

**COLLECTED
SHORT FICTION**

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WHEN THE MICE FAILED TO ARRIVE

One afternoon in one of the years when I used to stay at home to mind my son and my daughter and to do the housework while my wife was away at her job, my son was caught in a thunderstorm. The storm broke over my suburb at half past three, which is the time when schools are dismissed.

I had been alone in the house since half past eight that morning, when my children had left for school. All afternoon I had watched from my windows while the clouds gathered. I had thought of the storms that broke every few days in summer over the city where I had lived from my fifth year to my tenth year. That city was a hundred miles inland from the suburb of Melbourne where I lived with my wife and my two children. In the thirty-three years since I had left the inland city, whenever I had seen the sky darkening by day I had remembered the storms that gathered outside my schoolroom window in the 1940s.

The storms of those years had always arrived at mid-afternoon. When a storm was overhead the teacher would have to switch on the lights in the darkened schoolroom. Before the first lightning flashed, I moved as far away as I could move from the schoolroom windows. At home I used to hide from lightning by lying on the floor under my bed. At school I could only press my face against the desk-top and ask God not to let the lightning strike me through the windows. I never thought of lightning as striking a group of children. I saw in my mind the zig-zag of gold stabbing down from the black clouds and piercing the heart or the brain of the one child who had been marked out for dying on that afternoon.

When I thought of myself being killed by lightning, I dreaded the confusion this would cause. After I had failed to arrive home at the

usual time, my father would search for me along the streets that I had promised I would follow every afternoon. (Before my first day at school I had promised I would never turn aside from McCrae Street, Baxter Street, and McIvor Road. On the very few afternoons when I left those streets and walked for a little way along the creek, I supposed as I walked that my father was hurrying along McIvor Road while I was down among the bulrushes. My father had set out from home to meet me, I supposed. He had come to tell me that our house had been burned down or that my mother had been killed, but we had passed one another without knowing. On those afternoons I had almost turned back from the creek to make sure that my father was not somewhere behind me and walking away from me. And even while I wondered whether I ought to turn back, I thought of my father's arriving at the school and then turning back towards home but this time leaving the streets and walking along the creek for a little way because he thought I might have been loitering there whereas I was just then going back towards the school by way of the streets and passing my father again unseen.) When my father could not find me in my usual streets, he would think at first that I had turned aside to watch the water in the creek flowing swiftly after the storm. He would go down to the bank of the creek, and while he was looking for me among the bulrushes a priest from the presbytery next to my school would ride his bicycle along McCrae Street and Baxter Street and McIvor Road on his way to my father's house to tell my father, who was not at home, that his only son had been killed by lightning.

I prayed that I would not be killed by the storm and that my father would not be lost and confused during the hour when the clouds had passed suddenly away to the east, and when the twilight that had seemed about to turn into darkness had turned instead into a bright afternoon with wet leaves flashing in the sun and steam rising from roofs. I prayed, and I was always spared, and I walked home while the gutters were flowing and the last of the black clouds were rumbling above the eastern horizon.

While the gutters flowed and the wet leaves flashed and the steam rose from iron roofs, I understood that I had been spared, but perhaps only for two or three days. The lightning that could have killed me

was stabbing at the dark-green treetops far away past Axedale and Heathcote. By midnight the gold zig-zags would be shooting harmlessly into the Pacific Ocean. Days or even weeks later the clouds would settle quietly among the mountains of New Zealand or of South America. But somewhere behind me while I walked eastwards towards my home, another storm would soon arise.

I thought of each storm in summer as beginning far away to the east, in some bare paddock in the district around St Arnaud, where I had never been. (When I looked just now at a map of the state of Victoria, I saw that I have avoided all my life the countryside east of Bendigo. I was able just now to trace with my finger, beginning at Bendigo and moving north-west to Swan Hill then south-west to Horsham then roughly east to Castlemaine and then north to Bendigo, a triangle enclosing more than five thousand square miles that I have never set foot in. Near enough to the centre of this triangle lies the city of St Arnaud, whose name, whenever I heard it as a child, sounded like a preliminary snarl of thunder.)

When I thought of the beginnings of a storm, I saw a dark cloud rising from the earth in the way that the evil genie rose from the jar where he had been imprisoned for hundreds of years, in one of the illustrations that I often stared at in the pages of *The Arabian Nights Entertainment*.

In all his life my father never bought a book – for himself or as a present for another person. But a few books came into his possession from time to time. One of these was the book we called the Arabian Nights. Until I was thirteen years old, that book was the largest and the oldest book I had looked into. As a child I stared at the illustrations: plump, squat men with beards and turbans; giant Negroes with curved swords; donkeys cruelly burdened. I understood that the young women in the illustrations were meant to seem beautiful, but I was repelled by them. They had the huge dark eyes of Jersey cows, and their noses seemed to grow straight down from their foreheads. In the cities where all these people lived, the streets and lanes were narrow and gloomy; away from the cities the countryside was rocky and desolate; the sky, whether clouded or unclouded, was always grey.

