

## THE OCEAN OF BRISBANE

His voice came out of the black space between the two projectors. When a slide slipped off the wall, dropping into nowhere, the tiered funnel of the lecture theatre was so dark that the darkness seemed to rub itself against her, furry, like the legs of spiders. She shivered. Then a bubble of light would come, a coloured diagram or a photograph would appear on the screen straight ahead but below her, and words would unfold themselves on the other screen, the one that was angled across a corner of the room, high up, and therefore eye-level with the tier where she sat. She would see him then for a moment, shadowy, a juggler of ideas, images, impenetrable words, remote control buttons, a magician waving his arms in the twilight cast by the screens.

I watched her watching him.

She was trying to explain him to herself.

I watched how she held onto her own body, arms hugged tightly, and how she kept shivering (it *looked* like shivering) in the sweltering airless room.

Don't worry, I wanted to whisper to her. I wanted to put my hand on her arm, soothing, but it would have alarmed her. Don't worry, I wanted to whisper. It's just as much a mystery to himself.

He spoke, and his words settled lightly onto the cantilevered screen in black block capitals, crowding, jostling like branches full of crows, she had always been frightened of crows, the way they swooped at you, dive-bombed, that time on the farm at Camp Mountain, long before Brisbane, she was still a child at Camp Mountain, the beaks slashing at her head (or maybe magpies, was it? had they been magpies?), they go for the eyes, *Always wear a hat*, teachers warned, *and if attacked, cover the eyes*.

ELECTRON MICROSCOPY, the screen said.  
OF CRYSTALS.

And then in a fluttering rush: OF AN ALPHA-HELICAL COILED COIL. PROTEIN EXTRACTED FROM THE OOTHECA OF THE PRAYING MANTIS.

The black letters swooped at her and instinctively she covered her eyes. I watched the way her hands shook slightly (how would she speak to him? how had they *ever* really? and yet after all these years she had been hoping ... but what language could they possibly use?) and all the time, through her fingers, she was watching for crevices of hope, for something to grab onto, and *there* was something, *crystals*, yes, she recognised that, he used to have a set, those heavy headphones, telling them he could hear Indonesia, England, the cricket scores, winching the world into his room, swallowing it, he had this terrible hunger, this unnatural ... this kind of greed, she could never predict what ... and it was never big enough for him even then, his room, their house, their lives, Brisbane, the country, the world, he was like one of those alien children on the late late movies, growing into strangeness, his mind butting against the ceiling, webbed toes, a third eye, foreign to her from the beginning. She pressed a hand against her stomach and stared at it. Where had he come from?

"Coiled coil," he was saying, from the dark space between the projectors. On the lower screen were intricate diagrams that looked like tangled chain-necklaces, or twisted ropes of sausages perhaps. "Solving the structures," he said. "Electron diffraction ... especially certain membrane-embedded protein strings resistant to X-ray imaging." A ghostly pointer picked out the braided strings, and she turned to look at me suddenly, so specifically, that I heard her thoughts, heard the click of association, or saw it, and felt for my plairs against my shoulders. It was like groping for an amputated limb, the coiled coils of childhood.

*It seems only yesterday ...* her look said.

The coiled coils of language, I thought, and knotted myself into the puzzle. I saw diagrams of shared and divergent lives braiding and unbraiding themselves. Alpha-helical, alphabetical, we both rode in an Alfa Romeo once, it belonged to someone his older brother knew, I think, someone from Sydney, the wind whipping through the coiled coils of our hair and we two thinking we were Christmas, swimming through Brisbane like fish. There was nothing to it in those days. We could walk on water. We thought we were the beginning and the end, the ant's pants, the ootheca of the praying mantis, no less.

O-ith-ee-ka,

oh I *there* this,

thaid the blind man

though he couldn't see at all.

What the hell did *ootheca* mean?

