

INTRODUCTION

On the shelf above my desk is a battered exercise book, the kind used by generations of Australian primary school children – one that, in defiance of calculators, has tables of cubic tonnes and hectares and other measurements marching across the back cover. On the front cover is a small panel with these words printed carefully by hand: *Name: Kenneth Bernard Cook School: Fort Street Boys' High Age: 56 and $\frac{3}{4}$.*

That exercise book, one of the few tangible legacies of my brief marriage, is my portal into the past. Whenever I look at it I see a tall man with curly salt-and-pepper hair and a piratical beard hunched over a too-small desk, squinting through smeared glasses held together with sticky tape as words flowed smoothly from the nib of his fountain pen onto the page. A glass of Victoria Bitter or whisky and a cigarette always stood ready whenever inspiration failed, which

it rarely did, though the glass was always emptied. If he couldn't think of a word for a minute or two he would scribble. He often drew long, strange animals with droopy tails, whiskers and lolling tongues, and crosses for eyes. Once I asked him why he kept drawing pictures of rats. He explained rather huffily that they were not rats but ferrets, and that he just liked drawing them, that was all. But there were often times when numbers, not words, flowed from his fluent pen. Several pages of that exercise book display columns of figures and percentages, all related to money, income and expenditure. In the time we were together, and thereafter, these calculations had a greater influence on our shared life than any words he wrote.

The fact that Ken and I got together at all still surprises me. Though we were bonded by our love of books and writing, for me words were instruments of explanation, clarity and concision, both in my own writing and in my work as an editor. Ken on the other hand was first and foremost a storyteller, a man who often used words for dramatic effect, who gambled on always being able to sell the work he produced, a man who assumed that every business enterprise of his would be successful. He also believed that money, however obtained, existed to be spent; being financially conservative to the point of caution, I hadn't had a lot of practice in taking risks.

Ken had one great stroke of luck at the beginning of his literary career, of course, twenty-five years before we met. He was only in his early thirties when he published *Wake in Fright*, the novel on which his reputation still largely rests. The novel, published in 1961 and written out of an understanding of human frailty, a dislike of the cherished Aussie myth of mateship and a deep sense of pessimism, opened a lot of doors for Ken – though I don't think he really knew, as writers often don't, how he managed to make this particular novel resonate so powerfully.

It seemed to me, and still does, that for every quality he possessed he embodied its opposite. He was cool-headed, passionate, sensible, wrong-headed, tough and sentimental, an intensely urban man who yearned to lose himself in the world outside Australia's cities, a social snob who was happy to be a friend to anyone, a politically conservative anarchist, a truthful and honest man who would spin any yarn he thought he could get away with, a lunatic optimist with a strong sense of doom, and – like many Australians of Irish background – a hard-headed realist with an imaginative, even mystical, streak a mile wide. He could turn an argument on a sixpence, begin defending a stance he had just spent half an hour attacking. I never knew quite what I was getting, never quite came to the end of him. We had times of rich domestic tranquillity,

upsets that were enraging at times, and I was never, ever bored. Just that last, I have always believed, is worth a great deal.

I'd never met anyone like Ken Cook, and I haven't since. When I look back and consider the relatively flat plain of my life before his volcanic eruption into it, I still cannot quite believe the time we spent together. Not because it was always wonderful – it wasn't. Like many extreme events, human as well as geological, our association had sharp and potentially dangerous edges, visible from many sides. This is why – though it's not the only reason – I am charting its topography in these pages.

PART 1

BECAUSE
HE WAS HE,
BECAUSE
I WAS I



If you press me to say why I loved him,
I can say no more than because he was he,
because I was I.

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

A MEETING OF MINDS

It was July 1985 and I had been unexpectedly invited to a dinner party. People had them in those days. The hostess, whom I shall call Clare, was a woman I knew professionally rather than a friend: I had never thought we were close enough for me to be invited to her house. Certainly we both edited books for a living, but I wasn't sure what else we had in common. Small, neat and very English, Clare had worked in London publishing for many years – a world, we Australian book editors assumed, of calm and tradition, where family background was all-important and where most of the men who ruled the industry, and their employees, came from public schools and had private incomes. My own experience in London, brief though it had been, bore this out. On my first day as an editorial assistant to a London publisher about ten years before, I had seen the sales manager descending the staircase in

striped trousers, cutaway coat and top hat on his way to Ascot.

