

EDITOR'S NOTE

Beverly Farmer's first novel *Alone* (McPhee Gribble/Penguin) was published in 1980; her first and award-winning collection of stories, *Milk* (McPhee Gribble/Penguin), was published in 1983. *Home Time* (McPhee Gribble/Penguin, 1985) is her second collection of short stories.

"A Woman with Black Hair", "Home Time" and "Place of Birth" were originally published in *Home Time* (McPhee Gribble/Penguin, 1985), pp.53-60, 71-80, 1-25; "Letter to Judith Brett" was published in *Meanjin* 43, i (1986): 142, when Beverly Farmer wrote to the editor of *Meanjin* in response to an article in the preceding issue by Kerry Goldsworthy, "Feminist Writings, Feminist Readings: Recent Australian Writing by Women", *Meanjin* 44, iv (1985): 506-15; and "Literature Is What Is Taught" is an extract from an interview with Jennifer Ellison in *Rooms of Their Own*, ed. Ellison (Penguin, 1986), pp.115-29.

Beverly Farmer

Place of Birth

On the last day Bell will remember before the snow, on a blue-grey morning of high cloud, the old woman brings out a *tapsi* rolling with walnuts that she has cracked for the Christmas *baklava*. "We'll be shut in soon enough," she sighs, perching on a plaited stool under the grapevine with the *tapsi* on her lap. Bell, her son Grigori's wife, pulls up stools for herself and Chloe, the other daughter-in-law, the Greek one who has come to the village for Christmas; her husband's ship is at sea. The women huddle over the *tapsi* picking out and dropping curled walnuts here, shells there. Chloe's little girl, Sophoula, leans on her mother.

"Me too?" she murmurs.

"Go ahead."

Sophoula, biting her lips, scowls over her slow fingers. With a trill of laughter Chloe pops a walnut into the child's mouth. "My darling! Eat," she says.

"Don't tell me she has nuts at her age?" the old woman says.

"You'll choke the child."

"Mama, she's three." Chloe's face and neck turn red.

"Just the same —"

"Oh, I don't like it!" Sophoula spits and dribbles specks of walnut. The shelling goes on; under their bent heads Chloe and the old woman put on a fierce burst of speed. Suddenly all of them flare bright with sunlight and are printed over with black branches and coils of the grapevine as a gap opens in the cloud. Bell leaps to her feet and lumbers inside.

"What's wrong with you?" Chloe frowns.

"Nothing. I'm getting my camera."

"*Aman*. Always photographs," her mother-in-law sighs.

"It's too cold to sit out here," Chloe says.

"Oh, please," Bell wails from the window. "All stay where you are!"

But the gap in the cloud has closed over by the time she gets back, so that what she will always have is a photograph all cold blues, whites, greys and browns: brittle twigs and branches against walls and clouds, the washing hung along the wire, a white hen pricking holes in mud that mirrors her, and the three heads, black, brown and bone-white, suspended over the *tapsi* of walnuts.

Because she takes all the photographs, she won't find herself in any of them.

Six weeks ago, as soon as she knew for certain, Bell wrote to her parents that they would be grandparents some time in May. "You're the first to know," she added, though by the time the letter got to Australia the whole village probably knew. There's no hope now of an answer until after Christmas. But at noon the postman's motorcycle roars past, a fountain of mud in his wake, and stops at the village office, so she wanders down just in case and is handed an Australian aerogram. It has taken a month to get here and is one she will mark with a cross and keep as long as she lives.

Grandma and Grand Pop, eh, scrawls her father. And about time too. Tell Greg to take that grin off his face.

"Are they pleased, Bella?" The old woman is kneading the pastry for the *baklava*. Her arms are floured to the shoulders.

"Of course. Dad says, 'And about time too.'"

"No wonder! Considering that you're thirty-one —"

"Thirty —"

"— or will be when it's born."

"Hasten slowly." Bell reads her mother's exclamatory, incoherent half-page, laboriously copied, then goes back to her father's.

It's been three years. You could leave it too late, you know, Bell. With a bub and all that you could find yourselves tied down before you know it. It's hard to think we mightn't live to see our only grandchild. Mimi's been having dizzy turns again lately.

She's had one stroke, as you know. If money's the problem, I can help you there. Also book you into the Queen Vic or wherever you like.

"What else, Bella?"

"Oh, questions. Money, hospitals. All that."

"Surely you're booked into the Kliniki?" Chloe stares.

"No, not yet."

"Well, you'd better do it soon! You don't want to have it in the Public Hospital! They have women in labour two to a bed in the corridors, it's so crowded."

"I think I want to have it at home," Bell hears herself say.

"At home!" Kyria Sophia is delighted. "Why not? I had all mine here. Grigori was born in the room you sleep in!"

"It wouldn't be safe." Chloe raises her eyebrows. "Not with a first child. Anything can go wrong."

"Thank you, Chloe."

"It's the truth. Look what happened to the *papas's* daughter!"