*But you don't know, but I do, don't, do, don't too, do so, don't, do.*

Those two, our mothers used to say, will argue till the cows come home. Fish out of water, other kids' mothers said, but we weren't, we were in our own element, we porpoised through

books, we dived into argument, we rode our bikes into endless discussion and rainforest trails where we disappeared and swam in private time, no time, timeless rainforest rockpool debate time. We cavorted in the ocean of Brisbane, our own little pond.

I computed the odds against solving the structure of memory which dissolves and devolves and solves nothing.

Afterwards, waiting for him under the jacarandas, we fanned ourselves with the lecture handouts. From time to time, she smoothed hers out against her skirt and studied it with intense concentration, as though memorisation of the print might yield up a meaning. When she saw me looking, a kind of rash flared across her cheeks and she scrunched the handout into a fan again and whipped it back and forth. She said nervously, apologetically: "Me and his dad ..." Then she panicked about her grammar and bit her lip and began again. "His father and me ... I, I should say, I and his dad ... the Depression and the war and everything ... You know, Philippa, I'm sure Brian's told you, we only got to Grade 6."

"Oh heck," I said, "Brian's stuff is double-dutch to me too. To nearly everyone. To 99.9 per cent of the people in the world, I would say."

"Is it?"

"Oh God, yes. Brian lives in the stratosphere. He's really --- oh, please don't, Mrs Leekie."

"I thought ..." She was fumbling in her handbag, sniffing. "I'm not very ... I thought it was just me. I don't want to embarrass him."

"You won't, you *won't!* How could you even think such a ..." There were people jostling us, and we had to step back, step

aside, adjust ourselves. We eased our way to the outside edge of the crowd, beyond the cloisters, away from the hot blanket of bodies. "He's proud as punch that you're here. Look, he's just coming out now, he's looking around for you, see?" I waved madly and Brian made a sign of acknowledgment with his hand and went on talking to some colleague.

"You can't blame him," she said meekly. "It's just, sometimes we wished ... his dad wished ..." She mopped at her face with the Kleenex she had fished from her bag.

"It's dreadfully sticky, isn't it?" I could feel runnels of sweat making a slow tickling descent across my ribcage.

"I wished for his dad's sake." She studied her much creased fan again, its print smudging from sweat and oil. *Electron microscopy of crystals of an alpha-helical ...* "Me, actually to tell you the truth, Philippa, I got to Grade 8 but I never let on. Nor while his Dad was alive." A little smile passed between us, woman to woman — *Well, that's what we do, isn't it?* — and then she said wistfully, "His dad used to talk to him about the crystal set, he understood all that, they used them in the war, I think."

Delicately, with the thumb and index finger of both hands — handbag slung at crook of left elbow, lecture handout pressed under upper right arm — she took hold of the front of her bodice, just below the shoulders on each side, and lifted the polyester away from her body, raising it gently, lowering, raising, a quick light motion, ventilating herself. "Your dad, Philippa. That was a nasty bit of a turn. Is he all right?"

"Yes," I said, startled. "He's fine." I fanned myself vigorously, guiltily, because I had forgotten, completely forgotten, *like a fist squeezing his heart, he says, an item in letters, just a warning, the*

doctor says, *Doctor Williams it was, you remember him, he says at our age you're got to expect ...* "How did you —?"

"Your mum, I think it was, told me ... yes, I saw her on the bus one day. Going into the city. We had a chat about you and Brian."

"Oh dear!"

"She had pictures of all the grandchildren in her purse, I couldn't get over it, little Philippa Townsend with those big teenagers. And all that snow, I just can't imagine. It's funny, isn't it, how we ...? To me, you're still that little girl swinging on the front gate talking to Brian after school. You don't look a day older, Philippa."

"Oh, don't I wish!" I was swamped by the smell of frangipani beside their front gate. It was so intense, I felt dizzy. Lightly, indifferently, I asked, "The frangipani still beside your gate?"

"Fancy you remembering! His dad planted that. His dad was very good with his hands."

"Yes, I remember. Your roses especially ..."