We Australian editors, working mostly for the American- and British-based publishers who had dominated the local scene since the 1970s, snickered happily at the thought of any sales manager we had ever met doing such a thing. However, we did have one important thing in common with our UK counterparts: we were badly paid. Being a fairly bolshie lot, though, we were trying to do something about it. We asked no favours but claimed our right to a fair deal and, to Clare's fastidious horror, we had launched a lobbying campaign for more money and better conditions. Though this had been partially successful, Clare had made known very gently – as only the English can – that confronting one's bosses about money was unnecessary and even rather vulgar. Surely it was better to work behind the scenes, to persuade gradually. We scorned such an oblique way of doing things, and made this clear to her – as only Australians can.

Clare and I had never argued about this directly, but we were both aware that we were not exactly soulmates. So I thought it was generous of her to ask me to dinner, though the invitation still puzzled me slightly. The meal would be casual, she explained, nothing flash. The other guests were an Australian independent publisher and a bookshop owner and their wives, not all of whom

I knew. Clare asked me to bring the man I was seeing at the time, a former journalist who had worked for *Reader's Digest*, as did Clare herself. Maybe she wanted to talk to him, I thought. He was a very pleasant and affable man a fair bit older than I, and someone who, I knew, could be relied upon to ensure the conversation did not steer into any awkward corners.

Clare added that she was also inviting her fiancé. She gave the word a wry Jane Austenish twist, as if she'd said 'affianced' or 'betrothed'. I already knew that the man in question was not Mr Darcy. Indeed, when the word of this engagement had got out in publishing circles, the reaction had been a mixture of laughter and incredulity. The fastidious, patrician Clare intended to marry *Kenneth Cook*? Really? I had never met Kenneth Cook, but many publishing people had; he had been around since at least the 1960s and had written about a dozen novels, the best known of which was *Wake in Fright*, made into a classic film some years before. People spoke with awe about the amount of alcohol he got through without any apparent effect, how quickly and professionally he could turn out words, and I had been told that his family setup was rather odd. But nobody I knew went into detail about any of these things, and my impression was that he held himself a little aloof from literary circles.

People, whether they knew him or not, tended to

declare that Kenneth Cook was *larger than life*. They would say this in a slightly self-congratulatory way, as if this hackneyed expression was the best and only way to describe him. (It's a phrase almost always applied to men, by the way: maybe the thought is that women can generally be cut down to size.) This had put me off the idea of him for a start. A professional booze artist with a non-standard family? How was this *larger than life*, and how *large* is life anyway? But I did know that calling someone *larger than life* is rarely a compliment, like describing someone as *a character* – another phrase I had heard applied to Kenneth Cook. For me both these expressions conjured up a pompous, boring male – indeed, the kind of person skewered by Emily Dickinson as a 'somebody' like a bullfrog croaking his name *the livelong June – / To an admiring Bog*.

But I wasn't entirely sure that Kenneth Cook was this kind of person. For one thing, I couldn't imagine Clare, calm and punctilious as she was, putting up with a bullfrog. But more importantly, I had read *Wake in Fright* and seen the film: the truth and bleakness of that particular story, sparsely written and with flashes of sardonic humour, had stayed with me. And so my mental picture of the novel's author was not of a loud bully but of a tall, spare grasshopper of a man with a grim cast of mind and a bitten-back sense of humour. On balance, then, I thought the

dinner party was likely to be interesting and I looked forward to it.

