Jewel in the Crucible

I caught the first inkling of the notion, of the revelation, just as she walked out of the surgery, glimpsed it, saw it, albeit still vaguely, more as an intuition, in the droop of her shoulders, in her unsure step, and, as she turned to say once more, 'Goodbye, doctor, thank you,' saw it, too, in her doleful countenance and in that bewildered sleep-lost red-eyed look, so full with shadowed crevices and puckerings and serpentine veins that brought a fleeting image of the russet leaves that I would rake up, come Sundays, in my garden.

She was not ill, Jennifer Coates, only lovesick, her chest battered by a thousand hammers, her thoughts muddled, her slow difficult words stifling in her throat with what eighteenth–, nineteenth-Century novelists and romantics called unrequited love. After nearly three years of living together, 'sharing everything we had,' her boyfriend had left her, resisting her hints at permanent union until, pressed once too often, too far, he had walked out on her, saying, 'I thought I might soon be ready. But I'm not. There's too much out there still to experience, and fetters, strait-jackets, babies' nappies, colic, runny noses – they're not for me, Jenny, they're not, they're not for me!'

The seemingly-interminable night, the fragmented dreams, the splintered images, paralysis, and the biting into sodden handkerchiefs and pillows – all this I had learnt from my own Joanne – had left Jennifer Coates enervated and, as a student counsellor, she could scarcely see out the work-day in her beaten state. As a doctor, I had listened to her and, sponge-

like, absorbed at least a portion of her pain, but unable to do more, had dismissed her after decent time with a certificate for two days off from work to regain her poise. I had also said, 'If I can help with anything . . .'; but that was formula, part of a trite scenario, none more aware of it than I, for I doubted that I could satisfactorily assist her in her dilemmas other than with platitudinous ivory-tower advice – in effect, a series of options – or with a prescription for tranquillisers or anti-depressants or hypnotics to dull the acuteness of her desolation – to blunt, as it were, its needling nettles and thorns.

'Nice kid, but unhappy,' I said to Mary, to Mary Somerville sitting behind the reception desk as Jennifer Coates' steps echoed leadenly down the stairs outside, aware that, at thirty-two, she was scarcely a kid anymore, aware also that the fullest ripeness of her body was already past her, however vehemently its wish, its *need* to conceive continued to importune, and aware, finally, that, all too cruel in their prematurity, she showed the criss-crossed maze of dry, tiny wrinkles about her eyes, her mouth, her throat. I hoped, for her sake, that she was not given to looking too frequently into mirrors.

In that early afternoon interlude between surgeries, I looked out upon the street. Grey was scarcely my favourite colour, yet that was the tone all around – not merely of the sky or the pavements or the windows of the shops and trams and passing cars, but also of my mood which had already been brushed upon me that morning by the argument I had had with Joanne. I gritted his teeth as I remembered.

'What then is she if not clumsy, awkward, flighty?' I had shouted, hovering over Julia who wailed as she wiped from the floor the slop of milk, Coco Pops and muesli she had spilled.

'My God, what's bitten you this morning?' Joanne had countered. 'Accidents *do* happen! She's only eight, after all . . .'

'Accidents!' I had huffed. 'She's an ungainly, brainless, twittish . . .'

'She's our child!' Joanne had cut me short. 'She's my . . .!'

I had walked out then, stamped out, putting on my jacket outside in the fog and the moistness and slamming the accelerator as I drove, my temper abating only after entering the Richardson's home to examine the wheezy bronchitic husband and his tuber-jointed arthritic wife. As always, they had offered me coffee; but as always, I had refused, even less inclined than usual to hear yet again Rupert Richardson's tales of valour at Gallipoli where, for love of country, king and flag, 'our boys did their damn'dest to rout the Turks from them cursed hills!'

'For love of country, king and flag,' I said aloud now as I watched two men in overalls carrying out a couch from Stapleton's Upholstery across the road.

