

BLACK  
LIGHT

## About the author

K. A. Bedford ekes out a precarious existence in the radiation-blasted wastelands north of what's left of Perth, Western Australia. He is the author of the Aurealis Award-winning novel, *Time Machines Repaired While-U-Wait* (also shortlisted for the Philip K. Dick Award) and numerous other top, cracking reads, all of which make ideal gifts for all occasions <nodding very seriously>.

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*This book is for Georgia*

# 1

*May, 192—*

The ambulance raced through the narrow city streets.

My Aunt Julia, unconscious in the back, looked fragile, even frail. I sat next to her stretcher, holding a wooden spoon in her mouth, as the driver had instructed me, to prevent her swallowing her tongue in the event of another seizure. I had not seen my aunt in years. I knew she was now only in her fifties, but lying there in the back of the speeding ambulance, she appeared withered with age, and too pale.

I sat by her side for the long drive from Maylands Airport to Perth Public Hospital. The ambulance jinked and swerved as the driver tried to get us through the afternoon traffic. There were no windows in the back of the ambulance, but I could hear the driver swearing at motorcars, buggies and carts, even people on horseback, all of them in his way, going about their tiresome business, keeping us from reaching the help Julia needed.

The driver had told me that Julia had become agitated, even panicked, during the last few legs of her flight, and that, not long before landing, she had fallen unconscious after suffering “some sort of fit” as the aircraft, a converted Vimy heavy bomber, came rattling in to land.

“A fit? Julia has no history of that sort of thing,” I had said. But

then, what did I know? Twelve years had passed. Anything might have happened to her in that time. The Julia I remembered from my old life in England had been lively, funny, never unwell for a single day of her life. I held her cold and clammy hand, and thought that if she was so unwell, had it been wise to undertake this epic journey – all of those consecutive flights! – to reach me?

Julia and I, before our falling out, had been close, great friends. She was the only one in my family, other than perhaps my mother, who understood me, or at least accepted me the way I was, without question. My father, by contrast, had always been formal and serious, as if he'd been memorialised into a suitably grave statue even while still alive. He had been a pillar of the English Establishment, and I, his only child, a profound disappointment.

The ambulance arrived at the hospital. Rutherford, following behind in the Bentley, pulled up nearby. He joined me in the waiting room, pulling off his leather driving gloves. "Is there any news?"

I filled him in. He nodded, rubbed at his face, but said nothing. We managed to find seats and waited. I was struck by the noise of the place. Every hospital I had ever visited had the noisiest waiting areas and wards, despite the large signs throughout urging everyone to keep quiet. We were surrounded by family members, mostly mothers and wives, worried sick about loved ones; there were a great many men injured, perhaps in the course of their work, and just as many lively young children, generally little boys, who had taken one too many foolish backyard risks. It seemed children could sense the urgency and alarm hanging thick in the air. I was sympathetic. Many of the women looked exhausted beyond words. They had done their bit: they'd managed to get their husband or child here in one piece; the rest was up to the doctors. It reminded me of the night my father died, and the long trip from the family estate to the hospital, with Father so still and grey in the back of the car, and my husband Antony driving like a demon along those winding, narrow roads, desperate to get Father to the hospital in time.

Rutherford cleared his throat; he indicated the approaching doctor, a young, tired-looking man in a white coat with bad scarring on his left hand that may have come from War service. “Mrs Black?”

I went over to him. “I’m Mrs Black. How is she?”

“Can we just move over here?”

“Of course, Doctor.”

“I’m Dr Mendes.”

“Good evening, Doctor.” Rutherford had moved to stand behind me, offering his support.

“Are you Miss Templesmith’s next-of-kin?” He had a clipboard, making notes.

“I am, yes. Julia is my aunt, on my father’s side.”

Mendes nodded. “I see,” and made a note.

“Can you tell me anything?”

He checked his notes. “Miss Templesmith has suffered what appears to be a mild attack of epilepsy. Does she have a history of—?”