"The *papas's* daughter? You know why that happened? She got a craving for fried bananas in the middle of the night and her husband wouldn't go and try to find her any. And sure enough —"

"Mama, the cord got round her baby's neck and strangled it."

"Mama, not because of the bananas!"

"You're both fools! Of course it was because of the bananas!"

The old woman rams a grey branch into the firebox of the *somba*.

"*Aman!* How come I'm the only one who ever stokes the fire?"

She brushes a wisp of hair out of her eyes and flours her face.

White like her hair and arms, it sags into its net of wrinkles.

Lunch, Bell's chore today, isn't ready when the old man comes in from the *kafeneion* and finds her alone in the kitchen. Kyria Sophia has taken Sophoula with her to the baker to leave the *baklava*, Chloe is at a neighbour's place with the baby. He sits by the *somba*, small and grey and muddy, rolling and smoking one fat cigarette after another. The *makaronia* have to be boiled to a mush, Bell knows, before she can toss them in oil and butter and crumble *feta* cheese over them. Kyria Sophia comes back

exhausted hand-in-hand with Sophoula and as if the day's work wasn't enough, now she has her to spoonfeed.

They eat the *makaronia* in silence. At every mouthful a twinge, a jab of pain drills through Bell's jaw. Not a toothache, please, she prays. Not now, not here.

Sophoula pushes the spoon and her grandmother's hand away.

"Yiayia! You have to tell a story!"

"What story?" sighs the old woman.

"A story about princesses."

"Eat up and then I will."

"Now!" Sophoula bats the spoon on to the floor. The old woman gets another one and shovels cold lumps into the child's mouth, chanting a story by heart. Whenever she falters, the child clamps her mouth shut. Bell, stacking the dishes, isn't really listening, but when the bowl is almost empty she exclaims aloud in English, "Snow White! No, Snow White and Rose Red!"

The old woman giggles. "Zno Quaeet," she mocks. "No Zno Quaeet End —"

"Yiayia, pesi!"

"*Aman*, Sophoula!"

"Pes." She spits into the bowl.

After lunch these days Bell sleeps until it's dark. Now that she is into her fifth month she is sleepy most of the time. From under the white *flokati* she can hear Grigori's voice (so he is back from Thessaloniki with the shopping) and then Kyria Sophia's shrill one. When she wakes properly, ready for another long yellow evening by the *somba*, he is still there in the kitchen finishing a coffee. So is Chloe, red from her sleep, with the baby at her breast. "Hullo," Bell says, kissing Grigori's woolly crown. She fumbles with the *briki*.

"Coffee again?" Chloe mutters.

"Just one to wake me up."

"It's so bad for the baby."

"One won't hurt."

"Oh well, you'd know."

Bell turns her back to light the gas. "Where are the old people?" She touches Grigori's shoulder.

"Milking." His father's grey head grins in at the window; he leaves the milk saucepans on the sill. "You got a letter, Mama said. Are Mum and Dad all right?"

"Yes, they send their love and congratulations." Bell rubs her jaw. There's a hollow ache in her back teeth. She empties the sizzling *briki* into a little cup and takes a furry sip of her hot coffee. The *baklava* is on the table, baked and brought home already, its pastry glossy with the syrup it's soaking in. Grigori's shopping is all around it: oranges in net bags, chestnuts, a blue can of olive oil, lemons and mandarines and — she can hardly believe it — six yellow-green crescent bananas blue-stamped *Chiquita*. "Oh, bananas! Oh, darling, thank you!" she cries out. "We were just talking about bananas!"

"I'm so extravagant," Chloe simpers, "but Sophoula simply loves them. So I gave Grigori the money to buy her some." Her eyes dare Bell to ask for one. A pregnant woman can ask even strangers in the street for food. Bell grins at Chloe, remembering her frying mussels one day in Thessaloniki when a pregnant neighbour squealed from a balcony, "Ach, Kyria Chloei! Mussels! I can smell them!" and Chloe had to let her have a couple. "She never smells anything cheap," Chloe grumbled to Bell.

"Is that so, Kyria Chloe?" Bell contents herself with saying. "Ah, so much lovely food. We'll never eat it."

"You won't." The old woman comes in and lifts the milk saucepans inside. "*Aman*, the cold!" She slams the window. "You won't eat. You're fading, look at you. White as snow."

"I will. That was when I had morning sickness."

"We don't want a kitten, you know, we want a big strong baby."

"Believe you me," Chloe mutters, "the bigger it is, the harder it comes out."

"Ah, *bravo*, Chloe, *bravo*!" The old woman clatters the saucepans, straining the warm milk. "Don't you crave anything, Bella? You must crave something."

"Why must she?"

"Well, to tell the truth, I'd love a banana," says Bell. "It seems like years! Can I buy one from you, Chloe?"

"I'm sorry. There aren't enough."

"We share in this house, Chloe! If you want a banana, Bella, you have one! Don't even ask!"

"No, no, it's all right."

Grigori stands up. "See you later," he says. He grabs a mandarin and saunters outside.

"Not to the *kafeneion* already?" his mother pleads. "You just got here." She stares bleakly after him. "And what would you expect?" She rounds on her daughters-in-law. "Doesn't a man have a right to peace and quiet?"

