

Moscow! Moscow!

The moment had to come, that hard dreaded moment of limbo when, waiting for the taxi outside the theatre, she was no longer Irena Sergeievna buoyed on the pretence and artifice of imagination and craft, but Rosalie Richter pelted and beaten and stung by kicking wind and memory and by shifting shadows in a reality from which to escape could only be at a price. To right and left, the streets were scuttled of people; misty haloes ringed the turbid yellow lights; while, nearby, buildings stood eerily sombre, menacing, their formal solidity surrendered to the all-congealing jelly of night. Could time be suspended!, the performance infinitely prolonged!, the fall of the final curtain eternally delayed!

She turned up her collar, braced herself against the cold. Her thighs taut, cords binding the muscles, she stamped her feet for warmth.

“Damn you! Damn you!” she cursed again, cursed at the doctor, remembering, unable to forget, as she waited.

The way the doctor had looked at her that morning. At once pitying and knowing! The way he had talked to her, so mellifluous, conspiratorial!

“I *am* sorry, Miss Richter, my dear, but science is science and I can’t make the test change, you know. But. . .”

He paused, leaned forward, rolled his pen between stubby fingers, and raised an eyebrow. There was some indecency on the way. She looked at the test slide between them and held her breath.

“But my partner . . . he can help you. . . Everything sterile. . . Only half a day and it’s over. . . Confidential. . . Not a word. . . No fuss. . . No. . . If that’s what you want, of course. . .”

She knew, did not know, felt she knew, knew she did not know what she wanted. To carry the wretched beast within her; or to have the thing removed, destroyed; to carry it and to rear; to carry it and have it given out. The ordeals! The complications that were to follow! Had she only the strength to choose, calmly, rationally, without the spectre of possible regret, whatever her action!

The doctor twirling his pen, riled her. That eager, too eager readiness to help, that presumptuousness, the pat formula that implied personal gain from the advice he tendered peeved her to the quick. His cynicism jolted, and, in the face of it, any resolve for decisive, definitive action fell away. She could have been struck, so hot did her cheeks burn. She could not contain herself. Feeling herself ensnared, she rose from her seat, her legs jelly beneath her, and flared and lashed and screamed at the man in antiseptic white, screamed till she felt the very spittle on her own chin, "I am a person, a human being, a woman, not another bloody uterus to be scraped!" And then she ran — escaped —, the doctor's astonished expression behind her; behind her, too, the overturned chair, the smell of ether, the glare of the nurse in the doorway, and the faces, those flitting fleeting faces of others in the waiting-room — curious, hostile, embarrassed, amused. . .

"I am a person, a human being!" she fumed again, looking for the taxi that simply did not come.

But now, alone, isolated in a street grown dark, angry with herself for not accepting Gerard's offer to join him at Pellegrini's, it was not that earlier bravado, so passionate and liberating, that she felt, but futility. And constriction. And impotence. Conviction had flagged. A worm could not feel smaller, nor so superfluous, so reduced to the lowest definition.

"Damn you! Damn you! Damn you!", the words forced themselves again, the outburst not alighting so much upon the doctor this time as upon herself, upon Joel, upon that embryo rooted within her, upon everything — the oppressive buildings, the gloom, the wind, the passing cars, the taxi that hadn't come — upon everything that impinged upon the immediate compass of her senses.

But even this proved scarcely liberating. Turning one way as she waited because it was as good as any other, she caught sight of her photograph in the showcase outside the theatre. Nausea swelled. And loathing. And disgust. The very image before her was fake — its guise of wholesomeness, the smile, the glint in the eyes, the face set at a studied angle to temper the angularity of nose and chin. She would in that instant have smashed the glass and torn that glossy effigy to shreds were she, too, by that action to have been torn to annihilation or were her cheapness redeemed or betrayal rectified.

The betrayal. That had hurt the most. More than the doctor's verbal slap. More, infinitely more — because perhaps naively she had expected too much — than Joel's hard stinging open-palmed *physical* lash across her cheek.

The infatuation, then the love, had started simply, naturally enough. She, an actress, Joel a fledgeling director learning his art beside Gerard, Gerard a large man with a shock of magnificent silver hair, benign and clear-visioned, erudite and innovative, a father-figure to any who might for whatever reason have felt orphaned. First, there had been a few joking remarks from Joel during rehearsals — they had met over Mother Courage — then after-show coffee, then telephone calls, the occasional dinner at Cyrano's or La Bouillabaisse, culminating in the excursion to Phillip Island to see the penguins wading in at night. They had returned late, emotionally intoxicated, the darkness and the hour giving Joel the courage, or licence, to reach, to grope, to suck at her lips with his own, both moist and wild, and to bite at them with teeth widely-spaced, the while continuing urgently to probe while she, resisting, edged away, withdrew, the card-door on her side the limit of her retreat, until her protests and movements waned and her thighs yielded finally to his deep ecstatic and exhilarating entry in sublimation of a heated ritual.

Breached once, she found it easier to yield on other occasions, indeed welcomed those delirious afternoons, evenings and, when Sybil was out, nights, until, for reasons he never disclosed, Joel retreated into emotional distance, moved to another theatre group, retreated — he said — to write a play of his own. Perplexed, seeking in herself the blame, it was she who now tried to reach him, but his telephone rang often without answer or, if answer Joel did, he was invariably unable to speak, as he was, he said, in the midst of entertaining friends, or occupied with a play-reading, or on his way out to some engagement he declined to share with her.

She had then felt the first stirrings of unease in her throat, the first tinglings in her tightening breasts, the first awakenings to a possibility that for two anxious weeks riddled her with misgivings, panic, rationalisations, tormenting hopes and escape into flights where what she suspected and feared were mere fantasy. The doctor's confirmation of her suspicions, however unsavoury the

accompanying rider, rekindled, however tentatively and, she knew, irrationally the hope that, for decency's sake or in acknowledgement of his complicity or in a reawakening of his affections, Joel might still agree to some reunion; and, leaving the doctor's surgery, fuming still at the man in white, she made her way, trembling, heady, febrile, electric, towards South Yarra where Joel rented a bachelor flat in the heart of the elegant set.

He had let her in. He could not very well have done otherwise. But a smile would have cost a treasure while annoyance, or indifference at best, he displayed for free.

"So," he said, when, already aware of the futility of it all, she told him, "what do you want of me?"

"You, Joel, you!" she had answered vehemently. "It's you I want. . . The child inside me is ours. And after what we've known together . . . Joel, I still love you. . . What, tell me, what have I done wrong?"

Joel was close enough to touch, yet the furthest galaxy could not be further. Lips puckered, he poured himself a vermouth, offering nothing to her. He wore cream slacks, a tennis jumper, white shoes. He rolled his glass between his palms.

"No way," he said, "no way," assuming, she saw, the theatrical pose of a haughty Caesar. "I'm having no snotweed kid around me."