I suppose the illustrations in the Arabian Nights were printed from some sort of engravings on stone or metal. But I know no more today about the carving of pictures out of metal or wood or stone than I knew when I sat in front of my father's book and thought of the Arabians, as I called them, as living all their lives threatened by storms. Today, if I happen to see in a book one of the sort of illustration that I call, rightly or wrongly, engravings, I remember myself having felt sorry sometimes for the whole of a nation called Arabia because its women were unattractive and its weather seemed always stormy afternoon. Or I remember myself having rested my eyes sometimes from focusing on donkeys or genies, and having tried instead to discover the cause of the greyness overhanging everything Arabian, at which times I began to see hundreds of fine lines forming an impenetrable mesh between me on the one side and on the other side the turbaned Arabians and their cow-faced young women.

From the time when I first learned to read printed words, I wanted to read the whole of the Arabian Nights. I wanted to see far into the strangeness and the greyness of Arabia. One afternoon in a year when I could still read no more than scattered words and phrases, my father came up behind me and warned me that I would learn nothing of benefit from the Arabians. He warned me that the Arabians did without shame what he and I and the people of our inland city avoided as the worst of sins.

One day in my tenth year I read for the first time the whole of a story from my father's Arabian Nights. At that time of my life I read books only in order to look for details that I could include in my dreams of myself living as a grown man in a mansion (with a lightning conductor on every chimney) behind a high fence of strong and interlocked wire in the bushland between Bendigo and Heathcote. One room of my mansion was going to be fitted out as a private cinema. On many a hot afternoon when the people of the districts surrounding my mansion were looking up into the glaring sky for the clouds that would be the first signs of a storm, I would be in my private cinema. The blinds on the windows of the cinema would be sealed against the light from outside. Modern electric fans would whirr in slowly swivelling cages. At rest in my cool twilight, I would watch what

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I called true films showing men and women doing without shame in far countries what the people in the districts around my mansion avoided as the worst of sins.

Of the story that I read in my tenth year I have forgotten every detail except one. I have not forgotten that a woman in the story, wanting to punish a certain man, ordered her slaves to strip the man and to flog him with the pizzle of a bull.

For long after I had first read that detail, I tried to believe that the stories of the Arabian Nights were not wholly fanciful. I tried to believe that somewhere in some country on the far side of the grey cross-hatching in books, a woman might once have looked at and named without shyness or shame the naked pink object that I pretended not to notice if it protruded from beneath the bull that moaned and shoved against the tall fence around the yard where my father's brother milked his Jersey cows while my father and I watched during our summer holidays. And after I had enjoyed the delicious shock of supposing that a woman might once have done those things, I dared to ask myself whether a woman in some story I had still not read might have put a delicate finger to the object while it rested in the hands of one of her slaves, or might even have curled all of her fingers around the object and lifted it away from the slave and then – and here I winced or hugged myself or gasped – stepped daintily towards the man who had been cowering naked all this time with his back to the woman and with his hands in front of his privates, and brought the long and quivering object down on his white buttocks.

If, on the far side of the grey world of illustrations in books, such things as these had been enacted even once, I thought, then I myself might one day watch such things being enacted – not merely in my mind while I read some antique book but on the screen of my private cinema, in my mansion protected by tall wire fences.

In many of the white spaces around the grey illustrations in my father's copy of the Arabian Nights, someone had stamped with a rubber stamp and an ink-pad, many years before I first saw the book, a black annulus enclosing the words: *Library of H.M. Prison, Geelong.*

My father had been a prison warder for twelve years before I was born and for two years afterwards. The last of the four prisons where he had worked during those fourteen years was the Geelong prison. In the month when I became two years old, my father ceased being a prison warder and moved with his wife and son from the city of Geelong to the city of Melbourne. During the last days of the fourteen years when my father was a prison warder, I was looking often at what is the only sight that I remember having seen during the two years when I lived in Geelong and what is also the earliest sight that I remember having seen during my lifetime.

I was looking down from the high landing of a set of wooden steps at the rear of my parents' rented house in the suburb of Belmont in the city of Geelong. I was looking first at the fence of grey palings at the bottom of my parents' yard, then at a row of sheds with grey walls and whitish roofs in the next yard. Each shed had at its front a wall of wire-netting. Beyond the wire-netting was a grey-white blur made by dozens of hens moving about in their crowded shed.

While I looked I also listened. At any moment of the day, many of the hens would have been silent. Those hens that were making a noise would have been making one or another of the several different noises that hens make in company. But from where I stood high above the sheds, I heard at every moment of the day a shrill and continuous sound as though every hen in every grey shed was forever complaining.

In each of the many places where he lived after leaving Geelong, my father kept a dozen or more poultry of the Light Sussex breed. Behind every house he lived in, my father fenced off three-quarters of the backyard so that his birds could have what he called a place to stretch their wings. My mother and I complained sometimes that the poultry trampled the grass and turned their yard into dust or mud, but my father would never lock his hens in a shed.

During the nineteen years of his life after he had left Geelong, my father seldom talked about the fourteen years when he had been a prison warder. Once, I asked my father where he had got the strange grey raincoat that he wore around the backyard on rainy days. He called the thing his oilskin and cape, and he told me that all warders

wore such things in prisons on wet days. He said he had forgotten to return his oilskin and cape when he had ceased to be a warder.

