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John Clanchy

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### **Abstract**

She had come to him shortly after he had taken up the farm. Fifteen years, but the day was full of hope and he remembered it like yesterday. She had tumbled down from the truck, long-legged and spindly like a young girl, and stood in the paddock before him, her eyes bright and wild with fear at the bare endless spaces about her. She had never left her mother's side before, on a coastal farm, ordered, small-fielded, lush and English. But this brown vacancy could swallow her whole, her body seemed to say, there was nothing to hold her in. It was days before she allowed his hands on her.

# The Lie of the Land

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'That heifer,' Marjorie would laugh, 'I think she's in love with you. Moon-struck.'

'Don't be daft.'

'The way she follows you about. I think you talk to her more than you talk to me.'

And in fact he had acquired the habit, well not of talking to her exactly, but of talking out loud when she was around. It could be lonely out in the paddocks. He had found it a comfort, when he straightened up from the job of work he was doing, arching and rubbing the pain out of his back in the sun, to find her there, her head lowered, waiting patiently for him to scratch behind her ears or feed her the lump of sugar that he always carried away from the breakfast table with him. A sweetener for the other lady in his life, Marjorie would say.

He would lean across her shoulders and roll a cigarette; then, as the blue smoke whisped and curled in the morning air, they would contemplate his progress together. 'We'll need a couple more droppers in that stretch, Maisy,' he'd say, 'if we're to keep the bastards out of the wheat.' When things were bad, there were two years when the wheat had rust

and the whole crop was nearly ruined, he found it easier to talk to Maisy than to his own wife. Marjorie would only worry. An English farm girl, she had never really taken to life in the bush. He felt the need to protect her from the knowledge that this land could dry the bones out of a man, leaving him bleached white and salt in spirit while it burnt the skin from his back. Marjorie might speak his own fears, if she knew the full truth, saying it was madness to stay; scrabbling year after year in that burnt soil which God had staked out for the crows and other black creatures who passed blindly over it from time to time.

Better, he resolved, after their first year, when drought had left the land and everything on it helpless and gasping, to keep the full measure of his bitterness from her. 'Just one good year, girl,' he'd say to Maisy, watching the thin clouds drift like wraiths on the hills to the north, 'just one, that's all I ask. Then I'll make it all up to her.'

Not that Marjorie was soft. She had borne her own troubles with calmness. Having to send the two boys to school in the city had taken the heart out of her for a time, but she had seemed to recover. 'Besides,' she'd say frequently, as if reminding herself, 'it makes them all the more precious when they do come.' When school holidays were due, she'd fret for a week before the boys arrived. The farmhouse, normally kept spotless, would be turned inside out, the boys' beds made up with crisp fresh sheets days before in case school broke up early and they came unexpectedly. In eight years it never once happened. And then on the day, she'd be up before dawn and, taking the old tub out into the yard, wash her hair, combing and brushing the wet auburn tresses until they trapped the light from the flat rays of the sun. She was like a girl again, preparing for her lover to come home. She would stand for an hour staring out into the paddocks while her hair dried, shivering; but he knew that he should not speak to her or touch her. She would be winding the threads of her life back into herself, stilling the fear in her belly that this time she had lost them. They would be changed, no longer boys, their flesh grown strange and hard to her. She would be unable to touch, to enter the world they had constructed away from her.

At such times he kept clear, moping around the edges of the yard. He would check the level of the water tanks or dig fitfully with a trowel at the hard soil around the geraniums she kept in pots along the laundry wall. A kind of offering. The farm dogs would prowl restively at his heels wondering why he hadn't gone out to the paddocks yet. Until, finally, they would catch his eye. Shouting with relief 'Those dogs need a darned good brush,' he'd dive inside and, emerging a moment later with the shoe-box of brushes and steel combs, set extravagantly upon them. He'd

sit on the laundry step and, holding one of the dogs between his knees, rake the combs back towards him through the burred and tangled hair. 'There, that feels good, doesn't it, Darky? You needed that.' The others would sniff and whine about his knees, trembling, less in the knowledge that their turn would come than at the nervous excitement they could smell upon him.