'Richardsons' day, was it?' Mary Somerville said behind me. Mary was filing the patients' cards with her customary deftness. An indispensable part of the establishment, almost a fixture, she had come to know the patients well, in some details better than I. She had herself, as the saying went, buried one husband and driven out another and now lived alone, blissful in her independence, in a cottage in Garton Street where, evenings and Sundays, she painted watercolours of parrots, lovebirds and kittens. Her first husband had been a city councillor and a man of charisma but who with an autocratic will had over the years stifled all her regard for him, all her earlier love turned into fearful and resentful submissiveness; while her second husband whom she married on the rebound as it were, proved the complete obverse, a watery, spineless dependent man, given to sulking moroseness and to milking her forbearance *and* her means, drinking both away in every-lengthening alcoholic sprees until, as a final straw for her, he quit his post as a taxation clerk to creep under her feet at every turn, stifling her also, he with his jelliness as the other had done with iron.

'It's not that love is blind,' she had said then after her second debacle. 'God, no. It's simply a worm that eats you up inside even as you see crystal-clearly what the wretched thing is doing to you. Love is a vampire, a monster, a leech.'

There had been wisdom of a sort in that unsolicited offering, all the more persuasive as it was the gift, albeit a doubtful one, of authentic experience.

Across the road, as I stood before the window, I saw Frank Stapleton emerge from his warehouse, a large man with enormous flushed cheeks and still more enormous hands, then saw slight Father Murchison of St. Joseph's Church on the far corner step out of his car, and then Jennifer Coates again as she paused outside the chemist's to shut her purse.

I ran fingers and thumb down the rim of the curtain.

'Bloody, bloody, bloody love,' I said with rising emphasis. 'Poor wind-tossed powerless wretches. Poor miserable Jennifer Coates.'

'My, Dr Pearl,' Mary Somerville said airily behind him. 'You *are* poetic.'

All poetry aside, I feared for her, for Jennifer, though I did trust, had to trust, to the presence in her of a dominant instinct for survival and the resilience she had shown on past occasion upon her father's near-fatal coronary occlusion. But love, loss of love, both, were themselves dominant forces, so often virulent, which, when smiting, gave no quarter. If suicide, which had taken Teresa Mitchell, the grocer's adolescent daughter, was a savage god, were medals to be awarded for sheer wanton diabolical cruelty, then love, Eros, Aphrodite would merit a not-unearned generously-ample share. Whatever its delights – and with what easy glibness did poets and pop-stars compose verses and songs in its praise – love was in fact a thing of mischief, of villainy, tyranny and treachery.

That was the notion that had struck me, however vaguely still, as Jennifer Coates walked out of the surgery. But on reflection, the insight was in truth utterly banal, only the most basic superficial rendering of something more complex, labyrinthine, subterranean. What was love, what was love in the first place? Why did it so possess and bedevil, and so doggedly resist exorcism, even when, as Mary Somerville had said, the one who loved clearly recognised the worm that was eating

one up inside? Love might conquer all, as the comforters of the bedevilled might console, but how it could also ravage, pillage and devastate, even if it proved, in its time, requited – in such instances furtively settng the scene for later disenchantments, disaffections, complacency and vapid stagnation.

Yes, even stagnation. With all the tedium of it. Stagnation. Just as, standing before the window, I felt myself stagnating even now. For where, where, now that I had been led to think of it, was the love in my own life that once had been so acute, so galvanising and exalting?

Again, the memory of the morning jolted.

'She's our child! She's my . . .!'

The morning boilover rankled within me with heightened liveriness. My resurgent anger was not aimed at the child now, nor even at Joanne, but scattered as if from a blunderbuss willy-nilly to strike at any number of targets, at my sense of stagnation above all. I preferred not to delve into the issue again, but my thoughts, like an itch or a sneeze, could not be restrained.