“No, not at all,” I said. “Will she be all right?”

“It’s possible she’ll have recurring attacks,” Dr Mendes said. “There are some fairly crude medicines we can prescribe...”

I knew about such drugs. The worst was bromide, now something of an old-fashioned treatment. I dreaded the thought of Julia being given that. Such medications amounted to sedating one’s brain into a state of living death. “I see. Is there anything else that might help?”

“A country rest-cure couldn’t hurt. Somewhere quiet and peaceful. Good food, pleasant scenery, free from upsets and disturbances. Things like that would be a start. I don’t think it would eliminate the chance of further attacks, but—”

I held up a hand. “I know the perfect place, Doctor.” I explained about my home in Pelican River.

“Sounds ideal,” he said. “We’d like to keep Miss Templesmith in for a few days’ observation before we can release her, of course.”

“Very well, Doctor. Of course. When would be a good time to return?”

“Visiting hours close at eight. Perhaps after seven this evening would be best. Just ask when you arrive.”

I nodded, thanked the doctor for his time, and left, Rutherford following. It was now approaching five in the afternoon. I would need a hotel.

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Outside the hospital’s Casualty department, with its noise and odours, the world looked bleak. The approaching storm front was almost upon us. Across the street loomed St Mary’s Cathedral, impressive and as ancient as anything could be in this young city, all flying buttresses, towering spires and stained glass, manicured grounds, and a modest graveyard. It was not something I wanted to see at this point. Everything seemed more than a little ominous. Things happened, I believed, because they were caused. I had always been an empiricist, and did not believe in coincidences. Aunt Julia, by contrast, believed very much in them, and ascribed to them great significance.

Rutherford dropped me off at the Savoy Hotel, on Hay Street.

In my room, I could not relax. Thoughts of family and mystery plagued me. I missed my late husband Antony still, all these years later. I wore his gold signet ring on my right hand. He had worn it on the pinky finger of his left hand; on me it was so large that I had to wear it on my right middle-finger, and even then it was loose. I fidgeted with it when nervous. Sometimes I fancied I could smell him, as if he were in the room with me, and I could talk to him. It was comforting. He and I had always been able to talk. Far more than any other thing that we did or did not have in common, we had always talked. We’d been great friends as well as lovers. I had looked forward to a lifetime together with him, to having a sprawling family of unconventional children.

Soon the sweet-smelling rain came, pouring down from the dark cloud hanging over the city. I stood out on the balcony, getting wet, allowing myself time to enjoy the feel of the cool rain on my face and hands, which reminded me of better days. It had rained the day I met him, in one of Father’s shooting parties in the wood behind the manor. Antony had been a dashing young

man, dark and full of the world, with knowing eyes but a cheeky smile. He had taken one look at me, in my “mannish” clothes and short hair and no makeup, and he smiled with great charm, saying, “You, my lady, are destined, to be my wife.” I mocked his cockiness. Father, surprised out of his wits, said, “Good God, Antony, you can tell there’s a woman in amongst all that?” Antony smiled at me, saying, “Oh yes indeed, Sir Gustav. Yes indeed.” Naturally, I hated him with great vigour, and continued hating him for a long, entertaining time after that.

Rutherford knocked quietly at my door at a quarter to seven, looking crisp and refreshed. It was time to go. I sent him to fetch the car. The streets were almost deserted, the entire city closed for business.

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Aunt Julia was in a ward containing a dozen other patients, whose bedside tables were decorated with get-well messages and irregular vases that held cheerful floral arrangements. A severe matron monitored the situation from a formidable desk. Tired young nurses in heavy uniforms and large starched hat contraptions scurried about, attending to their patients’ never-ending needs. The air here reeked of antiseptic, pungent flowers, and something unpleasant but nameless.

Julia was sitting up in bed, looking weak and confused. Seeing me, she brightened. “Ruth!” she said, trying not to shout. Unlike the Casualty department, this ward was aggressively quiet. No-one would dare emit anything as gauche as a noise with Matron glaring from her desk.