He would brush with his hands, his eyes on Marjorie's back. He knew the stiffness against him that had come upon her. She would be fighting in herself the resentment that welled up, unbidden, unanswerable, her flesh divided at his having sent them away from her. A hard man, they were only boys, babies. A good man, the boys' father, their futures lay in school. There was no place for them in these empty baking plains. Finally, shaking the last of the shadows from her body, she would empty the soapy water bubbling into the dry red earth and, without speaking or looking at him, go inside.

He could feel her moving around the house. First, she would go to the kitchen and check the swelling loaves of bread, the scones and cakes she had left warming in the oven. The boys usually came about mid-morning and the breakfast was kept until then. Next, he knew, she would be drawn to the boys' room at the front. She would stand in the doorway for a moment, suddenly too shy to enter. The breath would be sucked out of her by the empty tidiness of it, the great fronds of the date palm in the front garden trailing their long bars of shadow across the bright walls. It would seem all wrong. A prison. A tomb. Not what she had meant at all. Near tears, she would fall upon the room, scattering the cushions and pillows, pulling toys and games from the cupboard in tumbling disarray. Worse. The younger boy's teddy, lying askew and broken-limbed at her feet, accused her of months of neglect. She knelt down and picked it up. The fur, normally rubbed flat and shiny by the boy's warm turning sleep, had grown hard and spiky in the dry air. Its coarseness set her teeth on edge, and she thrust it back on to the cupboard shelf. Hobbling around on her knees, feeling hopeless and defeated, she would slowly set the room to rights. Then, without a backward glance, flee to the kitchen again. The warm cooking smells reassured her, but she had left herself nothing to do. And so she would slump against the sink by the window, her eyes travelling back and forth along the red ribbon of road that ran past the farm, watching for the first cloud of dust in the distance that would tell her the bus was coming.

Knowing she was there, just feet away from him but unreachable, he would be unable to stand it any longer. Throwing the dogs off him, he would march resolutely across the yard towards the barn. The dogs

would snap their jaws on nothing, dart and yap at his heels, overjoyed to be moving at last out of the shadow of the house. The barn was wooden, not tin or corrugated iron like all of the other sheds. Warm on winter nights when the trees snap-froze and even the tin sheds crackled with ice and frost. He had built it, he said, for new-born calves. But 'Calves, huh,' Marjorie had sniffed, 'nothing's too grand for that lady.' And in fact Maisy had taken up nearly permanent residence and had to be shooed each morning out of the warm steaming dark.

He had acquired the habit of stopping by the barn before he went to bed each night. 'Just seeing the animals are settled,' he'd explain to Marjorie who'd smile without looking up from her knitting or the book she was reading. 'Bedded down,' he'd add unnecessarily. He wouldn't go at once but hover around the door waiting sheepishly.

'Well, go on then,' she would say at last, giving him the permission he would deny he had sought or needed, 'what are you waiting for?' And off he would go happily, whistling into the dark. The dogs, knowing where he was going, and preferring to stay in the warm kennels where they were, would simply acknowledge him by raising the lid of one eye and tracking his dark familiar shape across the moon-lit yard. One might whimper quietly, suppressing the impulse to follow him. In the barn he'd pitch a forkful of hay down from the loft into the feed-bin, then stand for a while running his hands on her smooth flanks or clapping the loose liquid dewlap that hung thick and healthy under her throat as she snuffled in the bin. No matter how he felt, she was always the same. He could depend on that. 'Well, girl, we made some real progress today,' he might say. Or, 'If it doesn't rain soon, we can forget the crops for another year. Maybe for good. Become townies again, or get a small dairy-run down south. You know she'd like that, don't you?' Whatever his tone, Maisy would turn her head from the bin and, arching her neck, rub the side of her face in short buffeting blows against his hip. He would resist pushing back hard against her, and in the tension that flowed between their bodies, something would be resolved, affirmed, a wordless contract that somehow they'd see it through together.

On mornings when the boys were due home, he'd not go to the paddocks but take his time mucking out the barn. The dogs, sick of waiting, would have gone off rabbiting in the dry creek bed. He would stop every few minutes and, leaning on his fork, gaze out through the open doorway where motes of straw and dust teemed in the brilliant sunlight, out to the same road he knew Marjorie would be watching from the kitchen window. He was aware only of emptiness, the vast desert spaces of desire and intention that separated them. Not born to it, he

had come to love the land, finding in its extremes, its desperate moods, a strange consolation. But Marjorie was frightened by it, seeing on those few occasions when she came out into the paddocks with him only the bleached bones and skulls of animals and the dun ribs of earth, broken and flaking, extruded through the thin cover of soil. There might still be places, she could barely conceive it, where no human being had ever stood. The land was unloved, unblest, no wonder men went mad in it.