The paradox was that I should, in fact, have been totally content. And satisfied. And buoyant. After all, at thirty-seven, I had attained to all I had ever wanted. My demands, in relation to my abilities, had always been modest and possessions therefore easy to obtain. My medical practice flourished, young Julia attended a private school that Joanne made sure was among the best, we lived in a two-storied house in Hawthorn, a formidable house of solid red-brick, architect-designed, completed but one year before, and, in harmony with Joanne's greater artistic sense, tastefully furnished. If there was a heaven on earth, I should have found it in his own home, particularly in my spacious library where the light, entering through the broad window, illuminated three walls of books reaching ceiling-high around me. I should have found it too in the prints of the Masters and in the local originals that hung on every wall in the house and in my ela-

borate immaculate Sanyo turntable and loudspeakers for which only Beethovens, Mozarts and Vivaldis were worthy fare.

But truth was that I was bored. Bored. Jaded. Bored. Not with life. That was ludicrous, too grand, and I was not given to dramatic hyperbole. But what had most recently come to irk me, and may well have been the mainspring for my irrational vendetta against Julia that morning, was the unremitting torpid sameness of every day, the monotony of the day's routine, the mind-deadening conversations so often repeated and despaired over with Joanne and our friends about children's schools, inept teachers, Queensland vacations, kitchen tiles, the cost of parquetry, and unreliable builders, and the mindless entertainments of over-rated movies and inconsequential stage-plays. If it was not a rut in which I stagnated, I saw myself then as plodding dully on flat land, across a vast featureless terrain beyond which lay nothing that could quicken expectation, stir interest, redeem the tedium of the passage. And I fell to wondering more than once what it was that even kept me within the marriage when, as for Jennifer Coates' boy-friend, there was so much still to experience – to see, to know, to explore – 'out there.'

But go – leave. Leave. And confront the attending complications, the recriminations, maintenance payments, the gossip. Even in quiet despair, there was still, in the marriage, much more security to be had than in the limbo of separation, and less energy to substain it was needed than to forge new liaisons and new attachments, these demanding renewed adjustments, themselves uncertain, possibly precarious and perhaps unsustainable, to different mannerisms, laughter, tosses of a head, body odours and breaths. Such effort was now beyond me. Besides, as I had read somewhere, why risk dying of thirst when clear streams flowed at my feet? And, besides, too, if pressed, I had to own that in my way I did love Joanne, though less springily than I had years before when, say, I had from the Union House watched her hurry towards me across the university lawns, smiling, buoyant, waving the tips of her

fingers from a distance, and dressed in luminous green, her face lunar, alive, and animated and animating both, causing me to hold my breath as I rose, tipsy with euphoric tingling, on beds of feathers. What counted, perhaps what held me to that vast flat unchanging terrain was, hence, my ability even after so long – fifteen years, sixteen? – to evoke that original emotion.

Evidently, such recall had receded beyond Michael Burton's capabilities or beyond his will and had in part led to the Burtons' downfall. Their story had made the newspapers, albeit as a mere six-line item, their calamity attracting less attention and journalistic colouring than the rise in the price of beer that headed an adjacent column.

Scanning the street, I now sought out the flower-shop, taken over most recently by the Monteaths on the near side of the cemetery. The name 'Sandy Burton's Flower Market' still stretched across the plate-glass window, but that was more witness to past history than to present reality and I wondered when the changed circumstances would be openly acknowledged.

They had been, the Burtons – to use conventioal jargon – deeply in love when, together, they first entered the surgery, leaving then in near-ecstasy after I had confirmed that Sandra was pregnant.

'Another lawyer,' Michael Burton had said, barrister-like furrowing his eyebrows and crooking his thumbs behind his lapels.

'Another florist,' Sandra had quipped.

When, two years later, the possibility of pregnancy again arose, Sandra Burton had come alone and sat discomfitingly tense as she watched me perform the test.

'Shall it be yet another florist,' I had said, 'or a High Court judge this time?'

