

## JUST A BOWL OF ASHES

The man who lived at the back of my block intrigued me the first time I saw him. I caught only a glimpse but I don't think I'd ever seen anyone quite so gaunt. He was tallish and haggard with a heavy steel-grey moustache. I spotted him through some shaggy-trunked gums. Perhaps it was because I had lined him up in such a wild environment that his characteristics impressed themselves so much. I don't know. I was feeling susceptible too — as any new-found freedom is apt to make you. After gruelling years of the rat race I had sold my city business to buy a large wild block on the edge of the small town. I was free at last to indulge a wish to live alone and to paint.

While I was building my small house the man dropped in a few times. Though unsmiling and solemn-voiced, he was friendly enough. One day he said to me, "Mason, after your house is finished I'd like you to call over and meet my wife." Often while I worked I looked over to his house, almost hidden behind a thick screen of trees. All I could see were a couple of sections of grey brick walls and the corner of a verandah — not enough even to guess what kind of building it was. Sometimes I would see him walking about, but never his wife. Perhaps she was in ill health and stayed mostly indoors, I thought. Then after what seemed like a year, but was in fact about three months and a few days after my house was finished, he came again. This time he told me his name. "You are my neighbour now," he said, "not only ostensibly, but in *fact*." He offered his hand. On his face was a faint illumination rather than a smile. "My name's Banby — Rollo Banby."

When I asked him inside, his eyes swept across my living room, taking in everything at a glance. "So you do paint then?" he said, looking at the canvas I had been dabbling with that morning. "So my surmise seems to have been correct."

"It's only an amateurish interest — nothing more than that."

He walked slowly to the fireplace wall studying the several paintings hanging there, keenly and in silence. Then as if following a kind of ritual he moved to the centre of the room to face me, with his hands clasped behind his back. "Very original work indeed," he said earnestly. "A subtleness and freshness of expression and . . . I feel a kind of nostalgia each time I see a new treatment like that . . . You see it means — but damn it I mustn't burden you with that now." He walked to the door and grasped the knob. "I'll be going now. By the way, Mason, I mentioned to

you earlier about dropping in to meet my wife. Well, what about Wednesday evening then – say at seven thirty?”

On Wednesday evening a piercing wind blew from the north-west. I was dressed in coarse-fibred slacks and a heavy, baggy, dark-brown pullover because Banby's neatness and stiffness of manner repelled me somewhat and I wanted to show him how casual I was. But I was still cold. I picked my way through the darkness, from my back fence, under the trees in his garden, to the light at the front door. The house was a solid, largish brick building with ornate ironwork around the porch and heavy timber-framed windows. It looked just like the kind of place I had secretly built around his character.

Banby greeted me at the door. “So you made it, Mason,” he said. “It's precisely seven thirty.”

My punctuality seemed to impress him more than the fact that I had come at all. A bright crackling fire had just been lit in the living room. The wall above the fireplace was crammed with paintings like pictures in a crowded gallery. When I moved closer Banby followed me. “Yvette – that's my wife – did those. All of them. I arranged them that way so that whenever you sit in front of the fire you can't help looking at them.” He waited for my comment expectantly.

Most of the paintings were portraits set curiously in airy landscapes or against a background of birds with enormous heavy beaks. “Fabulous,” I exclaimed, moving my head slowly in wonderment. “How could her mind conceive such things?”

My host looked close into my face. “And indeed when she *had* conceived them, execute her visions on canvas?”

“Remarkable whichever way you look at it. They're symbolical of course?”

“Symbolical? Indeed no. These are things she actually saw. To her they were pure realism.”

The imaginings of an indulgent husband, I thought. “Mr Banby,” I said, “You agreed that they were visions conceived in her *mind*.”

“I did say that, yes, realising that the real truth would be inconceivable to the uninitiated mind. Can you grasp it now that she didn't paint these things out of her mind, but saw them – saw them physically I mean?”