The nausea of pregnancy swelled to merge with the more intense nausea of entrapment, of air-depriving constriction.

"I . . . I . . ."

"Look. You want money? . . . A hundred? . . . Two hundred? . . . How much is it nowadays?"

A corner of his mouth twitched. He reached for his wallet. Rosalie remembered how, having inherited a goodly sum from his late father, money was to him no object.

"Joel!" she said. "If you're at all human. . ."

Joel flourished his glass. He could have been playing to an audience. His eyes pierced, his voice cut, his every gesture sliced with razor sharpness.

"Do what hundreds, thousands of girls do every day. What's one more? You've got a future. *I've* got a future. Why bridle yourself with a bloody millstone?"

He probed the air with a finger. He was Hamlet scheming. She had seen the pose before. It was the stuff of theatre, of

imagination, of artifice, while the reality embedded deep within her cried out against pretence.

"You pig, you!" she screamed out, "you foul-skinned weak irresponsible bastard!" falling upon him and beating out her accumulated venom at the doctor upon his chest, so that the Vermouth in his hand spilled on his immaculate white outfit.

She felt the hand before she saw it. It stung her cheek mightily; she stumbled; she heard him spit "You bitch!" in a voice scarcely his own when, reeling, she then saw the door open and shut quickly, glimpsing in that instant a crimson-lipped brunette in tight yellow slacks and pullover startle and gasp. She grabbed hold of a chair. Joel pushed past her. He ran out. "Margaret! Margaret!" she heard him call. "There's every explanation!", and then, "She means nothing to me, believe me, I swear!" His voice, suddenly grown pitiful, and plaintive, drowned out at the foot of the staircase, lost in the tide of a woman's shrill sneers and ugly laughter. Rosalie drew herself up to whatever height her suddenly-burdened form permitted her, looked about the elegant room with sickening distaste and walked out, struggling with every exertion against the brutal inclination to dissolution to hold on to poise, to strength, to erectness.

She had turned to Sybil then, Sybil, a psychiatric nurse, her flatmate, her prospective travelling-companion for their projected trip, to America, to Europe, the two thrown together by a two-line advertisement in "The Age". Sybil, to judge from her volubly-abundant clinical tales, exposed to schizophrenic girls, addicts, attempted suicides, alcoholics and the solitary, would understand, would know, would advise what to do and draw the sting out from the wounds. But Sybil was asleep. Sybil was a creature of the night, walking the wards of Prince Henry's Hospital by torchlight, then retrieving by day whatever sleep the night had deprived.

"Sybil," she had whispered by the bed, then "Sybil!" more loudly, more pressing, touching, shaking a shoulder. "Sybil, I must talk to you. Sybil, it's urgent!" But Sybil, her hair dishevelled over the pillow, mumbled in a drawl, turned, drew her covers up over her head and slept on while Rosalie circled the flat, sat down, rose up, made coffee, let it grow cold, felt the constriction of the four walls upon her and the very future become suddenly contracted, warped and impenetrably black, until, desperate, she ran back into the

bedroom, with one swipe stripped the covers from her sleeping companion and, frantically, cried out, "Sybil! Sybil! Sybil! Wake up! Tell me, for God's sake, for my sake, what I must do!"

With Sybil, too, she quickly recognised her mistake. Not that Sybil was annoyed at being woken, though she was not at first entirely pleased, nor that she did not listen to Rosalie's frenzied disjointed outpourings with whatever ear professional training and an easy camaraderie had honed in her. But in the end, all that she had done was to summarise the dilemma. "I can't tell you, Ros. Only *you* can decide. Give up your career, live on a single mother's pension, perhaps place the child in a creche while you're working, go to your parents for help when the child comes, forget for the time being our trip — or, get rid of it, be done with it, carry on as before and hope you will never regret what you've done."

"It's a living thing," Rosalie had said then. "That's the worst of it. It's a living thing. . ."

"I know," Sybil had answered; flatly.

"But what would you do, Sybil, you Sybil, if you were me?", she pressed, almost pleading.

And Sybil had said, not with pity nor judgement nor superiority, but simply and truthfully, however hard the truth was to take and however insensitive in its rationality it then had seemed, "But, Rosalie, *I* am not you."

Standing outside the theatre contracted against the cold, she remembered how Sybil had placed an arm about her shoulders just as Jocelyn Buchanan playing Olga had done scarcely a half-hour before in that final passionate declamation, "How cheerfully and jauntily that band's playing — really I feel as if I want to live!" and remembered how, as Irena, taking her bow at curtain call, she had quelled whatever humiliation, abasement and hurt the day had brought her until, as Rosalie, unable to stem the tide that had welled in her throat, she had run to the backstage toilet, there to hide and to release the swollen torrent of tears, emerging finally when, spent, she felt she could present herself once more. By then, only Gerard, delayed by administrative details, and the stage hands had remained. Gerard had invited her to join him for coffee at Pellegrini's, saying, "You look troubled, Rosalie, your performance tonight showed it," but with a shake of her head, she denied, and

declined the invitation, heading for the telephone to call the taxi. "If you want to tell me anything, Rosalie," Gerard had added, "I shall always be ready to listen"; but the problem, was hers and hers alone, as Sybil had implied, and, putting on her coat, she had forced a smile, said a mere "Thanks", and left. On his way out, Gerard passing her outside the theatre door, said "Changed your mind?" and, denied, walked on. She watched him recede, the large man with the magnificent hair, the sturdy step, the total inner certainty; saw him wave as he turned the corner, and, diffidently, she waved back, resuming then her pacing before the theatre.

Then she had enough. The taxi delayed, herself cold, unnerved, and driven by renewed distaste from that mockery that was her clean shining showcase effigy, she hankered suddenly after all after Gerard's company, swore "Bugger you!" at the imaginary dilatory taxi-driver, draped her coat more firmly about her and turned resolutely, almost sprinting, in the direction of Pellegrini's. It was not Gerard's advice she sought, nor even an ear to listen to her predicament, but rather his presence — no more, merely his presence — that transmitted, conferred by radiation, security, certainty, breadth and self-mastery, that sense of personal strength that permeated his sonorous tone as he impressed upon Jocelyn Buchanan the requisite resonant pitch of Olga's concluding speech: "The years will pass and we shall all be gone for good and quite forgotten. . . But our *sufferings*, our sufferings may mean happiness for the people who come after us. . . There'll be a time when peace and happiness reign, and *then, then* we shall be remembered, *kindly*, and *blessed!*"

At the Bourke Street corner, she collided with a scowling middle-aged couple. An old man with a newspaper under his arm stepped out of her way. She saw, did not really see, in her haste, the darkened shops, the picture theatre, the office entrances, the cafes pass her. She heard, did not really hear, the voices of people, their laughter, bluster, swagger, or the hum of cars, the clattering of trams, the grating of brakes. She felt, did not really feel, the wind in her eyelids, the dust, the bustle, the swirl about her. She knew them to be there. They were always there. Nightly exposure, experience, knowledge, dictated their ever-presence. In its human gyrations, this night could be no different from any other. Reason also vouchsafed the fact. But now none of what the night

contained could touch her. She was, she felt, severed from her surroundings and even metaphors of separation, of alienation, could not wholly apply to her. The literary parallels in inferior verse of driven shrivelled leaves, of solitary clouds, of ships adrift at sea — however detached, themselves, from their source, they were still of the world, the palpable, tangible, physical world, while she rode — was buffeted — on crests of inner turmoil, impervious to external influences now, yet in search — she knew, this she recognised — of anchor in Gerard who might restore to her by his mere presence the solidity, reality and durability of stone, the strength of worth, the belongingness — belongingness above all — to place and time which the doctor, Joel, Sybil had, each in a different way, undermined.

