JANETTE TURNER HOSPITAL

THE LAST OF THE HAPSBURGS

This is all you can see: the young woman, the Pacific, the stands of sugarcane beyond the dune grasses, and four miles of sand so firm that when Cabrisi's horse (the one that went wild, the brumby) when Cabrisi's horse gallops there, you can barely see hoofprints.

The young woman leaves no footprints at all. She stands with her bare feet and ankles in the erratic line of froth, at that point where ocean and shore eat each other, and reads the Port Douglas beach. Cabrisi's horse, nostrils flaring with the smell of her, rears: a salute of sorts.

"Caedmon," she says — here, the naming of creatures is all hers — "you beautiful show-off!" Of course he knows it. So bloody beautiful that a cry catches in her throat. Caedmon whinnies again, a high and jubilant note, and brushes air with his delicate forelegs. Another sign. The beach is thick with them, but who has time enough for the decoding, the translating, the recording?

Surf rises from her ankles to her knees. *Sing me north Queensland*, it lisps with its slickering tongues.

I can't, she laments, hoisting up her skirt. *I can't*.

She would need a different sort of alphabet, a chlorophyl one, a solar one. The place will not fit into *words*.

Surf rushes between her thighs. *Sing me north Queensland*, it commands.

The young woman lifts her arms high above her head and faces the ocean. She begins to dance. She sings. When the sun slides behind Double Point, she climbs the hill at the end of the beach, still singing. She finds the track, and eventually the road, and walks until a Holden utility brakes in a skirl of dust. "Stone the crows, Miss Davenport," the driver says. "You all right?"

She looks at him, dazed. Her sodden clothes give off steam. She says vaguely: "Yes, oh yes, perfectly all right, thank you."

Driving on, the man shakes his head and mumbles to himself, not without affection: "Strange bloody old chook. A looker once, probably. Quite a looker, lay you a quid, back in her prime."

Miss Davenport, the woman thinks, blinking, as though she has just stumbled across something she had misplaced. Miss Davenport the schoolteacher. And not young at all, how odd.

Before the avocados and kiwi fruit and mangos, back in the time of the sugar cane, Wednesday afternoons used to roll in with a dreadful humid regularity. They would float up from Cairns, cumulus, wet, fuzzy, drift past Yorkey's Knob and Port Douglas, and settle onto Mossman. *Several times a week*, Miss Davenport wrote to her sister in Brisbane. *I do think sport is very much overrated by the Department of Education. Why can't we have a compulsory afternoon of thinking instead? Or of daydreaming?*

Technically supervising the girls, Miss Davenport wilted under a parasol. *Deliquescence*, she thought. (She had a habit of fondling words.) *We are all gone into the world of fog*, she thought. Deliquescence: it had a damp sound, soft on the tongue. Miss Davenport mopped at her face with a lace-edged linen handkerchief. Flies molested her. She kept a fascinated eye on Rebecca. Already she had misplaced Hazel.

Rebecca and Hazel, she wrote to her sister, *have the gift. They are consummate artists. Houdini pales in comparison.*

Ida, her sister, lived in a flat in Toowong. Two years earlier, Ida had retired from one of Brisbane's more exclusive schools, and since then heraldry had engulfed her, the branches and twigs and epiphyte creepers of the family tree curling through her sleep, *gryphons rampant* and *fields azure* blooming in her waking thoughts. She wrote to vicars in Sussex villages and mapped her way, vine by vine and knothole by knothole, into the past. Not that this meant she neglected the scrapbooks. Far from it. At Christmas, both she and Lucia still worked on the travel book, refurbishing a June day in an Italian village here, resetting a sentence there. Emendations were also constantly made to the archival records of the more remarkable students.

You never know, Ida wrote back on the subject of the present specimens. *You just never know. Can any good thing come out of Mossman? As always, the answer is: who can possibly say? For you and me, Lucia, life is what we can catch in our scrapbook nets. That and only that, my dear. So pin your Rebecca and your Hazel right through their pretty wings with your fountain pen.*

Catch as catch can, thought Miss Davenport, dissolving beneath her parasol. There was a coded reproach in Ida's letter, but Ida had earned a permanent right to the little slinging privileges and arrows of sisterhood. Ida had hushed things up and smoothed things down the time Lucia's life had quite shockingly spilled out of handwritten page into messy event. Afterwards, of course, the private girls' schools were out of the question. Afterwards, Lucia had to be grateful for appointments in such places as Childers and Mt Isa and Mossman.