Clare's house was in Stanmore, a part of Sydney I have always liked. It had once been a rather grand suburb of large Victorian houses with black and white marble paths sweeping up to column-flanked porches, of bay windows and parquet floors and ballrooms and shady verandahs. But after two wars and a depression, not to mention the frenzy of demolition unleashed by the Sydney City Council during the 1960s, many of those houses had disappeared or were in varying stages of disrepair. More recently, in some parts of the suburb it seemed possible to touch the bellies of the shrieking 747s on their way to the airport. So now Stanmore's attraction was not the prosperity of its residents but its proximity to the University of Sydney. The elegant bay windows displayed bright bedspreads in Indian cotton as curtains, and solid wooden front doors were plastered with PEACE and NO NUKES stickers. I always liked the untidiness, the raffishness of Stanmore, and I never went there without wishing I was a student again, a proper, serious one with books to read and essays to write. But Stanmore's days as a student suburb were already numbered. Gentrification was once more on its way, with the tide of Tuscan apricot or forest green paint beginning to lap at its streets.

Clare's house on the edge of the suburb was small,

pleasant and unfussy, like Clare herself. Her front room was, as I had expected, full of books, mostly on home decoration and English history, with a few large volumes on art. Not much fiction – perhaps she kept that somewhere else. But I did notice a hardback copy of *Poor Fellow My Country* by Xavier Herbert, winner of the Miles Franklin Award a decade previously and well known as the longest novel ever published in Australia. Like Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time* years later, *Poor Fellow* was famous for being owned but not read. If Clare had actually read it, she was ahead of me.

My date and I were the last to arrive. In the sitting room Clare introduced us to the other guests. I was conscious of being the youngest in the group; Clare somehow managed to suggest that I had left my King Gee overalls and **SISTERHOOD IS POWERFUL** placards at the front door. The other guests were from the business side of publishing rather than the literary side, and the conversation soon settled to discussions about sales figures, sizes of local print runs, amounts paid for the rights of overseas books, how much business people expected to do at the Frankfurt Book Fair that year. I started to wish someone would throw a stone into this conversational pond, but nobody seemed interested in starting ripples. Not being this kind of provocateur myself I sat sipping my white wine, feeling I had very little to contribute.

Holding a glass and saying so little meant I had an excellent opportunity to observe Kenneth Cook, who was seated on the other side of the room and who, like me, was mostly silent. The first thing I noticed was how inaccurate my preconceptions had been. Here was no lean, sardonic bushman; no loud-voiced dullard either. He had curly hair, a beard, shaggy dark eyebrows, green eyes and very even white teeth. A writer from Central Casting, 1960s bohemian division, I decided. He was wearing grey trousers and a meek maroon jumper, but should have been in corduroy trousers and a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches. I mentally composed an 'about the author' blurb: *Kenneth Cook enjoys red wine and jazz, especially Kind of Blue by Miles Davis. A prolific novelist, he builds and sails wooden yachts in his spare time . . .*

But my first impression, again, was immediately contradicted. Though he was about six feet tall and solidly built he did not look particularly powerful, having narrow shoulders and long, thin arms and legs. Not, I guessed, a man who spent time outdoors building things. He looked on edge, taking frequent sips from his glass of red wine and puffing avidly on his cigarette. Nobody else in the room was smoking, and I knew Clare disliked it, but guessed that she had relaxed her house rules for him. Altogether he gave an impression of suppressed energy, of contained

restlessness. Indeed, there were a few minutes – while the others were talking about the Frankfurt Book Fair – when I wondered whether boredom would overcome politeness and he would actually get up and leave.

We moved to the table and Clare served dinner. I noticed that Kenneth did not offer to help and Clare did not ask him to pour the wine or bring any food from the kitchen, though other guests did. I marked Ken Cook down for that, but as the meal progressed his lack of any domestic or co-hosting involvement began to intrigue me. Though I had no particular expectations about how couples of mature years should behave in public – and certainly did not want to witness the shared knowing smiles, touches of hands, glances and private jokes that can be so tedious for outsiders – I saw nothing that indicated Clare and Kenneth Cook meant much more to each other than dinner guest and hostess. For two people who presumably intended to marry, their apparent distance from each other was mystifying.