As she hurried, one line, hers, Irena's, reverberated: "If only we could get back to Moscow! If only we could get back to Moscow!"

But what, where, was Moscow? Her parents' home? Her apartment, shared with Sybil? That sense of direction and poise secure before her encounter with Joel? The coloured floodlights, the chalk, grease-paint, ochre and rouge, and the flight into fantasy and vicarious life before an audience moved, stirred, enlightened, amused, enthralled, out there in the dark rows, silently breathing, shuffling at times a foot, coughing muffled into a palm?

"If only we could get back to Moscow!"

She reached Pellegrini's, scouted about the entrance, scoured the tables through the broad plate-glass windows in the abutting lane. Every seat was occupied. Inside were couples touching fingers astride the sugar bowls, overweight young men sucked spaghetti between writhing moist lips, girls sipped strawberry and orange granitas, well-nourished men with high red cheeks talked and gesticulated, and lean, bejewelled, dyed-haired women, veritable dowagers, smoked cigarettes through ivory-tipped holders. They were no part of her; she was no part of them. It was Gerard she sought, massive, silver-haired, broad-shouldered, amused, benign Gerard, who indeed was there, lounging at ease, arm over a chair, leg over thigh, gesturing in his easy flamboyant way before two youngish men in suede jackets and corduroys, actors themselves, she recognised.

Her courage suddenly failed her. She wanted Gerard to herself, unshared, undivided. To be buoyed by his strength,

his attention directed wholly upon her alone. If by chance, he were to turn and see her before the window, she would have entered, willingly enough still. But to enter now, unbidden, however earnest his earlier invitation, seemed too brash an encroachment, and she felt herself too unworthy, too debased to impose herself upon him before company. She did, however, pause before the window, contriving to linger there a little longer by pretending to have caught a stone in her shoe, but the delaying ruse yielding no result and herself thrown off-balance by an over-gay youth running ahead of a group of laughing fellows behind him, she emerged, beaten, into the noisy bustling illuminated footpath of Bourke Street, where, biting her lips and suppressing what may have been tears or anger or frustration or simple nausea, she hailed the first taxi that passed.

The driver, mercifully, was not a talkative man. Vapid conversation was the very last of her needs. She gave him her address in Windsor, saw him deftly turn the meter handle, sat back against the cracked vinyl of the seat, feeling its springs gouging into her, and watched for distraction the play of light on the driver's face. The doctor, Joel, Sybil, Gerard returned to her. And Martin Simpkin, as Chebutykin, singing "Tarara-boom-di-ay. . . I'm sitting on a tomb today," and Michael Paul, as Andrei Sergeievich, wheeling the pram and asking the old deaf porter Ferapont, asking the audience "Oh, where has all my past life gone to? — the time when I was young and gay and clever, when I used to have fine dreams and great thoughts, and the present and future were bright with hope?" And she saw herself, as Irena, sitting on the swing in the background, turning her face away, almost bursting as the words, so often repeated in the ritual of performance, suddenly acquired a directness that so riveted her that, were she to have the next line in the play, Gerard's strength notwithstanding, she would have surely melted, only discipline and movement rendered automatic through endless rehearsal and repetition seeing her through to the fall of the curtain. Michael, as Andrei, had also spoken of freedom and light. Sitting in the taxi, the street lamps flickering upon her, a living creature embedded within her, she felt acutely and irrevocably trapped, and the darkness she now sensed, the opposite to Andrei's light, had nothing to do with that other starker darkness of the night outside. Where, once before, in her parents' home, she had escaped entrapment and dark-

ness, these now seemed beyond escape. This darkness was nothing less than blackness, and that blackness bore the silence, the finality, the eternity of the grave. A door had been nailed upon the future, a future that, in the wake of her brother Judah's parting words, she had resolutely, and confidently, vowed to forge for herself.

She had been in the sixth form then, seventeen, and living with her parents in a drab terraced house in North Carlton. Her parents, aspiring to little, capable of little, had attained to little. Harry Richter had been a baker employed by a small concern until a back injury sustained while fixing the spouting above the kitchen shunted his existence on to rails running within the confines of a fortnightly pension cheque, while Paula, his wife, ever in fear of advancing age, sickness and decline, grasped at every device she could conceive to retain the notion of her beauty against all threat. Over-rouged and over-powdered, with scarlet streaks of lipstick drawn in thin tensile ribbons along her fleshy lips, she prowled about the house in a tawny dressing-gown all day, not venturing outside save to fetch the morning milk, returning often to the slanted mirror in her room or to the yellowing photographs in her album telling of better days, the while never missing an occasion to pick the bones of her impotent husband, her profligate son, and her stupid indolent daughter. Rosalie's father, too unenterprising and without means, besides, to do anything but bear with her, spent his days wandering about the streets chatting with neighbours or remoter acquaintances, or simply sat outside the cemetery to watch the passing traffic of Lygon Street, thinking thoughts that she, Rosalie, could never penetrate. She herself, bound still by obligation, though no less by pity and lack of options, had also held fast, enduring her mother's complaints with pert rejoinders and outright insolence which did nothing to breach her mother's self-focussed obtuseness. It was Judah, her brother, older than herself by two years, who broke away. Fed up to the eyeballs and beyond, as he said, with the incessant wranglings and rantings about him, he packed into his tiny second-hand Mini whatever he deemed of value — his record-player, a stack of records, a tattered pennant dating back to his junior basketball days as well as a few handkerchiefs, shirts, underpants and socks — and left. In the preceding two years, he had taken to brick-laying, car-selling, can-processing and serving at a petrol-station, all of

which shamed him by virtue of their manual nature. He had expressed some hope for the better when he confided in Rosalie that he was settling with a photographer's model in Richmond. But that liaison, too, came to nothing. He came home once more, this time to fetch his bag of golf-clubs he had left behind. None of them had seen him since but he did use that last occasion as he slammed down the boot of the car to say to Rosalie, "It's too late for me, pussy" — their mother could still be heard ranting in the background — "but the world out there is for those who make something of themselves, for those with the strength to look ahead. Pray to God that you don't let them get you down."