“I don't doubt what you say Mr Banby, but my mind –”

“But your mind rejects it. When you met my wife you'll believe me – and believe in her. Come her Mason – over here.” I followed him along the wall. On the other side of the fireplace he stopped beside a small mahogany table holding a big glass bowl. “Yvette, I'd like you to meet our new neighbour, Mr Mason.”

Yvette was nowhere in sight. "Here, Mason — *here*." Banby tapped the side of the glass bowl.

The bowl was a round squat-shaped container made of smoky-blue translucent glass. Two thirds filled with a powder-like substance, it was sealed with a large thick cork. I could feel the intense grip of Banby's eyes moving across my face. Suddenly the light of understanding came. "You mean that — that she—?" I gasped the words.

"I mean that she's dead and these are her ashes." He spoke evenly, without emotion.

"How long — how long since she . . .?"

"It's over two years now since she died."

This new knowledge was too sudden. For days, even weeks, I had been thinking of finding Yvette a living, warm and friendly uninhibited and fun-loving person. Then suddenly she was no more than ashes in a glass bowl. I felt more sorry for myself than I did for Banby.

"Don't look so tragic, Mason. She's not lost. There are her ashes — she never leaves those." I was speechless "Sceptical still? You really must learn to know her — it's so worthwhile." He cast his eyes towards the bowl. "She knows we are talking about her. See the glow of recognition in the ashes." He placed my hand on the glass. "Press your fingers lightly to the bowl and you will feel her warmth — see!"

I felt only the coldness of glass. "Barely perceptible," I said. "The skin on my fingertips must be too thick to be sensitive."

"Nonsense. You should be able to feel the warmth through perception I mean." He looked at me chidingly, as if I had wilfully neglected some duty. His behaviour had struck me completely by surprise. He was strangely deep and inscrutable, I knew, but I hadn't dreamed of him being such a complete eccentric. I hadn't prepared any defence and I felt pathetically vulnerable. The power of conversation was leaving me; what could I talk about with one so deeply under the spell of his obsession? Presently he seemed to sense my uneasiness and we withdrew to a small recessed section of the room. "Sit down Mason. I must have kept you standing too long," he concluded. "Let me get you a whisky."

Out of sight of the paintings he changed, as if a restrictive pressure had suddenly been lifted. Near the bowl the aura of his wife's ashes must have had an occult control of his mind processes. I felt sure of that.

After a couple of whiskies I was able to converse with reasonable freedom. For one silly moment I wondered if I had been mesmerised by the ashes too, a notion I rejected as ridiculous; I was too self assured for that. Banby didn't mention his wife again during the three hours we sat talking and drinking but on the way past the bowl to the door he set off on his fantasy again. "Tell me Mason. Did you like Yvette's work?"

"Fabulous," I said. "Such work could be conceived only by — well let's be frank — a genius."

The reaction on Banby's face was an immediate reward. "Thank you Mason. You must meet Yvette again. She enjoyed your company."

For weeks afterwards I couldn't look at painting. Yvette's work left me disturbed and restless. I had never bothered very seriously about other artists' work before. My interest had gone little beyond that of a dabbler. Now I felt that if I couldn't do work better than my old standard I'd rather not do any at all. The dead woman seemed to hold a forbidding hand over any fresh attempt I might make to resume work. Her influence extended well beyond the limits of the glass bowl.

During the winter Banby came over several times but never named an evening for me to call on him. His habitual reserve always precluded my visiting him without invitation even though loneliness sometimes tempted me; but I knew there was something more indefinable than the barrier of a fence between us. I could often see him moving around in his garden but sometimes not for about a week. Then one evening in early spring, just after I'd finished dinner, I suddenly heard a voice at the door. "Are you there Mason?" When I peered out Banby was standing back in the shadows. Then as he came forward I could see that he was carrying a small table, and, partly concealed behind the open part of his coat, the bowl of ashes. "Mason," he said, "tomorrow morning — quite early in fact — I'm going away for a few weeks and I'd like to leave Yvette with you. She knows you now and she'd be hellishly lonely left on her own."

