

THEA
ASTLEY

*A Descant
for Gossips*

UQP

MODERN CLASSICS

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One

Almost as long as Vinny Lalor could remember she had been on the fringe of things. Family and school both found her their least important member. They circled giddily without needing her. She was afraid, as she clung to the spinning edges of her world, that one day she would be flung unwanted and violently into space. Even the new season did not burst over her in a green flurry. Buds flocked along the adolescent trees, but she came, after her fourteenth winter, unmoved by the spring into the first week of the last term.

There was over everything, town and people, a dusty aridity, a breathlessness of rising temperatures and dry winds. Stolidly across the railway tracks the two pubs faced each other, roaring every evening until eleven with butterfactory hands come to cool off and to play snooker and pool in the rooms behind the bars. Spring came over the town with the poker and the beer and the starting-price betting all going on as usual, and as usual the bleary eye of the law turned in upon itself or lacklustrely courting the youngest of the maids in the farside pub. The clear sunlight in the daytime and at night the inspidity of starlight bathed both houses and shops with an equal uninterest, a flatness that pointed to no emotion behind the facades but made everything appear strangely two-dimensional.

Cruciform, the two main streets had as their pivotal point the school, both primary and secondary sections, and martyred

along the town's four limbs were a score of shops and business premises and three times as many houses. There were other roads leading out to the mountain district around Cootharabah and there was the road that curled in across the Mary Valley, but over all the deathly stillness and quiet of that first yawn of near summer shimmered amongst the scrub box and the tallow trees. Spring paraphrased itself with shoots from sap rising in the hoop-pine forests to the west and the piccabeen palms and sand cypresses to the east; but here, centred in hills, valleyed below Bundarra, hammer-hitting the hard blue sky, there were only the new pastures, the sprawling paddocks of Rhodes and paspalum, green-squared between township and forest. What there was of spring in the lack-lyricism of the summer opening was known in seascaped detail to the black swans and cranes fifteen miles away over the wateracres of Cooroibah, but not to Gungee, and not to Vinny Lalor now moving through the motionless morning to her personal crucifixion at the town's heart.

An eight-thirty sun cut the shadows back into the hot grass. A butcher bird drew a swift and lovely arc from the crest of a red cedar into the roadside scrub. And there was nothing ahead of the girl dawdling towards the town but dust, sunlight, crimped trees, the downhill bush road and the uphill town one. She held her schoolbag in front of her, banging it one-two, one-two, with her knees as she walked, watching the wide dark blue strip at the bottom of her letdown tunic flap forward with each jerk. She hated it. And she hated the way her panama sagged and bubbled where the rain had caught it last winter. A universal spleen engaged her whole being with bitterness translated into kicks at stones, nudgings at schoolbag, and a scowl into the vibrant sun. Only one thing prevented her turning about and setting off home again with a plea of illness, and that was the fact that in her case was her special holiday essay, in planning and completing which she had felt an inexplicable delight. For days

she had longed to hand it in to Mr. Moller, calculating grandly on his recognition of her genius, and subsequently her prestige (if not popularity) amongst her schoolfellows. For always, from the day when she had first attended school right up to her senior classes, she had been outside the group, position undesired but inevitable.

It seems that in the mob there is frequently the one shunned or suspect or unlovely in some very simple and irremediable way. And in this case it was Vinny. She was not a pretty child or even a particularly clever one. She was thin, pale, and red-headed. Her eyes were a peculiarly light grey and like her mouth they were nearly always unsmiling. But then she had little reason to smile. Glancing back beyond the safe family barricade of compulsory kindness, and discounting it, for she realized now its worth and its worthlessness, she saw in the uneventful years herself, when the skipping season was at its height, left endlessly turning the rope, while awaiting, wordless and patient, the briefest of turns. During the hopscotch and marbles seasons she was never able to find a sparring partner unless one of the spottier, plumper girls were temporarily out of favour. Only then did she find a nebulous kind of companionship, so tenuous she was always fearful of its ending, and barely enjoyed what she snatched. But too soon even this simulacrum vanished before the summer rounders with their unpleasant occasion for team selection which drove her unpopularity, her unlovableness home, as at every team choosing she was left wretchedly until last and then added grudgingly – a concession to numerical needs – as if her presence would bring bad luck to her side. ‘I’ll have Vinny,’ was said, tight smile embarrassed. (‘See, you others, I’m saddled with Vinny, but don’t you dare think it’s because I want her, see.’)

Vinny kicked her case viciously, remembering past humiliations still close enough to hurt. She selected a jagged rock from the road edge and hurled it on to the footbridge from where

it splashed into the narrow creek that half-circled the town. 'Warburton,' she said under her breath, and then, frightened of saying it because she had seen her mother beat the daylight out of Royce for using the word and because she had once suffered similarly, she quietly spelt 'B-I-T-C-H'. After that she felt much better and stayed hanging over the weathered hand-rail until the last circles on the water had melted into the creek margins.