Her only joy was spring when purple and scarlet wildflowers dressed the salt bones of earth. Then she would venture out in the early morning, out beyond the yard, and paddle barefoot, dreaming, crushing the dewy flowers under her feet in a gleaming English meadow. 'Maisy,' she would call down towards him where the animal stood, her own calf nuzzling at her flank, 'Maisy, daisy Mai-sy.' The animal would turn her heavy head and, without pausing for a moment from chewing her cud, draw this strange creature's cries into her own unblinking silky contentment. 'Maisy, you're beautiful. And your baby,' she'd go to cuddle it and the calf would spin its rump around by its mother's legs and, not letting go of the teat in its mouth, roll its eyes and gaze timid and watchful up at her. 'No wonder he loves you.' And, suddenly seeing her again, he could love her too; once more she would be the Marjorie he had married, the opaque winter shadows fled from her face. 'Not half as beautiful as you, girl.'

But most of the year she stayed close to the house, miles of land, foot-galling and broken-backed, between them. She would complete the chores inside by ten, then spend an hour before the sun grew heavy weeding and tilling the small plot of vegetables in the farmhouse yard, or tending the shrubs and seedlings that straggled bravely in the dust along the borders of the house. She would plant them as close to the walls as she could, taking advantage of what little shade there was under the eaves. An hour's gardening would leave her feeling wrung dry and dizzy and she would retreat guiltily to the shade of the house. Locked inside its walls, she could feel her flowers suffering, perishing silently around the boundaries of her life.

Sometimes, for no good reason, in the middle of a job of work, perhaps he'd be stretching the wire on a boundary fence, he'd find the breath catching in his throat and turn sharply in the direction of the farmstead, imagining a cry had come out across the paddocks to him from its silent walls. It was as though the wire had sung aloud with pain under his hands. He'd stand terrified for a moment squinting over to where the white homestead shimmered and quivered in the midday heat, then shake his head and bend his back to the wire again; 'Don't know what the

woman does all day.' But, really knowing, never asked. It became a tacit understanding between them. On occasions, realizing her lack of interest in the farm, he'd bring her a bright gift from the paddocks: a twist of wildflowers or the sight of a heron stalking the spongy marshlands priest-like after the rains. She'd smile slightly, catching his tone without listening, and go on preparing his dinner.

After they had eaten they would sit on the verandah for an hour, enjoying the evening breeze and watching the last rays of the sun flatten and lengthen across the land. There was a time, neither night or day, just before full dark, *gloaming* Marjorie would call it, when the gullies would fill up with shadows and the stringybark and white-fleshed gums would straggle untidily towards the house. The farm dogs would prowl, sniffing the air and whimpering. All around them they could sense the earth opening up. Animals strange to light would slither, shoulder their way up from deep fissures of rock; reptilian mouths gaped grinning to repossess a world older than the rocks themselves. 'Good night for hunting,' he would say, watching the moon ride full-bellied up the white stony ridges. And in fact something might thrash in the long grasses just beyond the front fence. 'Old Joe'll get himself a belly-full tonight.'

Marjorie had seen old Joe only once. She had been out in the yard weeding her plants in the early morning. The sun was just beginning to burn but the sweat that broke on her back was cold. She stopped every few minutes and turned around quickly, as though she expected to catch someone watching her. But there was nothing. The paddocks only stretched shimmering brown and empty as far as the eye could see. She stooped to the weeding again, willing herself not to turn around, but couldn't stop the cold animal prickling of her scalp. She was being watched. She knew it. Something was watching her; its eye, malevolent and cold, grazing on her naked shoulders. Without turning she bent her head and looked back under her arm. Just in time to see the old dead tree by the fence — blink. And writhe upon itself falling, the whole grey twelve-foot slack-skinned length of it slithering scabble-clawed down the black trunk. She shrank back clutching the wall of the house. The goanna turned its head towards her — she could feel herself being sucked, unresisting, helpless, into the green empty well of its eye — then stumped slowly away towards the rocks drawing the heavy reptilian tail in its wake.