"He was a quiet man, Ed, a very shy man, but he was a good man, no one realises how ... such a good ..." She began pleating her skirt in her fingers. "I suppose Brian told you about the nights, but it wasn't his fault, those awful nights, those terrible ..." She turned away. "I feel ..." she said, putting out a hand, casting about for some sort of support. "I don't feel too ..." Her hand drifted aimlessly through the wet air. "I think I have to sit down," she said.

"There's a bench, look." I led her towards it. "We don't have to go to the reception if you're not feeling well. I can drive you home."

"I don't know," she said uncertainly. She pulled at the damp

frizz on her forehead, trying to cover a little more of the space above her eyebrows. The space seemed vast now. Her fingers explored it nervously, scuttling across what felt like an acreage of blotched skin. I shouldn't have had it permed so soon before, she thought wretchedly. This dress is wrong. I should have worn the green suit. I shouldn't have worn a hat. She said plaintively, "You were so clever, you and Brian. Such clever children." Her voice came from a long way back, from our high school years or even earlier, from the times of swinging on the gate. "*He'll go far*, teachers used to say," and her eyes stared into nothing, following the radiant but bewildering trajectory of Brian's life. She spoke as sleepwalkers speak: "*He'll go far*. They always told us that, I remember." She looked vaguely about. "I mustn't miss the tram, Philippa."

As though the action were somehow related to the catching of trams, she stretched her hands out in front of her and studied them, turning them over slowly, examining the palms, the backs, the palms again. Her hands must have offered up a message, because she gave a sudden sad little yelp of a laugh. "I'm being silly, aren't I? There's no trams anymore."

"Oh, I do that too," I said. "The trams still run in *my* Brisbane." I tapped my forehead with an index finger.

"You know who I ran into in the Commonwealth Bank one day? Last year it was, the big one, you know, in the city, on the corner of Adelaide Street? *Mrs Matthews?*"

"Mrs Matthews?"

"Richard's mum, you remember?"

"Oh, Richard," I said, dizzy with loss. It was so unsettling, this vertigo, hitting sudden pockets of freefall into the past.

"Richard went away too," she said. "They never see him. It

just seems like yesterday when Brian and Richard and you and the others ... and Julie ... and Elaine. It was terrible what happened to Elaine. I cried when I read it in the paper. It's not fair, it isn't fair!" She picked up a leaf and began shredding it nervously and then dropped it. She ventilated herself again, holding the dress away from her skin, shaking it lightly. "Everyone's children went away."

"God, it's hot," I said. "The staff club will be air-conditioned though. For the reception. I wish they'd hurry it up."

"But you come back a lot, Philippa. I saw in the paper —"

"Oh yeah. Every year. Brisbane's got its hooks in me, I reckon. Look, he's coming at last, he's seen us. Oh damn."

We watched the student who had intercepted him; jeans and t-shirt, sandals.

"They all look scruffy," she said. It was an affront to her. Even the adults, the university people, the ones who would be at the reception, even they looked scruffy. Well, not scruffy exactly. But more or less as though they were dressed for an evening barbecue at the neighbours'. I shouldn't have worn the hat, she saw. I shouldn't have worn the corsage. But how could she have known? She had thought it would be like going to a wedding.

And he could have been a bridegroom coming towards us, easing away, trailing worshipful students like membrane-embedded alpha-helical streamers. He had the kind of bridegroomly self-consciousness and forced gaiety that goes with weddings.

"Dorrie!" he said loudly, full of energetic joviality, hugging her.

He had always called her that, from before he even started primary school. At five years of age: Dorrie and Ed. Never mother, father; certainly not mum and dad. It was as though even then

he knew something they didn't. And they had been too apprehensive, too apologetic, to protest. They had never even asked why.

"Philippa."

"Good on ya, mate." We hugged, old puzzle parts locking together. "You were bloody amazing. I'm speechless, I'm dazzled. What the hell's an ootheca?"

"What's a *what*?"

"An oo-ith-e-ka." I pronounced all four syllables carefully, the way he had, the stress on the third, treating each sound like glass. "The ootheca of the praying mantis."