She took the long way round deliberately, left under the railway bridge, then alongside the tracks past the Exchange Hotel, paint-peeling and tawdry. Of a part with it perhaps in its shabbiness, she sighed and hitched her bag into the other hand. Corner neat with chemist and drapery store flamboyant in summer silk led her on past newsagent and milkbar, sick under morning slops-suds-down-swept to gutter, wet patch ending raggedly before the grocer's territory of kerb took her dustily past the next paper-cluttered ramp. A dented utility angled in carelessly across the grass in the side street and backed towards the entrance of the bakery where Sid Ewers, butcher and beefy in stripes of blue and white, lounged in companionship big-muscled across the door, and sucked the last tobacco rags from his cigarette.

'Le boucher est gentil. Il nous donne de la viande,' Vinny said sourly under her breath, practising her second-best subject and her hatred together. She patted the side of her bag more to encourage herself as she turned in the school gate, and as every day, so today, first in a new term, she closed her personality into its narrow little room where year after friendless year it learnt to perfect the art of self-containment.

Between the technical block and the school proper was the scuffed grass rectangle where the senior pupils lunched and fooled from twelve-thirty till one-thirty or did last-minute 'crams' on the subject for the next period. Cicada-loud with voices, the stridulations of burly boys crashing their cases, it presented to Vinny and to the teetering fringes of giggling girls

an equal enticement. But she walked away from the square with an almost cynical world-weariness, up the steps and along the open verandas splashed sun-hot between the spare forms to the girls' cloak room. Peg with name on sticky paper curling back from an area of dried gum marked the place for her hat, but the case had to be humped to the classroom and placed under desk or chair if there were room, or foot-obstructing in the passageway. Vinny dumped it for the moment on the bench that lined the wall below the hat pegs and, going to the bubbler in the corner, splashed water over her hot face and hands. While she was drying herself on a skimpy handkerchief, the bell sounded from the rear veranda, rung jocularly by Mr. Findlay as was his custom on the first day back, expressing cheerful irony for the discipline of the next fifteen weeks. *Tirring-tring-tring, tirring-tring-tring*, repeated with intervals, made into a tiny programme work with the dutiful smilings of the staff as applause, inciting encores of tirrings. Vinny stuffed her handkerchief down the front of her tunic, grabbed her bag, and raced back along the veranda and down the steps to the assembly ground guarded by flag, full mast, pennoned over coleus pots worked by the primary school and senior garden beds with not a thing to show except a few dusty geraniums.

Although she hurried, the lines were nearly assembled and straightening out when, breathless, she panted on to the tail end. Pearl Warburton whispered to her neighbour and moved away from Vinny as she stood beside her. Vinny pretended unawareness. She had pretended it for years; and with a sense of inner comfort she searched among the faces of the staff to discover the one face that was as kindly to her as it was to everybody, that smiled and was angry dispassionately: Mrs. Stribel, her head bent to conceal her laughter, stood behind Mr. Findlay and to his right, sharing a first-day joke with Mr. Moller.

The headmaster slipped into his diurnal role with the ease of one putting on a dressing-gown. (It fitted him as comfortably,

too.) The greetings, the hopes for a pleasant holiday now over, the returning refreshed, the aspirations for a term well spent as the result of stimulating change – all the clichés dear to the educational process were there. Findlay knew, and the staff knew, that though the aphorisms achieved little, they were expected; they capped the moment – these references to God, the empire, duty, the home, children’s obligations to parents. What amazed the staff was the enthusiasm that Findlay could bring to the banality, the shining from an inner source that radiated his face as he smiled down on his three hundred charges. Faces fresh or freckled or acne stippled all looked up at him in his transfiguration on the western veranda.

‘Like the Sermon on the Mount,’ Mr. Millington, the wood-work master, whispered.

Peroration ended, the bell was rung again, this time by the senior perfect, and to the vulgar crashing of a march from Miss Jarman, robust at piano and insolent in her treatment of the major keys, the whole school turned right or left according to position and marched raggedly to their rooms. Moller hitched his grey sports trousers up on his thick belly and strolled out to meet the senior class for English.

In their end room they faced him with grinning anticipation, awaiting the customary sapid remark that usually ushered in a lesson. It did not come. Confronted by the twenty polite faces, the wall maps, the ‘suitable’ watercolour prints selected by the school committee, he felt an overpowering boredom. Through the southern windows the scrubby stringybarks crowded down on the Imbil road. Not a house was in view. He gave the order and the class seated itself nosily, crashing back school-case lids in order to burrow through to their poetry texts.