She would never venture by herself out beyond the gate at night.

In the barn, remembering her terror, he leaned on the solid handle of his fork and rubbed the heel of his palm against Maisy's blunt forehead. 'She'll feel better soon,' he said, 'once she's got the boys around her again.'

Maisy closed her eyes and lowered her head in pleasure. 'You know what it means to her, don't you, girl?' Maisy had been allowed to keep her own calves until they were full grown. The others were all shipped south to the city markets. But the previous year's calf would be her last. She had nearly died with it. He had stayed up all night helping to deliver it. The calf wouldn't come and Maisy, after eight hours of silent heaving labour, the froth caked hard on her lips and her eyes white and flecked with blood, dropped dumb and helpless on the straw. He too was exhausted and would happily have fallen beside her but knew that she would die. The calf must be got out of her; whatever happened she must be kept standing. 'Come on, girl,' he had pleaded, 'just one last try' and somehow, with a brutality he would not have suspected in him, heaved, kicked and dragged her struggling to her feet and locked her in a stall so that the wooden shafts pressing on her sides kept her upright. Able to offer no more, she gave herself up to him.

There was only one thing to do. If the calf wouldn't come by itself, he would have to drag it out. By now he was sure it was dead inside her. He hung the flickering lamp from one of the stall posts and stripped off his jacket and shirt. Crossing between her and the light, he was aware of his own blunt shadow like some gross predator bearing down on her. He hesitated only long enough to slap her roughly on the rump; 'Hang on, girl. Here we go,' and, bunching his fingers into a fist, plunged his arm into her. Pushed deep. The wet soggy mass gave way to hard tissue and he could feel the muscles, strained hot and full with blood, close around his arm. Beyond the elbow. Maisy bellowed for the first time and arched her back, throwing up a bridge of pain. Her hind legs buckled, wrenching his arm and shoulder down, but the wooden struts supporting her belly and flanks held her up. 'Easy, girl. Easy,' he cried out, feeling from inside the taut quivering cables of pain that grappled his own body to her. He pushed again until his arm was almost swallowed up to the shoulder. And found it: the calf's leg stuck athwart the neck of the womb. It felt odd; spongy, rubbery, not like bone at all. It had taken the full force of all the monstrous pressure.

He was hardly able to remember the next hour at all. He managed to bring the calf's two hind legs together and pulled, simply pulled — Maisy could do nothing — pulled, sliding and skidding on straw wet with blood, water and faeces, finally braced himself by placing his booted foot up against her haunches and tore the slack bundle free from her, slipping finally so easily — out. Dead. The wet weight of it slapped to the floor, its jersey skin gleaming darkly in the lamplight. Totally spent, he remembered to pull the handles that would release Maisy from the stall before

collapsing on the straw beside the dead calf. As he closed his eyes, he saw her turn and, plodding dumbly over, begin to lick the blood and remains of the liquid sac from the still body.

Just as her warm sandpaper tongue now raked his hand, breaking his reverie in time for him to see the clouds of dust billowing out along the road.

'Here they are. They're here,' he shouted to her and, throwing the fork down, strode almost running out into the blazing yard. The day's advance surprised him, and he staggered blindly for a few steps while his eyes grew used to the sun. 'Marj, Marjorie, they're here,' more in celebration than to inform her. She would barely have left the window all morning.

'Marjorie, you'll miss them,' he shouted into the house from the back step.

'You go,' she called back. She sounded distracted. 'I've got to get these scones out.'

It was always the same. Idle all morning, at the very moment they arrived she would find a thousand things that suddenly needed to be done, couldn't wait.

'They'll expect you.'

'I can't.' She almost screamed at him.

The bus was nearly there. He turned and hurried towards the gate, the dogs yelping excitedly at his heels. 'They're here,' he said. Their red tongues lolled stupidly in anticipation. The bus wheezed up to the gate, two boys still in school uniform tumbling out before it came to a halt. 'Dad, dad,' they shouted. 'Darky, Rusty.' The dogs were in a frenzy. He had to kick them away from the gate to get it open.