Miss Lucia Davenport could not see Hazel, but she could still see Rebecca working her way into invisibility. At each cheer or catcall, as

...pin them

through their pretty wings

though the noise itself offered camouflage, Rebecca would move a foot or two closer to the cane.

Between Miss Davenport and the cane was a paddock full of brown stubble and dust and hockey sticks *where ignorant armies clashed by* . . . well, where eleven local girls vied with eleven from Cairns High in the regional semi-finals. Boys wolf-whistled from the sidelines. Boys leaned on their bikes and laid bets on the outcome of the game. Boys lay on the grass for the very best view of Dellis's panties.

Miss Davenport saw Rebecca reach the cane. For a few seconds, Rebecca's hair was a black swatch against the purple tassels of the ripening stalks, then the girl disappeared.

Hazel had disappeared during the first ten minutes of the match, but that was different. The methods were different. Hazel had the spooky powers of a gecko lizard. You could stumble across Hazel in the middle of an empty paddock, sitting cross-legged on the ground, as unobtrusive as grass. "Hazel!" you might say, dumbfounded. "How long have you . . . ?" But because of something in Hazel's eyes, you never quite finished your question. And Hazel never answered you. She hardly ever spoke at all. She had another name which nobody could pronounce, though sometimes you heard it when one of her younger siblings came for the lunch. (In Hazel's family, the kids had to take turns; Hazel was the one who carried the much-creased brown bag and made the decisions.) *Joanna Goanna*, the boys called her, taunting.

Miss Davenport squinted and surveyed the entire paddock from the cane to the school buildings. It was quite possible that Hazel was there somewhere, watching the hockey game, willing them all to believe she was the magpie in the poinciana tree.

Rebecca had vanished.

Miss Davenport kept her eye on the magpie which looked right back and commanded: *Sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep . . . .*

"The last of the Hapsburgs," Charlie said. "That's what people call them."

"Who?" Miss Davenport asked.

"Her parents. That girl's. The one you go on about."

"Rebecca Weiss?"

"Yeah. Her mum and her old man, one hundred percent bonkers. Joe Hawkins at the Commonwealth Bank started it. He sees them once a month, they're rich as Midas, got most of it stashed somewhere in their place up the Daintree, Joe reckons. Not in their bank account, that's for bloody certain. They got *investments* in Sydney and Bribane, that's what

Joe reckons. They bring Joe their piddling deposits once a month, a bloody joke, typical Ikey. The last of the Hapsburgs, Joe says, and it caught on. Whoever the hell the Hapsburgs were."

"Austro-Hungarian emperors," Miss Davenport said. "Rulers in Europe from the thirteenth century to the First World War."

"Yeah?" Charlie laughed. "Well, there you are. Bloody peculiar, that's all I know. Mind you, anything you want to dream up, you can find up the Daintree. It's a zoo up there." Charlie ticked off the fingers of his left hand with the index finger of his right: "Crocs in the Daintree itself, and in the rainforest, you name it: Japs who've been lost since New Guinea, boat people, hippies, paddocks of mary-j that stretch all the way up to Torres Strait, greenies, Jesus freaks, Martians, dinosaurs, and the last of the Hapsburgs in their castle."

"Castle?"

"Yeah. Well, good as." Charlie O'Hagan drained his beer and signalled for another. "And I should know, I been there once." He leaned back on the stuffed leather banquette and laced his fingers behind his head. Lucia Davenport noted the strain in the fabric of his trousers when he did this: the creases, the protuberance, the welt of muscle along the thigh. Charlie closed his eyes and breathed deeply, and from off the top of his fresh-tapped beer he blew the froth of that up-the-Daintree circus.

"Two stories high," Charlie said. "And I don't mean it's got an under-the-house. I mean, two floors all inside, the way they have in England. And the roof has pointy things, castle things, whad'ya call em?"