Later in the living room my eyes tried to penetrate the smoky-blue glass of the bowl. "Sure Mr Banby, you can leave the bowl here."

He'd set the table and bowl against the wall underneath my paintings. Now with his closed fist held underneath his chin he strode backwards deep in thought to view the bowl from the middle of the room. "If you don't mind, Mason, I'll leave her there. Close to your paintings — she'll enjoy that I'm sure. You know I've never left Yvette with anyone before. You are the first to be her host."

"Then I am privileged."

"I've been away before, but never more than a week at a time. Those times I left her in the house. Long ago I had decided that I would not leave her for more than a week on her own." Saying that he'd be going too early in the morning to see me then, he shook hands warmly. "Yvette is still my wife. Your attitude to her of course will be circumspect."

That evening Banby was on my mind a lot; strange, strange chap. I wasn't really learning to know him and now somehow I seemed to be enmeshed with him in this extraordinary way. How the hell had I got myself into this position? I didn't mind knowing him as a casual

acquaintance, but I didn't wish to be involved in his emotions. But perhaps I was only being selfish and analytical. I forgot about the bowl of ashes, except occasionally when I felt a tinge of annoyance because he had placed it so close to something as personal as my paintings. Then I would try to assert the reasonable part of me by chiding myself. "It won't damage your selfishness to accede to an occasional whim of a neighbour."

One day I noticed a layer of dust on the bowl so thick that the ashes were only just visible: how careless of me not to cover it when I was working on the ceiling the day before. I flicked it with a duster then polished it with a cloth. When one of my fingers came in contact with the glass I thought I felt a ripple of warmth. I pressed my palm firmly against the bowl. "My God it is warm," I said aloud. "But how could —?"

I remembered then that when Banby had pressed my hand against the bowl on that first night I felt nothing; but now there could be no doubt. This time I encircled the bowl with both hands, feeling the immediate effect through the tips of my fingers. In an ecstasy of excitement and wonder I pressed tighter. I felt the delight of a human touch — the comfort of a woman. "Yvette. Yvette."

Releasing my clasp slowly I peered through the glass. The ashes glowed faintly with a lusty orange-red just as Banby had said they would. Pressing the bowl again I felt like a child who had just found a hitherto unknown delight; but it was more than this, more mature, adult, impelling. Something was suddenly playing havoc with my emotions and I wondered whether Banby had had the same thrill. I recalled his words of that first night. "Nonsense! You should be able to feel the warmth through perception — non-physical perception I mean." That would be Banby — too solemn and exacting to perceive the real sensitivity of physical touch: or could it be that Yvette radiated no feeling towards him at all?

I soon learned that the warmth of the ashes was not an isolated passing phenomenon, but a continual fact, proven every time I went near. It was dependent for effectiveness on the nearness of my physical body; the glow diminished quickly when I withdrew. The bowl was like the irresistible pull of gravitation from which I was never able to draw very far during the day. But now I was able to paint again. Yvette's influence was continually hovering around me. I was no longer hindered by difficulty of expression. Ideas flowed effortlessly and naturally. My work changed. I saw that her paintings were gradually influencing mine, each day the semblance becoming greater. Then one day I produced a work like hers in every detail. It could well have been hers. Since the first night my mind had been holding a precise picture of every stroke. I was

certain now that my work was no longer original. I was a puppet activated by an unseen hand.

Cursing I slashed the painting savagely before throwing it into the fire. Then with indulgent glee I watched as the flames consumed the sizzling bubbling oils. A little easier in my mind I was determined to make a fresh start somewhere away from the bowl of ashes. At first I considered shifting the little table and bowl into the kitchen. But I felt somehow that I would be breaking my trust with Banby. Picking up the easel, desperate to do something, I walked aimlessly around the house until I finished up in my bedroom as far away from the bowl as I could go. "This is it," I said aloud. "I'll paint in here."