'Peter, James, you've grown,' he yelled, 'how you've grown,' tossing the younger one on his shoulder. 'Your mother won't recognize you.'

'Mum, where is she?'

'She's inside. Making the best breakfast you're ever likely to eat. Now let's get your bags.'

Their high voices, running over one another, carolled like magpies all the way to the house: 'How's Maisy, dad? did Rusty have her pups yet? was the drought as bad as you expected? is Pearl still here?'

'Whoa, whoa,' he laughed, tousling the older boy's dark hair. How old was he? Thirteen ... no, fourteen. Almost a man. 'All in good time.'

'We're doing science next term,' the younger one offered.

'Science?' His hands felt suddenly rough and awkward, cradling this strange gift. 'That's nice, boy,' he said.

'I've been doing science for three years,' his older son reminded him

quietly.

At the entrance to the kitchen he held back, the two boys blocking the doorway in front of him. They peered hesitantly into the dim room as though they were not sure of what they would find. Marjorie stood by the stove, wringing her dry hands on her apron. The corners of her mouth crinkled in what was intended for a smile. He wanted to push them, to propel them into her arms, go on, she's your mother, you don't know how the woman's been waiting. But knowing how animals may shy at the most intimate connections of flesh, he waited.

It was the suspicion that all that dryness might dissolve itself in tears that finally drove the younger one gasping out across the dark mile of polished linoleum that separated them. 'Mummy.' His mother's body drew him in, folded about him, her eyes brimming with enquiry still fixed on her elder son. Seeing the boy start towards her, he hefted the bags and made for the front room, expelling as he did the dead weight of air that he was surprised to find was straining at his chest. It would be all right. He would leave them for a while, and they would stitch together yet once more the torn and ill-fitting patchwork of their lives.

While the boys were at home, Marjorie would be a girl again, drawing energy from their bright bodies. She took them on picnics, venturing further into the bush than she ever dared by herself. They were aliens to it too, but their innocence protected her from visions of ancient horrors. They competed with each other in spotting strange animals and birds or playing hide-and-seek (she found it strange, how many hiding places there were on the empty plains) or scrambling, last one to the top's a rotten egg, up the crumbling dead-wall face of the northern ridge. Occasionally she got the jeep out and drove sixty miles to the nearest town. She paraded in the main street with her two sons, showing them off to the few acquaintances she had made on shopping trips or when she had gone there with him for the cattle sales. They would linger in the shops, and she loved to buy them small gifts. Perhaps a clasp knife or a bush hat like his father's for the older boy. And coloured pencils for her young son who was keen on drawing. Then they'd stop at the cake shop for tea. She never went there by herself any more. Grown unused to company and small talk, she was intimidated by the waitress and the nods of encouragement from the townswomen. Even the neat gingham cloths on tiny rosewood tables troubled her with intimations of another life. But the boys made everything familiar, rounding the place out with their laughter and their gross unconscious appetites. Careless amongst such fragile china.

In the evening they listened to the radio or read, and, as night came

on, the younger one would quietly leave his book or drawing and, moving to his mother's side, curl up warmly against her.

'Tired, dear?' she asked, stroking his hair. 'Bed soon.' And then, as if she feared to be the cause of even that separation between them, 'Ten minutes more, and then daddy will see you off to bed.' He looked up from his paper and, catching her eye, smiled briefly that he understood: 'That's right, son. Early to bed and early to rise...'

When bed-time came he would tear, it felt like it, the sleepy child from her side. She sat unresisting, the impression of the child as he was lifted from her still clear in the outlines of her body. Her face, dumb with pleading, pulled at his heart as he carried his son up to the front room. He felt tired, ages-old like Abraham, scarcely possessing the strength to raise the boy up on his high bunk and lay him out on the spotless linen sheets.

As the days splashed through her hands, she became tense, incompetent with desire. She would cling to him in bed at night, passionate, demanding, as though she might tempt, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, some more enduring promise from him. But always it eluded her, shining clear and fiery just beyond reach. And so, learning to blame him, she withdrew into herself again, returning to its dark store-room the treasure she had dusted off and found to be of little worth. When the day for their departure came, she was calm and practical. She stayed in the house packing the boys' bags and cleaning their room — nothing must be left to tidy away after they'd gone — while they took leave of the land and animals with their father. Not much was said between them. But it was as though, in the end, his quiet strength possessed them. They helped him with the chores around the yard and sheds, feeding the hens and stacking firewood by the laundry wall. They had done with their holidays games. Now his example gave shape and order to their emerging lives.