‘Silence,’ Moller said, as he thumbed through his own book.

The September heat was warming the corrugated-iron roof above them in waves, corrugated also, it seemed. He wiped his forehead, his hands, and refolded his handkerchief with

the streaked side inward. The class gaped expectantly. What was up? Where was the old Herc ready to have a bit of a joke? Rhonda Welch whispered to Pearl Warburton two desks away and was promptly reprimanded. Vinny watched him with an anticipatory expression only because of her essay. Moller saw the eager look on her face and wondered idly what caused it. He stifled a yawn.

‘Open your books at the section on Brennan – ’O desolate eyes’. And keep those holiday tasks *closed!* Howard will collect them at the end of the period.’ He nodded shortly at a slim, handsome boy at the end of the front row. Howard turned and winked hugely at the class behind him, but Moller ignored the gesture and tapped impatiently on the table with his pen. Directly in front of him a gangling lad with untidy black hair was painstakingly turning the pages of his text one by one. Moller watched with exaggerated interest and class became very still as they looked on.

‘Peters,’ he said. ‘Peters, must you?’

Peters stared back, lovably dense.

‘Must I what, sir?’

‘Expend such tender care on each page. Turn them, Peters, at least five at a time. The poem is on page sixty-three.’

The class laughed, relaxed, and settled back more comfortably. Moller nerved himself for the plunge into lyric poetry with a group of adolescents whose tastes were already fairly well formed by film and comic. He pushed his full lower lip out and then bunched it in over the upper; his hands were trembling slightly when they rested on the edge of the table, and he felt a sharp craving for a cigarette. Another yawn was rising in his throat. He waited until all heads were lowered to the books open before them, but he was not deceived by the external appearance of attention, for he knew quite well that although the eyes might be following the words printed on the paper, not one fraction of inner attention or interest would be

being given by any of the pupils in the room except one or two. Distracted by a movement from Pearl Warburton again, he saw that she was scribbling a note on a tiny piece of paper. He smiled. He could not be bothered interfering – she was one of the pupils he liked the least. He could still remember a verbal skirmish they had had a year before when the arrogance of her attitude had prompted him to ask her her age. ‘Old enough, sir,’ she had said.

He commenced reading.

His voice had a peculiar resonance not really suited to poetry reading, but what it lacked by conventional standards was atoned for in the emotion he experienced in his reading and which in some miraculous way he managed to transmit, to the few children who really enjoyed his lessons and benefited by them. Intelligent phrasing and emphasis and a personal underlining of the poet’s intentions all conjoined to achieve for the listener a wonderful congruity of reason and feeling. But in poems like this – little personal pain-spots – Moller knew that he transferred the writer’s reactions to his own being and suffered in the translation. Even as he read to the deaf room, incredibly the longing swept into the quiet rivers of his blood for the old places and the time-lost evenings of twenty years before, sharp with friends’ voices. What creatures budded out of this sudden pain laid bare, reason receding until he was only pain and once more forced to explore this unimportant love or that, familiar fray on still-remembered carpets, harsh tongues tasting his foibles. His present was pain with the past. It was all one thing – the wasting of café conversations in the student days and the weekly visits of squeezed-out talk with Lilian now. There was the group waving violently on the church steps – she had insisted on a formal wedding – and here were the empty rooms at night top-heavy with silence.

He paused after reading the last line and looked up at the class.

Warburton must have successfully delivered her note because he could see Betty Klee scribbling what he assumed was a reply. Howard had drawn an overdeveloped female profile in the margin of his book. Peters, right under his nose, had more juvenile tastes and had inked in every 'o' in the poem. He sighed, quite audibly, and the class took this as the signal to drop the pretence of concentration. They rustled with relief.

From farther along the school building the neums of multiplication tables plain-chanted into the morning became part of the heat, the boredom in the room. It is impossible, Moller thought petulantly, utterly impossible to conform happily to the syllabus. And he proceeded moodily to discussion and analysis of the poem, details of technique. Thirty minutes dragged a wounded length round the clock-face. Moller closed his book and asked the class if the poem suggested anything to them about the poet. The twenty faces stared politely but in a hurt fashion at him for half a minute, and then a few tentative hands were raised. Vinny Lalor caught his eye. She had been hoping she would. She was one of the few who listened to and enjoyed her poetry classes. Whenever Mr. Moller read she wanted to cry.

'Well?' he asked, interested in her opinion because of the difficulty of the poem and because he had known her school background for three years.

Vinny stood up with her hands resting on the desk to support her, as her chair was pushed in too far in order to make room for the desk behind. Leaning awkwardly, appearing to topple with her zeal, she shook a piece of hair out of her eyes.