I painted solidly for two days, working nervously. Ideas came easily, but I had to resist first impulses in fear that the inspiration was not my own. To make sure I cross-examined every thought and every stroke. It was enervating tedious toil. When I had finished I breathed a little easier. "Well this one should be *me*," I said to myself; but one final searching glance told me I had failed. Superficially the painting bore a few traces of my own style, but underneath was the strong domination of Yvette's hand. I knew then that her influence extended far beyond the vicinity of her ashes; that her will was stronger than mine. My first impulse was to slash the work to ribbons again but I threw open the door instead and raced to the bowl of ashes in the living room. Throbbing with emotion I thrust my hands around the glass once more. "Yvette," I whispered. "Yvette, why have I resisted you? I should have known that your will is as irresistible as your love."

The glow of the ashes was brighter than ever before: Yvette was just as excited. How could I have been so inhuman as to neglect her for two days? My restless fingers worked an amatory pattern of caresses on the outside of the bowl as I responded uninhibitedly to the pulsations of desire passing through their tips. "Yvette, you have overcome me so completely. I am your slave. Use me to the extent of your pleasure."

I was amazed that the words were my own. I, who all through life had shunned women, was committed without one reservation. Next minute I contorted with cynical laughter. Why should I worry? After all I was speaking only to a heap of ashes. And what power could they possibly hold over me? I could cancel that commitment any minute I chose — such madness that it was. It was only a crazy obsession, unreal and unnatural. When I stopped laughing I felt the lines of seriousness tightening across my face again: *of course* I meant those words. I was powerless to do otherwise. The ashes were not *dead*.

The next day I received a letter from Banby, marked at some place in South Australia. The message was simple. "Look after my little Yvette

for me. Keep her safely till I get back." It didn't say when. Look after my little Yvette. . . I smiled wryly. He could trust me not to neglect her. I was doing my paintings with her again. This time I made no resistance to impulse but allowed my hand to flow faithfully to her direction. That night in bed I missed her immediate presence more than ever. By half past twelve I had lain restless and sleepless over an hour. Twenty minutes before, nearly crazy with longing, I went to her in my pyjamas and bare feet, to caress the bowl for five minutes, saturating myself with lusty enjoyment. Now the longing was gnawing maddeningly at me again. I vaulted out of bed. "What a bloody fool you are," I said. "Why can't I. . .? Oh damn Banby and his notions as to where the bowl of ashes must be kept. See Mr bloody Banby — *I'm* her keeper now!"

I put the bowl of ashes on the bedside table: God, why hadn't I done this before? Back in bed I switched off the light. With the friendly glow beside me I relaxed, stretching my hand to it, letting it comfort me through my fingers. Sleep came quickly after a delicious drowsiness. In the morning I returned it to the little table near my paintings, bringing it back next night; and from then on every night. I knew now that beside me was an ease for my dreams and nightmares. Whenever I awakened suddenly I received immediate reassurance. I wondered deeply and seriously about its inexhaustible source. How was it that Yvette never failed me? Didn't she have fears and depressions of her own? All she needed, it seemed, was the touch of my hand. But surely there couldn't be anything so wonderful and magical about me — anything that could. . .? Could it be that I affected her in the same way as she affected me? If this were so then we must be in. . . I stopped myself abruptly before the words formed: I wanted to hear myself say them aloud. "*We must be in love.*"

A new problem came with this realisation. What happens when Banby comes back? It suddenly hung over me like a new nightmare, every scheme pre-doomed to failure. There was nothing to do but wait. The present was too precious to squander on imponderables. Banby had been gone for nearly a month, and I'd heard no further word. Perhaps he'd stay away for another month — or longer. Perhaps he'd wander around the lonely north somewhere, become lost, and never come back. My crazy speculations invented situations to suit their own ends. While the future remained an enigma I sheltered behind it, wanting to live the present to its fullest; able to do this to a degree where thought of the future was almost erased.