Never one for extended conversation, he simply said: 'Do well. You'll be wanting work of your own in time.' He hoisted the younger boy up on to Maisy's patient back and, marvelling at a trick that had puzzled him for weeks, smiled: 'Science, eh? What do you think of that, girl?' Maisy snuffled in her bin of oats with satisfaction. 'Oh dad, what would Maisy know about science?' He was amazed. 'Well ... nothing, I suppose.' The boys laughed and he found himself half joining in. 'No more than me, that is. Won't be long before you'll be leaving us both behind.'

Marjorie came out with them to wait for the bus. Her hair, normally worn down when they were home, was imprisoned once more in a tight bun behind her head. The light had laid bare the naked bones of her

face and her eyes were wide, milked of colour by all that blue distance. A flight of white cockatoos, worried by the dogs, wheeled squealing and squawking in indignation around the house. She watched them settle fluttering like damp cloths, she almost thought *souls*, in the shade trees. The boys chafed, anxious now for their other lives, shying away from her whenever she approached to pat down a flyaway strand of hair or pick a stray piece of lint from their grey suits. The uniforms which she had cleaned and pressed so carefully made them strange to her. She wanted to hold them. They made tangible her own uncertain sacrifice. But as she bent to kiss them goodbye, her nails felt dry and brittle on their skin. Passion crumbled like dust in her mouth: 'Goodbye, Peter. Look after James. Goodbye, darling.' Their father shook hands solemnly with each of them. Standing side by side they would wave until the bus turned the corner out of sight. Then made their way slowly back to the house. Even the dogs were subdued, while the cockatoos fell from their perches on an empty land.

'Don't worry, girl,' he would manage by way of consolation, 'they'll be back.' And they were. But less frequently as the years passed. She tried not to feel resentful when one of them wrote asking if he could spend the holidays with the family of a friend, perhaps skiing or staying on the coast. Not that he wouldn't come if she really wanted. But how could she object when it was a chance he mightn't get so easily again? It was never the same when only one of them was there. Fretting for the one who was absent — their games seemed only ever made for three — all the grace and girliness fled from her body. She lost all sense of adventure. If she did go out into the bush, her old fears returned. A gust of wind would set the trees braying with laughter. She was aware only of roots writhing on broken soil.

Even the farmhouse grew monotonous with heat. Whole hours might pass when the one who was with her would slip unnoticed from her side, tired of cooking and housework and indoor games, and look for Maisy and his father in the paddocks. 'Does your mother know you're here?' he'd ask, guilty for enjoying the boy's quiet presence. 'She'll miss you.' He had resolved long ago that giving his sons up to her was the price of his own obsession. But seeing the boy's reluctance, he wouldn't press and eventually Marjorie would join them, half-complete in the semblance of her family.

Until one year when they didn't come at all. James was now at the university and the older boy had a job in one of the cities down south. It wasn't, he tried to assure her, that they didn't care; they had still sent cards for her birthday. It was just that they had their own interests, their

own lives to lead. She wouldn't want them to be tied to her apron strings forever, would she? For an answer, one blazing summer day she simply carried out into the yard all the toys and games from their cupboards and set fire to them.

Seeing the flames from the paddock, he raced back to the house. She stood with her thin arms held out to the bonfire as though she were warming herself or even praying by it.

'Marjorie. Why?' The eyes that passed over him were calm, vacant. He could see James' teddy melting into a black and yellow sticky mass, a grin still fixed in the tortoise-shell button of its eye.

'Why?'

'They died in the night,' she explained matter-of-factly. 'They were making the house cold.'

When old Dr O'Grady came, he seemed irritable.

'It's as far to go back as it is to come out,' he complained climbing back into his battered black Ford, 'and the roads get no better the second time. If I'd known she was like this, I wouldn't have bothered. You could have brought her in with you next time you came to town.'

'But I still don't know what's the matter with her. What's gone wrong?'