"Spires?" she asked. "Minarets?"

"Minarets, yeah." Charlie opened his eyes and smiled a slow smile. He drank a golden mouthful and let the golden word and the liquid slip pleasurably together, making a tour of his veins. "Minarets," he repeated, in love with the sound of them, the idea of them. "Yeah, minarets. That's what it's got. Twenty or thirty sprouting out of the roof like bloody pawpaw shoots."

"Oh Charlie." She laughed, pushing a puddle of beer across the table with one finger, accidentally brushing his hand. "You and the blarney stone."

"They got more rooms than you could shake a stick at."

"How many rooms?"

"And servants," he said, rising to a warm and beery eloquence, "with velvet bloomers like your grandma used to wear."

None of this, alas, could be put in the letters to Ida. It would never do, it would be sheer lunacy, to submit Charlie to a reading by Ida.

Charlie, alas, had a reading audience of one. But there, he was without fixed form or narrative limit; in secret genre, he flourished as extravagantly as climbing pandanus up the Daintree.

"And in a room smack in the middle of the mansion," Charlie elaborated, in a bloody *wardrobe*, no windows, that old codger Weiss turns Daintree fungus into gold."

Charlie O'Hagan, Mossman cop, married man, father of a good Catholic brood (several of whom learned their English French History Geography from Miss Davenport, high school arts teacher) met with Lucia as often as possible. Not in Mossman, needless to say. And not in Cairns, which would not have been any safer, bars having at least a thousand eyes and motel rooms a thousand ears, especially where schoolteachers and policemen were concerned. No. Luckily Charlie had connections and they met offshore in the floating tourist hotel. They drifted as whim took them: Green Island, the outer reef, the Whitsunday Passage, wherever. They left no wake.

Miss Davenport leaned across the table in the dimly lit bar. "Do you mean he's an alchemist?" she asked. "Rebecca's father?"

"Yeah," Charlie said. "That's the word, I reckon. Makes this dynamite dope out of fungus, pure gold in Sydney. Got his private fleet of hippie runners, that's what we reckon. We turn a blind eye. But we'll bust things up quick as a wink if we ever have to."

"But you *wouldn't*, Charlie, oh you wouldn't, would you? You can't believe a word of all that, it's just talk. And they're so shy, they're so harmless, and Rebecca's so . . . Anyway, you're not that kind of policeman."

Charlie O'Hagan put down his beer and coughed. "Yeah, well. Don't spread the word. Do me in, if they find out what a softie . . . " He grabbed her hands, slopping beer on the table. Policeman and schoolteacher slid into collision on slick leather. Ignoring the waitress, Charlie O'Hagan sent his rough cop's tongue on a voyage inside Miss Davenport's mouth. "I gotta get you into bed," he said. "In the next five minutes, or else."

Without coming up for air from the kiss, Charlie O'Hagan snapped his fingers, and the manager pulled up anchor. Four stars streaming, the hotel tacked into the wind, making for the steamy place where the Daintree spills into the sea.

The boys thought Rebecca was ugly, plainjane, a real dog, a praying mantis, a barbwire tangle of sticklimbs and sharp points, so of course Rebecca believed them. Miss Davenport thought she was striking in the

manner of Virginia Woolf, the kind of girl whose gaunt cheekbones and deep eyesockets will become memorable — though perhaps not ever in Mossman.

On a certain Friday in the not-quite-so-wet part of the year, gangly Rebecca, who wrote unsettling English compositions modelled on Dostoevsky, hung about Miss Davenport's desk.

"My, uh, father and mother," she said in her oddly formal, oddly desperate way, "wish to, uh, invite you . . . " Shyness scrunched Rebecca's eyes tightly shut. "They, uh, told me I had to invite you for *shabbas*."

Miss Davenport, not entirely precisely clear on the subject of *shabbas*, answered carefully. "When is that, Rebecca? *Shabbas?*"

"It's, uh, tonight," Rebecca said. "For tea."

Miss Davenport raised surprised eyebrows. She was touched. Rebecca, however, twisting the damp edge of her school uniform in her hands, gave every sign of hoping that her invitation would be turned down. Miss Davenport bit her lip, compassionate. The last of the Hapsburgs, Charlie whispered in her ear. She saw minarets. Curiosity, alas, overcame her.