"Them" had been their father Harry Richter and their mother, Paula. Rosalie had fondly patted her brother's bristled chin and said, laughing, "No, my Bohemian brother J., there's no way they will get me down."

She didn't let them get her down. Her parents' manifest inadequacies as integrated individuals which she was ready, if not to overlook, then at least to forgive, had nurtured in her a resilience laced with a quietly-burning defiance and resolve in time to step out of the mould of clay that heavily grounded them in stagnation. Already on the threshold of matriculating, she was now looking ahead, as Judah had advised, and felt as a natural extension of her extra-curricular school involvements the bond of the stage with its glitter, fantasy, amusement and limitless paraphernalia. Taking her cue from her mother, although in the hours when the lights in the rest of the house were extinguished, she painted her lips, dabbed rouge on her cheeks, rubbed shadow around her eyes, combed her eyebrows to sharpness and put on old dresses imagining them to be satin, and ragged shawls fancying them as furs, and posed, gestured, grimaced and mimed before the mirror, contorting her face, fingers, arms and torso in the roles of an Antigone or Puck, a Juliet or Jocasta, or, extending herself beyond her age, of a Lady Teazle. The floodlights luminous in her imagination, she stood in the centre of their beams, all severity, levity, grief, ecstasy, arrogance, humility. In its focussed glare, she loved, wept, importuned, trembled, sneered, laughed, suffered anguish. Her hair she loosened, plaited, tightened, bunned, threw into chaos, her mirrored self as audience, seeing in that audience of one an audience of hundreds cheering, applauding, accepting, acclaiming. This was the door to the future she

was approaching in her final school year; this was the door she opened when first she enrolled in evening drama classes; this was the door she now found after five years suddenly nailed because of an indiscretion, a flickering love match, that had burnt out after a mere handful of weeks.

What tore at her still more viciously now, adding shame to the sudden black constriction of time, was that that prophecy of her mother's, if as such it was intended, had been fulfilled. Finding part-time work in a gift-shop to pay for the evening courses which in time increased to full half-days, she had finally accrued sufficient financial resources and personal confidence to step over the threshold and down the outside stairs to stand on the asphalt, to feel its firmness, and to test the light of independence or, as in language growing more sophisticated she termed it, of liberation. In the hankering after liberation, there had been a scene to be sure, but one more scene on the tail of earlier ones in number nearing infinity left no deterring impact upon her resolve. She left, not fed up as Judah had done, nor even despairingly, but with a sense of buoyancy, expectation, and relief, laughing privately at her mother's garrulous parting sally, "I suppose you'll go out now, get yourself conned, and end up with a bun in the oven or some such thing!"

She did not feel herself "conned" — love with Joel had been mutual and genuine, however brief — but the result was the same. The bun was in the oven. A seal had been set upon the future. And future was now blackness and incarceration in caged domestic routine, unless she yielded to the doctor's insinuations and Joel's exhortations; and future, were she to yield, was ugliness and guilt, waste and recrimination and possible sterility; while the image of wide-kneed exposure and anaesthetics and of being shunted, dumb submissive animal, through corridors and operating theatres to be scraped out by a man in white with the concern he would give to breathing caused her to huddle deeper into the darker recesses of her vinyl seat, the better — if unsuccessfully — to recede from whatever assaults threatened from without. And, with misted gaze falling upon the flitting yellow lights, upon the inert trees and posts that lined the footpaths, and upon the dormant black solid buildings beyond them, she did feel their assault, if only because they were a part of a reality which, however adamantly she might close her eyes, she could not in any way blot out.

Nearing home with its foreshadowed emptiness — Sybil, she remembered, was again on duty — that reality struck her all the more acutely. The anticipation of solitariness intensified it. Walls could protect, but walls could also isolate, and isolation, harnessed to the rack of ever-circuitous thoughts of blackness, futility and entrapment threatened with uncertainties more fearsome than any that even the unwallled darkness of night imposed upon her awareness. Caught in limbo between the wished-for retreat and the need for space, she leaned forward, sank back, leaned forward again, finally directing with a devil-be-hanged resolve the driver to alter course and to take her to St. Kilda, to Fitzroy Street, where even now, approaching midnight, there would at least be light and activity and voice and where she could still opt for solitude while moored in the midst of surrounding movement.

The driver obliged, but this time not without comment. There was a hint in his tone — unless she imagined it — of mirth, knowingness, even of something lascivious as, rubbing his bristles with the palm of a hand, he said, “Goin’ out on the town, are ya?”

“My flatmate’s a singer at the Casablanca,” she lied, as though compelled to render some personal apologies. “I’ve decided to join her there, then go home with her.”

The very febleness of her reply sent a flush to the roots of her hair.

“Sure,” the driver said. “I got a brother with the State Opera, did ya’ know?”

Outside the Pizza Bella Roma restaurant in Fitzroy Street, she bade him stop. Counting out her change, he placed each coin with a studied thrust into her palm, then clasping her hand, pressed her fingers tightly and said, “Think of me, poor Charlie drivin’ ’round town while you’re havin’ your fun, won’t ya’?”

Slamming the door behind her as she stepped out of the taxi, she shouted “Pig!” at the driver. He might or might not have heard. Whatever the impetus — whether her shrill incensed ineffectual expletive or his own salty allusion — he raised his chin, laughed with merriment that could only have been private, and pressing on the accelerator squealed through a narrow reckless semi-circle across the tramlines and around a central pole to return the way he had come. Another car passing close, too close, veered searingly to a

side and jolted to a screeching halt, and Rosalie, compelled to turn, her pulse quickened and skin galvanised in the expectation of inexorable impact, saw its owner pound at the horn of his car with florid fury and heard him scream "Ya' bloody mongrel!" after the taxi driver who, upping a thumb through a lowered window, was hurtling wildly out of hearing.

"Lucky you got here at all," she heard someone close say into her ear. "Man like that ought to be locked up."

Startled, Rosalie turned. Behind her stood a dark curly-haired fellow in roll-neck pullover, a leather jacket and jeans. His nose was sharp; his chin jutted; a smile stretched like a fixed inscription between the dimpled limits of his lips.

"Say, do you live around these parts?"

She saw the cocksure way he rubbed an ear and became aware of two other fellows behind him standing in the entrance of a haberdashery shop watching with amusement their companion's gambit. The smoothness of the man's approach and the assumptions behind it set her jaws to firmness. This could be a mere game they were playing and, at other times, she might have matched game with game; and were game to turn to menace, would have protected herself with laughter as her brother Judah, not particularly clever in the acquisition of skills but not wholly devoid of earthy wisdom, had often enough advised.

Menace was there. Suspicion was near enough to certainty. But laughter this time did not come. Yet, to cast the fellow off in a way feeble and limp that would leave to him the victory of venture was to add a further wound to the others already festering in her.