'Bush neurosis,' he said, slamming the door. 'The pills will let her sleep — but I can't answer for dreams.'

'Neurosis?'

'It gets nearly all of them in the end. The women.'

'What should I do?'

'A few bits of flowers,' he jabbed an angry finger at Marjorie's garden. 'What can you expect? They don't work the land. They've got no relation to it.' Dr O'Grady was shouting now as though the husband were to blame.

He started the engine and the car began rolling towards the gate. The farm dogs yapped and snarled; their teeth bit madly on the unyielding rubber.

'But what should I do?'

The car pulled up sharply and the doctor's face squinted back at him. He looked surprised, even shocked.

'Do? There's nothing you can do,' he said. 'Not now.'

And so they settled down to the long summer days of her madness. Weeks passed, one day drifting into the next so that he lost all sense of time, while Marjorie sat in the living room clutching and unclutching her hands. At night she lay up against the wall, dry-eyed and staring. He tried to comfort her but found he had lost the practice of words. Her flesh became alien to him; his hands rustling like paper on her withered

flanks. When she did allow him to touch her, she would draw his hand to her belly: 'There,' she would say, her voice rising in excitement, 'there, can't you feel it growing?' Sometimes he imagined he could feel it, a hard knot of tissue or muscle embedded in the flesh, but could never be sure. His hands were shaped to the ranker growths of animals. 'It won't be long now,' she'd say, smiling and turning away from him. Clutching the bright promise of her secret to her.

Since the fire he had become watchful, never moving far from the farmhouse. If he went to the paddocks, his mind immediately strayed back to where she lay in their dark room. Troubled by fears in his own broken sleep, he removed all matches from the house and kept the sharper knives locked away with his shotgun in one of the sheds.

But he couldn't be watchful all the time. One night he awoke and found the bed empty. The light was on and her nightdress lay crumpled by the doorway. 'Marjorie?' he cried out. One of the dogs on the verandah whimpered, trembling on some ancient nightmare. 'Marjorie.' The walls of the house lapped him, cold and silent. He ran from room to room, all the lights were burning. Then, snatching up a blanket, slapped bare-foot out into frozen puddles of air. 'Marjorie!' He saw her almost immediately, the white moons of her flesh gliding softly between the black trunks of the acacias. Her body seemed slim and firm with resolution. He ran after her. 'Marjorie!' Hearing his cry, she halted, standing patiently until he came up to her, her back still to him. 'Marjorie, oh Marjorie,' he pleaded, wrapping the blanket around her, 'what in God's name are you doing? You'll catch your death.'

'He was calling,' she said softly, 'didn't you hear him? He was calling my name.'

He gazed around. 'Who? Who was calling?' The rocks glinted crystal with starlight.

'Old Joe, of course,' she said, looking at him as though he had lost his senses. She let him take her by the hand.

It felt cool and fresh on his rough palm, and he led her like a child back out of the darkness to the blazing house.

For a brief time she seemed better, even getting up to join him for dinner, though she would forget to eat if he did not remind her. Everything was an effort to her. 'You're so thin,' he'd say placing the fork gently in her hand, 'you'll waste away to nothing.' Despite his hunger, he could only manage to pick at his own food. The days in the paddocks and the constant watchfulness at night were beginning to exhaust him.

Twice he found that he had locked Maisy in the barn at night and forgotten to release her next morning. Except that he wasn't sure that it

was the next morning. From the dung pats and soiled straw it could have been two days. Or even three. Each time, seeing her look of reproach, he rushed back to the house to find whether Marjorie had been similarly neglected. There was no way of knowing. The plates in the sink, rimmed with grey fat, might have been from that morning's breakfast.

On the verandah in the evenings he would sit helplessly and watch the bright sun flickering and guttering in the dark pools of her eyes. She would catch him watching her and reach out to take his hand, smiling as though she understood his plight. 'Soon,' she would say, making a round pearl of pity with her mouth. He had not known that peace could taste so bitter. Even the boys' visit — they came as quickly as they could in answer to his letters — failed to waken her. She let herself be led around the garden, supported on each side by her tall sons. 'Poor things,' she would say, patting their arms in consolation 'the sun kills them.' Stricken with youth, there was nothing they could do but return her to the dark shelf of her life.