Then one day, like a sudden lightning flash, news came of Banby in a telegram. "Home Thursday. Have Yvette ready. Banby." All at once the world became bleak and empty. I studied the message — as if in some

mysterious way it might not be true, a hoax or something, anything. Home Thursday. Christ, that was the day after tomorrow — two days! Have Yvette ready. As if I was his bloody servant. How could he dare to take her from me? She didn't love him. She couldn't. She wasn't his kind.

At half past three on the Thursday afternoon Banby's car arrived home on schedule. Half an hour later he walked over to my house. I watched him stalking through the trees, his solemn eyes unsmiling and his heavy moustache pushed forward and bristling. God how I loathed him for coming to take Yvette away. He led me into my living room and to the bowl. "It's been so many weeks my dear," he said running his fingers lightly over the glass. "She seems quite comfortable here."

"Quite."

My mood must have been as bad as his. Neither of us seemed to care whether we spoke or not. However, I did make a weak attempt to ask him about his trip. But he remained unresponsive. With our eyes focussed on the bowl I wondered what he was thinking: did he suspect anything between Yvette and me?

"So you'd say then Mason she settled in all right with you?"

"Yes, perfectly." I was thinking of myself so I didn't care if I hurt Banby. "Perhaps she'd be better left here for a time till you settle back in again. After so many weeks away there will necessarily have to be re-adjustment."

"I appreciate your concern for me but please don't worry."

"I was thinking of Yvette."

"Yvette will have to get used to me again. She's mine and mine she'll remain. I'd hate to have to account for the swine who'd try to take her away from me." He picked up the little table and bowl and moved towards the door. "We are going," he concluded. Outside he gave me a critical glance through a squinted eye. "This is just so ludicrous Mason, that I don't know if I should thank you — or if perhaps you should thank *me*."

To have Yvette wrenched away from me so suddenly and so coldly tortured me more than I could ever have imagined: a bereavement couldn't have been worse. Daytime was bad enough but nights, when I could scarcely sleep at all, were an agony of half-sleep and disturbed dreams. During the waking periods there was no reasoning in my obsessed emotions. Early one night I sneaked over to Banby's house to somehow snatch a glimpse of the precious bowl. The night was inky black with heavy cloud and a low rustling breeze. Banby didn't keep a dog so I had no worry about being heard.

Over one of the living room windows the blind had been drawn to within a few inches of the sill and a patch of weak light spilled out into

the darkness. Banby was bending into the fireplace tapping out his pipe. The outline of the bowl of ashes was just visible against the far wall. I strained hard to see. Damn the man for having only one dim light on at the back of the room. I moved cautiously towards another open window further along and only a few feet from the bowl. When I saw it clearly I pressed my face close to the pane. "Yvette. Yvette." The magical glow of recognition came in an instance. She loved me. I had to restrain myself from calling her name out aloud. I glanced at Banby. He was sitting back in his chair yawning, his hands clasped over his eyes.

After Banby went to bed I stayed another half-hour watching the glow languorously and whispering to Yvette. I came again every night at the same hour after that like a pilgrim honouring a sacred rendezvous, learning a lot about Banby's habits and soon realising that they were regular and firmly disciplined and unlikely to be carried out on impulse. I learned that he didn't lock the door at night; went to bed at a quarter past nine; went to sleep easily and slept soundly. Previously I had found out on his own admission that he never rose before nine in the morning. So on the strength of his knowledge I borrowed the bowl of ashes and returned it just before daybreak keeping it as before, at my bedside.

Sometimes I smiled at the way I deceived Banby. It was his own fault: his set regular habits were the weakness that enabled me to practise the intrigue. I gloried in my triumphs and felt no remorse even when in his company. I spent an evening with him twice during this time as his guest, and each time afterwards I waited a few minutes outside in the shadows while he went to bed, before borrowing the ashes again.