Over the chicken casserole and green salad, the bookseller asked Ken politely what he was writing. Thinking this might be the cue for a bit of *larger than life* behaviour, I braced myself for the sort of self-important explanation of My Work I had seen in other writers of his vintage. But no. He said diffidently that

he was working on a couple of projects, nothing very big. It was clear that he was not about to say any more, and the conversation drifted back to sales figures and print numbers, and then to Reader's Digest Books.

At the time Reader's Digest were putting large amounts of money into original, lavishly illustrated volumes about Australian history, flora and fauna, and actively looking for Australian novels for their Condensed Books series. Like other Australian editors at the time I was somewhat snobbish about Reader's Digest Condensed Books. We thought they represented yet another example of aggressive US cultural hegemony at work, not least because Digest's editorial policy was often to rewrite, shorten and homogenise Australian books. As far as we could see, this meant getting rid of any local colour and striking down adjectives and adverbs without mercy. What about the writer's individual voice? we asked self-righteously. Had Australian novelists laboured for years to have their evocative and tender prose obliterated and replaced by the literary equivalent of Spakfilla? We were aware, of course, that many local writers we knew disagreed with our position: RD paid very well, and outrage about stylistic alterations came a long way behind taking the money and running. But in our eyes that did not excuse what these American imperialists were doing.

I learned that Kenneth Cook's novel *Tuna*, about an impoverished South Australian fisherman and his attempts to land the biggest fish of his life, had been published by Condensed Books to some acclaim. I had been drinking white wine for a while by now, and was becoming irritated by the enormous respect that publication by Reader's Digest seemed to attract from the other guests. It was, then, with perhaps a small touch of aggression that I asked Kenneth, 'So what did the Digest call your novel when they'd finished with it? *Sardine*?'

There was a small silence. My dinner partner shot me a sideways glance. Nobody laughed – except Kenneth. 'Nope,' he told me. 'They did it just as it was.'

'That's very rare,' added my partner quickly; I could see that he wanted to smooth things over.

'Right,' I said. 'Must be a good story.'

'Oh, it is,' Kenneth assured me, his eyes twinkling. 'I'm sure you'll enjoy it. I'll get you a copy.' The conversation moved on, but he kept glancing at me speculatively.

One evening a couple of weeks later I was at home in my apartment when my phone rang. 'This is Kenneth Cook,' said a deep, cultivated voice. 'I'm in the pub just around the corner from your place. Come and have a drink with me.'

No *Hello, how are you or are you free ...* And how the

hell did he get my number, anyway? Let alone know where I lived?

When I asked him, he chuckled. 'I have my methods,' he said. 'Well, what about it?'

'Sorry,' I said. 'I'm on a deadline.' I wasn't, but I had been caught by surprise, and I wanted to think about this.

My reply did not faze him in the least, and he said he would call again. A few days later he did, and I said no, this time with some indignation: who did this bloke think he was, asking me out when he was practically married to someone else – and to a colleague at whose house I had met him?

He rang yet again, and again, and I kept saying no. 'Well, when can you come out with me then?' he asked tersely. 'Tomorrow? Tuesday, Thursday week? Next Pancake Day ... oh no, you'll probably have to wash your hair that evening ...' He didn't seem seriously annoyed at any time, and neither was I. I could certainly have told him to get lost and made that stick, but for some reason I didn't want to. There was no animosity in our conversations, which on the whole felt like a kind of friendly game, perhaps a circling around each other. This was probably why I felt a stab of regret when he stopped ringing me, though I knew how completely illogical this was.

A couple of months later I heard that he and Clare

were no longer engaged; nobody, including me, thought that this was the most surprising news they had ever heard. Clare had called a halt to the arrangement because she said she *couldn't stand living on the edge*. I wondered about her choice of words, but life grew busy and I dismissed it from my mind.

And then towards the end of the year I opened a copy of *The National Times* to see a photograph of Kenneth Cook with a large and alarming bandage round his head. It came with a longish article, which he had written, describing his operation to replace an artery in his head to prevent a stroke. I was really shocked to discover he had been so ill. But the tone of the piece was airy, almost light-hearted: there were no reflections about mortality, but a certain triumphalism, a celebration of having survived, cheated death. The article gave few family details, just mentioning that he was separated from his wife and had four adult children (the inability to wrestle with his 'strapping sons' was a cause of regret, it seemed).