On the morning the boys left, he sought his usual refuge in the barn.

'It's up to us now, girl,' he explained. 'We've got to face it. She's just not going to get any better.'

Maisy's blue tongue lapped comfortingly in his palm. He ran his other hand over her shoulders; she had grown thin and coarse with age. How had that happened without his noticing? Her flanks shivered as he touched the bare patch where she had rubbed herself against the stall-posts in the barn and the hair had refused to grow back. 'I've been neglecting you, girl,' he said bitterly, 'neglecting everything.' And so he threw himself into the farmwork once more, holding fast to the one certainty that he knew. The rhythms of the day controlled his mind. Rising early, he yoked himself to the shoulder of the earth, labouring through the midday heat until the dropping sun mercifully unharnessed him. Mostly he was aware of vacancy; the burnt face of the earth across which he crawled, and the sky above him endless with white heat. Between those fiery plates his spirit was pressed out. He would lose himself until a stone jolted his hands or a blister burst on them. Then he remembered. There would be a flash of resentment at her total dependence on him or the sharp rush of guilt when he realized that he had worked happily, not having thought of her once for hours on end. But as one day plodded in the furrows of the day before, and the earth turned steadily beneath his feet, he even dared to hope again: 'We'll manage, Maisy girl. Somehow we'll see it through.'

Scarcely a week later Maisy failed to respond to his morning call. He searched the yard and the barn and the home paddocks, half-angry that

she should have made him late for the ploughing. It was mid-morning before he found her. She was lying on her side on the sharp crusted clay of the dam in the bottom paddock. 'Maisy! Maisy!' She had fallen from the high shoulder of the dam and he could see from the attitude of her body that a hind leg was broken. Bone ground on bone in his hands as he tried to straighten it, and Maisy screamed aloud with pain and fear. He dropped to his knees beside her, and she struggled to raise her head. One horn had been snapped off clean at the base in her fall; she gazed at him with lopsided apology. Her tongue filled her mouth, and the air that sang and whistled through her nose burnt on his cheek. How long, he wondered, had she been lying here? He brushed away the flies that swarmed at her eyes and, scrabbling down the bank, filled his hat with the warm rusty-coloured water. 'Here, girl. Drink this.' He tried to lift her head but the sun was draining his own strength, so he placed the hat to her lips, pushing the brim up so that it formed a funnel against her mouth. 'Come on, girl.' Maisy gulped desperately. The water caught in her throat and, when she coughed, ran streaming like blood from her nostrils.

Her leg was too badly broken to think of splinting. He placed his hat over her face to keep off the flies that again droned and sawed at her eyes. The crows sat bunched black in the trees waiting their turn after the flies. It was hopeless. He slumped to the ground beside her and lay with his arms stretched over her panting flanks.

Steadily the sun drew the energy and will out of him. He watched a crow perch on the horn of a branch. Crows are the sun's children, he thought. The sun was black too, and he lapsed into it. It burned and he woke. The ants, he noticed, had begun. He must act, do something. If only Marjorie had been well, there might have been some chance to save her. But Marjorie lay spreadeagled by the heat, wasted in darkness by the salt spirit of the land — and by his pride.

She had begged him to leave, to give up. He remembered her face: *They died in the night*. But no, he must hang on, must draw the plough of his own necessity across her body. It was her blood which had watered his crops. Now he watched them burning, turning back into the red dust from which they'd come.

The paddocks swam in waves and swirls toward him; there was Marjorie born auburn-haired and laughing on the tide. He knew she'd come. 'Marjorie,' he cried out. 'Marj.' The trees broke apart in fluttering shapes of angels; they carried her name wheeling in black veils of shadow across the sun.

Marj. Marj. Marj.

Flesh stirred baking in the fire beneath him. He must get up. She was his responsibility, she had served him faithfully all these years.

Marj. Marj.

Get up. Flames ran in the paddocks, the whole earth was bleeding. 'Marjorie.' He pushed himself up on her flanks; the air rushed from her, she was still breathing. He plunged into the blazing paddocks towards the farmhouse, knowing he must get there before he collapsed. No one else could do it from him. Gunmetal broke star-cold and certain in his hands.

Somehow he would find the strength to put her out of her misery.