"Auntie?" Chloe has taught Sophoula this English word. "Auntie Bella? Do they have Christmas where you come from?"

"Yes, of course."

"Did you go to church?"

"No."

"You stayed home at Christmas?"

"We went to the beach," Bell says.

"At Christmas! You're funny, Auntie!"

"Funny, am I?" Bell crosses her eyes. With a giggle, Sophoula sits in her lap.

"Where's your baby?"

"You're sitting on it. Oh, poor baby."

"What's its name going to be?"

"I don't know. What's your baby's name going to be?"

"We won't know till he's been christened."

"Oh, no, I forgot."

"If it's a girl, they'll call it after Yiayia," Chloe interposes. "The same as we did with you."

"Good idea. I'll call my baby Yiayia."

"Auntie, you can't!"

"Why can't I? Not if it's a boy, you mean?" Bell winks. "Then I'll call it Pappou," and she is rewarded with a peal of laughter so loud that it wakes the old woman.

"Let's eat, Mama," Chloe says.

"Is it late?" She blinks, squinting in the light. "The men'll be home any minute."

"No, they won't." Bell lifts Sophoula down. "Can we eat the *baklava* now? I crave *baklava*."

"Oh. All right." Smiling in spite of herself, Kyria Sophia cuts her a dripping slice. As Bell bites into it, the ache that has been lying in wait all day drills through her tooth and she shrieks aloud, letting syrup and specks of walnut dribble down her chin. She swills water round her mouth. The women cluck and fluster. Sophoula clings to her mother in tears of fright. The old woman mixes Bell an aspirin and she gulps it. She is helped to bed, where she curls up moaning in the darkness under the *flokati*. The light flashes on once, twice. She lies still until the door quietly closes.

Grigori is undressing with the light on. Bell rubs her watery eyes. The ache is duller now.

"Were you asleep? How's the tooth?"

"Bad." She probes with her tongue.

He turns off the light and lies on his back with one cold arm against her. "What's all this about having the baby here at home?"

"No! I'd be terrified."

"Mama said you said you wanted to."

"No. She misunderstood. I meant — I just feel — I want to go home and have it." She holds her breath. "Home to Australia."

"How come?"

"Oh. Mum and Dad. You know. Mostly, I suppose. Yes."

"We can't afford the fares."

"One way, we can. Dad said they'd help."

"Ah. One way? I see."

The moon must have risen. In the hollow glow through the shutters the *flokati* looks like a fall of snow on rough ground. "I wonder if it'll snow for Christmas?" she says. "It didn't the other times."

He snorts. "You spring a thing like this on me. What I might feel — you couldn't care less, could you! I wanted to stay in Australia three years ago, but no, you uprooted us, you — *felt* —

you had to go and live in Greece. And now what? Come along, doggy, I want to go home. To Australia!"

She takes a shaky breath. "I feel guilty, I suppose. They're old, they're not well. You could leave it too late, Dad said."

"You know what a pessimist he is. You used to joke about it."

"Can we bank on it, though?" She ploughs on. "It's not as if it would be for ever."

"It might."

"We can always come back."

"Always, can we? Backwards and forwards." He turns his back to her. "I'll need to think it over. I'm tired."

"There's not much time. We've got till the end of February. That's when my smallpox vaccination expires. I can't have another one while I'm pregnant and I can't enter Australia without it."

Lying along his back, she feels him tightening against her. The nape of his neck is damp and has his hot smell. Once he pelted her down a sand dune and was out of sight in the white waves when the hot smell from him buffeted her face. That was at Christmas.

We went to the beach at Christmas when I was little, she remembers. On Phillip Island we had dinner at the guesthouse and then Dad and I followed a track called Lovers' Walk — there was a board nailed up. Lovers' Walk — to look for koalas as they awoke in the trees. First we walked down the wooden pier where men and their sons were fishing. Red water winding and hollowing. Crickets fell silent when I walked in the tea-tree. After sunset the waves were grey and clear rolling and unrolling shadows on the sand. The trees, black now, still had their hot smell.

Some time in the early hours the toothache jerks her out of sleep. Grigori breathes on deeply. Tossing, feverish, close to tears, she stumbles to the kitchen for an aspirin and Chloe, passing through to the lavatory annexe, sees and scolds her. "You shouldn't take any medicines now," she says.

"One little aspirin!" Bell's smile is a snarl.

"Any medicine at all."

"I have a toothache!"

"Still, for the baby's sake."

Bell turns and gulps it down. Back in bed the pain is relentless, it drills into her brain. After an hour, two, of whimpering in her sweat she creeps back to the kitchen and in a flash of bilious light swallows down three more aspirins. No one catches her. In the passage she trips over Sophoula's potty, which they leave outside their door until morning. Splashing away over cold urine, she lets it lie where it fell. Grigori is snoring. "Turn over," she hisses in Greek, and he turns.