She snorted, facing him square-on.

"Have you heard of Moscow?" she said.

"Moscow?"

"Moscow," she repeated, edging past him. "Either you go there or I do. But not the bloody two of us together. Now go get yourself another bed!"

She walked away, her knees jelly, her limbs quivering with her own audacity. The men in the darkened doorway laughed, emerged to join their companion. "Hey, you got me all wrong," she heard behind her. "What I meant was. . ."

She did not wait to hear what he had meant. The advances of smug strangers in Fitzroy Street while the rest of the city huddled itself in its down of dreams had but one meaning —

the intended relief of whatever tickled and itched between the knees. She walked on, past the butcher's, past Topolino's, past the amusement centre, and would have joined, lost herself in a current of people if such a current were there; but in the crisp coldness humming in eddies from the sea, any flow was sluggish, any motion only dull and haphazard, born less of indolence than of indirection in which solitary men, drunkards, derelicts and heavily-painted girls in bright jackets and slacks, hugged doorways, shadows, benches, waste-baskets and lamp-posts. She had come to be among people, to be in a crowd, and yet to be alone. Her miscalculation piqued her. Her expectations, nurtured in better, happier times when she had walked here in mid-evenings with Joel, had been scrambled. Alone she was indeed, but alone with the loneliness of others whom Gerard, himself a tenant of the darker hours, was fond of calling the flotsam and jetsam of the night.

Flotsam and jetsam, too, was she then as she passed a cafe outside which two Greeks were laying bets on a matter she couldn't comprehend; flotsam and jetsam as she passed an unshaven loose-jowled man in ragged overcoat, curled and snorting on a bench, the neck of a whiskey bottle protruding from a pocket; flotsam and jetsam as she passed a violet-checked huge-torsoed man reeling on the footpath, pursued by a weathered runt of a woman who shook a fist and screamed with drunken shrillness, "I'll throw ya' out o' the house yet, ya' besotted bastard, ya' jus' wait 'n' see!"; and flotsam and jetsam as above the woman's shrillness there rose the approaching then receding stridor of an ambulance siren followed by the whine of a police car which caused two fellows, one in his twenties, the other scarcely a teenager to melt into the wall next to the doctor's surgery in Jackson Street, then to emerge, the older one to say "Thirty dollars I said," the younger to plead "Twenty's all I got", and the other to reply, cold and severe, "Then go rob a bank this stuff's pure mate not just any shit. . ." She was of a kind with them as a wind brought a blast of sea-air with its astringent taste of salt, sea-weed, sulphur and refuse; as she passed Cyrano's where, again in better times, Joel had quipped, tongue-in-cheek and cornily — but so amusingly then — "I shall be your ever-admiring Cyrano and you shall be my Roxane"; as she hurried from the place, fled, her cheek smarting again with the sting of his slap, fleeing, as if by

flight she could flee from memory, from reality, from the being deep within her that like a parasite was eating away at all that she had stored up for the future.

The absurdity of attempted flight struck simultaneously with the blast of a gelid current of wind hurtling in from the sea, and, outside Peter's shoe store, she slowed her pace, braced her shoulders inwards and looked blandly towards the Casablanca discoteque ahead, outside which a group of youngsters were smoking, jostling, laughing, swearing, writhing in simulated dance. A brief, too brief, memory of parties, of dressing-up, of expectations, and of the touch of fingers along the spine, around the neck, over her eyes, and lips, flitted through her, buoyed her ever so evanescently on a rising wave only to dash her, as other memories surged within, against the coarser sorely-abrasive terrain of a hard-grained shore. She was nearly abreast of those youngsters when a lean marble-boned chisel-limbed woman in black pullover, black tights and high heels stepped out of a doorway and barred her way. She seemed young, but it was a youth, Rosalie saw, to which she clung desperately, a legacy sustained through the artifice of lipstick, powder and thick eye-shadow to conceal the brittle cracks, folds and crevices of some deepening dissipation. The woman leaned towards her, menace potentially brutal, unfurled her lips, showed her teeth and sneered, "Now piss off, dear, this is my beat!"

Creatures of the night, Gerard had called them, as well as flotsam and jetsam, though with his customary charity. "To condemn is to hate," he had once said, "and no artist — an actor least of all — is permitted to hate." A globe-trotter, he had scoured the dark-hour life of New York, Paris and Hong Kong, and looked upon all things with a sobriety which caused him never to raise an eyebrow at what to others seemed potently outrageous, unsavoury, criminal or indecent. Rather, he would sit back in his chair, cross one leg over the other, interweave his fingers behind his massive head and smile — smile with every crease of his large splendidly-plastic face — and say, "If only I, I, my dear, could be an innocent again, wear glasses with rosy tint, be swaddled in diapers again, suck at my mother's breast. . . How splendid! Sublime! Perfect! . . ."

Confronted by the young, no-longer-young woman, Rosalie tried to capture and hold to a splinter of Gerard's charity. She smiled, in so far as she felt herself capable of

smiling, turned up a palm and said, shaking her head, "I'm no danger to you, I'm. . ."

The woman, thin and stark in black, eyed her up and down, pursed her bitter lips to rank contempt and snorted. "Piss off anyway!" she said, gesturing Rosalie on her way with a thumb.

She did not enter the Casablanca, but, impelled, driven — irrationally, she knew — to prove her harmlessness to the trollop, she aimed instead for the Dairy Queen cream bar just beyond. Its fluorescent whiteness beckoned; its drifting savoury sweetness, balm to the day's accumulated unfed hunger, drew her; its very emptiness, save for a lone customer and the attendant who was wiping the counter, offered a measure of poise that the street denied. She did not reach its door, however. Outside the discotheque, a crew-cut ear-ringed fellow wolf-whistled at her; another, winking to the clamour of approval, called out, "Hey darl, ya' wanna' make it with me?"; while a third, this one pimply, red-haired and fat, danced gracelessly around her, clapping his pudgy palms aloft, his buttocks nudging provocatively at hers as the white flesh of his exposed belly, the chill weather notwithstanding, writhed jelly-like over the belt of his pants. There was laughter, all reserve abandoned, as one after another, the youths swayed to and fro suggestively before her, in their reaching out, in their rocking, shuffling and gadding about her, forcing in her the suspension of all conscious breath and the piecemeal loosening of tenure upon whatever equilibrium she felt she still possessed until, walking on, shut-eyed and goosefleshed, she sensed — Mercy, her protector — that she was safely past.

