

In her mother's room, half-lying across the bed, Zoe pulled an awkward-looking book from the pile on the table beside her. Press cuttings. Her left hand held the cover open. Already her fingerprints would have smudged her mother's, blotting them out. Soon, from all the books, all the furniture and door handles, from everything everywhere, her mother's would be obliterated and never reappear, even though just hours ago she had breathed in this room.

Consciously, Zoe breathed. Minutes before, she had arrived from Europe, stunned by the flight, stunned to be told she was a day too late. Her head was a labyrinth of pain; she was aware of nausea and stiffness, but not really of the presence of her self. Downstairs, her father and Russell and the others were behaving well. Soon, she would be obliged to emerge, though everyone said rest for the funeral tomorrow.

It was raining. Winter here, summer in Paris. Zoe stared

through the open window at the straight lines of rain. Over there, she had described Australian winters with new-minted, dazzling skies. The rain. The very rain that fell a thousand years ago; the rain that fell on everyone who ever lived. She had a second's prompting to go outside and stand in it, but there were the stairs and people and possibly complex explanations.

In the book lying open on the bed, she saw several photographs of herself. *Zoe Howard in Paris Nightspot. Joseph Stranger and Friend. Zoe Howard on Film Set. Australian Girl with Winning Poster.*

There was the much-reproduced face of the Neapolitan urchin, now at school somewhere, a haunted face that went all over Europe, over most of the world. Money was collected for the victims of war and poverty.

Girl Photographer Parachutes into Middle East War Zone. Her mother had written, asking, 'Was that necessary?'

'Of course not,' she wrote back. 'But it was someone's bright idea. I came down (more or less) at the air terminal, far, far from any shooting. Have no fear, and don't believe anything you read in the papers. I have already been admonished by mail by Russell, for risking my life in an unworthy cause—i.e. publicity-seeking and money-making in a tragic area. It was only a commission dreamed up by a crazy friend in need of cash, but the pictures weren't bad and did no harm. Russell is probably right, but it's done now. I've admitted to being reprehensible.'

Another page fell open under her hand. Glossy photographs of private life. There was one taken when she and Joseph first met, years ago. There they sat at some café table,

Joseph looking sad, bearish, bulky, when in fact he had more facets than the Kohinoor diamond, very few of them sad or bearish. They had had a crackling quarrel that morning, Zoe remembered—her fault, some hours past, and Joseph was explaining her to herself since he was so much older and wiser, and had once been more famous than he was at present.

‘You like opposition too well, my darling.’

‘I rise to it, and I always shall.’ Obstinate.

‘But that’s a very dangerous stand, and not sensible, either. See how’—he took the nearest hand and traced its lines with his forefinger, making her shiver—‘if I were a cold-hearted and unscrupulous person, instead of my benevolent self, I could manoeuvre you into any frame of mind.’

Said nothing, breathed fiercely, snatched hand away.

‘Wild girl. Wild girl.’ He patiently took back the hand. ‘I’m too—interested—in you to take advantage of you by trickery.’ Looking into eyes. ‘But you, ungrateful girl, don’t value restraint and tact. Don’t even realise. Don’t even hear. I look in your eyes and see—storm, storm. Not Zoe considering Joseph’s statements. Not even Zoe thinking about something else, but Zoe—storm, storm.’

Tried to pull hand away, but he held it tight.

‘No. You’re not going to throw something at me. We’re too close together at the table, and it would be boring.’ He shook his head, and turned the captive hand over and smoothed the palm with his thumb, making her shiver again, sighing slightly.

‘This way of yours—I hope it isn’t instinctive. It would weary us. I hope it’s only youth, lack of experience, an

inclination you will grow out of, or some silly habit you've picked up from your smart young friends.'

'Will you stop talking like my father? *Not* that my father would ever—'

He continued, a very large, grown-up man. 'If you were only—*storm*, I should not be so very concerned. To be young, spoilt, with a face and body, and little bits of temperament borrowed from people older than yourself, is not so unusual. Even to be intelligent, talented—there are many such people. And that is still not very much.'

With atrocious confidence. 'I don't believe any of those things are so boring to you.'

