Sandra Brunet

LEAVING PARADISE

My new journal has an embroidered satin cover
patterned with a rampant dragon;
trees, flowers, two men in a canoe
and the shadow of stars among the bamboo grass.
If you tilt the cover
the figures change
from light to dark,
from dark to light

I am sitting in my heated room wearing a sweater and heavy overcoat but I cannot bring warmth to the skin between my shoulder blades. The flesh there is constantly shivering, sending small shudders up and down my spine. My grandmother would have said, "Somebody's walking over your grave."

The shuddering is so bad I would say all the local villagers are walking over my grave. I think of your beautiful hands applying chop sticks up and down the spine to ease my tension; I think of you as people walk over my grave, standing between my shoulder blades, making the nerve ends twitch. I write your names: Robert, Roberto—sometimes you were Rabbito.

At our daughter's funeral you said in a whisper: "How tiny it all is." At our feet was the coffin and the mound of dirt from the grave. None of us had ever seen a coffin or a grave so small. James stood as close to you as he dared, while your niece, Dini stood alone, holding a small bunch of wild bluebells, already dead.

I will never forget the afternoon Dini and her friend James first arrived at our place. "To meet the ideal couple," she had told him. The light was behind them, momentarily illuminating the faded enamel of their car. Dini got out, you and I kissed her, and then a man climbed out of the passenger seat. We turned towards him and I saw in my garden a statue of Apollo in a white sports shirt with the light creating a sheen around his blond curls.

That weekend I was entranced. And I think, you were too, although at the time I didn't realise it. James had more than intelligence, wit and charm. He had an indefinable something, a self containment you find sometimes in people who live close to their ideals. Yet it was more than that; some sort of spiritual quality from deep within him sparkled. I thought how faded you and I seemed in comparison. My finger tips brushed his slightly as I handed him a drink in the

garden before dinner. It was early summer and the crickets were loud. While you and he were talking about the greenhouse effect I watched a watery moon slide out of the magnolia. When Mephistopheles jumped onto his lap I could see he was not pleased. I called the cat to me. He laughed and said, "For a moment I thought I was in Paradise but I can see even Paradise has its ferals." He turned to you and Dini and asked: "Does God have a gun?"

You laughed.

Dini petted the cat and said, "Poor kitty, don't listen to him."

Charmingly you replied, "I don't keep a gun. I'd worry that Angela might point it at me. Under all that sweetness and light she really does have quite a temper."

I've noticed over the years how you keep your choice observations about me to trot out in front of visitors. I manage to smile brightly: "Only when provoked. It's a pity I'm such a bad shot." James looked at me and smiled. "A woman of passion." He turned to you. "If I were married to you I might point a gun at you too."

The conversation paused. I thought I saw your eyes meet his fleetingly before Dini said, "Isn't God immortal? And a woman?"

We all laughed. I told myself I was imagining the exchanged glance, the light in the garden was fading.

During dinner we talked about the Melbourne jazz clubs where he played the piano and she sang. I noticed how radiant Dini looked. She'd always complained that she didn't have the looks to be a singer but on this visit her uneven features were transformed into startling beauty.

I discovered James' father had been the school chaplain when I was at boarding school: "Your father was so different from the previous chaplains. The one before him—I've forgotten his name—his services attracted the very old or the very imprisoned—us—inmates from the local boarding school"

"Not much choice there."

"We used to walk down to St Johns on glorious Sunday mornings when the rest of the world was still asleep. We'd return to a lunch of gluey meat pies while the locals sat down to a Sunday roast. You could smell it as you walked back."

"Yes, dad was never boring." He gazed out the door into the darkened hall. "He was certainly fiery enough."

"But with a sense of humour."

"Usually." James smiled at Dini: "Although nobody was ever kept in for mucking around in his Divinity classes." He looked back at me: "He's a bishop now. And enjoying it."

It seemed that the main legacy from his church background was the music. When he talked about his bonsai trees I saw that it was the beginning of a bond between both of you, you who had spent so much time studying Eastern painting and gardening, wanting to turn our partly English, partly Australian, partly Japanese garden into one that was truly Japanese.

"No," I had said. "I like it the way it is."

"It's a bit of everything and it ends up being nothing," you replied with that look of distaste you keep for people who serve you tea made from tea bags.

On their second visit you told Dini and James your plans.

"It's eclectic," I said. "I like its freedom."

"It's tangled," you replied.

"Why the hell shouldn't a garden be natural."