My habits became regular too – like Banby's. Every night shortly after nine I accomplished my little mission. Each morning I returned the bowl before daybreak, with never a hint of suspicion until a close affinity developed between us – the kind of trust that comes often after a long and intimate association. But there had been no real friendship and no closeness; only the common interest of sharing the same love. This new status didn't change my attitude towards Banby. He was the barrier that made it necessary for my relations with Yvette to remain secret. I had no conscience about deceiving him, and the deeper the deception the more satisfaction I felt.

The hitch occurred one morning when I was returning the bowl of ashes. Dawn had already broken, so I glided along carefully lest someone should see me in the increasing light. I felt strangely guilty – like a naughty boy who has just stolen a bagful of fruit. When I attempted to open the side door I found it locked. Christ, it can't be, I thought. It's just got to be open. I turned the knob again, trying harder to force the door with the weight of my knee. But it was locked all right – and bloody

well properly too.

The front door had a night latch and couldn't be opened from the outside either without a key. I rushed around to the back door but it was locked too. I tried the windows one after the other. They were all locked. Daylight had crept up on me while I was rushing around in a panic. I couldn't stay any longer. Suddenly I felt vulnerable and exposed — as if someone had stripped me naked. I slid behind the cover of the trees and edged back to my house. I put the bowl back in my bedroom. What had made Banby break his precedent and lock everything up? Something must have driven him to get up during the night. Perhaps he hadn't noticed that the ashes were gone. In this case I might have some chance to return them unnoticed through the day.

And if Banby *had* noticed the ashes were gone? I covered my face with my hands and tried to persuade myself that everything would be all right. But I couldn't be convinced. I knew that Banby would be calling on me. I remembered the sinister words of his warning and waited nervously expecting to hear him come up the gravel path at any moment. Several times during the morning I looked through the trees to check on him, but saw nothing. Then sometime in the late morning he crept up on me unnoticed, in spite of my watchfulness. Suddenly he was knocking at my door.

Banby was rather friendlier than usual. We sat and chatted a while about nothing in particular. But soon the trace of a smile that had been there faded and a more serious mask settled over his face again. "Mason," he said at last, "all this — all this secretiveness and sneakiness will have to stop. It's —"

"All this — all this happened —" A surging of confidence and strength swept up over me. "All right Banby. You know it and I know it — we both love the same woman. Neither of us is ashamed of it. That leaves us one thing to do — talk about it like honest men. You are the husband. I am the lover. You entrusted her to me while you were away, and now this is the result. Oh yes I became obsessed with just a bowl of ashes — madly obsessed. Perverted, if you like. And I believed I was perverted, right up till this minute. It's changed now. It's not obsession or perversion. My love for Yvette is real and natural, honestly natural. I know now it had to happen this way. It's —"

Banby's hand gripped my shoulder. "Let me finish," he said firmly. "I said all this business must stop. It's simple enough: I'll have Yvette in the daytime and you can have her at night — openly though. None of this secretive stuff. Fair enough?"

I wanted to say more but stopped. For a few moments we both gazed silently out of the window, where the first heat of early summer

shimmered on the grass under the shaggy old gums. For the first time we understood each other. "You'll stay for lunch— and a drink?" I said.

## DONNA MAEGRAITH

### THE LIBRARIAN

hair clings limp to the forehead  
he picks with his fingernails  
meticulously  
the scabs on the skin of his hand  
it irritates

his fingers plough furrows  
as he moves through corridors  
of dust  
his stooping shadow on the wall  
the only thing that grows  
in the afternoon sun

in the night long and alone  
he rehearses Japanese characters  
elegantly  
his fingers trace the air  
as his lips mouth silent sounds  
and the darkness  
like water runs off his ears  
curdles on his lips