I had stopped at the shop downstairs and obtained some grapes and boiled sweets for Julia, which seemed to bemuse her. “Oh dear, I am an invalid, aren’t I?” She smiled, saying this, and helped herself to a grape or two as we went through the greetings. She was very taken with Rutherford, who did not sit, despite being offered a chair. He stood at the end of the bed, hands crossed behind him in the “at-ease” position, gloves and hat under his left arm, looking efficient. I could tell Julia would have liked to chat with him about the sheer impossibility of

looking after her wayward niece, but she was more concerned about other matters.

“I received your telegram, Julia. What’s—?” I produced the crumpled telegram and showed it to her. I had received it four days earlier. Julia had sent it from Kuala Lumpur, one of the last stops on her epic series of flights out here from Britain. Julia’s telegram read:

RUTH—YOUR LIFE IN DANGER STOP COMING TO  
SEE YOU STOP BE CAREFUL STOP WITH YOU SOON  
STOP LOVE JULIA

“Yes, yes, of course. I’ve been so confused, with all the...all this fuss. Do you know what these doctors are telling me, Ruth? They’re telling me I have *epilepsy*, for goodness’ sake! What rot!”

Which seemed to rule out the disturbing thought that she had a history of the condition that she’d kept secret. I felt that she would have told me, in these circumstances, if there had been such a history. The condition was too alarming to lie about it. “The doctor in Casualty told me you’d collapsed during the final part of the flight,” I said.

Julia looked puzzled, and touched her forehead. “All I remember, I remember feeling anxious, and somewhat ill—nasty turbulence, they said—and I was so worried about you. I set out two months ago, and all that time this anxiety has only grown worse. It was the most frightful trip you could imagine. I couldn’t keep any food down, so I’ve been terribly hungry—thank you so much for the grapes, I must say, just the thing!—and all I could focus on was that I simply had to tell you about my dreams—”

“What did you mean, ‘Your life in danger’?”

Julia, about to eat a grape, nodded, and then stopped. “I have been having the most frightful dreams, Ruth. Frightful! Something was happening to you—or possibly someone else, I couldn’t quite be sure, not at first. Something terrible. In the later dreams, which I started having *en route*, I saw someone trying to kill you, someone with the most enormous hands—”

Julia had always claimed to have “the Sight”, as she called it.

“Surely, though,” I said, sceptical, “this is just the sort of nonsense we all get in dreams. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“I entirely disagree, Ruth. I know the difference between ordinary, common or garden dreams, and these...these *experiences*, that I’ve been having. You see, in these dreams, I’m looking out through the eyes of this person, and he’s stalking through your house, looking for you, looking through your papers, that sort of thing, and then he comes to your bedroom, and you’re asleep and...” She was getting upset, and apologised. Her strength was fading, now that she’d at last unburdened herself of her message.

“How did you know it was my house? You’ve never seen my house.”

She sniffed. “I just knew it was your house, the way you know things in dreams. It looked very nice, too. Just the way I’d always imagined it.”

I glanced at Rutherford, who also looked minutely disturbed. He must be worried sick, I thought.

I said to Julia, who now was looking like she would fall asleep at any moment, “You’re coming to stay with me, in Pelican River, at least for a while. I have everything laid on, an excellent cook, and the town itself is charming. Right on the sea.”

She looked, despite the weariness, astonished, and further chagrined at said astonishment. “Are you sure that’s a good idea, Ruth?”

“How do you mean?”

“Your house. That town.” She stared at me, as if it was blindingly obvious.

“Yes. My home. Very nice, comfortable, splendid view of the water—”

“Quite. Of course. But don’t you see, dear. These visions are warning me—warning *you*—about your house! The very last thing you should be thinking is returning there, let alone with me.”