"Non-conformist plants," said Dini. "I like the idea." James looked at me: "Eve in Paradise or Eve in the Wilderness?" He had a beautiful smile.

"For me Paradise is a wilderness, not some garden of Versailles. All those trees standing to attention like sentinels," I said.

"We're talking about Japanese gardens." You were arching your eyebrows, the way James does.

I ignored you. "When I see photos I think, this one wants to blow its nose, that one wants to scratch its balls ..."

"God, Angela."

Sometimes you're so prissy. I turned to James: "It looks excruciatingly painful, don't you think?"

"I'll bring you this book I have on animism, Angela." He always assumed he was better informed than anybody else.

"Angela, freedom fighter for plant rights." laughed Dini. She read my thoughts: "He's irritating isn't he? Such a smart arse."

The next time James came up alone. He said Dini had a singing engagement. Instead of a book on animism, he brought a book on the significance of the horse in Chinese art for me and for you, books on bonsai.

"Poor twisted things," I said as we sat in the sun room at breakfast time looking at the bonsai books. James handed me the horse book.

"Look at your horses running free, Angie."

"Saddled and carrying soldiers." I said. James looked hurt. "This one's superb." I pointed to an exquisite sculpture of a big-bodied animal on slender legs. "I'm starting to feel like that already," I said.

"Angela's pregnant." You came across and kissed me.

"Yes, I guessed."

I looked down at my belly, about to make an ironic retort.

"No horse riding now." He looked at me without smiling.

"James, you're so old fashioned." But already his head was bent over a book. "My doctor does know what she's talking about." My voice was unnecessarily loud and defensive.

You both became so involved in your discussion on bonsai I went for a walk. When I returned you were showing him your new book on Japanese prints: Images from the Floating World. You were both looking at the print called "Lovers." In the caption it said: In ukiyo-e distinguishing the boys from the girls requires a little practice ... I burst our laughing. "It's pretty obvious to me which is the boy." The print depicted a young man with an enormous erection about to penetrate a young woman who was lying on one elbow biting the back of her hand. Both had long hair tied back in a bow. You and James remained quiet.

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I close my eyes: I can see people from another world floating in and out of a garden of magnolia blossoms until there is only you, faded, but it is you, sitting in the cane rocking chair watching the cat eat grass, listening to the magpies celebrating a superb winter's day. Or are they squabbling over food or territory? Or mates? You are smiling at the cat doing his paw exercises at the base of the banksia rose. The garden is sodden. With a book in one hand I drag an old cane chair into the middle, not far from the archway of wisteria, not far from you. The sky is cloudless. The cat jumps onto my lap purring. He stretches out against the length of my thigh. He is finding it difficult to get comfortable; as my belly distends with the growing child my lap retreats. I begin to read my book: Aboriginal Myths and Legends. One story describes how the souls of dead babies fly to the high branches of the gum trees which line the banks of rivers and billabongs. The breeze through the leaves is the sound of the babies crying.

In the distance someone is using a chain saw. It cuts through the magpie's song. The chain saw puts my nerves on edge. I feel the tension lace my shoulder blades together and split my brain in two. My vision doubles as the pain shoots down my spine just before James enters the garden from the direction of the house. His back is towards me and as I am so pale sitting there on the chair nursing my pregnancy, he doesn't see me.

He walks across to you and hands you a glass of wine. The cat who has just settled on your lap jumps over the chair's arm to flee from the man who constantly calls him feral and accuses him of a thousand murders.

It is true. Sometimes at the foot of the magnolia I see the scarlet feathers of a rosella, the soft breast crushed, the spindle legs stiff.

"Bloody feral. One day I'll bring a gun." James is a conservationist. Today my hair feels so limp. I envy James his bright golden curls.

He kneels beside your chair and spreads across your lap the plans he has drawn up for the garden. Your heads almost touch as you pore over your pooled ideas to reshape Paradise. "Perfect", you whisper. "James, you're a genius."

James stands and walks behind your chair. "Angela might not be so keen."

"Oh Angie's all words." You sound impatient. "She just hates things to change."

James ponders the matter: "One day when she was out riding I picked up her journal—she'd left it lying around—she'd written down a bit of Zen: "No snowflake falls in the wrong place ...

You frown: "You actually read her journal?" For a second you look shocked.

"Then she had, 'The secret isn't to impose order upon chaos, but rather to negotiate the maze through it as best we can.'" He smiles indulgently. "She's always borrowing and weaving."