'He was a very unhappy man,' she stated definitely. 'But he enjoyed being unhappy.'

The class laughed. Paradox appeared plain silly. That was all. Moller could not help smiling himself, but because of her cynicism. Kindred spirits, he thought. It takes one sufferer to understand another.

‘Perhaps not all the time,’ he said. ‘Though it was very clever of you to sense that some people do enjoy their agonies. I think that only people capable of assessing their suffering are capable of writing about it with sensitivity. They stand back from themselves, as it were, and watch their own joy or unhappiness with an interested observer’s eye. In a way it is good to be clinical about your personality, for self-analysis should be honest if it is to have any meaning when it is written down.’

He did not know whether the girl understood all he said. He felt sure she would understand part of it. Vinny watched him with bright eyes, happy at being the sole receiver of his opinion.

Moller eased his chair back from the table and walked over to the window. Sid Ewer’s truck with stinking exhaust crashed across the rectangle and vanished into the receding perspective of the trees. As he watched the red dust settle he told them something of Brennan’s life and his unhappy career. There was not much he could tell them, he reflected, for too many of them knew adultery and drunkenness in such a day-to-day fashion in their own homes, its relevance in the life of one of the country’s finest poets would be missed.

‘Before we finish,’ he said, glancing thankfully at his watch, ‘are there any questions?’

He looked round the room without much hope that his invitation would be accepted. Betty Klee was nodding vigorously and giggling at Pearl Warburton. Pearl rose, smiling but with poise, and said, ‘Please, sir, there’s one thing I didn’t understand. What does “niggard bosom” mean?’

A convulsion of mirth shook the room, but Moller preserved his calm. He looked at her sadly and smiled back.

‘Howard,’ he said, ‘the essays. There’s half a minute to go. Is there anyone who has not completed it?’

Three arms waved shyly. He glanced at the owners and noted their names in a pocket diary. ‘No excuses accepted,’ he said. ‘Remain after school.’

The class shuffled as the period bell rang. Some of them stood in an attitude of respect when he left the room, but most of them sat giggling with their neighbours. They watched him go, solid under his cheap tweed jacket, fingers already fumbling for the makings of a quick puff between classes, groping in the pocket where the tobacco crumbs fell from the loose pouch.

Vinny looked after him with something near to love as she handed in her essay to Howard, recalling what he had said about pain and sensitive people and writing about it. How did it go? 'Only people able to something their suffering could write about it sensitively.' One day she'd show them, Warburton and fat old Klee and the rest. Fame and fame and fame ...

'Open it up, Lalor,' Howard snapped. At sixteen he already hated plain girls.

'I don't know how the population increases,' Helen Striebel said gloomily as she watched the barbaric young killing time mercilessly, slaughtering the lunch-hour. 'That is, I understand the fundamental principle, but I cannot understand its repetition.' She turned away from the window, teacup in hand, to her lunch spread out between the exercise stacks on her desk.

The men roared with laughter.

'What's this? What's this?' Moller said, coming in rubbing his hands. 'Sex rearing its lovely head?'

He went to the battered teapot near the wash-basin and filled a cup.

'Weak brew. Who's guilty? Helen, what was that remark I surprised you in?'

She laughed with the others. 'These *children*. I explain a perfectly simple trigonometrical problem, I set a similar one, and not a soul gets it right. Peters said he thought it was a quadratic equation. Still, I was pleased he even knew the term. His idiocy is rather endearing.'

‘No shop first day back,’ Sweeney roared heartily. His coarse good-looking face stuck out arrogantly above a footballer’s frame. He tapped another memo for Findlay, using his typewriter in somewhat the way emotional pianists use their instruments, crouching low and leaning back and making rather unnecessary arm movements. ‘How’s your wife, captain?’ he asked Moller, when he had come to the end of the memo. Moller, watching him, felt like bursting into loud applause. (‘Brilliant, my dear fellow! Positively brilliant!’) Hesitation patterned his plum face and he lit a cigarette before he answered. He could sense the others waiting for his reply also.

‘Much the same. Worse if anything, I suppose. Her right hip is affected now.’

‘Sorry, old boy.’ Sweeney gulped back lukewarm tea and felt safe; safe in his job, safe in his health, and safe in the campaign he was conducting towards achieving a profitable marriage. He eyed Rose Jarman sideways where she sat, not quite plain, and not quite good-looking in her expensive one of many linen suits. Her father owned a large dairy farm in the Mary Valley, a seaside cottage at Inskip Point, and a big, fast black car. Sweeney coveted all these things, and his covetousness was understandable, for Rose was an only child whom her father loved in a completely foolish way, lavishing on her practically anything she wanted. At times Sweeney felt too young for marriage at twenty-four, but, realizing an opportunity such as this might not come his way again, he was prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice of the male. Although he was not interested in easy seduction, it was on no moral ground. Rose was not sufficiently attractive for him to labour through the preliminary details of an *affaire*, and he was, if nothing else, a man who demanded value in kind for his money.

