem. *'To go by the way he went you must find beneath you / that last and faceless pool, and fall. And falling / find—'*. He looked at Tom. 'Find, find . . . what? Do you remember what comes next?' His right hip had begun to ache.

Tom would tell himself there was no design at work in the misunderstandings. They arose because Nelly and her friends had forgotten how recently he had arrived among them. It was a compliment, this taking for granted that spared him explanations. He acknowledged, too, his own part in the confusion, his preference for observation over asking questions. He wondered, not for the first time, whether the trait was symptomatic of arrogance or caution, the clever boy's reluctance to expose ignorance or the outsider's fear of what might follow if he does.

No one had set out to mislead him. The agent at the controls was concocted from inadvertence and poor timing. It was the selective vision of hindsight, he reasoned, that set a figure in the carpet. There could be no motive for deceiving him; and only a mind corroded by evil or disease deceives without purpose.

But not everything he failed to grasp was insignificant. And by accumulation, even minor errors take on density and cast shadows. Reality is an effect produced by the accrual of detail, a trickery whose operations Tom had traced in the pages of countless fictions. He was unable to shake off the impression that a similar process governed his relations with Nelly, staging elaborate scenarios that mimicked the solidity of truth. These, if probed, readily revealed their flimsiness; yet who could be sure that the vista thus arrived at was not equally contrived? The bottom of the box might always be false; so Tom Loxley feared.

There was the matter of Rory.

Nelly, clashing cutlery in the sink one afternoon, addressed the boy over her shoulder. 'You've known for ages Gretchen's interested. She sets up a meeting to look at your folio. And you ring up the day before and cancel?'

'Yeah, whatever. How come you're suddenly so keen on Gretchen anyway? You've always said she had crap taste.'

'You've got to put the effort in. With any dealer.'

'Easy for you to say. Like when did you last have to—?'

But he interrupted himself to answer his phone: a sullen, square-set boy with a patch of black fur under his lip. 'Sweet!' he said to his caller. And to Nelly, 'Gotta go.' Tom he ignored.

They heard the crash of his boots on the stair; the jump that took him to the half-landing.

It was a scene that returned to nag at Tom. It reminded him of something he was unable to name. He had recognised Rory, of course: the dark boy who had laughed with Posner that first evening at the gallery. It was obvious Rory didn't remember him, but he rather thought Posner did. At the solstice party, the dealer's eyes had considered Tom as if he were something on a plate; something Posner might eat, or send back to the kitchen.

Yet Posner set himself to be attentive. The reedy voice, so at odds with the man's bulk, held forth about Tom's book. 'James and the uncanny: it wouldn't have occurred to me. His novels seem so thoroughly materialist. All those people hankering after all those things.' He filled Tom's glass from the bottle he was holding and inclined his head, flatteringly deferential.

Encouraging a man to display expertise is the shortest path to gaining his trust. It seemed a transparent tactic.

'And money! It's everywhere in James,' went on Posner.

Tom thought, And what's more elusive, more ghostly, than money?

On the other side of the room, Nelly was laughing.

'Mind you, it's a long time since I've read him.' Somehow it was

clear Posner was lying. Tom thought, He's prepared for this conversation. Now he'll trot out some lit crit crap he thinks is profound.

'There's a sentence in one of the notebooks about going to the Comédie Française a great deal in '72.' Posner said, 'I came across that, quite by chance, years ago. It had the effect of marooning James forever in the past. Eighteen seventy-two: unimaginable from the perspective of the 1970s. But I've never forgotten it.' He smiled: a wet, pink-lipped, humourless occasion. 'As it happened, I was living in Paris at the time. And I did go, now and then, to the theatre. I imagine a young man reading that in my diary one day.' Posner looked up from his glass. 'Quite a jolt, realising that the life you remember so vividly exists for someone else as so much historical dust.'

Tom thought, I've felt that too. Was, despite himself, moved. Yet the man made his flesh crawl.

Nelly had said, 'We had a thing—oh, you know, ages ago. Before I was married.'

'I thought he was gay.'

Her hand made a rocking motion. 'He's not too fussy, Carson.'

The idea of her young. There was a faded Polaroid pinned to her lavatory door: high-necked blouse and tight skirt, pouty mouth, jet hair drawn into a topknot with strands falling around her face. She was twenty and looked thirteen. She looked desirable, bruised, corrupt, infinitely oriental. 'Very *World of Suzy Wong*.' Posner's broad-knuckled fingers carried the knowledge of her flesh.