You sigh: "Angie doesn't weave, she undoes things. Then she becomes entangled ... pregnant" You stare into space. James places a hand on your shoulder. You look up and smile into his eyes. "Anyway, she's hardly likely to blockade the rotary mower."

James laughs and walks in front of the chair pretending to blockade it with the exaggerated gait of a heavily pregnant woman. He stops. "Poor Angie." You both chuckle and he walks behind the chair again.

"Bastards! I hate you both!" I throw acorns from the base of the oak but they miss their mark. Some fall from my hands to my feet. Go to hell ... The unborn baby and I have become so pale ... if they turned around they wouldn't see me.

James begins to rock your chair, gently at first and then more violently until he tips you out across the buffalo lawn. I watch you fall awkwardly, the knees of your jeans grass-stained.

"You bloody fool," you yell. As he bends to help you up, you lunge at him and bring him down in a Rugby tackle. You both laugh and roll across the sodden lawn, across the fallen magnolia petals.

I open my eyes. The crushed petals melt into the lawn like drops of ice-cream.

We used to buy ice cream every Sunday afternoon when the baby was little. We smiled as the pale ice dribbled onto her perfect hands. Remember the smell of soft, new flesh? Sometimes we would touch the tender skin with our fingertips ...

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and the shadow of a woman with a baby.
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Poor Robert. You were so sad when James moved to Hobart. "Hobart?" You said. "People don't move to Hobart."

I know you tried hard. You really were so tender with me and the baby although I could see your heart was breaking. Your eyes were so pale. Our daughter had dark hair like mine. In fact she looked just like me. I think you wanted her to have bright golden curls. The pain between my shoulder blades is so bad I begin to wonder: was there ever a baby Robert? Was there ever a baby? I remember the birthday party, one candle on that huge cake you ordered. From then on my vision of her blurs; it's as if she were so weak she faded away. The outline became blurred and the child's white skin took on the yellow tinge of the grass or the faintly bluish tones of the sky when you tossed her above your head as people do with young children. The doctors had no answer. You gently held her until she was so frail you thought her bones would break. I began to take her to the artificial lake with the lily pads in the middle. I thought if I could amuse her with the ducks and the frogs she might recover, become bright-eyed and robust. "O Christ, Baby" I would hold her thin skin close to my cheek. To warm her I would gently place her inside my dress against my belly and breasts. Her cry was a tiny thing, a thin shadow against my body.

Each night I dreamt how I stood there helpless as I watched her fade against the clear water of the lake until all that was left was a thin cry which flew from my arms to the top branches of a giant river red gum.

To touch you I must write images.

To touch her I must close my eyes.

James flew up from Hobart. After the funeral we formed a circle around a giant river red gum near the lake. We squashed our bodies flat against the trunk and hugged the tree so that we could hold hands. I had never really touched James before. His palms were fleshy, sticky with sweat. As we knelt in the dust our fingers slipped apart. Ants from the trunk began to crawl towards my breasts. The wind in the leaves was like a baby's cry.

That night we didn't talk. We sat in the living room with the lights off and through the screen we watched the crescent moon above the birch tree. In the

morning James flew back to Hobart. A week later I took your suit to the dry cleaners and found an unused airline ticket to Hobart. How hard it must have been for you. To stay. Why didn't you destroy the ticket? You're so damned careless.

In autumn we raked the leaves until the pile was higher than my waist. Bright golden leaves. You raked them into the wheelbarrow while I stood on top and trod them down. I smashed them with my boots. You cried. For the first time since I'd known you, you cried and I was glad to see you cry. "Poor withered leaves," you said. I found a perfect one and put it in your pocket.

We held on to each other. I kissed your salty cheek. "Go, why don't you. For Christ's sake, go."

That night we didn't talk much. We sat in the living room with the lights off and through the screen we watched a full moon above the birch tree. I closed my eyes and with my finger tips I traced the outline of our daughter in the night air.

In the morning you said, "I've got to go to Tokyo at the end of the month. Come with me." I imagined myself sitting next to you on a flight to Tokyo, our faces masks from a Noh play, the black ocean below us, knowing you would prefer to be on your way to Hobart. I thought I saw both hurt and relief in your eyes when I shook my head: "Dini's spending part of her holiday here before she goes overseas."

That afternoon I washed your old checked shirt and found the perfect leaf. Slowly I crushed it in my palm until it resembled yellow dust. "One day I'll leave Paradise behind," I told Mephistopheles who thought my hand held food. In the garden I stretched out my hand, palm upwards, and let the breeze carry away the fine gold particles.