"Jesus, Philippa!" Brian laughed. "Typical. Absolutely peripheral to the lecture. Trust you to focus on a fucking *trout*!"

"What does it mean?"

"It's the ovum sac," he said.

"The *ovum* sac. Hmm. So the breakthrough was dependent on female biology."

"Oh, fuck off." He made a fist and shadow-boxed, stopping an eighth of an inch from my nose. "Listen, Dorrie ..." turning toward her. He had a message of great urgency and import.

"Brian," she rushed in eagerly, tripping over her nerves. "I remember about the crystal set, you and your Dad, how you used to hear foreign languages."

Brian frowned, at sea. He just stared at her, disoriented, and then looked around nervously. ("You actually *blushed*, for God's sake," I told him later. "As though anyone would give a damn, even if they'd heard.")

"Now, Dorrie," he said gently. "There's this ghastly reception that Philippa and I have to go to, it's a stupid boring thing, and there's no sense in the world making you put up with ... So

listen, I'm going to call a cab for you, all right? And we'll come on later for dinner, just like you wanted. All right?"

"All right," she said, parrot-like, meekly, looking somewhere else. *And then afterwards there's a reception, she'd told the saleswoman, seeing white linen and cake and champagne, and I think this little one, the saleswoman had said, adjusting a wisp of feather at her brow, this little number will be perfect. Just the thing for mother of the famous man. Just the thing for the scientist's mum.*

It's because I wore a hat, she thought.

"Look," Brian said, raising his arm, waving. "Here's a Black and White." He hugged her again. "Take care of yourself now, Dorrie. Go and put your feet up on the verandah for a while. We'll see you later, okay?"

He said something to the driver, gave him money, and we both waved. We kept on waving till the taxi disappeared.

"I don't look at me like that, Philippa."

"Like what?"

"Just cut it out, okay?"

"I don't try and dump your guilt onto me."

"She would have hated it. She's terrified of social stuff, always has been. They never went anywhere. I was being kind, if it's any of your business."

"Jesus, Brian. That was brutal. And so totally unnecessary. I would have kept her under my wing."

"She would have hated it," he insisted. "Anyway, I'm not even going myself. I'm off to the Regatta. Let's go."

"What? But it's in your honour!"

"I don't give a stuff and nor do they. No one'll even notice I'm not there. It's the free booze and free food they're after, that's all. C'mon, let's go. You got your car here?"

★ ★

"You think it's because I'm ashamed of her," Brian said moodily on the verandah at the Regatta. "But you're wrong. It's not that."

I sipped my beer and stared across Coronation Drive at the river. Two small pleasure craft, motorboats with bright anodised hulls, were whizzing upstream, and a great ugly industrial barge from Darra Cement was gliding down, shuddering a bit, moving its hips in a slow, slatternly wallow. The sight of it filled me with happiness. *Good on you, you game old dick, I thought fondly, and raised my glass to it.* "Probably the same rusty tub we used to see when we were riding the buses out to uni," I said.

"Probably," Brian said lugubriously, slumped over his beer. "Everything's stuck in a bloody time warp, it's like a *swamp*" he waved his arms about to take in the verandah, the Regatta, the river, the whole city . . . "it's like a swamp that sucks everything under, swallows it, stifles it, and gives back noxious . . ." His energy petered out and he slumped again. "There was this funny little man in the front row who used to sit in on lectures when I was in first year. Flat earth freak, or something, he used to buttonhole people in the cloisters. We all used to duck when we saw him coming. Must be ninety now, if he's a day, and there he was in the very same seat. It gave me the shivers."

I squinted, and lined up the top of my glass with the white stripe on the broad backside of Darra Cement. "I saw in the paper that home-owners in Fig Tree Pocket and Jindalee and those newer suburbs are trying to get the dredging stopped. One of these days we'll come back and the river won't be brown anymore, it'll be crystal clear. I suppose that'll be a good thing,

but it's funny how I get pissed off when anyone tampers with Brisbane behind my back. God, I love being back, don't you?"