The tumult of mirth and banter exploded wildly into commotion of another sort, into a crescendo of sudden violence, of chaotic screaming, alarm, sibilance and cacophony. Jolted, her reflexes taking possession of her with a vice of their own, Rosalie turned. She saw, heard the young folk running, saw their backs, heard the leather, the rubber of their shoes ringing, pounding on asphalt; she saw, heard windows screech to openness, saw puzzlement, curiosity, irritation on nest after nest of protruding faces, heard shouting, at first unclear and remote, reaching her with the electricity of vicious rumour, "There's been a shootin'!" "A fella's bleedin' to bloody death!" "Call an ambulance! . . . the police!" "Oh, God!", and it was then that the report

registered in her, that hard harsh clap and echo that her awareness had, a moment earlier, in the hold of dread construed as the mere backfiring of a car. And torn, then drawn, a filing to a magnet irresistible, she followed the crowd, and quickened her step, the shops, the overhead lights, the traffic flitting past her with diminishing clarity and distinctiveness till, she reached the Jackson Street corner where, outside the doctor's surgery, a swelling, from all quarters-converging crowd milled around a central hollow from which there sounded a sickly whimpering and whine as one man in a dressing-gown thrown over pyjamas pumped fruitlessly at the doctor's bell, cursing "Answer, you bastard, answer, for God's sake!", and another threw stones at the dark barred windows upstairs.

She became trapped in the crush, those towards the centre condensing to harder solidity of mass, others behind pressing her inward, the steam and midnight acidity of their breaths, their odour of sweat, and the tremor of their excitement feeding her own like a contagion violent and unyielding. Voices, shouting, importunate, crude, continued to blast into her ear, an ox of a man stepped on her toes, she felt an elbow whip once, twice into the very pit of her belly. She turned, writhed, sought retreat, escape from that mass. But the flotsam and jetsam, grown more numerous, crushed ever more heavily upon her; rather than backward, she was pushed forward, through every cranny approaching the shrinking hollow where, upon reaching it, she gasped, felt the sickness of it all welling in turbulent waves from her stomach to her throat as she saw, two clammy-shirted men beside him administering however primitive the aid, the youth, the teenager she had seen bargaining over drugs but minutes before, kicking, wriggling, reaching, his acutely-wizened face, his pullover, his hair and the ground around his head glistening with trickling tarry liquid under the murky glow of a yellow light.

"Someone give me a fuckin' 'andkerchief, a tissue, damn you, a towel!" called out one of the men as he pressed upon the wound in the adolescent's neck, while the other, holding a wrist and listening with an ear to the chest, muttered in synchrony with the boy's fading whine, "Oh, hell, hell, where's the bloody ambulance? God, he's going, he's going! If there's any pity on this earth, hurry up, will you, oh God, hell, hell! . . ."

Impotence, goosepimples, frenzy assailed her. Rosalie wanted to give — a handkerchief, a scarf, a shawl. But she had nothing. She cringed with the very shame of her ineffectuality. She cringed, too, as memory once more smote her, quivered as she heard that resurgent anger within burst out “I am a person, a human being!”; as she heard further her own echo as Irena, Irena, crushed, smitten, adrift, appealing to Olga “What is it, tell me quickly, what is it, for God’s sake?!” followed by Chebutykin’s bland fatalistic “The Baron . . . It’s the Baron . . . he’s just been shot!”; as she saw herself under the lights, in country dress and cotton shawl crumbling in Olga’s arms, wailing, this last night in artifice and reality coalesced, “I knew it, I knew it, I . . .”

She rocked with the predatory gathering, bit her lips with horror and cold, closed her fists with a tightness that imprinted her nails into the very flesh of her palms, holding back, every muscle called upon to work, the nausea stirred by the sight of a life petering bloodily to oblivion, by the ease, so absurd after all that was invested in it, with which existence could be extinguished, by the wantonness — mortar pulverised, powder in wind, crystal crushed — that rendered breath and heartbeat and mind so trivial, so cheap, that for the mere difference between twenty and thirty dollars, men could wrangle and murder and die. She had known all this, from reading, from hearing, from performing. But the confrontation with black reality brought concreteness and immediacy to that which earlier, for all the ugliness and waste she had been privy to in her home, had been abstract, the stuff of imagination and untouchingly remote.

“Hell! Hell! Hell!” the words pounded at her, echoing the panic of the man bending beside the now-immobile unconscious youth, as to the cries of “Move back!” “Right! Everyone go home!”, “Show’s over!”, she felt the crowd sourly thinning around her to permit two policemen and two ambulance attendants wheeling a trolley enter into that inner sanctum of terror. To the older officer’s question “Who knows anything about this?”, a hubbub of voices welled about her.

“He’s a druggie. . .!”

“I heard the shot from Theo’s . . . came running. . .!”

“God ’e was bleedin’ like a pig. . .”

“He was warned, poor bastard. . .”

Rosalie, carried by the volley, stepped forward. "I . . . I . . .," she began, speaking into the officer's shoulder, faintly, scarcely audible before hurriedly stepping back, and further back, seeking facelessness in that moment in the midst of the dispersing crowd before she complicated her existence still further by admitting to have seen, heard, the dispute that culminated — the ambulance attendant was shaking his head now as he covered the youth's body with a sheet — in murder. Films, television had taught her the tedious side of crime, the inextricable entrapment in red tape, in the maze of police stations, statements, identification parades, affidavits, trials, prosecution and defence overbearing in interrogation; and the vision of that ordeal, suddenly so acute and total, drove her, however quickly not quickly enough, from the scene, back to Fitzroy Street, back the way she had come, past Theo's again, past Topolino's, past the Pizza Bella Roma, aware of movement, wind, seaweed, and the caustic smarting of her eyes, her own motion propelled by images of caves, cages and graves, of dark hollows lit up weakly by flickering lights, of that creature — hated, pitied, living, constricting — gnawing at her within, and by the jolting sense of brittleness and vulnerability and detachment of everything around, by the impermanence of it all, save that of death, of death, of death which, so bland and inoffensive on the stage was as grotesque in its ugliness as . . . as . . . There was no word for it. It bore comparison to nothing in her experience. Whatever else had to her once seem odious, monstrous and ravaging fell short by an infinity of the transcendent starkness of hapless futile death. She hugged the shopfronts as she fled, ready to regain certainty and solidity to fuse with them, ready, too, if any familiar being were suddenly to emerge, to cling to him, to her, to Gerard, Sybil, even Joel again, and nestle in caressing huddled warmth, flesh to flesh, contracted ball.

And then outside Umberto's, the first pains griped at her, not intense, nor prolonged, but startling in their suddenness. Rosalie felt again the whipping of the elbow in her belly, drew breath and hurried on, looking around, scouring the foot-path behind her for the two policemen in pursuit and along the road for the rectangular rooftop glow of a vacant taxi. And as she veered to the kerb, the pain seized her again, this time more cramping, transfixing her back, as, slowly, stickily, she felt warm moistness run down the insides of her

quaking thighs. A flush of relief, even happiness, rose within her, and released in her a jubilant "He was wrong, the test was wrong, the bastard lied!" before the truer reason pelted her with brutal vigour.