'If you were only that, we'd never have known each other so long as this. Fiery? That's not such a remarkable thing to be. The most ordinary thing in the world. No, you're more exceptional than that. You must do yourself justice, Zoe. While you are so vain, you do not even start to comprehend what you are. Do you know how I think of you?'

Then suddenly, in a trance, quite silent, hand in his, night approaching, drifts of chestnut leaves piling in the gutters, crunching underfoot, extraordinary Paris faces passing, there was happiness being given like sweetness on a spoon. Joseph took the hand he held in his two hands and kissed it and placed it on his knee.

A long time ago. More than five years since she left Sydney and the harbour, the stone house, parents and friends. Joseph had a wife in America, an aged mother in Rome, and a flickering career as a film director. None of that mattered much to

her. It was all play. Although at this age—twenty-five and some months—she should have felt herself deep into her life, and experienced, she felt instead that it had only been a game.

In Roman history, Zoe had been amused, not by the antics of the infamous Clodius, but by the description of him as ‘a young gay liver’ and ‘a debauchee’. She had wondered how gay and debauched one might have to be to qualify for such titles. Now, when she could have expected to have a clearer opinion about such matters, she believed that there were as many aspects to vice as there were stars in the sky, and that quantities of them had nothing to do with sex. A lack of mutuality, absence of tender feeling, were obscene, but nothing else. In every state of life these lacks and disparities seemed the evils from which most sadness stemmed. And yet, in spite of having learned as much as this, Zoe seemed to herself still to be waiting for the real beginning of her life. She had failed at nothing.

Sitting up, she let the book fall shut. Any moment now her mother would come in and she would be nineteen or seventeen. She would smile; her mother would look bedazzled and loving. Under the press-cutting book, she saw a smaller volume. Family photographs. Russell, Lily and the twins. Grandparents, now dead. Zoe could just remember the muted sensation of their going. It had seemed unaffecting, quite natural and unmoving, that grandparents should die. They had lived in other cities, were unfamiliar except in anecdote. As they dropped away, her mother and father showed no great sign, determined to cast no shadows on their children, not to be overthrown by emotion. They had each other.

Anna's wedding. Zoe studied this with a swooning mind. David's face looked large and smooth, his eyes lively and intelligent, his mouth sensitive and magnanimous, ready to smile. They were married for eighteen months. Then out of the blue she had heard that he was in hospital with some difficult-to-diagnose disease. In six weeks he was dead, Anna a young widow. He was only thirty-three.

Till now there had seemed to be so much time. Since time stops, the world—which has been waiting for you in particular—stops when you arrive and grow up. It must be some inbuilt trickery, some necessary blindness, that makes us think so. And she had felt herself scarcely launched, still only standing up to her ankles in the ocean. When all the while human beings disappeared constantly from view. Likeable men of thirty-three. Her *mother*.

'Come on, sweetheart. Don't stay up here by yourself.' Her father stood behind her with a hand on her shoulder. She twisted round to look up at him. He had lost weight.

He said, 'Anna's downstairs talking to Russell and Lily. She and Stephen have come over to see you.'

'Oh, yes.' Zoe paused, then rose to her feet. She swayed and held her father's arm.

The room was lit like a stage directed to represent the desert at midday, though it was some unidentifiable hour of night. Numerous persons of a mind-jerking familiarity (like the crooked wooden telegraph poles, like the weeds, strongly calling and signalling to her through the car window on the drive from Mascot, like the sweet breath of the continent

blowing through her mother's room) sat about or walked in and out on errands, making her think again of the stage, of actors waiting for a rehearsal to begin. Apart from her family, Lily's mother and father were there, Uncle John from Melbourne, the Pattersons, and the Blakes, friends since childhood, Janet Bell, her mother's best friend, Tony Merson from Biology, and finally, Anna—now Anna Clermont—and Stephen Quayle.

After embraces, Zoe sat down expecting her mother to come in swiftly and switch off half the lights, making the room habitable and intimate and like itself. Everyone murmured apologetically about her death. Minute after minute, she failed to appear. Zoe's head continued to swoon. Her heart fell into hallucinated regions while the gathering, intent on cheering up, questioned her about the wide world.