A rooster calls, the same one as every morning, then hens, then a crow, so loud that it must be in the yard. How long since she last heard a gull? It must be only a couple of weeks. When was the last time she was in Thessaloniki? Gulls are as common as pigeons in the city. It seems like years.

What does tea-tree smell like in summer?

Their bedroom is white and takes up one corner of the house and of the street, 21st of April Street these days, in honour of the Colonels' coup. The two-roomed school that Grigori went to is opposite. They are on one of the busiest crossroads in the village. All through Christmas Day, Boxing Day and the next day Bell sleeps and wakes to the uproar of tractors, donkeys, carol-singers, carts, trucks with loud-speakers bellowing in her windows. Snow falls. She sits sipping milk at the family table in her pyjamas, staggers to the lavatory annexe and back to her cooling hollow under the *flokati*. She coughs. Her head pulsates. She loses count of how many aspirins. The toothache goes through her in waves. Sweat soaks her pyjamas and sheets and Kyria Sophia dries them again by the *somba*. Grigori takes refuge for two nights at his cousin Angelo's place behind the bakery. Children throwing snowballs yell and swear. The baby wails. From time to time Sophoula opens Bell's door, but slams it in panic when Bell stirs to see who it is. Chloe keeps away in case she and the children catch something. Kyria Sophia comes and sits at the end of the bed crocheting with a pan of hot coals at her feet.

Penicillin, somebody suggests, a shot of penicillin, there's a woman down the street who's qualified. Bell says yes, oh yes, please. Chloe is appalled. But no one ever comes to give the injection. Time has broken down. Sand slides shifting under the

scorched soles of her feet. The scream of a gull makes her slip and clutch at the stringy trunk of a tea-tree, but it must be the grapevine. No, she is flat on her back, she is clutching the *flokati* when her eyes open. It looks like snow on rough ground. That scream comes again and it's the baby screaming. Chloe's baby though, not her own, that she can hear, then all the sounds of hushing and commotion as he sobs, then whimpering and quiet.

One morning she wakes and is well, clear-headed, free of toothache and of fever. She opens the windows but the shutters won't move. She is weak, look, trembling. But it's not that: snow is heaped on the sill. She patters to the door and stares down the white street. The sun is rising behind white roofs and trees, turning the snow sand-yellow, shading in the printed feet of birds and a stray dog. The stringy grapevine has grown spindles of ice.

Stooped panting over buckets and *tapsia* of water, she spends the day washing her stiff, sour clothes and her hair, stuck in yellow strings to her head by now; and sitting with hair and clothes spread out to dry by the *somba*. She would love a bath, but not in the dank ice-chamber that the lavatory annexe has become. For one thing, other people are always wanting to get in. And in any case, it's not as if they'll notice whether she does or not, not even Grigori: for fear of a miscarriage, now that she has finally conceived they don't make love. She's well again, she won't risk catching cold. She wraps a scarf over her mouth whenever she goes outside. Now and then a twinge through her tooth alarms her, but the rivetting ache is gone.

Every day there is washing and cooking of which she does her share. When the sun is out she walks around the village photographing crystals and shadows, tufty snow and smooth. The narrowed river is crinkled, slow, with white domes on its rocks. Ovens in the deserted yards have a cap of snow over two sooty airvents and stare back at the camera like ancient helmets. White hens are invisible except for their jerking legs and combs. The storks' nest is piled high; it could be a linen basket up on top of the church tower. In the schoolyard a snowman has appeared — no, a snow woman two metres tall in a widow's scarf and a

cloak of sacking under which her great round breasts and belly glisten naked.

She takes photographs of the snow woman and of children hiding to throw snowballs and of the *piapas* as he flaps by, his hair and beard like a stuffing of straw that has burst out of his black robes. The family and the neighbours line up for portraits under the grey grapevine. The old man leads the cows out of the barn and poses for her standing between them on the soiled snow while they shift and blink in the light, mother and daughter.

"You can show them to your parents," he says. So all the family knows that she is going home. No one talks about it.

She takes time exposures in the blue of evening as the windows in the houses light up and throw their long shapes on the snow outside. As often as not, Kyria Sophia, Chloe, Grigori, even the old man, can be found in one or other of the rooms, the little golden theatres, that Bell used to love being in. Now she knows the sets, the characters, the parts too well. She would rather stay home alone; she is quite happy babysitting. Having read her own few books too often, she reads Sophoula's story books about princesses. If Sophoula wakes, Bell reads aloud with the warm child in her lap. When the old man comes in they roast chestnuts on top of the *somba* until the others come. They listen in to the clandestine broadcasts on Deutsche Welle, which he calls *Dolce Vita*: these are banned by the Junta and the penalty for listening could be imprisonment, could be torture. He has enemies who would report him if they knew. "The walls have ears," he growls, the radio pressed to his grey head; he is hard of hearing himself. His wrinkles are so deep that they pull his hooded eyes into a slant and his lips into a perpetual smile around his cigarette.

On New Year's Eve Kyria Sophia announces that she is too tired even to dream of making the family *massilopita*. "Thank goodness my nephew's the baker," she says. "Angelo says he'll bring us one."