For a moment I wished I had kept in touch, could make an effort to contact him and say how sorry I was that this had happened. However, I told myself I really didn't want to encourage him to call me again. So I left it, and gradually forgot about him.





Looking back, I can see how settled my life was then, and I told myself I had arranged things much the way I wanted them. Following a pattern established for more than ten years I lived in a small apartment, worked alone and supported myself. Kipling's cat who walked by herself – that was me, or at least I liked to think so.

My literary career – if that's what it was – seems now to be a matter of impulse, of opportunity, with very little planning. Having started off as a journalist on a TV magazine, I had spent a few years as a children's radio producer with the ABC in Sydney before tossing it in to work overseas. This was the time when living in London was a glamorous thing to do, at least to people who had never tried it. Existing on money from temporary secretarial jobs – the great dream of breaking into the BBC remained exactly that – I moved

through a succession of cabbage-smelling bedsits, saving as much as I could to go to the theatre and the opera and museums and to buy books. I was also trying to write, and amassing the Wallace Collection of rejection letters from newspapers and magazines and book publishers. It was all hard work, but certainly not depressing: my naïve optimism, knowing I had prospects and possibilities, however nebulous, kept me afloat. Trudging home from the Tube through the freezing darkness of a winter afternoon and living on noodles in a damp room are fine if you can transform what you see around you into Material.

I certainly met enough characters to put into the novel I was going to write someday. One of my favourites was the independent publisher Peter Owen. His obituary in *The Guardian* a few years ago paid due tribute to his achievements in bringing European writers to the attention of English readers, but that is not what I remember about him. He was a short and erratic man, even shambolic, with a harsh voice and mad Einstein grey hair, a wearer of expensive suits with trousers trailing on the floor and important buttons missing. But his office in Holland Park laid claim to some grandeur. Indeed, it had been Peter Owen's sales manager whom I beheld in all his Ascot-bound glory.

I learned that Owen's authors included Anaïs Nin,

Hermann Hesse and – when she and Owen were on speaking terms, which wasn't often when I was there – Doris Lessing. These were just names to me; I never met any of them, nor had I read their work (I caught up some years later). I spent most of my time in the tiny back room of that Georgian mansion filing and typing letters, arguing with Peter about getting the ancient and decrepit photocopier repaired one more time ('Can't you just type out the contract again?') and trying to throw away used office stationery, not with much success. I would come into work in the morning to find him glowering over the wastepaper basket. 'Look at this!' he would caw at me, holding aloft a sheet of black carbon paper. 'Why did you throw this away?' When I pointed out that it was peppered with tiny holes and therefore useless as a copying device, he would snort, 'There's at least another week left in this!' I took to smuggling the used carbon paper out of the office and getting rid of it in council street bins.

However, Peter Owen proved to be useful for more than just Material. When I returned to Australia I was able to parlay my experience with him into a job as an editorial assistant at Reeds, a New Zealand-based publisher of natural history and educational books. I couldn't believe my luck: I was being paid roughly twice what I had been earning in London, and I had embarked on a career in publishing. And so I traded an

office in a London terrace with antique furniture and Anatolian rugs for one in a warehouse the size of an aircraft hangar on the northern bush fringes of Sydney. Crouched behind bookcase partitions, the staff froze in winter and sweltered throughout the fierce bushfire-smoky summer. Between November and March the only cool spot in the place was the air-conditioned room in which dwelt the God of the Sales Department, the enormous state-of-the-art computer.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, local publishing was expanding. Though it was dominated by British and American companies, at least they were publishing books by Australian writers for Australian readers. There were more books, more writers, more stories, and it was exciting to be part of all that, however small my role was. After a while I left Reeds for another publisher – Cassell Australia, like so many other medium-sized publishers later swallowed up by a conglomerate – and then became a freelance editor, working on a project-by-project basis for several publishing houses.