"I hate it," Brian said. He'd thrown his jacket across a spare chair. Now he undid a couple of buttons on his shirt and rolled up his sleeves. "Look," he said with disgust, raising his arms one by one, inspecting the moons of stain at the armpits. "A bloody steam bath."

"That's what I love. This languid feeling of life underwater." Between us and the river, the traffic rushed by in beehive lines but the noise was muffled, a droning damped-down buzz. Everything was fluid at the edges. Cars seemed to float slightly above the road and to move the way they do in old silent movies. Even the surface of Coronation Drive was unfixed, a band of shimmer. A drunk man was shambling along the bike path giving off mirages; I could see three of him. I could see the gigantic bamboo canes at the water's edge doubling, tripling, tipping themselves into the haze. I could see wavy curtains of air flapping lazily, easily, settling on us with sleep in their folds. "The only reason I don't come back to stay," I said drowsily, "is that if I did, I would never do another blessed thing for the rest of my life. I'd turn into a blissed-out vegetable."

"It makes me panic, being back," Brian said. "I feel as though I'm suffocating, *drowning*. I can't breathe. I can't get away fast enough. I get terrified I'll never get out again."

"Go back to Bleak City then," I said. "Stop whingeing. You sound like a prissy Melbourne."

"I am a Melbourne."

"Bullshit. You'll be buried here."

"Over my dead body. I can never quite believe I got out," he said. "I've forgotten the trick. How did I manage it?"

I shrugged, giving up on him, and let my eyes swim in Coronation Drive with the cars. An amazing old dorsal-finned shark of a Thunderbird, early sixties vintage, hove into view and I followed it with wonder. "Who was that friend of your brother's? The one with the Alfa Romeo. Remember that time we came burning out here and the cops —"

"You've got a mind like the bottom of a birdcage, Philippa," Brian said irritably. "All over the shop."

"Polyphasic," I offered primly. "Highly valued by some people in your field. I read an essay on it by Stephen Jay Gould. Or maybe it was Lewis Thomas. Multi-track minds, all tracks playing simultaneously. Whatever happened to him, I wonder?"

"To Stephen Jay Gould or Lewis Thomas?"

"Neither, dummy. To that friend of your brother's. How's your brother, by the way?"

"He's fine."

"Still in Adelaide?"

"Mm."

"Did he stay married?"

"Knock it off, Philippa."

"You stay in touch with her?"

"No."

"I'm sorry, Brian. I'm really sorry about all that. Are you, you know, *okay*?"

"Yeah, well." Brian shrugged. "It's easier this way. No high drama, no interruptions. I practically live at the lab."

"I read a glowing article about you in *Scientific American*. It was an old one, I picked it up in the waiting room at my dentist's."

Brian laughed. "There's achievement for you."

We lapsed into silence and drank another round of beer and stared at the river.

"Your mother said she ran into Richard's mum."

"Don't get started, Philippa." Brian warned.

"I miss them, I *miss* them. I miss our old gang. Don't you?"

"No."

"Liar."

"I never miss *anyone*," he said vehemently.

"Your mother said . . ."

"Okay, get it over with."

"Get what over with?"

"The lecture on how I treat Dorrie."

"I wasn't going to say a word," I protested. "But since you mention it, I don't understand why you feel embarrassed. You were actually *blushing*, for God's sake. As though anyone minds."

"You think I'm ashamed of her."

"Well?"

"It's not that. I'm not. I'm *protecting* her. I can't bear it when other kids smirk at her. At them. I can't *bear* it."

"Other kids?"

"There's a lot you don't know, Philippa."

"I don't know why you think they were any different from anyone else's parents."

He signalled for another jug, and we waited until it came, and then Brian filled both our glasses.

"They were," he said. "That's all."

"They weren't. I spent enough time at your place, for God's sake."

"God. I'm depressed," Brian said.