Mrs. Striebel marked another book, unnecessarily conscientious on this first day back. Elderly Miss Rowan, disappointed in love, in life in the broader sense, and in occupation, grizzled into the room from the infants’ department.

‘Sixty-three! Would you believe it! Sixty-three in that tiny room. I’m resigning at the end of the year, I tell you.’

‘Go on with you!’ Moller said. ‘You’ve been saying that for years, Rowie. I bet you’ll be teaching their grandsons. Have a cup of this appalling tea. I don’t think the dregs were emptied last term!’

Miss Rowan shifted her glasses higher and flopped into a chair.

‘Dear, it’s awful,’ she said. ‘Why do we do it? Why on earth do we do it?’

‘Because we love little children. We see their essential innocence, their kindness to each other, their respect for old age. It’s all so rewarding,’ Moller sipped tea and sucked at his cigarette alternately. Sweeney shoved a paper of sandwiches across the table and Moller took one absent-mindedly. Chalk dust still in corners, rolls stacked on corner press, programme registers along tables, tea-cup rings – all the impedimenta of teaching. The eight members of the staff squatted uncomfortably with them, acting no longer with each other, now that familiarity’s offspring banished politeness and allowed the idiosyncrasies-shortness of temper, oddly enough, and the uncalculating kindnesses – full play. This laying bare of the personality made in a general way for more harmonious living together. There was no necessity for pretence. Although the end of each school year found nerves frayed from irritations that were part of the job, the staff returned each February, prepared to live out again a union more intimate in some respects than marriage.

For the past three years there had been no transfer of staff, and daily interchange of ideas and school gossip had given these eight people a relationship intangibly binding one upon the other. That this was a dangerous thing did not make itself immediately apparent; yet month after month of limited companionship, limited conversational gambits, threw the staff in upon themselves in a desperate circle of self-concentration.

The school and its problems became over-important; the behaviour of one member of staff to another, the fortune or otherwise of any of them, was balloon-swollen and treated as if it were the concern of all. Partisanship reared up in sudden ugly growth about trivia, and though it withered away in the calmer moods of the men and women, memory had still many limbs to spread tendrils of discomfort and dislike.

I will remember this room, Moller thought, though the years deny all cognizance of time and place and mood. I will remember it by the positioning of chairs, the ink stain on the corridor wall, the windows looking out on the school field and the courts and the mountain sky threatening behind the township. Glancing round, he reflected with amusement that the seating habits of the staff had remained unchanged since he had been there – and that was three years. Helen, calm, straight-backed near the end window; Sweeney sprawled huge and boorish over typewriter at the centre table, and Rose Jarman beside him with Miss Rowan, slicing the townspeople into tiny pieces and serving them up with their sandwiches and cake; Millington, blond and good humoured, near the door beside Corcoran, late-comer to lunch, over-bellied, tonsured at forty, bullying the seventh grade into examination passes at the end of each year. Only one person was missing – Mrs. Ballard, efficient as an egg-whisk in the home science section, all gleaming like a hard baked stove, ate, often as not, in her separate teaching wing the left-over fricassee and pastry prepared at her classes. Eight of them, nine with Findlay, all marooned on this educational islet, aching from each other and from the town, ingrown like nails, throbbing with self and other self.

Below the end windows a surging and unexpected clamour of singing broke on them.

'Oooooooh – the tunnel of LOVE, the tunnel of LOVE!' It was chorused with the heartiness of bush-hikers and a salacity of emphasis remarkable considering the age of the performers.

‘Vulgar little bastards,’ Moller said. He leant out the window and glared down on four boys from the senior school. They were squatting with arms linked, and swaying to their singing.

‘First day of term is hardly one for rejoicing,’ he said. ‘Get out of there. Right out, you fellows. You know this section is forbidden. Get down near the technical block.’

Four pleased faces, upturned to his, smirked their satisfaction, happy with the result they had achieved.

‘Sorry, sir,’ Howard said, all melting politeness sauced over a crustacean shell of insolence. ‘We forgot. We didn’t mean to be happy.’

‘Go on!’ Moller roared. ‘Out!’

They sauntered off, slowly, provokingly, while Moller watched them until the corner of the building cut them from view.