Chloe fluffs up her hair. "My mother always makes ours."

"It's a lot of bother for nothing, if you ask me!" snaps the old

woman. "Who appreciates it? Look at all my *baklava* that none of you will eat!"

"Mama, it's a wonderful *baklava*!" Bell hugs her.

"You say that. Eat some then."

"And what about my tooth?"

"*Amari*, that woman!" Bell hears her whisper to Grigori. "I could wring her neck," meaning Chloe, or so Bell hopes.

Then to her further exasperation the old woman looks everywhere and can't find the *flouri*, the lucky coin that she hides in each year's *vassilopita*. Bell gives her the lucky sixpence that she brought from home, the one her mother used to put in the plum pudding.

After dinner, while Grigori and his father are still at the *kafeneion*, Angelo and his mother, Aunt Magdalini, arrive with the *vassilopita*. An elderly doll in long skirts, she falls asleep by the *somba*, steam rising from her woollen socks. Bell wakes her to eat a floury *kourabie*, and again to drink coffee. Angelo has ouzo. It blurs his sharp brown features, so like Grigori's, and makes him jocular.

"What can you see out there, Bella?" She turns from the window. "Your man coming home?"

"The moon rising."

"*Fengaraki mou lambro*," recites Sophoula proudly.

"Good! What comes next?"

"*Fexe mou na perpatoi*!"

"I'll give you twenty drachmas," Angelo drawls, "if you can tell me what the moon's made of."

"Rock?"

"You lost. It's a snowball, silly. It was thrown so high it can't ever come back to earth."

Sophoula's jaw drops. "Who threw it?"

"Guess." He scratches the black wool on his head.

"A giant?"

"I think a bear. There's one up the mountain. There were tracks up there the other day. The hunters are out after her."

"The poor bear!"

He peers out the window. "That's not her in the schoolyard, is it? A huge white bear?"

"Silly." She giggles. "That's only the snow woman."

"The snow woman, is it?" hisses Angelo. "So that's who threw the moon up there!" and Sophoula screams in terror.

Kyria Sophia glares up over her glasses. "God put the moon there."

"Supposing she comes alive at night time? Supposing she comes and stares in all the windows while we're asleep?"

"No, no!" Sophoula clamps herself to Bell. "Auntie, make him stop it!"

"Angelo, please?"

"Of course she doesn't!" cries Kyria Sophia. "Aren't you ashamed to put an idea like that in the child's head?"

The door bursts open on Chloe red-faced and turbulent. "You'll wake the baby! Can't I leave you alone here for one minute?" She drags the child by the arm into their room. There they both stay until Angelo and Aunt Magdalini have gone and Grigori and his father are home for the midnight ceremony of cutting the *vassilopita*. Then Chloe sidles sullenly in with her black hair stuck to cheeks still red with sleep or crying. "Sophoula will have to miss it. She's asleep," she mutters.

The old man, as head of the household, carefully divides the loaf. He sets aside a piece for the church and then for every member of the family, present and absent. The lucky sixpence turns up in Chloe's baby's piece, as it was bound to, and they all pretend surprise. Bell stuffs the sweet bread into the safe side of her mouth. Next New Year, she knows, wherever they all are by then, the *flouri* or the sixpence will turn up in her child's piece.

The New Year card games at the *kafeneion* will go on all night. Grigori walking back is a shadow among other shadows that the moon makes in the snow.

On New Year's Day no bus comes to the village. The road in has been declared dangerous because the two narrow wooden bridges that it crosses are thick with frozen snow. No buses until further notice, bellows the village loudspeaker. People grumble. This happens every winter and every winter the government promises a new road. The mountain villages are worse off, of course;

they'll be snowed in for weeks, not just a few days. Still, since no one has a car, everyone is trapped here while it lasts, except Angelo with his bread van.

Angelo goes on delivering his bread around the villages using chains, risking unmade tracks on hills and across fields to bypass the bridges. Grigori has been joining him lately for the sake of the ride and the company; now he goes on every trip in case Angelo strikes trouble and needs a hand. But Angelo won't take anyone else. "It's not legal," he tells everyone, "and it's not safe." He broke his rule twice last year, he says, and look what happened. The old man that he took to the district hospital in the back of the van survived; but the woman in labour? She lost her baby when the van hit a buried rock miles from anywhere and broke an axle. "Never again, not for a million drachmas," he says. "Don't ask me."

So that evening Bell and Chloe, sitting by the small *somba* in Chloe's room with the work done and the children asleep, are thunderstruck when Kyria Sophia — who has made herself scarce all day — puts her head round the door to announce that by the way she and Grigori are off first thing in the morning to Thessaloniki to see her other grandchildren. Angelo is giving them a lift.

"She can't do that!" Chloe cries out, and follows her into the kitchen. "You can't do that!" Bell hears.

"What? What can't I do?"

"What about *me*?"

"What about you?"

"I brought the children all this way to visit you and it wasn't easy on the bus and now you take it into your head to go off to Thessaloniki just like that and —"

"Look, when I need you to tell *me* what —"

"— And leave us stranded here!"