I enjoyed being able to concentrate on the work at hand without factoring in office politics, personalities and meetings. Besides, the range of manuscripts I worked on was vast, ranging from novels to illustrated children's books and tomes about natural history. I even worked on something called *Modern Electrical Wiring*,

a job that mostly involved making sure diagrams were in the right place, though I never really knew what they were for. Generally, the work suited me very well. On good days – and there were many – helping authors to write better books felt like an honourable craft, an honest and useful thing to do. In those days, before it was possible for a book to go all the way from author to printer as a one-dimensional array of bytes somewhere in the ether, manuscripts were living things. Those piles of paper with pencil markings like bird tracks, crossings-out, paragraphs chopped up and sticky-taped to pages and sentences selectively obliterated in a blizzard of Tipp-Ex could seem as huge, creative and messy as the process of thought itself.

In 1984 I moved into an apartment in North Sydney that I loved. I had discovered it by sheer chance: I had been walking down a street of bland suburban bungalows when I came upon an apartment house – it looked too small to be a block of flats – called Bellarion Court. It had white stucco walls and a front door of toffee-coloured wood guarded by two green-painted pillars twisted like pieces of barley sugar. A vaguely heraldic stained-glass window above the entrance cast shadows of ruby and gold. Bellarion Court combined *Ivanhoe*, *Sunset Boulevard* and *Hansel and Gretel*, and I knew immediately that I had to live there.

The local newsagent told me that the house had

been built during the Depression by a father and his two sons from the central west of New South Wales; they had intended it as a boarding house and after the war converted it into apartments for rent. The last remaining member of the trio, a tall, silver-haired man in his seventies who could have been the butler in *Sunset Boulevard* except for his slow Aussie drawl, still lived in the building. He personally vetted all tenants and had no truck with leases, children or pets. He told me that no apartments were available at the moment, but he would let me know when something came up.

When I asked why he had named the place Bellarion Court, he told me he didn't know, that the family had just liked the name. But I discovered that Bellarion the Fortunate was the swordsman hero of a novel by Rafael Sabatini, author of *Captain Blood* and other swashbuckling historical novels widely read during the 1920s and 1930s; he and his father might have adopted it. I was pleased that the building had literary associations and liked the thought that this building, like its heroic namesake, was standing ready to fend off bad men, in this case evil property developers.

It took three months before I was able to move into Bellarion Court. Number 7 was on the bottom level of the building, down two steep flights of stairs and along a narrow cream-painted passage. Light off the harbour made watery lines on the ceiling. It was like walking

down the corridor of a passenger liner in the 1930s.

The flat, which was part furnished, consisted of a living room, kitchen, small alcove bedroom and a tiny bathroom. To the coldly appraising eye it was on the shabby side: the wallpaper in the living room was lumpy, the grey carpet was frayed, the wooden sash windows screeched in protest whenever they were opened. The kitchen was long and narrow, with a round table and chairs at one end and a sink at the other. The gas stove, an Early Kooka with a kookaburra emblazoned on the door, reminded me of the kitchen in my grandmother's house when I was a child. I appreciated its sentimental value but it wasn't great for cooking: roasting a leg of lamb could easily take half a day. I sometimes thought that if Sylvia Plath had had that oven, she would probably still be alive. But I loved Number 7 from the moment I walked in. Light danced through all the rooms: I could gaze down through a scrim of trees and morning glory on the sparkling waters of Lavender Bay. From the kitchen table, my books and papers spread out as I edited some manuscript or other, I would watch commuters picking their way to the ferry across the disused railway tracks that curved around one side of the bay. It was like looking into a Tom Roberts painting.