"I spent time at Richard's and Julie's and Elaine's. They weren't

any different from anyone else's mum and dad." Brian said nothing. With his index finger, he played in a spill of beer. We were both, I knew, thinking of Elaine.

"Sorry," I said, "I shouldn't have . . . That's something that happens when I come back. Every so often, you know, maybe once or twice a year, I still have nightmares about Elaine. But not when I'm back here. When I'm here, we all still seem to be around. In the air or something. I can feel us." I stared into my glass, down the long amber stretch of the past. "How long is it since you've been back, anyway?"

"Five years."

"That's your average? Once every five years?"

"It's not that I want to come that often," he said. "Necessity?"

I laughed. Brian did not. "You're not usually this negative about Brisbane," I protested. "When was the last time I saw you? Two years ago, wasn't it? In Melbourne. No, wait. I forgot. London. June before last in London when you were there for that conference

— Yes, and we got all nostalgic and tried to phone Julie, tried to track her down . . . that was hilarious, remember? We got onto that party line somewhere south of Mt Isa."

"It's different when I'm somewhere else," Brian said. "I get depressed as hell when I'm back."

"Boy, you can say that again."

"Last time ever, that's a promise to me," he said. "Except for Dorrie's funeral."

"God, Brian." I had to fortify myself with Cooper's comfort. "You're getting *me* depressed. Anyway, speaking of your mother, we'd better get going. What time's she expecting us?"

"Oh shit." Brian folded his arms tightly across his stomach and pleaded himself over them.



"What's the matter?"

"I can't go."

"What?"

"I can't go, Philippa. I can't go. I just can't. Can you call her for me? Make up some excuse?"

I stared at him.

"Look," he said. "I *mean* to. I thought I could manage it. But I can't. Tell her I'm tied up. You'll do it better than I could."

"What the hell is the matter with you?"

"Look, tell her —" He seemed to cast about wildly for possible bribes. "Tell her we'll take her out for lunch tomorrow, before my afternoon flight. I'm staying at the Hilton, we'll take her there."

"I won't do it. I'm not going to do your dirty work for you. This is *crazy*, Brian. It's cruel. You'll break her heart."

Brian stood abruptly, knocking over his chair and blundered inside to the pay phone near the bar. I watched him dial. "Listen, *Dorrie*," I heard him say in his warm, charming, famous-public-person voice. "Look, something's come up, it's a terrible nuisance."

"You bloody *fake!*" I yelled. There were notes of rush and pressure in his voice, with an undertone of concern. It wasn't Brian at all. It was someone else speaking, someone I'd never even met, someone who couldn't hear a thing I was saying, someone who didn't even know I was there.

"They've got something arranged at uni," he said smoothly, unctuously. "I didn't know about it, and the thing is, I can't get out of it. I'll tell you what though. Philippa and I will take you out to lunch tomorrow. She'll pick you up at twelve o'clock, okay? and we'll all have lunch at the Hilton. Look, I've got to

rush, I'm terribly sorry. Look after yourself, Dorrie. See you tomorrow, all right? Bye now."

"I'm going," I said as he lurched back. "I'm taking a cab right now to your mother's. I won't be part of this."

"Philippa, stay with me."

"I won't. It's just plain goddamn rude and boorish when she's got a meal prepared. At least *one* of us ... I'm just bloody not going to — *What?* What is it? What the hell is it?"

I le looked so stricken that there was nothing to be said.

"All right," I conceded, resigned. "Where do you want to go?"

"Come back to the Hilton with me. I don't want to be alone. I have to get blind stinking drunk."

In the cab I said: "How come I feel more wracked with guilt than you do?"

I le laughed. "You actually think I'm not wracked with guilt?"

"Oh, I know why I am," I said. "It's because I'm a mother too." If my son did this to me, I thought, I'd bleed grief. My whole life would turn into a bruise.

"There's a lot you don't know," Brian said. "I can't talk about it unless I'm blind stinking drunk."