Somewhere close, she heard a woman giggling, and above the giggle a man's drunken banter in a bellow haranguing, "Your bloody room's as good as any! Your bloody twat's as good a prize as any!", while not three feet from her, a car drew up, its occupants, three scraggy young men in leather jackets, singing "'Twas on the good ship Venus" as the one closest to her upped two fingers with crude ugly laughter.

Had she been physically struck, as Joel had struck her, she could not have turned more quickly in recoil. She took to flight once more. Grimy wrinkled newspaper tangled itself in her legs, dust scoured her eyes, an awning overhead flapped with whip-like reports. Looking back towards Topolino's, impulsively glancing — not daring more — at the scene of madness where the doors of the ambulance were now setting the seal upon a youth's oblivion, she saw the post-office and hurried, ran, towards the telephones. Her cramps waxed momentarily, then waned, but the sodden panties clung to her; her thighs rubbed unpleasantly against each other as though smeared with jelly; she rummaged through her purse to find a silver coin and, trembling, her teeth set on lemons, she dialled, misdialled, dialled again. There were dial tones, and clicks, and ringing, then more ringing, and more, an age passing between successive whirrs, until a toneless switch-board voice replied, took her message, and at length connected her through.

"Sybil!" she almost screamed into the mouthpiece when her flatmate's familiar voice inquisitively answered, "Ward 2 East?". "What can I do I'm bleeding Sybil it's pouring I'm bleeding . . . bleeding . . . like a pig!"

The ensuing pause, the silence, short as it was, was eternal.

"Rosalie? . . . Rosie? . . . Well, there's your solution," she heard Sybil say. "Someone up there loves you."

"Sybil?! . . ."

"You're losing it, Rosie, it's on its way out. Wherever you are, get to the Women's. Don't panic. Go to Casualty. They'll treat you right. They'll do . . . you know. . . And Rosie . . . you know what this means, don't you? Our trip's on, sweetie, it's on after all."

Rosalie rammed the receiver down upon the hook.

"You bitch! you bitch!", she fumed on the way to the hospital, "You bastards! mongrels all!", the street-lamps flitting by and the wind slapping against the taxi's windscreen adding counterpoint to her curses. And the throb of indiscriminate fury pounded more violently still as, scarcely glancing at her, the Casualty clerk wrote her particulars into a dog-eared book, as a fat-ankled sister in soiled bloodied white ordered her into a gown and on to a couch, as a flighty scatter-brained nurse thrust a thermometer in her mouth and carelessly read her blood pressure, and as, first, one doctor, then another, prodded her and probed under the too-white glare of an incandescent light, the second declaring matter-of-factly before she had yet covered her naked spread-eagled thighs to decency, "There's nothing for it but to take you to theatre and stop all this!"

Within the cubicle, trapped by her gravid, now-bleeding body, caged by a ceiling too low, by curtains drawn too close, with the air redolent with the sourness of disinfectant and ether and floor wax as doctors, nurses and orderlies noisily brushed and bustled about the ward, protest stifled within her. "I am a person, a human being!" she wanted to yell again, but, yielding to the futility of it all, she remembered, so sudden the memory, the frenzied flight of frightened cows, she saw again the family's bitch delivering scrawny premature pups through a swollen crotch, could smell the dogshit and manure that her father had scraped Sunday mornings to spread over his tomato patch and sprinkle around the pear-trees. All of it ugliness, indignity, abasement.

Again and again, the cramps recurred. She winced, drew up her knees, gasped, hissing "Bastard" through pursed rigid lips. Above, the lights shimmered, glittering jelly, Haloed there was Joel, a mere moment but a moment too long, foppish in white, in succession smirking, livid, plaintive, fawning, vanishing then in the incandescence, only his voice, too close, desperately calling "Margaret! Margaret! She means nothing to me! I swear it! I swear it! I swear!", at which she clenched her fists to trembling and set her teeth in marble, the readier to meet menace as vision fell to vision and voice yielded to voice.

"You'll end up with a bun in the oven or some such thing."

"But my partner . . . he can help you. . ."

"If only we could get back to Moscow!"

“Pray to God that you don’t let them get you down.”

“If you want to tell me anything, Rosalie. . .”

“But our sufferings, our sufferings. . .”

“Piss off anyway!”

“Someone give me a fuckin’ ’andkerchief. . .”

Time straggled. Memory rent her — her mother, Joel, the doctor, Gerard, Sybil, the killing, flight, the glare of the ceiling lights and the burning odours around her, all of these fettered her to a chain of inevitability, threatening now to stifle her, to toss her upon an ocean of cadavers, the thing within her living, dying along with her, as leaden breath-constricting pressure transfixed her chest and whatever saliva formed in her mouth she found intolerable to swallow. Cleaned once of the blood along her thighs, she felt the sticky warmth of yet another trickle and tossed her head from side to side, the metal bed on which she lay rocking with her, its springs and wheels and attachments clattering and squeaking in raucous protest to her “No . . . I won’t . . . it isn’t . . . They’ll kill. . . Don’t let. . .!” until the sister in dirty white walked in briskly, all temper suppressed, said “Won’t be long before they take you,” swept back the sheet with one broad gesture, coldly dictated, “Now roll over, dearie, and let’s see your behind”, and thrust a needle into her buttock which spasmed with a searing stinging that turned to molten throbbing. Turned on her side, she saw a carcass of beef hanging from a butcher’s hook, then mice scurrying between the legs of the chairs, and the remains of a cat in a gutter, crushed bone, ravaged fur, and pulped innards smeared and lying in a scum of congealed blood, flies in swarms scavenging the corpse with hungry frenzy. And that other scene of bloody death returned, she tasted again the sea, felt the dust in her eyes, heard a woman’s giggle and a drunkard’s garrulous banter. From somewhere close, she heard too a toneless voice say “That one in there” and started as the green curtains around her rode back on their rails and a young bearded orderly in blue beckoned, tugged at her arms, her leg, saying “Take it easy now, love, don’t want any accidents, come over here, we’ll get you through all this soon enough.” Inside her, she imagined the thing living, dying, also had a beard. And madly, she giggled, reached up but missed the orderly’s face. “Hey, hit your funny bone, did you, love?” he said, flipping the sheet over her and moving to the foot of the trolley. The corridors were white and long, the