One night when I was in my thirteenth year, I heard a radio programme about a man who had killed three young girls in districts near Melbourne during the years just before I was born. I thought while I listened that the man and the girls were fictitious characters, but at the end of the programme my father told me that what I had heard about had mostly happened. The name of the murderer was Arnold Sodeman, and he had been hanged in Pentridge prison, in the suburb of Melbourne where I was later born. My father had been one of the warders on duty on the morning when Sodeman had been hanged. When I asked how Sodeman had looked and behaved just before he was hanged, my father told me that Sodeman's face had turned a grey colour such as my father had never seen in the face of any other living person.

Until he died, my father kept among his shoes in the bottom of his wardrobe a piece of wood about the length of his forearm. The wood was slightly tapered and painted black. A circle of strong cord ran through the hole that had been drilled through the narrow end of the wood. The piece of wood was the truncheon that my father had carried while he was on duty at Geelong prison.

When my father had been dead for more than twenty years and I supposed that most of his friends had also died and that I would never learn any more about my father's life than the little I already knew, I read a short paragraph about my father in a printed leaflet.

The leaflet contained assorted details from the history of French Island in Westernport. About ten years after my father had died I began to notice newspaper articles describing French Island as a place for tourists to visit, but for fifty years before then, part of the island had been one of the four prisons in which my father had worked during his fourteen years as a warder.

I read from one paragraph in the leaflet that my father (whose surname had been misspelled) had been responsible, about ten years before I was born, for introducing to French Island the pheasants that still flourished there at the time when the leaflet had been compiled. My father had bred pheasants in cages at the prison and had released their young in the scrub around the island.

After reading the leaflet I wanted to know who had supplied to the compilers of the leaflet the item about my father and the pheasants. I learned from one of the compilers that the item had come from a woman (described as frail and elderly) in a suburb of Melbourne. I then wrote to the woman.

The woman wrote to me in faultless handwriting that she had known my father slightly. The item about the pheasants had come from her sister. When my father had been a warder in the prison on French Island, her sister had been living with her parents, who were farmers on the island. Her sister and my father had been good friends. Whenever the writer of the letter had returned to French Island to visit her parents in those days, she had supposed that my father was courting her sister. However, her sister had later left home to become a nun. The sister was still a nun. When the writer of the letter had told her sister that a leaflet was being compiled to inform tourists about the history of French Island, her sister had urged her to pass on to the compilers of the leaflet the information about the man who had introduced pheasants to the island.

The letter-writer had named in her letter the order of nuns that her sister had joined and the convent where her sister still lived. I knew about the order of nuns only what I had heard as a boy: that the order was an enclosed order whose members never left their convents. The nun who had been a good friend of my father had lived in a convent in a suburb of Melbourne since the year in the 1930s when she had left French Island, where my father was releasing young pheasant hens and cocks in the scrub. In all the years since then, the nun who had once seemed to her sister as though she was being courted by the man who later became my father would have received as visitors to the convent only the nearest members of her family. The visitors would have sat in the visitors' room, and the nun would have spoken to them from behind a steel grille set into the wall of the room.

I remember meeting my son at the front door on the afternoon of the storm and taking his schoolbag from him and giving him a towel from the linen cupboard to dry his face and his hair. I remember making a cup of cocoa for my son while he took off his wet clothes and dried himself

in the bathroom. I went into the bathroom afterwards and picked up the wet clothes and put the shirt and the singlet and the underpants in the laundry basket. My son stood in the lounge room in front of the gas heater wearing his tracksuit and drinking his cocoa while I arranged his pullover and his trousers on the clotheshorse in front of him.

My son accuses me sometimes of having forgotten important details from the years when I used to cut his lunches and make his cocoa and tidy his cupboards and wash his clothes and read stories to him at night. I told him one day lately the very words that he had said to me on a certain afternoon seven years ago while he stood in front of the heater in the lounge room and drank his cocoa, but he looked at me as though I had dreamed of the dark afternoon, of my twelve-years-old son being caught in a thunderstorm, and of the mice that had failed to arrive.

While I was writing the paragraph above that begins 'I remember . . .', I should have remembered that I would not have made the cocoa while my son was taking off his wet clothes. I would have waited until my son had done what he did every afternoon as soon as he arrived home. I would not have begun to make the cocoa until I had heard from my son's room the chugging and the hissing of the apparatus that he called his machine.

My son was an asthmatic who took medicines every few hours of every day. One of the medicines was a liquid that had to be inhaled in the form of a vapour. Three or four times a day my son sat for ten minutes with a mask of transparent plastic fitted over his nose and mouth. His medicine was in a plastic cylinder attached to the lower part of the mask. A rubber tube connected this cylinder to a pump powered by an electric motor. The pump forced air up the rubber tube and into the cylinder. How, I never understood, but the compressed air turned the liquid medicine in the cylinder into a vapour. Most of the vapour hung in the mask and was inhaled by my son, but some of the vapour escaped around the edges of the mask and out through the ventilation holes. When my son had first seen the strands of vapour drifting and curling around his face, he had called them his whiskers.