We didn't go to his room. It wasn't like that. We have never been lovers, never will be, never could be, and not because it isn't there, that volatile aura, the fizz and spit of sexual possibility. I vaguely remember that as we got drunker we held each other. I seem to remember us both sobbing at some stage of the night. It wasn't brother/sister either, not an incest taboo. No. We were once part of a multiform being, a many-celled organism that played in the childhood sea, that swam in the ocean of Brisbane, an alpha-helical membrane-embedded coiled-coil of an *us*-thing. We were not. Other to each other or them, we were already

Significantly *Us*, and we wept for our missing parts. We drank to our damaged, our lost, our dead.

When drink got us down to the ocean floor, I think Brian said: "It's the *house*. I really believe that if I went there, I wouldn't be able to breathe. I'd never get out of it alive."

And I think I asked: "What did your mother mean about the nights? *Those awful nights*, she said."

And the second I said it, a memory I didn't remember I had shifted itself and began to rise like a great slow black-finned sea-slug, an extinct creature, far earlier than ichthyosaurus, earlier than the earliest ancestor of the manta ray. It flapped the gigantic black sails of its fins and shock waves hit the cage of my skull and I was swimming back to Brian's front gate. I was waiting for him there, fragrant currents of frangipani were swirling round, and these monstrously eerie sounds, this guttural screaming and sobbing, came pouring out through the verandah louvres in a black rush that whirlpooled around me, that sucked, that pulled ... I clung to the gate, giddy with terror.

Then Brian came out of the house with his schoolbag slung over his shoulder and he pushed the gate open and pushed his way through and walked so fast that I had to run to catch up. "What is it?" I asked, my heart yammering at the back of my teeth.

"What's *what*?" Brian demanded.

"That noise." I stopped, but Brian kept walking. "That noise!" I yelled, and Brian stopped and turned round and I pointed, because you could almost see those awful sounds curdling around us. Brian walked back and stood in front of me and looked me levelly in the eyes and cocked his head to one side. He gave the

impression of listening attentively, of politely straining his ears, but of hearing nothing.

"What noise?" he asked.

He was so convincing that the sound sank beneath the floor of my memory for forty years, even though, two blocks later, he said dismissively, "It's nothing. It's Ed. He does it all the time. It's from the war."

And forty years later, swimming up through a reef of stubbies and empty Scotch bottles, he said: "He never left New Guinea really. He never got away. And it was *catching*. After a while, Dorrie used to have Ed's nightmares, I think."

"Oh Brian."

"Sometimes the neighbours would call the police. The only place they felt safe was the house. They never went *anywhere*."

"I never had any inkling."

"Because I protected them. I was magic. I designed a sort of ozone layer of insulation in my mind, you couldn't see through it, or hear, and I used to wrap them up in it, the house, and my dad, and my mum."

*My dad and my mum*. It would be something I could give her the next day, something to put with the corsage.

It was a long time after I rang the doorbell before anyone came. And when she came, she didn't open the door. She just stood there on the verandah peering out between the old wooden louvres. She looked like a rabbit stunned by headlights.

"It's me, Mrs Leckie. Philippa."

"Philippa?" she said vaguely, searching back through her memory for a clue. She opened the door and looked out uncertainly, like a sleepwalker. She was still in her housecoat and slippers.

She squinted and studied me. "*Philippa!*" she said. "Good gracious. Are these for me? Oh, they're lovely. Lovely. Just a tic, and I'll put them in water. Come on in, Philippa, and make yourself at home."

It was eerie all right, one little step across a threshold, one giant freefall to the past. There was the old HMV radio, big as a small refrigerator, with its blistered wood front. There were two framed photographs on it, items from the nearer past, tiny deviations on the room as I knew it. One was of Brian's wedding, the other of his brother's. I picked up the frame of Brian's and studied it. I hadn't been at his wedding. We'd all got married in the cell-dividing years of the us-thing. I'd been overseas, though my mother had sent a newspaper clipping. I was trying to tell from the photograph if Brian had been happy. Was he thinking: *Now I've escaped?*

"I don't understand about marriages these days," she said, coming up behind me with the vase. She set the flowers on top of the radio. "I always thought Brian would marry you, Philippa."