She had smiled, true, but there was little mirth in her response, little animation or eagerness, only a bland and softly-spoken 'As long as it is healthy and happy . . .'

Scarcely six months after the second child – also a girl – was

born, Michael Burton presented at the surgery complaining of chest pains, headaches and fatigue. A word, two, quickly established that he was crushingly dissatisfied with himself, along with his work, his family and his social life, and that he had begun to pay attention to a young sprightly articled clerk employed by his office. His attachment was but an infatuation, he had repeatedly told himself, one that in time would pass, but daily proximity only fanned his ardour to a pitch he could only call love, but which to me bordered on an obsession which, while igniting a blaze on the one hand, enervated him on the other; until, physically, mentally and emotionally depleted, he yielded to shortness, argument and rantings which were devastating his marriage.

'The whole thing's too strong for me,' he had said, 'it's something overpowering, as if some devil within were physically turning me away from Sandra and driving me, whatever the damage, to Yolanda in the office, as if some fiery chemistry were annihilating all reason.'

Reason certainly urged Michael Burton to preserve hearth and home, but his chemistry had dictated otherwise. It became evident from Sandra Burton's mounting symptoms of anxiety and depression with which she came that the Burtons' domestic life was in turmoil. Suggestions, attempts to heal the widening rift – through marriage guidance counsellors, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and the use of medication – all failed; Sandra's behaviour became more erratic in its desperation, this only distancing her husband still further, until, one Saturday afternoon, when Michael Burton returned to his office to complete, so he had said, some outstanding work, she had succumbed to the despotism of her own chemistry. She took three wreaths from the shop up to the bedroom and there, drawing the blinds against the light and life, cut the throats of her two children and then her own.

Michael Burton, chastened, penitent and demolished, himself abandoned by Yolanda, packed together a few basic items,

left all his affairs to an executor and, shutting shop, simply disappeared.

Such was the might of that chemistry, I recalled yet again at that moment, such was its might that gave boil to dramas day in day out, dramas enacted in the curtained privacy of every house, dramas in the main resolved – who could even know their number? – but dramas, also, which sometimes spilled into the newspapers to tell, where one read between the lines, of guts spilled, brains exploded, stomachs washed out and arteries exsanguinated under the tyranny of passions, in truth of chemical laws, that affected all, all, who were ever with a navel born.

Phillip Stapleton, for instance, – a mere hair of his bull-necked upholsterer father, lean and angular in all dimensions, sunken-eyed, thick-lipped and hump-nosed, and gracelessly gangling. In appearance, intellect and conversation, he was the least prepossessing of his family and of his class and the butt of his sturdier, more assured, more accomplished peers. Had he been hunch-backed as well, he would have been Hugo's Quasimodo complete, tainted, rejected and misunderstood, yet capable – had he but *not* had that power! – of loving. He was obedient to the extremes of self-denial, obliging to the point of ingratiation, and clinging, clinging, to the very limit of endurance of those to whom he clung.

In the fourth form where, after two years repeated in the earlier classes, he was older than his classmates, he became attracted to Priscilla Perkins, a flush-cheeked, flashing-eyed coquette given to short skirts, tight pullovers, tinkling bracelets and a pendant that rocked loosely and provocatively between firm cupolaed breasts rendered all the more prominent by her peacock strut.

Not one to know the art of subtlety, he quickly betrayed his attraction and Priscilla was not among the last to become aware of it. If, at first, she showed disgust at having caught that devotee's eye rather than the fancy of her more favoured Julian Meehan, she expeditiously turned disgust to the

delights of mischief. Seating herself behind Phillip in class, she passed him paper hearts, tantalised him with messages written in red, and blew cool draughts of spearminted breath down his neck. Days there were when she let him accompany her home, if always in the presence of two or three other girls who giggled from behind, and days when she brought cigarettes to school, daring him to smoke them at recess behind the bicycle shed. She joked with him and touched his cheeks and, elated, he laughed, too, and for her, for her, for her, performed cartwheels in the quadrangle and straddled fences in mighty, if awkward, leaps.