Almost for the first time in her life, Zoe felt herself at the mercy of circumstances. She was *never* overborne, yet she was overborne, letting herself be talked to, meek, unable to assert her will, or even to be certain what that was. All the things ever said about death were true. Like a light going out. If her mother came in the door now, turning off all the lamps, still the glow from her presence would make the room visible.

'We were always seeing pictures of you taking pictures.' Tony Merson eyed her intensely, giving the impression that his glance was taking a hundred tiny photographs for future reference. 'You know, the parachute one, and in the refugee camps with the kids. Living dangerously,' he said, taking further pictures with his eyes.

Still her mother waited outside the door, refrained from smiling, from saying, 'It's like the Hotel Australia!' and banishing the remorseless, shadowless glare of a public place.

Zoe said, 'From here it doesn't seem worth much.' Across the room, Russell and Anna were standing together.

Then Stephen was in front of her. 'You should look older than you do,' she told him soberly.

'How so?' He sat next to her on the sofa. Tony Merson gave her hand a valedictory squeeze and moved off from his confidential perch beside her.

'So much has happened, so far away. Like science fiction. You return from outer space unchanged and find your contemporaries ancient.'

Again she looked in the direction of the door. Someone had left it open, exposing among the bright angles of copper, flower arrangements, paintings, no person. No one. Zoe studied the distant hall for a few seconds. She said without expression, 'I feel she's in another room. I keep wanting to look through the house to see what she's doing. . . . And you, Stephen, still the boyish anarchist, still young, upsetting all my notions. Are you as wrapped up in brown paper and string?' She felt her head jerk involuntarily away from him.

'More than ever. But in Sydney now, with a secretary and access to the top-secret files. All that's lacking is a hotline to Washington and Moscow. A success story.' Tallish, spare of frame, as he was years ago. His clothes were better, and his barber knew how to cut hair. But he had altered at less superficial levels, too; had an ease of manner distinctly absent when

they first met. Most noticeably, he looked directly at the person he was talking to.

Zoe forced herself to converse as though she had merely come home for a visit. 'I've heard of other things. . . Science. Your degree. . . Yes, you went away to Melbourne. I remember thinking you did that on purpose.'

'There wasn't much choice, but I thought I'd better get out.'

She stated, 'Because of me,' and he nodded. When he began to speak again, Zoe found herself watching his teeth, small and well-shaped, as familiar as her own. 'That was a pity,' she said, not noticing that she interrupted him. 'But you've changed.'

From time to time Zoe continued to glance at the open door, expecting a doctor to appear, saying, 'Everything is going to be all right. In a few days she'll be up and about.' When no one made any such announcement, when her mother chose to stay away, and stay away, she turned with untiring patience back to Stephen, her expression curiously fixed. To be seen by *them*, the powers of the world, to have limitless patience to spend on her mother's survival was essential.

Stephen said, 'You aren't the same, either.'

Zoe looked into his eyes coldly for a second or two. 'Well, I'm not like this, if that's what you think. However I seem now, it's not what I'm like.'

His interest, once so desired, now so unsurprisingly given, made him no less alien to her. By allowing her eyes to pass deliberately over the quiet groups of actors standing in clusters

or turning chairs to form islands, she reminded him of the occasion. Death. Her mother. But how inept he was, after all! Tactful, instructive movements of the eyes were wasted on him.

Self-conscious but unconscious, discontented but apparently passive in his discontent, since he was still involved in the sale of packaging. A faulty man, sensitive and obtuse. He had taken off his glasses. Her eyes focussed on his hands as in a gigantic close-up—thin, long-fingered. The contents of her head swooped and zoomed as though the house rocked on its foundations. Feeling sick, she glanced away from Stephen to the room and its quiet inhabitants. And frail, and in fearful danger, they looked to her.

‘Could you get me something to drink? Who’s taking care of all these people? Didn’t Russell and Lily move in to help? Nothing very hospitable seems to be happening. It’s not like our house.’

‘They’ve all eaten hours ago. You have a drink there.’ He nodded at the low table in front of them.

But now there was a stirring in the room as though the star or the producer had been spotted approaching from behind the scenes. There were voices in the hall. Mrs Perkins came in abruptly, eyes in mottled face hunting out Mr Howard, who stood with Lily’s father. Zoe and Stephen held each other’s gaze to listen more attentively to her message.

‘Mr Proctor’s here about the funeral.’

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