During his first five years my son was often in hospital. On every day when he was in hospital, I sat beside his bed through the morning and the afternoon while my wife was at work and my daughter was with neighbours.

The hospital was built on a steep hillside, and my son's room was on an upper floor. At one side of his room a glass door led to a veranda overlooking the valley of the Yarra. The season was always late autumn or winter when my son was in hospital, and the days were often foggy or rainy, and no one went out onto the veranda. On those days I would sit beside my son's bed, staring through the windows and across the veranda and trying to see the hills of Templestowe or the bushland around Warrandyte through the fog or the misty rain.

On foggy or rainy days I read to my son from his favourite books, from his sister's books, and from new books that I bought for him every day. I kept him supplied with paper and coloured pens and pencils, and if he was too tired to use them I drew pictures and made paper models in front of him. Each day on my way to the hospital I bought another Matchbox car to add to his collection. He and I put stuffed toys under the green coverlet on his bed and called the green mounds hills and undertook long, rambling journeys with toy cars through the pretend landscape.

If the weather was fine and if my son was not struggling for breath, I took him out onto the veranda.

From the parapet of our veranda to the floor of the veranda above was a wall of strong wire mesh. My son and I pressed our faces against the wire. Sometimes the boy would be standing beside me and sometimes he would be riding piggyback with his chin resting on my shoulder. We stared at the motor traffic on the road far below, at the trains crossing the bridge over the road, at the girls in grey and blue uniforms in the grounds of Our Lady of Mount Carmel College, at the green hills of Templestowe, and sometimes – if the sky was quite clear – at the long dark-blue hump of Donna Buang, thirty miles away where the mountains began.

On the veranda my son was usually cheerful and looking forward to leaving hospital. He would talk to me about the things that he could see on the other side of the wire. I would wait for him to ask me the

two questions that he always asked when he thought about the future. I would wait for him to ask why he suffered from asthma while so many other children breathed freely, and to ask when he would be free from asthma forever.

I had a stock answer for each of my son's two questions, but I did not merely answer in words. I had been trained as a primary teacher after I left secondary school. I had ceased being a teacher in the year before my son was born, but for ten years before then I had taught classes of boys and girls nine or ten years old. When I talked to my son or my daughter I liked to make use of my teacher's skills.

On the veranda of the hospital I said first to my son that every man was given an equal amount of suffering to endure during his lifetime. However, I said, one sort of man was given most of his suffering when he was only a boy. (At this point I would describe with my hands, in the air above my son's head, a shape that was meant to represent a dark-grey cloud. I would then fling my hands apart to represent the cloud breaking open, and immediately afterwards I would flutter my ten fingers in the air above my son's head to represent heavy rain falling on the boy.) The other sort of man, I said, had no suffering to endure as a boy. (I lowered myself a little way towards the floor of the veranda and tried to suggest a boy skipping lightly and carelessly.) Years passed, I said, and the two sorts of boys had grown into men. The first man, the man who had suffered as a child, was now strong and healthy. (I lifted my son onto my back and rushed towards the wire and made as though to tear it apart.) The second man, however, had not been prepared for suffering. When suffering threatened this man, he fled from it and tried to hide from it and lived in terror of it. At this point, I set my son down on the floor of the veranda and moved back from him and became the man who had not learned to suffer early in life. I looked up into the air. I saw my own hand describing a broad circle just above my head, and I understood that the circle was a black thunder-cloud. Then I saw my own hand, with the index finger outstretched, darting downwards again and again through the air around my head. I understood that bolts of lightning were flashing all around me, and I fled.

The veranda of the children's ward had become, over the years, a dumping place for toys and furniture. Whenever I answered my son's

question, I took care to be standing in a certain place. When I played the man who was frightened of suffering, I had only to scamper a few paces to the disused hospital bed that stood in the corner of the veranda. Then I crawled under the bed in order to escape from the lightning. But the bed had no mattress or bedclothes on it – above me was only the network of fine steel that formed the wire base for a mattress. And my mime would always end with my grinning at my son from under the bed, as though the man who had fled now considered himself safe, while out of my sight just above me the index finger of one of my hands jabbed and probed at the gaps in the sagging mattress-base.

In answer to the other question that my son asked me, I would try to be cautious. No doctor had ever said more to my wife or myself than that a certain proportion of children experienced significantly fewer attacks of asthma after reaching puberty. But sometimes I would read in a newspaper about a runner or a jockey or a footballer who had been a severe asthmatic as a child. I would stick a photograph of the man to the door of our refrigerator where my son would see it every day.

In the winter of my son's seventh year his asthma was more severe than in any previous winter. Yet in the summer before that winter I had thought I saw signs that my son was on the way to overcoming his asthma. In hospital during his seventh winter, when he asked me the second of his two questions I became reckless. I told him that the worst was now over at last. Every year from that year, I told him, he would become stronger and his asthma weaker. Five years from that year, I told him, our dream would have come true: he would be free from asthma and breathing easily.