And came the day she brought other kinds of cigarettes, crudely rolled, without label, with little taste, which made him more wild and daring and enterprising. He clambered up and jumped off the roof of the shelter-shed, rode a borrowed bicycle without hands against the traffic, and leapt fully dressed into the pool, while Priscilla, eyes, teeth, breasts all inciting, all exciting, egged him on with more such cigarettes and more and more, till cigarettes were followed by thin white powder, ampoules of water, and needles and syringes which, behind the gardener's hut in Curtain Square, she taught him to use, stirring in him a craving that progressively mounted and set him upon a succession of impulsive, compulsive pre-dawn break-ins into local pharmacies and doctors' surgeries. It was while climbing out through the window of my surgery one early morning that he was apprehended, his face and hands bleeding from cuts sustained on the broken glass, and dazed and dislocated by the suddenness of the arrest.

Called to survey the shambles he had made of my surgery, I had a last look at the feeble-minded youth. I had in the past treated him for ear infections and bronchitis and more recently for warts. Now, I cleaned and dressed his wounds, both of us wordless in the presence of two policemen, then laid a pitying solicitous hand upon his shoulder and watched him as he was led to a waiting car.

What followed, I learned from Mary Somerville who knew

the Stapletons socially. But even without being informed, I could have guessed. For even in matters such as these, there were formulae, natural histories and events that led in predictable directions in the realisation of clear-cut prognoses. – There was a trial, Phillip Stapleton was released on a good behaviour bond, then committed for therapy in a drug dependency clinic, lapsed from treatment, returned to marihuana, heroin and morphine, slid into vagrancy and periods of communal living in foul-smelling barely-furnished ramshackle terraces, to be found, finally, slumped in a public toilet in St. Kilda in a pool of urine, head askew, chin on chest, tourniquet about his arm, his arm itself a patchwork of festering scars and needle-pricks, with a dirty syringe, needle and ampoule by his side.

'All he ever wanted was to be accepted, to be loved,' Mary Somerville had said, echoing a guilt-ridden Lorraine Stapleton, in concluding her account.

Remembering the boy, I conceded again that perhaps Mary had been right, and reflected on how the simplest needs could lead grotesquely to the most sinister effects; but how I would, in this instance, have preferred instead a human enactment of Anderson's '*Ugly Duckling*' with its comfortable, homely lived-happily-ever-after ending, as in young Julia's brightly-illustrated, oh-so-optimistic, oh-so-sunnily happy story books.

But reach out and touch, the world was made of hardness. Hardness, not floss, not dough, not velvet. Scrape a hand against gravel and it will bleed; march a few kilometres and there will be blisters to count; play with fire and flesh will burn.

So was Lygon Street, my Lygon Street, all hardness now in this leaden-grey hour of afternoon. Brick, concrete, asphalt, timber, glass: iron, aluminium, copper, bronze and steel. The shops and the cottages stood impenetrably solid on the other side, trams clattered by, metal rung on metal, cars hummed and purred and hissed, and whatever voices reached me were themselves harsh and strident begging to be heard above the surrounding din. There *was*, to be sure, room for tenderness,

empathy, a pat on the back, a kiss, a smile; but the church to the right, Sandy Burton's Flower Market to the left, and the cemetery further beyond, and, reaching into memory of that morning, Rupert Richardson and 'our boys' of whom he boasted, all these told of more pervasive time-spanning bloodier realities. There was love in the city, in the world. There was; there was. The legend outside St. Joseph's proclaimed it: '*Through love of God is man redeemed*'; so did the visiting evangelist who had thundered, 'And love consumes the universe and the universe glows with the splendour of it!', and the ever-recurring lyrics of popular songs: 'So give me love, love, love', 'To know is to love', and 'Love makes the world go round'. That chemistry, those molecules of heart and brain and blood that wrought the emotion given the name of love teemed in fevered vibrato under every roof from Balwyn to St. Albans, from Brighton to Fawkner, from Rejkjavik to Capetown, from New York to Auckland. The English, so staid, could become drunk with it, and, with them, the Russians, Maltese, Brazilians, Nigerians and Japanese. Popular wisdom was to have folk hanker after it, political wisdom was to promote it, artistic wisdom to exalt it, religious wisdom to deify it.