"What would you do there, anyway?" Kyria Sophia shouts. "Your husband's away at sea for two more weeks!"

"I happen to live there. *Your* husband's here, remember? How will he feel if you go? This is your house, it's not mine. I could have gone to my own village for Christmas and New Year when they begged me to. *My* mother —"

"You're a married woman. It's your duty to come to us."
"Duty? Oh, duty? What about your duty, then? Aren't you a married woman?"

"You dare to talk to me like —"

"Mama, you have *no right* —"

"Get out of my kitchen, Chloe. You say one more word and I swear I'll hit you. I'll hit you!"

Chloe strides into the room where Bell and now Sophoula too are listening in horror; she slams the door behind her. Thuds and crashes of glass hit the wall between them.

"*Oriste mas! Oriste mas!*" come her shrieks. "Now *she* 'll tell me if I can go or not, will she? Twenty-five years old! *She* 'll tell me what I can and can't do!"

"Mama, what's Yiayia saying?" Sophoula whimpers.

"Never you mind. She's wicked. She doesn't love you or any of us." Chloe bites her lips. "Let the old bitch howl," she mutters. "She would have slapped my face in there! She knows she's in the wrong."

The outside door slams and they jump. Footsteps splash past the shuttered window. The three of them creep to their beds. Bell is still wide awake when at last Grigori comes in and starts undressing in the dark.

"Grigori?"

"You're awake, are you? What happened here? Mama's in a frenzy. She's beside herself."

"She had a fight with Chloe."

"And you?"

"Me? No! I stayed out of it."

"You didn't try to stop her."

"As soon try stopping a train! If Chloe wants a fight, I suppose that's her business, isn't it?"

"If she fights with her own mother it's her business. If she fights with mine it's my business and yours and all the family's."

"So I should have stopped her."

"You were there." He has slid into bed without touching her. "And your place in the family gives you the right."

"Because I'm older than Chloe?"

"No. Because I'm the older brother and you're my wife."

"Oh, I think Chloe was right to be upset. Is it fair of Mama to go off and leave us like this?"

"One more day of Chloe, she says, and she'll go mad."

"Chloe's hard to take. It's the children. They tire her out, you see."

"Mama does everything."

"No, she doesn't. Chloe pulls her weight. I'm here all day and I know."

"You know! You live in a world of your own! Chloe pulls her weight, does she? And what about you?"

"Tell me, what do the men do here while the women are pulling their weight? Play cards in the *kafeneion*? Stroll around Thessaloniki? If it comes to that, I'm the one who really needs to go. If I don't get to a dentist, I might lose this tooth."

"Nice timing."

"For every child a tooth, they say. It's to do with lack of calcium."

She feels him shrug. "Drink more milk."

"I'm awash with milk already. Milk won't fill a rotten tooth, though, will it?"

"Well, bad luck," he says wearily. "It's stopped aching, hasn't it? There'll be a bus soon anyway, go on that. The fact is Angelo only has room for two and he needs me."

"Well, let *me* come, then! Explain to Mama!"

"You explain to Mama." He waits for her to think that over.

"Why all this fuss, I wonder?"

"You're going and leaving me here."

"It's not as if it's for ever, is it?"

"Oh, that's it. I see. You want revenge."

"You're happy to go off to Australia and leave me here."

"Happy? I'm hoping you'll come."

"It's more than hoping, I think. It's closer to force."

They are lying rigidly side by side on their backs and neither moves. "You'd be taking my child with you."

She snorts. "Not much choice at this stage!"

"No. There's not. So I want you to wait."

"I can't, I told you. My smallpox vaccination."

"I know that! I mean wait till after it's born."

She opens her eyes wide in the darkness, so suddenly alarmed that she thinks he will hear the blood thumping through her. "No, I'd be trapped here then," she dares to say.

"Trapped!"

"Besides, the whole point is to be home with Mum and Dad before the birth. And then come back. If you want."

"Why? Why does it matter *where* you are for the birth?"

"It just does," she mutters. "I'll feel safer there."

"You're a stubborn, selfish, cold-blooded woman, Bell. You always have been and you always will be."

"Always?"

"You want your own way in everything. Well, you're not getting it."

Calming herself, she strokes the long arch of her belly, fingering the navel which has turned inside out and then the new feathery line of dark hair down to her groin. Once or twice a flutter inside her has made her think the baby has quickened, but it might have been only wind. Soon there'll be no mistaking it, her whole belly will hop, quake and ripple. She runs a finger along the lips that the head will burst through. "What the fuck are you doing?" he mutters.

"Nothing."

"You're breathing hard."

"No, I'm not." She forces herself to count as she breathes slowly in one two three, out one two three.

"I can hear you."

"No." She moves to the cold edge and listens motionless, breathing very slowly. He is silent. He has had his say.

She wakes at cockcrow when he gets dressed. She hears the van come, then go. She has stayed in bed through all the flurry of their departure, and so has Chloe. They open the kitchen door to find the *somba* burning with a bright flame, the milk boiled, the baby's napkins dried and folded, the day's eggs brought in from the bar and the table laid with bread and cheese and honey under a cloth.