Fourteen years before my son's seventh year, I spent every afternoon alone in a room with the blinds drawn. The room was the lounge room of a rented flat that had been described by an estate agent as a luxurious, fully furnished, self-contained flat suitable for a young business or professional couple. I lived alone at that time, and the rent for the flat was forty percent of my net earnings, but I had chosen to live in the flat because I was tired of sharing bathrooms and toilets and kitchens with the queer, solitary men and women of the boarding houses and

rooming houses that I had lived in since I had left my parents' house five years before.

The flat was at ground level, and the windows of the loungeroom overlooked a gravel driveway and part of the street and the footpath in front of the block of flats. I kept the blinds drawn in the windows of the loungeroom of my flat because I wanted neighbours and passers-by to think I was not at home.

Fourteen years before my son's seventh year, I was a teacher in a primary school in an outer south-eastern suburb of Melbourne. The outer suburb had once been a seaside resort separated from the suburbs that were then the outer suburbs of Melbourne by paddocks and swamps and market gardens. As late as the 1950s, the place where I taught as a young man in the 1960s was still chosen by some newly married couples as the place for their honeymoon. The block of flats where I lived with my blinds drawn was in the older part of the suburb, where the honeymoon couples had once strolled. The primary school where I was a teacher was on the edge of the suburb, on the side of a hill from the top of which it was possible to see not only Port Phillip Bay but also, far away in the south-east, part of Westernport and even, in clear weather, a grey-blue smudge that was a corner of French Island.

Most of the children of the school where I was a teacher lived more than two miles from where I lived. When I had first moved into the rented flat I wanted none of the children or their parents to know that I lived in their suburb. I did not want the children or their parents to know that I spent every afternoon and every evening and nearly every Saturday and Sunday alone in my flat. I did not want the parents especially to wonder why I seemed to have no friends either male or female or to wonder what I did during all the time while I was alone in the rented flat.

After I had lived in the rented flat for a few months, some of the children in my own class learned where I lived. The children were three girls nine years old who happened to be riding their bicycles along my street one Saturday morning when I was walking home with my weekend's shopping. The girls and I spoke politely to one another, after which I expected them to ride on their way. Instead, they followed me on their bicycles, at a distance of about twenty paces.

When I was inside my flat and the front door was closed behind me, I peeped around the closed blind and saw the three girls standing on the footpath and looking towards my flat. A few minutes later, while I was unpacking my shopping bag, a knock sounded at my front door.

I opened my front door and saw one of the three girls on my front porch. The other two girls were still standing on the footpath with the three bicycles. The girl on my porch asked me politely whether she and her friends could do some cleaning jobs for me in my flat.

I thanked the girl and told her that my flat was quite clean. (It was.) Then I said that in any case I was about to go out for the day. (I was not.)

I spoke softly to the girl and lowered my head close to hers. I did not want my words to reach the woman in the flat next to mine. I believed she was watching me and the girl from behind her drawn blinds. While I spoke to the girl I was pleased to see in her face that she was about to turn away and leave my door. But while I spoke I happened to look up and to see that a woman was passing in the street and looking hard at the solitary man who was whispering something to the small girl at the door of his flat.

After that day I would never answer any knock at my door. I did not want my neighbours or any adult passing in the street to think I was the sort of solitary man who was attracted to nine-year-old girls.

In fact, I was attracted to half a dozen of the nine-year-old girls in my class – and to two or three of the boys. Every day I looked from the sides of my eyes at the smooth skins of the girls, at the trusting eyes of the boys. I would never have dared to put so much as the tip of a finger on a child in a way that might have suggested something of what I felt for the child. All day while I taught my favourite children I wanted no more than that they should think well of me. But when I was safely out of their sight I often dreamed of the children.

I dreamed that my favourite children lived with me in a mansion surrounded by a tall wire fence in thick bushland in north-eastern Victoria. The children were no longer children; they were almost adults. They were free to live their own lives in the far-flung suites of my rambling mansion. I had never forced my company on them. I lived alone in my self-contained flat in a corner of the ground floor

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of the mansion. But the children who were no longer children knew that they were always welcome to knock at my door. I was always pleased to take them into the room where I sat behind drawn blinds on most afternoons and evenings watching black and white and grey films of men and women in far countries of the world doing without shame or shyness what I hoped my favourite children would never dream of doing.

In my classroom, fourteen years before my son's seventh year, I devised projects that encouraged the children to write about themselves. I wanted to know what memories of joy or sorrow were already stored in the children's hearts. I wondered what my favourite children dreamed about when I caught them gazing into the air.

One day I announced to my class that I had found a pen-friend for each of them in New Zealand. I announced that each child in my class would prepare during English periods for the next two weeks a long letter to be sent to his or her pen-friend. Each child would prepare as well, for sending with the letter to New Zealand, drawings and perhaps a photograph of the writer of the letter with family and friends and pets. When every child of the forty-eight children in the class had prepared his or her letter and accompanying material, I announced, I would make up a parcel and post it to a certain teacher in a large school in New Zealand. That teacher would distribute our letters among the children in his school. A few weeks later I would receive from New Zealand a parcel comprising a letter for each child in my class from a child in New Zealand, together with drawings and perhaps photographs.