More than anything else, what I enjoyed about Number 7 was its quiet and privacy: as soon as I shut the door behind me I was in my little cave, all by

myself. I enjoyed the solitude, I felt literary and self-sufficient – a freewheeling writerly spirit from an earlier epoch, perhaps Stevie Smith or Winifred Holtby, frowning below her 1930s fringe while a novel formed itself purposefully under her hand. By this time I had published one book of non-fiction, a history of Australian radio based on interviews with many of those who had worked in the medium, from sound effects operators to the stars of yesteryear. I had thoroughly enjoyed writing and researching it, and the book had sold quite well – but I regarded it as something of a prentice piece. Now I was working on another, this time about memories of Australian childhood. But fiction was what real writers wrote, I believed, and that meant a novel. Nothing much had changed from London, really – I still had ideas floating around in my head, though none of them had magically coalesced into an actual work. But that might happen soon, I thought, and I would be ready for it. Just as soon as I got rid of having to edit manuscripts for a living. At the same time I knew even then, I think, that the solitary life of the full-time writer was not for me: I found meeting people and working with them and with their words – which editing gave me – more satisfying than the kind of isolated intensity needed to write an actual novel.

I can see now that I was really not very different from all the other young Australian women who had

been good at English at school, had gone to university, travelled a bit, collected a store of interesting anecdotes for the amusement of friends. True, I hadn't completed the other part of the usual story: I was in my late thirties without having married or had children. But as far as I was concerned that was fine, certainly not a cause for regret.

So here I was, a literary-minded and independent household of one. I had even developed a small reputation as the go-to person for an apt quotation or the title of a book. I liked lending my books to friends and talking about them; I usually remembered people's birthdays and enjoyed combing bookshops for books they might like – whether they were readers or not. So I lived in words, was surrounded by words; words were my business. My job was to manipulate them, sometimes, to put them in the best possible order so that the author's intention was clear. Clarity was the aim, and I liked to think that finding it was my skill, too. There were times, though, when this all felt rather secondhand. Sometimes, not often, I wondered whether I was like the woman in an early Margaret Drabble novel (*The Millstone*, I think) whose education had taught her to think mainly in quotations. When feeling melancholy, as I sometimes was, I wondered how much I really knew about the world.

It's very easy to get a name for independence of

mind when you don't really engage with the messiness of life. And this I think is exactly what I had done: I had shielded myself behind a wall of books and a regulated pattern of work, both immensely enjoyable, true, but removed from dispute and challenge except on a level I had chosen. I knew that there were potential dangers in living too much alone: the arthritis of habit or emotion could easily set in. However, I was never down for long. There was always a new manuscript that needed work, another idea about what I might write, and I was generally content with that.

One afternoon in February 1986 I was sorting through photographs for a book about horses when the phone rang. I clambered across piles of encyclopedias and notes and boxes of transparencies heaped on the floor and picked up, to find myself speaking to Margaret Gee, a small independent publisher I did not know and had never worked for. She explained that she needed an editor for a book of humorous bush stories she was publishing, and asked whether this was the sort of thing I liked working on.

My first impulse was to say no. Bush yarns, especially the broadly Australian, Bill Wannan stone-the-crows kind, I have always found pointless and tedious. I hadn't known that they were still being published. While I was forming a refusal in my mind, Margaret added, "The book is called *The Killer Koala*, and the stories are

written by Kenneth Cook ... have you heard of him?’

‘Oh yes,’ I said.

‘Well, would you like to edit them? I don’t think they need much work ...’

That’s what they all say, I thought. But even so ...

‘Sure,’ I said.

Not long afterwards the phone rang again. On the other end were the rich modulated tones I recognised and remembered instantly. Kenneth Cook clearly had no recollection of our previous encounter, and his voice was on its best behaviour. ‘Ms Kent,’ he said, being very careful about the pronunciation of ‘Ms’, ‘what I am about to say is very important to me. I am not used to being edited. My characters do not exclaim, they do not snort, wince in speech, respond, or chuckle or gibber. I don’t want you to change “he said” or “she said” to any of these things. Is that clear?’

Oh, for ...

‘Perfectly clear, thank you, Mr Cook,’ I said, making no effort to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. ‘And would you like me to put hyphens between the syllables of the long words, too?’

At the other end of the line there was a long – I hoped stunned – pause.

‘I think we should have lunch,’ he said.