‘There you are,’ he said to Miss Rowan. ‘There’s your answer. We do it for absolutely nothing. We do it so that any manners or good taste we attempt to give them may be thrown back in our teeth. We correct so that parents may criticize our harshness, and we neglect through sheer weariness and hopelessness so that parents may criticize our indifference. But all the time, *all* the time, mark you, we must be cautious of ourselves; we must live righteously within the law and the sub-sections of the Education Act. Circumspection is our ruling word.’

Sweeney clapped ironically. ‘Well said, captain. Have another ham and pickle. They’re doing you good.’

Helen Striebel rolled the last of her crumbs into a brown paper bag that she screwed up and hurled into the wastepaper basket.

‘Everything you say is right,’ she agreed. ‘And add to it the necessity for near-perfect technique in our subjects. I remember when I was teaching in Sydney, before Tom died, the headmistress of the school I was at being displeased with the writing of the English staff. So one afternoon – and though this is incredible,

it's perfectly true – she took the five of them, all graduates mind you, and some of them middle-aged, and gave them a writing lesson in cursive alphabet formation for forty minutes. She made them practise each letter as if they were children.'

'My dear, I can still help you,' Miss Rowan said bitterly. 'Crushing a sixty-fourth into the prep room will be a matter of no importance.'

Corcoran knocked his pipe out against the table edge and brushed the ash carelessly from his grey flannel trousers. His entire life was governed by routine and examination cramming; it was not a pose and it was not that he wanted particularly to get on in the department – he just preferred it that way.

'Playground duty,' he said. 'Who's for it with me?' He knew – he always checked with the roster – but a pretended joviality over tasks was his one concession to flippancy about the job.

'Mercy on this first day,' Sweeney pleaded. But he got up, nevertheless, nudging Rose on the thigh as he went past.

When they had gone silence fell heavily and accustomedly. Miss Rowan rose after a while and stamped off to her room to prepare the afternoon's blackboard of objects so carefully drawn they appeared unnatural – apples, oranges, books, dogs and cats whose outlines were executed in vigorous lines and scarlets and purples to gain the interest of her class. Rose Jarman washed the cups in a small enamel dish, dried them quickly, and then called a child to empty the slops. Moller sighed and opened the first of the essays piled on his table and began reading unenthusiastically. Most of them were two pages in length, eked out with wide margins, large writing, and generous paragraphing. This is where I cry for my dividends, he thought, where I long for some seed of original thought to display even the minutest germination. He knew that in attempting a lesson on Brennan he had been ambitious, but after all the poem was in their set text and he always subscribed to the argument that if only one

child responded to the challenge of something both beautiful and difficult, then the waste upon the others was worth it.

So now, ploughing through this weed-rank jungle of holiday tasks that all seemed to be a dull resume of unreal picnics, fishing trips, and bush rambles, or else adventure stories so garishly coloured they were childish, it was with a feeling of wonder that he paused finally before placing his red-pencilled approval at the end of Vinny Lalor's precise writing. He looked up. The room had emptied while he was working save for Helen, who shared the next period off after lunch with him, a period of relief while Findlay, godlike above the test tubes and the bunsen burners, took the combined school for chemistry.

Moller looked across at Helen through the thin planes of silence in the room. Outside the bell shrilled suddenly and the inner silence was united with the outer that spread like mist all over the grounds and found the very last whisperings and the very last scuffle melt away. He could hear the lines forming as Corcoran gave the orders, and then the tapping of Rose Jarman's expensive tittuping heels when she went along the veranda to the music room to wrest cold technical sense from the untuned keys. The boredom that he had endured all morning dissipated as he saw his teaching partner calmly turning pages of books and impressing her ideas on them in a thick blue comment. She sensed his eyes upon her and smiled without looking up.

'Just a moment, Robert. I'm on my last one, and then I'll join you in a cigarette.'

Moller watched her smooth face and drank in the quietude of her lowered eyelids and sad mouth. She had joined the staff a year after him, widowed and withdrawn for at least six months, until he, about to lose his wife in a permanent illness, found his being's purpose running parallel with hers so that it would have been a wild and incredible thing had not each found the other a solace, at least in the daytime hours. Her practicality, which he lacked, and her humour, which kind he possessed but enriched

male-fashion, drew him, the impractical and the dreamer, into a companionship that tempered their teaching relation. Affection existed between them. They were both aware of it. But they were circumspect, careful of staff and town that lay idle under the hot sun waiting to devour reputations. Sometimes, but never often, they would stroll down from the school together in the late afternoon, watching Bundarra fling its hammer shadow across the little streets and shops and houses, and when they reached the hotel where she boarded he would turn away after the briefest of leave-takings along the road beside the railway line to his empty house.