And yet . . .

And yet . . .

Poor Jennifer Coates, and Sandra Burton, and Phillip Stapleton.

And poor old Cecilia Williamson, too, flying, soaring, riding in her private blessed fiery chariot in the Edgewood Mental Home, there loving God, and with hymns and devotions praising Him, and, with voice passionate and tremulous, pledging fire and promising brimstone, promising, foretelling, evoking the showering of hot molten hellish brimstone, upon all heretics, upon all atheists and agnostics, upon Moslems and Jews, Anglicans and Presbyterians, Eastern Orthodox and Copts, upon Hindu and Buddhist alike, the while crediting to Rome the truth and the love, the mercy and the forbearance that, were all men to turn to the faith and worship the Father and with Him His Son, would redeem mankind

forever and absolve it wholly, absolve it mightily, absolve it eternally from sin.

Such was Cecilia Williamson – Lion-hearted Richard, Torquemada, Savonarola, all in one.

Behind me, Mary Somerville had completed her filing. She had also straightened the magazines on the corner-table and adjusted the chairs and, now, taking her purse, said, 'Just nicking out to top up supplies.'

I watched her as she crossed the street where she paused outside the grocer Ralph Mitchell's window before entering Crawford's Newsagency. Harry Crawford, too, had a story to tell – but then, who hadn't?, who hadn't? Father Murchison, meanwhile, had come out of the church and driven away. The cross on St. Joseph's steeple stood austere and innocuous against the greyness. Heavy clouds had gathered beyond it, but they were not the sort that threatened rain. Rather, they merely subdued the surroundings, tempered mood and inclination and spontaneity. Outside Stapleton's, another van pulled up; a delivery boy followed by a collie cycled by; people were entering, leaving the grocer's, the chemist's, the dry cleaner's, the fruiterer's; Janice Monteath, the new florist, was sprinkling water on bunches of chrysanthemums, roses and carnations outside her door.

I looked further down the street. Against the murmur and movement of the traffic, the cemetery stretched gloomily, stretched so inert and so neutral and petered out of sight into distant dense and indefinable smudge. Tall pines surrounded the enclosure. Between their trunks, I saw the tops of crosses, tombstones and the attendant's hut. Against the railing stood slender lush-haired Brenda Lysterfield, her arms draped about the neck of a fellow leaning close. They kissed briefly, then laughed. Old gout-ridden Bertram Ogilvie, passing by, waved his stick at them, but the young ones, unperturbed, laughed again.

Watching, I jerked to straightness and felt the skipping of my pulse. A flush flooded my cheeks and I tingled with a hot titillating headiness and acute exquisite depthless sorrow as

what had earlier been a vague raw notion assumed fuller flesh.