Tom knew that Rory had dropped out of university; that he lived in Posner's house. He imagined them together: the silver head grazing a dark line on the boy's flat stomach.

At the solstice party, he watched Posner's terrible eyes seek Rory out; and the boy not noticing, stroking the hair under his lip, then crossing to the throng around Yelena.

Later, when things were breaking up, a group left to go clubbing, Rory swept up in the clamour.

Watch out, thought Tom, he's slipping your leash. He felt a small, mean joy: Posner, wakeful and alone.

It was to Yelena, early in their acquaintance, that Tom spoke of Nelly's painting. 'I can't get it out of my mind.'

The girl was spooning baked beans straight from the tin onto white bread. She had a predilection for vaguely repellent snacks: fruit-flavoured yoghurt eaten between bites of gherkin, crackers topped with peanut butter and chocolate sprinkles.

Her great dark eyes rested on Tom. 'You say it like a criticism.'

'It's just . . .' He began again. 'I keep coming back to how beautiful it is.'

Yelena spoke through a mouthful of beans. 'So?'

Acutely aware of that angled face, he answered with deliberate scorn. 'It's an amateurish response. It doesn't exactly advance understanding, does it?'

When she had finished her sandwich, Yelena set down her plate. She reached under the couch and retrieved the *Concise Oxford*. 'Amateur: one who is fond.' There was something semi-literate about the way she read aloud: sounding each word distinctly, as if testing it out. 'It says here, from *amare*, love.' She looked at Tom. 'Love is amateurish. You wouldn't say it advances understanding?'

She abandoned him soon afterwards. Then Nelly turned up, and noticed the plate Yelena had left on the kitchen counter. She picked it up, and came and perched beside Tom, on the broad arm of his chair. 'Look.'

The plate, smudged here and there with sauce, was rimmed in faded gilt. It showed a man and a woman conversing in a garden where a fountain played against a backdrop of pagodas and snowy peaks. Opposite this scene, a tree blossomed pinkly beside water, while overhead a plane flew through rags of blue.

Tom could see nothing remarkable about this object. If anything he was faintly disgusted by the combination of smeared surface and pretty patterning.

Nelly was saying, 'Plates like this, they're usually olde-worlde. They have these pictures of frilly ladies and hollyhocks and stuff. But this one's got a plane.'

He looked again.

'It would've been the latest thing when it was designed,' she went on. 'A tribute to air travel or something.'

But there was something about the plane, the oriental scenery: recognition flashed in Tom. 'It's Shangri-La.' He took the plate from her and turned it over, scattering crumbs. Together they read the inscription: *Lost Horizon*.

'Oh wow. I remember that movie from when I was a kid.'

'The book the film's based on was the first literary paperback. Late '30s, something like that.'

'How cool is that!' Delight stretched in Nelly's face. 'So this plate would've been doubly modern.'

She had come in from the street. Was stitched about with thready peak-hour fumes that fluttered in Tom's nostrils.

He rubbed his nose and said, 'That's not quite how I'd describe it.' He was not sentimental about second-hand crockery, having expended energy in putting some distance between himself and that kind of thing.

'But that's what gets me.' Nelly said, 'Modern can never keep up with itself. Nothing dates quicker than now.'

A few days passed, and Tom found his thoughts returning to the sauce-smeared plate. He couldn't understand the pull. Then, without warning, the plate slipped sideways in his mind, revealing an object he had once yearned for with the absolute, concentrated longing of small children and later quite forgotten.

Auntie Eulalia Doutre, who was not his aunt, had a long, low cupboard with angled legs and sliding doors in her hall. When Tom

and his mother called on her, Auntie Eulalia opened one of the doors and handed the child a wooden object for his amusement. It was a pencil box with a range of snowy mountains and a pink flowering tree painted on its lid. Tom ran his fingers over it and the lid slid to one end. He found this wonderful, the box that opened sideways, doubling the cupboard door's smooth glide. He moved the lid back and forth, glancing now and then at the cupboard. In bed he would think about the wooden box lying in the wooden cupboard. He pushed his sheet away and drew it back over himself, and felt pleasure thrill in his marrow. The big door slid open and so did the little one. The child wished to keep that marvel safe forever.

The plum-blossom plate had this consequence too: it focused Tom's attention on Nelly.