"That would be lovely, absolutely lovely, Rebecca. I'd love to come." Rebecca's lashes fluttered across despairing eyes. "But how will we . . . ?" Miss Davenport began to ask.

"On Fridays, uh . . . they, um, my parents drive down." During the week, Rebecca boarded at the Methodist parsonage next door to the school. "We have to, uh, be back by sundown. They'll be waiting for us, uh, at the Post Office."

He's like a goblin, Miss Davenport wrote to Ida. *So is the mother. And only alchemy could keep that car functioning. The drive takes an hour, and the forest starts smothering everything once you're fifteen minutes north of Mossman. It's like moving inside green yeast.*

There were no minarets.

There are two storeys, Lucia wrote to Ida. *But it's rather like a dollhouse, or a farmhouse in the Black Forest, and very beautifully made out of cabinet timbers. Mr Weiss built it himself, and the mother weaves tapestries on a loom. They take carvings and weavings to Kuranda and Cairns to sell. Poor as churchmice, I'd say. Hardly any furniture, but everything handmade and wonderful to touch. And everywhere, floor to ceiling, there are piles and piles of books. I've never seen so many books.*

At table, there were candles, and place settings for five.

"Rebecca," Mr Weiss said in his heavily accented voice. "Ask Leo if he will please come down and join us with our guest for *shabbas*."

Rebecca, expressionless, looked first at her mother, but her mother was ladling vegetable stew. She looked at her father. She twisted the hem of her skirt in her hands.

"Rebecca?" her father asked, his eyebrows raised.

Rebecca climbed the silky-oak staircase, trailing a hand up the bannister. She disappeared for a full two minutes. Miss Davenport spoke warmly of Rebecca's writing.

"Yes, yes," Mr Weiss said, nodding. "In the beginning, God *spoke*. There was a word and it contained everything. Everything." He nodded and nodded, beaming at her. "The word," he said. "The word. We are grateful to you."

Rebecca came slowly downstairs. "Leo is unable to join us, Father," she said.

"Ah." He sighed and bowed his head. "But perhaps only to be expected, yes?"

Candles were lit, bread broken, wine drunk. Mr Weiss spoke of music and books, of Mendelssohn and Isaac Babel . . . Would Miss Davenport, perhaps, be teaching Babel's stories in the English class?"

"Actually," Miss Davenport confessed, embarrassed, "to tell you the truth, I'm afraid I'm not familiar with . . . I haven't actually had the pleasure . . . "

"Yes, yes, *Red Cavalry* and *Tales of Odessa*, ah, *there* was — as he called himself — the master of the genre of silence." Mr Weiss spoke of things not lost because the silence preserved them. He spoke of the words of silence and the silence of words. He talked with manic excitement and speed, as though he were some necessary counterpoint to the masters of silence.

Mrs Weiss did not speak at all.

"Rebecca," Mr Weiss said when the plates had been cleared, "will you ask Leo if he will play for us now? For our guest? The Mendelssohn, tell him, he cannot refuse us."

Rebecca did not look at Miss Davenport, but Miss Davenport watched Rebecca's face, in profile, floating upstairs at the top of her shoulders. It was like a mask, like a waxwork image of Rebecca.

They waited. Mr Weiss spoke of Mendelssohn, of silence, of darkness, of how all that mattered could be preserved if one got far enough from distracting noise and light. "Getting far enough away, that is the

secret," he said, nodding, nodding. "Silence and darkness. Although such problems for the violin, poor Leo, *ach*! You have no idea of the problems, the rainforest, the heat, the moisture, *oi vay*."

"Father," Rebecca said in a low voice, descending. "Leo says he will play, but he will not come downstairs."

"Ah, ah!" Mr Weiss raised his wineglass to the stairs. "He will play."

Mrs Weiss folded her hands in her lap and closed her eyes. Rebecca twisted her skirt in her fingers and studied the tablecloth. Mr Weiss began rocking gently backwards and forwards, eyes closed, a smile on his face. "Ah," he sighed blissfully. "Mendelssohn."