The teacher in New Zealand was a man I had met two years before when he had been in Melbourne under the terms of a teacher-exchange scheme. Just before he had left Melbourne he had given me his address in New Zealand and had suggested that we should pair our pupils as pen-friends each year. In the first year after the man had gone back to New Zealand I had not taken his suggestion, but in the second year I suddenly thought of all the words that my pupils would write about themselves after I had told them that a class of children in New Zealand was waiting to read letters from them.

I ought to have checked first with the teacher in New Zealand before I began the project, but I was eager for my children to begin writing. After they had been writing for a week, I wrote a note to the New Zealand teacher to tell him that a parcel of children's letters would soon reach him. When I was ready to post the note to New Zealand I could not find the address of the teacher in New Zealand. I found in the notebook where I kept addresses the names and addresses of people I could not remember having met, but I could not find the address of the teacher in New Zealand, and he was the only person I knew who lived in New Zealand.

I ought to have told my class next day to put aside their letters and their sketches for the time being, even if I had not told them that I could not find the address of the New Zealand teacher. Then I ought to have found out the addresses of periodicals published for teachers in New Zealand and to have sent to the editor of each periodical for publication in the periodical a notice asking for pen-friends in New Zealand for a class of children in an outer suburb of Melbourne, Australia. But when I saw my children next day editing and rewriting their letters I could not bring myself to tell them that they might have been writing to nobody.

After that, I knew I could never tell my children what I had done. I could not even take steps to find another class in New Zealand for my children to write to. Each day for five days I read through the children's letters, correcting with light pencil marks their mistakes in spelling and punctuation. Each day I watched the children rewriting words and adding punctuation marks and then erasing my light pencil marks from their pages. Each day I watched children decorating with their coloured pencils the sketches they had made of their houses, their bicycles, the places where they went for their holidays. Each day I helped children to mount securely the photographs they had brought from home. Then, at the end of the week, I packed all the children's letters into my bag and took them to my flat and emptied them into a cardboard box on the floor of the built-in wardrobe in my bedroom.

When I had taken the children's letters from them I had warned the children not to expect replies for many weeks. I had told the children

that they ought to forget that they had posted their letters, so that the replies would be all the more surprising when they arrived at last. And I had even said in class that I hoped my teacher-friend had not moved from his address and had not met with an accident since the year when he had given me his address in New Zealand.

The month when the children had given their letters to me was June. The school year did not end until December. From June until December of that year I offered my class every day some new diversion that would help them forget, I hoped, the letters that they had written to New Zealand. Some of the children seemed to have forgotten the letters after only a few weeks. Other children remembered the letters almost every day and reminded me that no answers had yet come back.

In September of that year I applied for a transfer to a school in a suburb on the other side of Melbourne. On the day after the last schoolday of that year I packed my clothes and my books ready for sending by taxi truck to my new address. I sealed and packed also the cardboard box that had been stored in the bottom of my wardrobe since June.

Before I sealed the cardboard box I spent an hour kneeling on the floor beside the box and tearing into small pieces every envelope in the box and every sheet of paper in every envelope. While I tore the paper I did not once look down at what my hands were doing. I did not want to read any name of any child or any word written by any of my children to one of the unknown children of New Zealand. When I had torn all the pieces of paper and when I was pressing the pieces into the box before sealing it, I remembered myself eight years before tearing paper into shreds and pushing the torn paper into the small cardboard boxes that served as breeding boxes for the mice that I kept in the shed behind my parents' house.

I had torn up the children's letters because I had thought of the box of letters falling from the taxi truck on the way from the children's suburb to my new address. I had thought of someone finding the box in the street and reading the names on the backs of the envelopes and then sending the envelopes back to the children who had been in my class, and I had thought of the children and their parents beginning to understand what had happened to the letters.

When I had begun to pack my belongings in my flat, I had thought I would light a fire in the small yard behind my flat and would burn the envelopes and their contents. But then I had thought of pieces of burnt paper being lifted by the wind over the fence around the block of flats and being carried by the wind eastwards towards the houses of the children who had been my pupils. I saw in my mind piece after piece of grey paper with black penstrokes showing clearly against the grey, and all the grey pieces drifting towards the same children who had written messages on the pieces when they had been parts of white pages.

My son stood and drank his cocoa while I arranged his wet clothes on the horse. I told him his troubles were over for the time being. He was safe and dry in his own house after the storm; his machine had relieved his asthma; he could sit with me in the lounge room and watch the last of the storm passing over the house.

My son told me that he had not had a hard day. He claimed to have had a rather pleasant day. His class at the high school had had almost a free afternoon. First, one of their teachers had been away sick, and then their science teacher had given them a free period in the last hour because the mice had not arrived.

For three or four weeks, my son said, the science class had been looking forward to the coming of the mice. The science teacher had told them she had ordered fifty mice from a laboratory. She had planned with the class beforehand a series of experiments. Small numbers of mice would be put into separate cages. Some mice would be allowed to breed. Each child in the class would be responsible for feeding and observing one of the cages of mice.