corners dizzying, the elevator nauseating, the faces — of doctors, nurses, housemaids — a blur. They were elongated, the faces, distorted, ever-changing, leering, accusing, threatening. One pair of lips, too thick, too close, said “What do you want to do that for?”; another menaced “You’re killing it, you know,”; and a third “If you was my daughter. . .” On her way, doors opened and closed, rubber squealed on linoleum, pipes hissed, water rushed in torrents. Warmth, then cold, streamed along her arms and paralysed her legs as vapours engulfed her and bitter clagging dryness stiffened her lips. She drew her hand away from touch, but another’s hand continued to cling, weighing it down with lead-weight perserverance as whiteness and glow capitulated to greyness and then to darkness which exploded in turn miraculously and magnificently to the turbulent radiance of burning suns beneath which she floated, yellow and red-sailed yachts rocking on cerulean waters nearby, swaying on waves that lapped at their prows and carried her gently, so gently towards a luxuriant coast where a peasant woman pointing with a scythe said “Moscow’s a stone’s throw away” and a tall massive white-haired man draped an arm about her shoulder and puffed into her eyes and said “If you want to tell me anything, I shall be ready to listen,” leading her to cry out, though she didn’t feel herself to be speaking, “Tomorrow I’ll go away and teach at a school somewhere and I’ll take the baby with me and I will love it and smother it with love and I’ll go on working and working and that young fellow’s not really dead it was only a game there is no Jackson Street nor any Fitzroy Street and besides it’s daytime and this is Moscow Moscow Gerard a real place not an ideal like you say not a state of mind but oh God it is innocence innocence lost and recaptured and happiness beauty pure fresh immaculate where there are no bleeding pigs and murdered barons and I must tell Sybil to come on this trip and I must tell Judah and I must tell everybody everybody everybody oh God oh God oh God” and not a step from her Irena wept and then Irena laughed, her teeth not white as in the photograph, nor shining, but blue, her lean skewed body rocking on a swing as she laughed, that laughter rising shrill and cackling and stridulous until it could scarce be distinguished from screaming, her whole face now blotched and livid blue, her own screaming laughter joined by that of others as, suddenly, all blackness again, the seething suns crumbled and she began

to run, masses of young people after her and the sirens of police, past Topolino's, past the post office, past the bank, her ears pounding with accusation and menace "She's the killer!" "Won't be long before they take her!", "She mustn't be allowed to escape!", "She must be punished!", to which over her shoulder she pleaded "I didn't I didn't I didn't!" as hands, a rash of them, seized her and brought her down and held her, gripping her head, her arms, her legs, vague male voices repeating from distances remote "It's over it all went well open your eyes now," and she opened her eyes and closed them again as orbs of focussed light crashed upon her awareness and circles swam and spun and vibrated, nausea gorging in her throat like fetid gall. "Well, we've cured the problem," she heard the same voice say and then a second deeper one, more muted, as if muffled by a mask, "I dare say you'll be more careful next time."

Light followed darkness, darkness followed light. The darkness of eyelids; the light of a torch, a corridor bulb, the glow from an adjoining room. Now and then, she started to the clatter of ringing metal, to the touch of fingers upon her wrist, to the pressure of a cuff closing about her arm. She swung on swings and ran down streets, swam in seas and clambered through hollows. Hollows. Hollows. Repeatedly through hollows in which faces in profusion appeared along with voices and echoes and smells, and other hollows, empty bloodied hollows, reeking of antiseptic and ether, from which something close yet something hateful had been removed, causing her even in her darkness to weep and to laugh, cold tears and spittle on her pillow smearing her cheek, sheets and blanket tossed and rumpled with the restless twitching of her limbs.

And then, as if suddenly, she opened her eyes and the grey-ness of sky glinting with fugitive arrows of sunlight made her squint. Tentatively, she faced the day again and contracted at the approach of a slender long-fingered nurse who, straightening her covers with expert briskness, said, "My, you did have a long sleep, didn't you?"

Rosalie looked at her dully. Her gown clung to her with clamminess. A pad lay soft and soothing between her legs.

"Has anyone been here?", she asked. "Does anyone know?"

"Too early for visitors, Rosalie, shall I call you Rosie?", the nurse said. "And as for knowing. . ."

"It doesn't matter," Rosalie said. "It doesn't. . ."

"Well, I suppose you'll be wanting a wash and some brekkie. Odds are you're leaving today."

Rosalie nodded, turned, pushed herself on to an elbow.

"Well, here's your towel and there's soap in the bathroom."

The nurse walked over to another patient, said "How's the pains today, Tess?", nodded at the reply and left the ward.

Tess, a pale doughy woman with small hands, grimaced and said, "Ya' could be dying', they don' listen to ya'."

Opposite her, another woman, a shrivelled weed with transparent cheeks sucked into troughs looked at her blankly, while in the next bed, another still, younger, willowy and handsome, preened her lush cascade of hair before a mirror, clicked her tongue, and said, "Yes, well, you know. . ."

Rosalie stood up. The ward spun. She clung to her bed till the haze passed from before her eyes and the jelly in her legs set to firmness, then stepped towards the window where she found more solid anchorage at the window sill.

"Careful now," she heard the young woman say behind her. "Don't want to hurt yourself."

She did not look at her. Rather, she let her gaze fall upon Cardigan Street below where cars, people, children, passed. From her height, they were small and seemed to move mechanically, puppets in a toy-shop wound by keys and moving straight or turning corners or tracing paths that meandered higgledly-piggledly across a vast untouched untouchable landscape. They passed in ones, in twos, sometimes in threes; yet each on his own path, with his own direction, known and unknown, was encased in solitude, each just one more piece of deadwood in the flotsam and jetsam that made up the mass of what Gerard, at more charitable times — or was it with tongue in cheek? — called suffering humanity. Something of her dream nudged at her, but it was unclear, elusive. Something had lived and died within her, but instead of the relief she thought she ought to have felt it was rather an emptiness that remained, a hollowness, in which all anger, frenzy, chaos has been dissipated and transformed into enervated languor and fatigue. She was one of a kind now with that flotsam. Aiming higher, she had nonetheless been dragged into it. There was blood in the streets and brutality and dissipation and rankness and waste, and friendships that were brittle and attachments that proved devious, and what

was meant as laughter turned instead to leering and what was offered as soft touch left behind a thousand bruises, and . . . and . . . Toozenbach was right, it would ever be the same, not only in a couple of hundred years' time but in a million years in which life, *living*, would continue to follow its laws without concern for men, and . . . Masha, poor Masha . . . in which nothing would matter and everything would be just as wild grass, for no-one would ever know why cranes flew and why children were born and why the stars shone in the sky and . . . and. . .

Rosalie touched a window-pane. To her fingers, it was cool, it was smooth.

"Someday," she remembered, "people will know why such things happen and what the purpose of all this suffering is. There won't be any more riddles. Meanwhile, we must go on living and working. Yes, we must just go on working."

And then that fragment of dream returned to her. Even against the greyness through which brighter sunlight was struggling to emerge, she saw the peasant woman pointing her scythe on the luxuriant shore. She stood easily, untroubled, in colourful dress; her face was open, full, receiving. "Moscow's a stone's throw away," she said.

And Rosalie took firmer hold of the window-sill, scanned again the brightening streets below, and, sensing the burgeoning of something tender within her, of something gauzy and exquisitely fragile, she gasped, even as she saw the smallness and the mechanical weaving of the people below, and murmured soft and quiveringly fervent into the void, "Oh God, I am I am I am. We are we are we are."