I was speechless for a moment. Rutherford stepped in. “If I may be so bold, Miss Templesmith, I served with distinction in

the War. I still have my service revolver. Anyone wanting to enter that house with murder on his mind will first have to contend with me.”

Julia stared at him for a moment. He stood there, next to me, the image of the stalwart and resolute English soldier he had once been. She looked at me, then back at Rutherford, who glanced at me now, as if worried that he’d overstepped the bounds of propriety. Julia said to me, “It would appear I have little choice.”

“Of course you have a choice, Julia. But consider: your evidence for this belief, that my life is in danger from someone breaking into my house one night, is your dreams and visions. You don’t know for certain that it will happen.”

“My dreams often do come to pass.”

“Yes, and equally often do not come to pass. You must admit that.”

“Why can you not simply agree to move into a hotel for the duration?”

“Yes, and for how long? How long would I have to stay in this hotel? A week? A month? A year? You don’t know, from what you saw in your dreams, exactly when this attack is meant to happen. It could be tomorrow. It could be years from now.”

“Yes, there is that,” Julia said, and disconsolately munched a grape.

“Moreover,” I went on, pressing my point, “what’s to say that the, let’s say ‘the killer’, would not simply find me wherever I went? It could be that the location in your dreams is beside the point, and that the salient point is that it is me on the receiving end.”

“That is true, I must admit,” Julia allowed.

“I could go to the South Pole, and it wouldn’t matter. If he wants me dead, he’ll—”

“Yes, yes, your point is made, dear Ruth. No need to beat me about the head and shoulders with your argument.”

“So what do you say? I have no plans to move out of my own home. And if it’s good enough for me to stay there...”

“You really think it would be safe?”

“Rutherford has never failed me.”

Rutherford blushed lightly on hearing this.

“I don’t know. I think you’re mad, but if you think it would be all right...”

“I could have a word with the local police, if you like. They could increase their patrols.” It would keep them from their fishing and crabbing trips, so they would not be pleased about it, but they might possibly do it.

Julia sagged visibly. “Very well, then. I am persuaded. I have always loved the seaside.”

“Then it’s settled,” I said.

## 2

In the two days of her stay at the hospital, Julia and I spoke at length each night, about home, family—and those troubling visions. Feeling foolish, I began to see that perhaps these were not dreams but something more powerful, and more focused. The more Julia described specific items and rooms of my house, the more I felt unsettled. In my hotel room those nights, it took longer than usual for sleep to come for me, and, when it did, it was neither restful nor satisfying. I woke late in the mornings and felt out of sorts. My own dreams offered no insights; indeed, I could remember nothing about them, other than a jarring sense of confusion. Rutherford, by contrast, informed me that he was sleeping very well indeed. The constant traffic outside, with its rattling engines and clopping hooves, shot through with yelling newsboys, did not bother him; he said he had slept through much worse during the War.

What was I to make of Julia's very specific visions? The more she described, the more it did indeed sound like my house. Her description of the intruder thoroughly and professionally rifling through my desk, for example, was chilling. I quizzed her as hard as I dared, considering her condition, on the specific items on the desk and in the drawers, and she was correct eight times out of ten. Her description of the intruder's attempt on my life was unnerving; so detailed, so confident, it was as though Julia

was not quite herself as she described the events; it was as if she were accessing the mind of the intruder himself from some future point. I had never heard of anyone being able to recall things seen in even particularly strange or noteworthy dreams with such cool clarity of detail and intent. Not even the accounts described in volumes by Freud, whose work I did not entirely believe, matched these for sheer chilling detail. When I asked her to stop, when I could hear no more of such things, Julia blinked a few times, glanced at me as if seeing me for the first time, and would say, “Oh my goodness! Ruth! Whatever’s the matter?”

What was the matter was the prospect of “seeing” one’s own death described in such a detached manner, in a voice which, though it came from my Aunt Julia, held no trace of her personality. Even Rutherford looked pale on hearing these accounts. He would no doubt be wondering why he did not feature prominently, dealing with the intruder’s threat long before he could reach my bedroom.