The mice had been due to arrive at the school, so my son told me, on that very morning, but they had failed to arrive. My son had cleaned the cage where his mice were going to be kept. He had set out a small heap of torn paper for the mice to use as lining for their cardboard nest-box. But the science teacher had announced to the class at the beginning of the last period of the day that the people supplying the mice had let her down. The mice had not come, and she was going to have to spend most of the science period telephoning to find out

what had happened to the mice. While she was out of the room, the teacher had said, the class could use the time for private study. And then, so my son had told me, the teacher had left the room and he had spent the rest of the period talking with his friends or watching the approach of the storm.

While I listened to my son I felt a sorrow for some person or some thing that I could not have named. I might have been sorry for my son and his friends because they had waited so long for the mice that had not come. Or I might have been sorry for the teacher because she had had to disappoint her class, or because she had had to lie to the class (because she had neglected to order the mice, or because she had learned many days before that the mice would never arrive but had been afraid to tell her class). Or I might have been sorry for the mice because the taxi truck bringing them to the school had overturned during the storm, and the boxes containing the mice had tumbled out onto the road and had burst open, after which the mice had crawled around on the wet grey road, confused and bedraggled, or had been swept away in the fast-flowing water in the gutters.

Each time my son had said the word *mice* he had made faint signs with his eyes and his mouth and his shoulders. Probably no one but myself would have noticed the signs. He had turned his eyes just a little to one side and had stretched his mouth outwards just a little at each corner and had hunched his shoulders just a little. When I had seen that my son was making these faint signs, I had found occasion myself to speak the word *mice* and to make faint signs in return when I spoke the word.

The faint signs were the last traces of the signs that my son and I had made to one another during earlier years of his childhood whenever either of us had talked about mice or other small furred animals. During those years, whenever he or I had spoken the word *mouse* or the word *mice* in the other's hearing, each of us would have peered from the sides of his eyes and hunched his shoulders close to his head and stretched his mouth wide and held his hands in front of his chest in the shape of paws.

In earlier years I had always understood my son's signs as telling me that he was a mouse at heart. He was telling me that he was smaller than

other children and made weak by his asthma. When I made my own signs in return in those years, I was telling my son that I recognised his mouseness and that I would never forget to put into his saucer each day a little heap of rolled oats and a cube of bread spread with vegemite and a scrap of lettuce, or to put a heap of torn paper into a corner of his cage when nights turned chilly.

When my son had made his faint signs to me on the afternoon of the storm, he seemed to be saying that he would always be partly mouse. He seemed to be saying that he had not forgotten my telling him five years before that he would be free from asthma after five years had passed; he had not forgotten, but he knew that what I had told him was not true. He seemed to be saying that he remembered every day what I had told him five years before; he had remembered it while he wheezed and gasped on his way home during the storm that had just passed over; but he knew that I had told him what I had told him only so that he could believe in earlier years that he would one day cease to be a mouse.

On the afternoon of the storm my son seemed to be telling me also that his life as a mouse was not unbearable; he had not been unhappy while he walked home through the rain; he was not unhappy now while he sat with me and watched the last of the clouds drifting towards the hills north-east of Melbourne. He seemed to be telling me finally that he was telling me these things because he understood that I too was partly mouse and would always be so.

During my fourteenth and fifteenth years I kept mice in cages in the cement-sheet shed behind my parents' house in a south-eastern suburb of Melbourne. Most of the mice were white or grey or fawn. A few mice were pied. I bred the mice selectively with the aim of producing only the pied sort. I kept the dozen or so female mice in one large cage, and the four or five males each in a small cage on the opposite side of the shed from the females. I had also two small breeding cages where a male and a female would be kept together until the female was swollen with young, at which time the male would be returned to his solitary cage. From each litter I kept only the one or two pied mice. The others I drowned. I put the unwanted mice in an old sock

When the Mice Failed to Arrive

with a handful of pebbles and lowered them into a bucket of water. While I held the sock in the water I did not once look down at what my hands were doing.

I spent at least an hour every day in the shed alone with the mice. I fed the mice and cleaned their cages and set out torn paper for their nests. Then I studied the charts and tables showing the pedigrees of the mice, and I tried to decide which female and which male would be the next breeding pair.

During the hours while I was watching the mice I was also listening for certain sounds from the other side of one of the grey walls of the shed. I was listening in order to know when the woman from the house next door was in her backyard.

The woman was aged about thirty. She lived with her husband and her mother and her infant daughter. All of the family were Latvians and spoke to one another in a language that I supposed was Latvian. Whenever I heard the voice of the woman through the wall of the shed, I locked the door of the shed and crouched in the corner behind some of the cages of mice. I did in the corner what was all I could do as a solitary male who wanted to be one of a breeding pair. While I crouched in the corner I did not once look down at my hands. Instead, I pressed my ear to the cement-sheet in order to hear the voice of the woman talking in her own language. When I heard the voice I persuaded myself that the woman was talking only to me and talking without shyness or shame.

During November and December, most of the children seemed to have forgotten having written letters to New Zealand. Only one boy still asked me quietly every few days what I supposed might have happened to the parcel of letters. The boy was not one of my favourites, although he was one of the most intelligent in the class. He was not among my favourites because he was too often restless and talkative. One of his previous teachers told me that the boy was what he was because his father had been too anxious about the boy. The father was a teacher himself and had watched over the boy too closely.