He kept it going. There was not much point in selling it until he knew exactly what to do about Lilian, whose paraplegia was now so advanced. They were separated physically by her illness and absence and spiritually by the despondency that had enveloped her to such an extent that even his weekly calvaries of pity to visit her meant nothing really to them, who were childless of the body and no longer shared offspring of the mind. He kept the house going largely as a place for his books, somewhere to play a record and cook a quiet meal; or just to lie around in the months of June and November, unhappy in the debris of unmarked examination questions.

At those times when the summer evenings drifted in from the sea in a green translucence that lay over the hills and paddocks like clear water and the after-tea hours lay ahead as empty as the sky limits, he would have liked Helen with him to share the silence or the idly dropped word. But his neighbours watched with unkindly interest the most trivial actions of a man who did not belong to any of the local clubs, refrained from attending any church, and found horses and bridge boring beyond endurance. Occasionally he played an uninterested game of badminton at the doctor's home, but that was not sufficient to excuse his lack of interest in sport. His love of books and music made him immediately suspect, and his preference

for drinking at the hotel bars with the working class, instead of the private polite parties, marked him down as rather common. He did not know, and he certainly would not have cared if he had.

In much the same fashion Helen Striebel was criticized by the women of the town, who resented the way she was able to keep to herself, disliking her because of a self-sufficiency that precluded the need to swap knitting patterns and sponge recipes and allowed her to retire blamelessly to her room at seven. This sort of behaviour was accepted as a personal affront by the active women's organizations, who regarded it angrily as voiceless criticism of their behaviour. In a way perhaps it was, though it was unintentional.

'In a place like this,' Moller used to say to her, 'you may detract and calumniate with impunity, but sneering at *mores* and traditions is unforgivable.'

By now Helen had put down her pencil and pushed the bundle of closed books to one side. She fumbled in the bag that she kept slung over the shoulder of her chair and drew out her cigarette case. Through the thinly fanning smoke they looked amusedly at each other, he finding her devotion to the tedium of correcting exercises as much a part of her personality drive as she found his amusement at its part of his. Their ability to predict each other's reactions pleased them both. Finally Moller spoke.

'It's good to see you again, Helen. The holidays were no holiday for me.'

'It's good to see you, too.' She paused. Her eyes looked away into her own shyness. 'Robert, I heard you tell Greg Sweeney that Lilian was worse. I'm so sorry. Won't she get any better? Not any better?'

'Not a scrap.' Moller remembered the tossed bed, the crumpled pile of women's magazine, the sweet smell of ether and the oranges, unwanted, piled beside the flowers. Remembered, and

felt a frightening weariness at the thought of it again next week and the next and the next with the tossed bed, the magazines, the sweet smells of ether and the oranges and the flowers.

‘Not only will she not get any better,’ he said, ‘but she is slowly, very slowly, becoming worse. And indefinitely, it seems. Only one thing is definite, Helen, and that is she has completely lost the use of both legs.’ He tapped the ash off his cigarette. It fell into the light layer of chalk dust below the table. ‘She’s too miserable to be interested in much. Each week-end I see her she plucks nervously at the covers most of the time and hardly has a thing to say.’ He stood up agitatedly and walked over to the window. But his agitation was not really with Lilian.

Helen sensed that he wished to say no more about it so she said abruptly, ‘My holidays weren’t the best, either. Margaret was down with ’flu. The city was jammed with Show visitors and I lost a tenner first day there. I’m glad we don’t have to write a holiday task about them.’

‘Talking of holiday tasks,’ Moller said, swinging round from the window, from the pain in his mind, and hurrying back to the pile of books on his table. ‘I’ve got something here that might interest you, Helen. A child with an idea at last.’

‘Who is it?’

‘Vinny Lalor. Yes, Vinny.’ Moller laughed as he saw the disbelief on the other’s face. ‘Not brilliant, but original. It gives quite an interesting sidelight on that unhappy kid’s existence.’

He sorted through the books until he found the grease-spotted cover that badged most of her exercises, and opening up the book he read, “‘A Family Day’”. He stopped ‘Get that, Helen. Even the title has escaped.’ He glanced down at the book again and flicked the page over. ‘Would you mind if I read it?’

‘No,’ Helen said. ‘Go ahead. The staff is as one when it’s a question of discovering a little intelligence.’

Moller hooked a chair out with one foot and having sprawled easily in it he continued to read in his soft voice:

“All yesterday I wondered if families were like ours. At first I thought there could be no answer to this and then quite strangely I found that there was. Very early I began to walk from our home which is at the top of Duncan Hill and passed most of the houses on this side of the town well before ten. At one place after another the same scene repeated itself, a crying child, a woman shaking a mop over the stair rail and a man lounging back in his chair and shouting an order.” I like that bit,’ Moller said. ‘This part was different because my father shouted his last order three years ago and then left. I think this is a pity for though it is bad to be shouted at, it is worse to have no one to shout at you. I feel if he were here with us, shouting or not, we would be more like other families.