Miss Davenport heard the usual forest noises, the calls of night-birds, the cicadas.

And then, she wrote to Ida, *I don't know how to explain this, but I heard it too. I definitely began to hear a violin. At first it was so faint that I thought I was hearing the echo of Mr Weiss's hope, but then it was Mendelssohn, unmistakeably. The first movement of the violin concerto. When it ended, Mr Weiss was crying.*

Lucia did not mail this letter to Ida.

"Rebecca," Miss Davenport said, as they walked west, late the next Wednesday afternoon, on the road that led to the Mossman Gorge. Dust rose in little mushroom clouds around their sandals. "Who is Leo?"

"Dad's oldest son. He used to play in an orchestra over there."

"Over . . . ? Were you born there?"

"No. Out here. After . . . all that." Rebecca looked at Miss Davenport and then away. "Second marriages. They both had other children but there was no one left."

It was a three-mile walk through tunnels of cane in a swooning heat that dripped across the forehead and down the neck and gathered wetly in bodily creases. Then they would climb into the shadow of the Divide, where the gorge was full of deep green pools and falls and ferns.

Rebecca had been alarmed by the invitation. "What if someone sees?" she'd asked nervously. She was afraid of being called teacher's pet; she feared open spaces and long exposures. Lucia had had to wait for her half a mile along the road.

Lucia imagined what Rebecca might write in her diary: *She watches me all the time, and today she asked me to go swimming at the gorge. Help! Some of the girls think she's queer. I wonder? Don't really think so. Just a pathetic old maid who's so lonely she has to . . . .*

Rebecca said: "I suppose you think we're crazy? Like everyone else does."

"No, Rebecca, I don't."

Heat, cane, dust, steamfoghaze. It was like walking through dreams. Miss Davenport's voice came sleepily, drugged. "You'll win scholarships, Rebecca. To university. You'll escape from here."

Rebecca stopped then, turning, swaying a little in the haze. "But this is where we've escaped to," she said.

They walked. At the end of the road, just before the wet mouth of forest licked up unpaved grit and dust, the Reserve slouched against the mountain, a sorry place. Some Mister Government Man, well intentioned perhaps, had hacked clear a crater between forest and canefields, a pitiless saucer of red dust in which he had planted twenty fibro huts on low stumps. Men sat on the wooden steps, children chased each other in the compound.

"There's Hazel," Rebecca said.

"Where? Oh!" Miss Davenport waved and called. A hush and a stillness fell abruptly on the children playing tag. Thirty or more faces, the faces of men, women, and children, stared silently.

Hazel, barefoot but still wearing her school uniform, did not move.

"Hazel?" Miss Davenport called again, less certainly.

Hazel came forward slowly, her bare feet sending up dust signals, her eyes down.

"Hazel," Miss Davenport said. "Rebecca and I are going to swim at the gorge. Would you like to come with us?"

Hazel rubbed one bare foot against the other leg and studied the busy columns of bull-ants emerging from pockmarks in the earth near her feet. She touched the black juicy bulbs of an ant body with her big toe, and the three women watched a file break rank and follow its leader across the mound of Hazel's foot. Fifty ants later, Hazel looked from Miss Davenport to Rebecca and back to Miss Davenport. Since the invitation was not withdrawn, she bit her lip and giggled a little and put a hand over her mouth to cover her shyness. "Okay," she said, from under her hand. She giggled again, and blushed. She called something back over her shoulder and flicked her hand in a curious way. It was as though she had pulled a switch: noise began, the men looked away, the children went back to play.

Miss Davenport the schoolteacher and her two pupils left the bare saucer of the reserve and crossed the shade line.

The change was abrupt. The light turned green, the temperature dropped, webs of lawyer cane lay in wait. Below the falls (they were only ten feet high, but aggressive) the pool was as green as the matted canopy above. Hazel tossed her tunic and blouse over a rock and dived in, a shallow arc from the bank. She was not wearing underwear. Rebecca and Miss Davenport registered this with mild shock.

The Methodist minister's wife, Lucia mentally wrote to Ida, *donated the uniform and shoes. Hazel, no doubt, would have been too shy to specify further needs, and it would not have occurred to the minister's wife, or any of us, for that matter . . . .*

Rebecca took off her uniform and folded it neatly.