Sometimes when this boy asked me about the letters during the last weeks of the school year, I thought he might have suspected me

of having not sent the letters to New Zealand. I was thinking of this boy when I decided to tear the letters into small pieces before putting them into the taxi truck.

The place that I moved to was an upstairs flat with no yard where I could burn large quantities of paper. But soon after I had moved to the new place, I began to visit a man and his wife in the hill-country north-east of Melbourne. One Saturday when I visited these people, my bag was stuffed with the torn pieces of the letters to New Zealand.

I burned the pieces of the letters on a cloudy afternoon with a cool breeze blowing. The breeze, like nearly every breeze or wind in the districts around Melbourne, went from west to east. When all the scraps of the letters had been burned, I pounded the ashes with a stick. I wanted no fragment of charred paper to be left lying on the ground with a few blackened words still visible. Yet I had noticed, while the fire was burning, a few pieces of grey paper being lifted up and carried by the breeze over the nearest treetops.

The district where I stood, in the hills north-east of Melbourne, was at the edge of the mountains that were burned, in the summer when I was born, by the worst fires since details of the weather were first recorded in the state of Victoria. I had read that the smoke from those fires drifted all the way across the Tasman Sea and darkened the sky over New Zealand. I had read also that fragments of burnt leaves and twigs fell on some cities of New Zealand from the dark clouds that had drifted from the burning forests of Victoria, far away to the west. When I saw the fragments of grey paper being carried from my fire eastwards across the treetops, I thought of the fragments drifting down at last on New Zealand and one of the fragments happening to catch the eye of a boy or a girl of nine or ten years and of the boy or the girl making out a few words of a child's handwriting on the fragment.

Five years after the year when my son had been caught in a thunderstorm, and nearly twenty-five years after I had burned the pieces of the children's letters, I saw in a Melbourne newspaper a tiny photograph of the man who had been the boy who had been the last of the forty-eight children of my class to go on reminding me that the letters to New Zealand had not been answered. I had heard nothing of the boy

since I had left the outer south-eastern suburb nearly twenty-five years before, but as a man he had become the South Pacific correspondent for the newspaper in which I had seen his photograph.

Underneath the tiny photograph of the man who had once been one of my pupils was a report that he had written in the language of writers for newspapers. I understood the man to be reporting that some people in New Zealand were afraid that a cloud of poisonous substances was approaching them from the east, and to be reporting also that some people in Australia were afraid that the same cloud would approach Australia after it had passed over New Zealand. The cloud had arisen far away to the east of New Zealand at a place in the Pacific Ocean where scientists from the country of France had exploded a bomb.

After reading the report in the newspaper I was not afraid of the poisonous cloud. I thought of the poisonous cloud as passing not from east to west but from west to east like the storms that had frightened me as a child and like the storm that had broken over my son and like the smoke from the bushfires in the year when I was born. I saw in my mind the poisonous cloud drifting down at last into the ocean near South America, where the last of the clouds had settled after each of the storms that had come up out of the paddocks near St Arnaud like the grey shape of a genie from the Arabian Nights.

Towards the end of my fifteenth year, my father told me we would soon be leaving the house that had behind it the shed with the walls of grey cement-sheet. The house where we were going to live had no shed behind it.

I understood that I would not be able to breed mice in the place where I was going to live. Nor would I be able to crouch against a wall while a woman spoke in a foreign language on the other side of the wall.

In the last weeks before I left the house with the shed behind it, I prepared to drown all of my mice and to tear up and burn the notebook in which I had recorded the pedigrees and the matings of the mice. While I was looking through the records I noticed that one of the male mice had not yet been used for breeding. Each of the other males had been moved at least once from his solitary cage to a breeding cage where he had been allowed to remain with a female until she was

swollen with young. But one male mouse had been kept as a solitary male from the time when he had been taken as a half-grown male from his mother and his litter-mates.

I looked into the cage of the mouse that had been kept always solitary. The mouse was standing at the small panel of flyscreen wire at the front of the cage. I supposed that the mouse saw only a grey blur while he stood in the darkness of the cage with the fine mesh of wire in front of him and on the other side of the wire the half-light of the shed where I stood watching him.

The mouse pressed his nose against the wire and sniffed the air.

I knew that the solitary mouse had seen no other mouse, either male or female, in all the time since I had put him into his cage. But I wondered whether the mouse had sometimes smelled the smell of another mouse, either male or female, or had sometimes heard the squeaking of another mouse, especially the squeaking that came from a breeding cage whenever I first put a male and a female together there.

While I stood in front of the cage, I understood that I might leave the solitary mouse alone in its cage until the day when I drowned all the mice, and that I might keep the mouse alone even while I killed it. I understood also that I might take the mouse from its cage at that moment and put it into the cage where a dozen female mice were kept together and leave it in that cage, the one male among a dozen females, until the day when I drowned all the mice. And I understood that I might carry the cage of the solitary mouse to the other side of the shed. I might then place the cage so that the panel of flyscreen wire at the front of it rested against the panel of flyscreen wire at the front of the cage where the twelve female mice were kept together. I might then leave the cages in that position until the day when I took all the mice from their separate cages and drowned them.