"Oh, lovely!" cries Bell.

"You see?" Chloe snorts. "She's sorry."

"She must have been up all night!" Bell could hug the old woman.

"She was. I heard her."

"She didn't have to do all this for us!"

Chloe stares and shrugs. "Why shouldn't she?"

Chloe spends the morning washing and rinsing clothes, Bell taking Sophoula for a walk with the camera. The piles of soft snow were frozen overnight; so were the puddles and the clothes hung out on wires and bare brambles. There are no clouds this morning to block the sun or the faded half-moon, and everywhere they go water trickles and drips and glitters. As they come near the schoolyard Sophoula cringes, pulling at Bell.

"Carry me, Auntie Bella."

"Why, for heaven's sake?"

"The snow woman's there."

"It's only snow! It's only a big doll made of snow."

"It's the wicked witch." She huddles against Bell. "She comes alive at night and stares in the window."

"She does not! Look, she's melted. The poor old thing, she's vanished away." A heap of pitted snow sits under the pines.

"The moon's melting too, Auntie Bella!"

Sophoula keeps Bell company while she boils the potatoes and fries eggs for the four of them for lunch; Chloe is with the baby in the bedroom. But the child is grizzily and cross now and says she isn't hungry: she doesn't want potato or egg or bread or anything.

"Have a bit of banana?" Bell pleads. One banana is left. Chloe has made them last, feeding them to Sophoula inch by inch and folding the black soft skin over the stump. But no, Sophoula won't. "I know!" On impulse Bell peels the last banana, flours it and fries it in the pan with the eggs for Sophoula. "My darling, eat," she says. The old man trudges in. Lunch is late again. "Try it? For Auntie? Have some milk with it?"

"Tell a story."

"Once upon a time," she slips a spoonful of banana in, "in a little cottage in the woods —"

Sophoula gags and splutters. The old man stares. "Eat," he growls. "It's good for you."

"Not Auntie, I don't like it!"

"All right, you don't have to eat it." Blushing with shame, Bell gobbles the banana herself before Chloe comes.

"There was a banana," Chloe says when they are peeling fruit into their empty plates later, and Bell tries to explain. Sophoula announces smugly that Auntie ate it all up. So as not to let it go to waste. Bell says, red-faced. "You know she has them raw," Chloe accuses. "No more bananas!" Chloe kisses the child's hair. "Wicked Auntie! Where will I get my darling some more?"

The old man, groping in his pockets, finds a bag of peanuts in their shells and presses it into Sophoula's hand.

"Is it safe to give her nuts?" Bell wonders aloud. "They'll choke the child."

In silence she rinses the dishes while Chloe shells peanuts by the *sombra*. Abruptly Sophoula hoots and stiffens. Her back arches. Chloe bangs her, shakes her, shoves her head forward, and at last a great gush of sour curds and speckles pours out of her mouth all over her mother.

"Thank God!" Chloe hauls her jumper over her head. "Auntie, my poor darling!" she moans, dabbing Sophoula's white face. "They're bad, don't ever eat them! Wicked Pappou!" She pushes the whole bag into the firebox and slams the iron door. The old man plods to his room. "There," she says, "let them burn. He won't tell Her," she mutters at Bell, who has brought a glass of water. "Thanks. Don't you tell either, or we'll never hear the end of it."

It is dark these days before the old man wakes to do the afternoon milking. The torch he takes into the barn lights up the ridge of snow at the door. His approach to the house is a clank and slop of saucepans past the window and a red point and trail of smoke, his cigarette. This time he dumps the saucepans caked with dung and hay inside on the kitchen floor and covers them. "Who'll strain the milk?" he says loudly to no one. "Will you boil it or use it for cheese?"

Sullen with sleep in their doorways, the women exchange looks. He is waiting. Chloe tweaks a curl off her baby's damp cheek and kisses it.

"Two daughters-in-law!" barks the old man and they all jump. The baby whines.

"Sssh." Chloe frowns.

"Two daughters-in-law and I do it, do I? I strain the milk! I make the cheese! It's not enough to look after the cows and milk them. I can do the lot!"

The kitchen door slams. Chloe pulls Bell into her room, where they stand listening behind the door as he unlatches the window and clatters the saucepans. Then the front door clangs shut and his boots crunch away.

"He's thrown it out!" Bell mutters.

"Two daughters-in-law and I do it, do I?"

"Sssh. He'll hear!"

"Him, hear?"

"Sssh."

They creep to the kitchen and turn the light on. In the square of yellow it throws outside, Bell can just make out the saucepans on end against the barn wall. The sun never comes there and the snow is still thick, with a pale puddle in it, a cat crouched at the edge, and all around a wide shawl of creamier snow. "Oh! What a waste," Bell sighs.

"Who cares?" Chloe looks in a jug. "Look, there's all this left from this morning."

"He's right, though."

"It's Mama's job!"

"But since she's not here."

"I have two small children I have to everything for."