"That would have been some scrap," I said. "We were always arguing, remember?"

"You would argue till the cows came home," she smiled. "I always thought you'd get married."

I set the frame down again, and she picked it up. "They didn't have any children," she said sadly. "Barry either. I don't have any grandchildren at all." She returned Brian and his bride to the top of the radio. "I wish they'd known him before the war, that's all. Before it happened. I just wish ... But if wishes could be roses, Ed used to say, or maybe it was the other way round. Would you like to see them, Philippa?"

I scrambled along the trail of her thought. "Oh," I said. "Yes,

I would. I noticed them from the gate. And your frangipani's enormous, it's going to swallow up the house."

"Ed planted that," she said. "He was always good with his hands, he had a green thumb. I have to get the boy down the road to mow the lawn for me now. Watch out for that bit of mud, Philippa, there were some cats got in. These ones," she said, "Ed planted when the boys were born, one for each. This one was for Brian."

It was a tea rose, a rich ivory, Champagne-coloured, perhaps. Off white, I would probably say to him in some future joust. His mother hovered over it like a quick bird, darting, plucking off dead petals, curled leaves, a tiny beetle, a grasshopper, an ant.

"You've kept them up beautifully," I said.

"And I call this one Ed, I've planted a cutting on his grave." There was something about the way she bent over it, something about her gaunt crooked arms and the frail air of entreaty, that made me think of a praying mantis. Maybe she heard my thought, or maybe the grasshopper she pinched between finger and thumb reminded her. "He said something about a praying mantis," she said. "You asked him about it, Philippa. What was that thing?"

"The ootheca."

"Funny word, isn't it?" She pulled her housecoat around her and tightened the sash. "He won't be there for lunch, will he?"

I bit my lip. "He had to take an early flight," I said. It was and it wasn't a lie. We both knew it. "He had to be back in Melbourne."

She concentrated on the roses, bending her stick limbs over them, a slight geometric arrangement of supplication. "Anyway," she said. "I don't like going out. We never did, Ed and me." She straightened up and turned away from me, walking toward the

gate. "I hope you won't mind, Philippa, if I don't ..." At the gate, she reached up and picked a frangipani and gave it to me. "Could you tell him," she said, "that I've still got his crystal set? It's in his room. I thought he might, you know ... I thought one day he might ..."

I held the creamy flower against my cheek. It's excessive, I thought angrily, the smell of frangipani, the smell of Brisbane. I had to hold onto the gate. There was surf around my ears, I was caught in an undertow. When I could get my voice to come swimming back, I'd tell her about the safety layer that Brian kept around his mum and his dad.

## NORTH OF NOWHERE

They are curious people, Americans, Beth thinks, though it is easy to like them. They consider it natural to be liked, so natural that you can feel the suck of their expectations when they push open the door to the reception room and come in off the esplanade. Their walk is different too; loose, somehow; as though they have teflon joints. Smile propulsion, Dr Foley whispers, giving her a quick wink, and Beth presses her lips together, embarrassed, because it's true: they do seem to float on goodwill, the way hydrofoil ferries glide out to the coral cays on cushions of air. Friendliness spills out of them and splashes you. Beth likes this, but it makes her slightly uneasy too. It is difficult to believe in such unremitting good cheer.

Of all the curious things about Americans, however, the very oddest is this: they wear their teeth the way Aussie diggers wear medals on Anzac Day. They flash them, they polish them, they will talk about them at the drop of a hat.

"Got this baby after a college football game," Lance Harris says, pointing to a crown on the second bicuspid, upper left. Lance is here courtesy of Jetabout Adventure Tours and a dental mishap on the Outer Reef. "Got a cheek(ful) of quarterback cleats, cracked right to the gum, I couldn't talk for a week. It was, let