“In the evening I went past the same houses and from each the lights shone boldly in the darkness. In one house there was a piano with someone making a mistake over and over and in another I could see people laughing over their tea. It was like looking into another world. But from nearly every home in the street blared the radio tuned to a talent show. The announcer was so kindly he was false and the performers were so sincere they were sad. And when I crept home, there was mum listening quietly to some classical music because she has always wanted us to be more refined. So when she became busy with the ironing, I went softly to the radio and tuned in to the talent show too. Listening to the bad singing and the hill-billy guitars I felt happier than I’d ever felt before. Our house was the same now as all the other houses in the street, and I was part of the sameness.”’

Moller looked up at Helen’s disturbed face.

‘Not exactly the usual style of holiday task, is it? Poor little beggar!’

They both thought of the child and her isolation. Helen saw the playing-fields curving back to the peppertrees and the tennis courts, and the senior pupils in groups forming permutations of

gossips over their lunch hour activities; and apart from them, outside all the groups every day, the hair-bright, plain-faced child trying desperately to look as if she were walking purposefully, as if there were a goal somewhere – and not succeeding. Sometimes when Helen was on playground supervision she would come up to her and ask a trivial question about the afternoon's mathematics class. Her requests were such thin ruses to give her approach some point that Helen, filled with pity for the child's friendlessness, would walk across the grounds with her, talking about school work and the girl's interests as long as the lunch duty lasted. This was bad in a way, for it not only set Vinny Lalor apart but it made her the butt of unpleasantness, charges of currying favour. Yet neither the child nor her teacher felt capable of acting otherwise. Moller spoke to her, too, in the yard, but less frequently; and then after a while, when it was discovered how she loved reading, both of them lent her books of a better quality than the meagre contents of the school library could provide. Despite this particular attention, however, her essays had never before revealed, apart from an occasional felicity, any mark of the sensitivity behind her observations.

'It's quite incredible,' Helen said. 'By the way, how do you think Vinny would know what was bad singing and what wasn't?'

'I suppose she heard her mother criticize the talent shows.'

'That's so. Incidentally, I had no idea the father had left home. I was under the impression he was dead.'

'It happened just before I came here,' Moller said, 'but it's such an old story no one ever discusses it. Mrs. Lalor seems to manage somehow. Better off, probably. Two of the kids still home are working, and they help out. You've noticed Vinny's clothes are never quite up to scratch. That seems to be the one thing some of the nasty little beasts in her class can't forgive.'

'God, they're cruel,' Helen said. 'And there seems to be nothing one can do about it.' She paused. 'I feel,' she said

deliberately, and thereby setting up the first piece in a dangerous montage, 'that I would like to do something special for that child. Give her a treat that she'd remember with pleasure for a very long time. How about running her down to Brisbane with us next month and taking her to a ballet or a play or something like that?'

Moller jerked his head back in surprise. 'Are you serious?' he asked.

'Perfectly. I've always had a weak spot for that girl.'

'But think of the complications. There's the mother to ask. Findlay probably will think it odd and the rest of the kids will give her hell.'

'There's no need for Findlay to be told and Vinny won't mention it to the others. I'll see to that. As for Mrs. Lalor, I'm sure she would be pleased. I know her.'

And did know her: the seedy dresses, the hair worried through its curling pins, tortured by steel waving grips, the grammar struggling desperately to surface the swamp of local carelessness, the seedier finance behind the upbringing of six children, Vinny last and least lovely; knew her in her gaping timber house behind casuarina and lantana hot-prickled-red-yellow-freckled maze of overgrown hedge, up garden path between the asters and chrysanthemums tangled in fertility to the wistaria'd veranda; as a pale face through leaves and worries.

'She would be pleased,' Helen repeated. 'Vinny could stay at Margaret's with me and be perfectly safe. Robert, I'll enjoy the variation in my routine, so be a little more enthusiastic.'

'When will you ask?'

'I think I'll stroll up to Lalor's this evening while the impulse is still fresh.'

'If you're determined ... it might be a good thing at that,' Moller said. The tiredness was sweeping over him again in the rising afternoon temperatures. He stretched his knotty hands painfully-pleasurably, above his head and grunted.

The period bell would ring in five more minutes. Placing a hand on Helen's arm, he patted her lightly. A fly drummed backwards and forwards across the ceiling, and Corcoran's voice raised in sudden anger throbbed along the veranda. All the newness of term opening was gone in the establishment of routine. Everything was as usual. Findlay came into the room through webs of heat, ovoid and perspiring and genial, but relentless in his pursuit of minutiae, to post another notice on the staff-room board.