"Yes, I should have done it."

"You're pregnant!"

"Only five months." She sits down. "I need a coffee."

"No, come on, let's get out of this place before we go mad! We'll take the children to Aunt Magdalini's. Come on."

At Aunt Magdalini's, the village secretary's wife tells them that the bridges have been declared safe for the time being and that a bus to Thessaloniki will run in the morning. Rowdy in her elation and relief and scorn of Kyria Sophia, who might just as well have waited, Chloe hauls Bell and Aunt Magdalini's three daughters-in-

law along the crusted, muddy street to celebrate her release at the *kafeneion*.

Inside its misted windows men are smoking at small tables, watching the soccer on the grey television screen (the only one in the village) or looking on while Grigori's father plays the champion at *travi*. The men all sit with their elbows on the chair-back and their hands flat on their chests, glancing sidelong from time to time at the table of women drinking orangeade. When Grigori's father wins the game he sends the *kafedji* over with another round, and the women raise the bottles smiling in a salute to him.

Chloe tells joke after joke uproariously and the other three are soon helpless with laughter. "What are the men staring at?" she asks, gazing round. "Oh, Bella, it's you!" She swoops and whispers. "Bella, look how you're sitting." Startled, Bell looks. "Bella, your hands!" She has them open over each breast exactly as the men's are, but women never sit like that. She moves them to the slopes of her belly and Chloe giggles and nudges but Bell is too torpid in the smoky heat to be bothered. When the others are ready to go they wake her. The sky is all white stars, frost crackles as they tread. They link arms with Bell in the middle to keep her from a fall. Scarves of mist trail behind them. They drop her at home on the way to Aunt Magdalini's.

Alone in the cold bed, Bell is awake for the first unmistakable tremor of the quickening.

Before daybreak Bell is up to strain the milk — twice carefully through the gauze — and boil it in time for breakfast. Chloe's noisy desperation surges all around her. At last the kisses crushing or missing cheeks and she is away with the children, the old man carrying their bags to the bus, and Bell has the house to herself.

She scrubs the saucepans and puts clean water on to boil. The table is littered with crusts, plates and cups under the yellow bulb that only now she remembers to switch off; she tidies up. She has packing to do as well, letters and lists to write, but that had better wait until Grigori decides whether or not to go with her.

When her saucepans boil she carries them and another of cold water into the lavatory annexe that the old man spent all autumn building and is proud of. In case he tries to come in and wash, she pushes the heavy can of olive oil against the door. There is no light bulb in here yet, only an air vent and a candle stuck on a plate. She leans over to put a match to it and its flame lights her breasts: they are as she has never seen them, white and full, clasped with dark veins like tree roots. Shuddering in the cold, she stands in the *tapsi*, wets and soaps herself urgently, rinses the soap off. Flames go down her in runnels. She is rough all over with goosepimples except for her belly, domed in her hands, warm and smooth like some great egg.

All the water is swilling round her legs in the *tapsi* before she has got all the soap off but she rubs herself dry anyway, pulls on her clean clothes and with a grunt hoists up the *tapsi* and pours all the water into the lavatory bowl. It brims, then sinks gurgling down in froth and a gust of sweet cold rotteness from the sewer belches up in her face.

Still shuddering, she hugs herself close to the *sombaa*, propping the iron door open while she crams pine cones in. She sits with her clothes open. Perhaps the baby can see and hear the fire, she thinks: did he see my hands in there, by the light of the candle? They must have made shadows on his red wall.

Here we are in a cold white house with icicles under the eaves and winter has hardly begun, but inside its walls are warm to the touch, full of firelight.

She has a couple of hours before she needs to start cooking lunch, and one full roll of fast film left: she will use them to take her last photographs. Bare interiors of sun and shade and firelight, in which as always she appears absent.

Home Time

By late afternoon the sky is a deep funnel of wind, damp and white. She remarks as she passes through the lamplight around his desk on her way to the bathroom: "Doesn't it look like snow!"

"Do you think?" He squints out the window.

"That hollowness of the light."

"It's early for snow."

"*Casablanca's* going to be on TV tonight at eight," she says before he can look down again. "Why don't we go to that bar and see it and then have dinner somewhere after?"

"Mmm."

The room is grey; only the light around him is warm and moving with shadows. The steam pipes are silent. Whenever will they start clanking and hissing and defrost the apartment? "*Isn't it cold, though!*" she says brightly.

"Mmm."

"Maybe I should go for a walk downtown, take some photos of the lights coming on," she says.

"It's a lot colder outside."

"Walking would warm me up."

"Okay."

"Oh, maybe not," she says. "I might write letters home instead." Home is Australia. It's summer there. "Until it's time for *Casablanca*."

He sighs and waits for silence.

She has an electric radiator on in her room — the sitting-room really, but she works in here. She has twin lamps of frilly glass at twin tall windows inside which wasps sizzle and cling and trap themselves in shreds of cobweb. The table she writes at faces the windows. Three times a day she pushes books to one side and turns papers face down, since this is also the table they eat at. The