Ribs like corrugations on mother's old wooden washboard, Miss Davenport saw herself writing. *So painfully thin, I couldn't bear to look. For a moment, Rebecca seemed to be assessing the disadvantages of walking back into town with wet underwear, but then she entered the water with tentative steps until only her head was visible. Perhaps she could not quite subject herself to open comparison with voluptuous Hazel.*

In the green pool the two heads floated with their dark hair fanned about them: waterlilies on lily pads. A languid steamy contentment suffused Miss Davenport. Back on the hockey field, in the sticky heat, she had thought only of coolness, water, the gorge. Rebecca had been an afterthought, an impulse; Hazel another impulse. But sometimes . . . *All manner of thing shall be well.* She saw the words in black floreate script on parchment. She smiled.

Green coolness, she had been thinking on the hockey field. The gorge, the falls, the pool.

She had not thought of the matter of clothes at all, how it complicated things. And now, after all, it was irrelevant again, for all manner of thing would be well.

Miss Davenport, with a careless rapture, took off all her clothes and walked into the water.

The pool, from dark subterranean places, was chilly, a shock to the body for whole minutes. Time must have passed, though the three women were not conscious of it. They did not speak, but they were aware of each other. Birds piped and flashed their colours, the falls kept up their subdued chatter.

This is where we have escaped to, Miss Davenport thought. One is safe in water.

One is helpless in water.

Afterwards, she could never understand how there was no warning, no transition. Just peace, and then chaos, the jarring laughter and catcalls, the five boys standing on boulders.

Joanna Goanna's tits! they whooped. *Cop those black tits! Plain-jane hasn't got any tits, she's flat as a bat. Oh my God, look! You can see old Dried-up Davenport's pussy!*

The boys, Miss Davenport noted, were in an intense and spiritual state, a kind of sacreligious ecstasy, leaping from boulder to boulder around the pool. Like kings of the wild, they stood high on the great black rock at the lip of the pool and pissed into the water. Then one of them, Ross O'Hagan, eldest son of the local policeman, an ordinary boy who sat at an ordinary desk in Miss Davenport's English class, that boy turned his back and pulled down his shorts and squatted. A turd emerged slowly and hung suspended from his hairy anus. It was long, amazingly long, making its celebrity appearance to a chanted count. One! the boys chanted. Two, three, four, five . . . Miss Davenport, Rebecca, and Hazel watched, mesmerized. The turd had attained the count of ten, a plumbline reaching for water. Eleven, twelve, thirteen . . . It detached itself at last and fell into the pool with a soft splash. Cheers went up, and more whoops of laughter, and then the boys were off like possums, flying from rock to rock. They scooped up the bundle of female clothing, and ran off.

Miss Davenport was able, for a moment, to think of the value her nylon panty would have as trophy; a relic almost, handed from boy to high-school boy until it passed into legend.

Water lapped at their shoulders. Polluted water. Hazel, innured to indignity perhaps, was the first to move. She clambered onto the boulder below the falls and let the water hammer her. Once she slipped, and fell back into the water, and climbed out again; she submitted her front and her back to the punitive shower.

But what comfort could Miss Davenport give to Rebecca whose face had put on its whitewax look-alike mask? How could she unsay the sentence that had been spoken, become an Anti-Circe? In her teacherly mind, she rehearsed possible spells: *This says more about the boys than it does about us.*

But it would not serve, she knew it. It might be true, but it would not serve. That steaming fact, dropping stolidly into the pool, spoke a thick and dirty language. The acts of men, even when they are boys, Miss Davenport thought, are shouts that rip open the signs that try to contain them. We have no access to a language of such noisiness. Our voices are micemutter, silly whispers.

We will have to stay here in the pool forever, she thought. We are dead ends, the last of a line, masters of the genre of silence. We will have to invent a new alphabet of moss and water.

Hazel, wet and comfortably naked, walked out of the pool. "Clothes," she announced shyly, from behind her hand.

Miss Davenport shook herself as a terrier does. "Yes," she said briskly. "Oh yes, thank you, Hazel. If you could bring something. We must be off before it gets too dark."