There *was* love in the world, had always been, crucibles and vats and cauldrons of it. Small, privately-tragic, painful, annihilating, by-the-world-forgotten, time-and-grave-obliterated loves of such as Jennifer Coates and Sandra Burton, Phillip Stapleton and Mary Somerville, and of many more besides, loves ever-recurring and ever to recur across the generations; but transcending these, there were grand, ennobling, edifying, awesome and awful forms of love that, in the oratory of the evangelist, consumed the universe. – And how that love consumed! The martyrs and saints were witness to it; and the centuries, the millennia, and the continents; and art and poetry and liturgy; and the wind-touched crosses and the tombstones, and the cenotaphs and shrines, in nation and nation and nation – witnesses all to love set, so often virulently, against love, the same alchemy of worship and loyalty influencing contending Roman and Israelite, Moslem and Greek, Mongol and Kurd, Frenchman and German. To love was to suffer, true, all true; but to love was also to hurt, and, in the name of love, Love, Higher Love, – divine, national, brotherly-sisterly love – to burn, to hang, to disembowel, and to crucify, behead and gas, even as one bowed the knee – sing Gloria in Exelsis Deo – to praise, to honour, to glorify, to pledge, and to affirm. O, how love could straddle the sublime and the malignant, the splendiferously wondrous and the heinously mean! What bliss it could be, and yet what hell; what ecstasy and yet what villainy; what force towards creation, and yet what harbinger of devastation!

I continued to look outside. Brenda Lysterfield and her boyfriend had moved on. To what place, to what future, I could only guess. I wished them luck. I wished them freedom, too, freedom from the ravages of their affection. And I wished them more, more: a recognition, and a taste, however fleeting, of the purity of their affection, a taste of that jewelled purity such as I myself had known, myself had savoured in that precious moment when I, so long ago, and yet not really so

long ago, had stood outside Union House and watched Joanne, so bright, so brilliant and so immaculate in green, approach and felt my pulse quicken with her coming and felt, too, my every pore fill with hunger and thirst and need for her.

And I felt something of that now, too, as I stood before the surgery window, and, touched by a sudden idea, a happy thought, I teetered in wavering uncertainty. I saw Mary emerge from the fruiterer's carrying her calico bag, and saw near the corner Mrs Rafferty approaching the surgery. Joanne would still be home. Twenty minutes remained before she collected Julia from school. There was still time to act.

Heading for the telephone, I sensed the final lifting and dispersal of the morning's temper. I felt through all that I had seen and recognised bracingly washed and fresh and clean. And restored, reinvigorated, renewed. Quickly, breathing heavily – almost an adolescent again – I dialled, waited, listened.

Joanne answered the phone, her voice as ever mellow, open, rendered that bit musical by its terminal enquiring lilt.

'Ye. . .es?'

'It's only me,' I said. 'I just wondered . . .'

'Oh?'

'Wondered if we should go out to dinner . . . The three of us . . . You, Julia, me . . . Alone . . . I shan't be late home.'

'That *would* be nice,' she said. 'Should I book La Cocotte for six-thirty?'

Could I but reach physically across the distance! – I saw her full cheeks, her faintly-freckled nose and the dimples beside her mouth and remembered, too, her photograph as a girl just Julia's age, a child smiling, squinting into the sun, unaware of her future, but deserving only good of it, not hurt, nor dislocation, disruption or pain. I wanted to say 'I love you', but felt the expression to be mawkish, hopelessly trite and even in its honesty desperately inadequate and pale.

Instead I said, 'Yes, six-thirty's fine,' and added, 'Will you wear the opal pendant and those matching earrings? The green . . . they suit you . . . they . . .'

I did not finish. Mrs Rafferty was entering now, just ahead of Mary Somerville coming up the steps.

'Must go now,' I said. 'See you tonight.'

I knew Mrs Rafferty's complaint in advance.

'It's me 'usband. 'e drinks 'is fill o' beer, then tries ta' knock the daylight out o' me, then falls on 'is knees an says 'e loves me 'e does, falls on 'is knees and' says 'e loves me...'

But I was ready for her, I was ready for all the frailties and turmoil, all the caprices and waywardnesses of that magnificent volatile ever-boiling ever-brimming ever-restless human chemistry that claimed that name 'humanity'.

Let them come, I thought as I ushered chirpy long-suffering hardy Mrs Rafferty into the consulting room.

Let them come, I thought, all boredom, jadedness and gloom lifting off from me.

Let them come I thought, let them come, I thought. For humanity I am ready.

I am ready.

I am ready.

Let them come.