I also asked her more pointed questions about her collapse. In the daylight hours before my nightly visits to the hospital, I had taken the opportunity to consult with a number of doctors about epilepsy, as I tried to find out as much as I could about its symptoms, origins, and alternative treatments. The more Julia told me about her “fits” the less they sounded like “common or garden” *grands mal* epileptic seizures, and the more it sounded – and this will seem fanciful – like a human brain trying but failing to wrestle with some greater “force”. I only considered such an unlikely notion because of Julia’s well-known but oft-ridiculed psychic access to what she had always called “the other bits of reality”. I was wondering if one of these “other” bits of reality was endeavouring to force its way into this world – and if it had succeeded, taking root in a quiet part of Julia’s brain, away from her conscious perception. Such things, I had read, were not unknown, if one consulted the right history books.

Once we reached Pelican River, I planned to seek out my dear friend Gordon Duncombe, for his opinion on the matter. Gordon had manifold talents with electrical and mechanical engineering and had also been known to dabble a little with

rather more “unorthodox” ways of influencing the world around him. One hesitated to describe him as an “amateur magician”, with his precious old books and fussy manner, but perhaps that’s, at least in part, what he was.

My greatest concern was for Julia herself. Was I even wise in taking her home? This question gnawed at me during the long and bumpy four-hour ride, listening to loose limestone gravel spraying up from the car’s tyres and rattling across its undersides. I knew that if I were to leave Julia to look after herself with the Perth medical community, she would be consigned to a home before she knew it. The first sign of another fit or attack would guarantee her fate. And if she were to describe her visions to a doctor, and that same chilling, detached voice emerged from her mouth, she would also quickly find herself incarcerated. Equally, I did not like the thought of sending her home to England. I could afford to have the best medical minds in Australia come to Pelican River to look at Julia, if the need arose—Antony’s life insurance and the modest proceeds from my previous novels saw to that; I was established as a woman of means, and I would look after Julia as best I could, and in the best, most peaceful environment I knew.

And yet, as we passed the sign for Pelican River—a sleepy little fishing town sixty or so miles south of Perth—I did wonder how whatever might be lurking in the back of Julia’s brain might feel about arriving in the very house featuring so heavily in those visions. Would this bring forth the events she had foreseen? Was it Julia, or something employing her body, that would steal through the house and kill me? Or—and this was some sort of comfort—was the fact that I had been warned enough to deflect that fate? After all, I could arm myself, both with weapons and with information. It might be possible to determine, for certain, what was going on with Julia, and prevent everything happening.

If only life were that easy, that tidy.

### 3

Rutherford brought the great vehicle to a stop out the front of my home. He climbed down and came around to help Julia and me disembark. Doing this, he settled into the usual routine, ordering the three other staff about, getting Young Ryan to come and help with the luggage, and asking Sally Hall if she and Vicky Tool had made up a room for Miss Templesmith, as per his telephoned instructions. Sally said they had prepared the Yellow Room, next to mine, thinking that Ma'am would want her relative close by. I greeted everyone, and told them they were doing a fine job, as always. Though I did pause as Ryan went by, and said, "The new hair cream not working out?" He coloured and said, "No, ma'am, sorry, ma'am," and struggled into the house, bearing more luggage than his skinny body looked capable of carrying. I introduced Julia to everyone, and in particular to Sally and Vicky, and instructed them to take the very best care of her. "Aunt Julia's not been well, and is in need of a good pampering."

Julia was staring around her at the house—a modest red-brick two-storey Federation-style property with an extensive verandah all the way around. One of the house's most novel features was the circular windows here and there, like portholes on a ship. "It's bigger than I thought," she said, smiling weakly back at me. She was also staring at the enormous, but very strange-looking, paperbark gums looming around us, their pale, peeling trunks

looking as though they had some terrible skin disease. Native birds cawed and squealed and carolled noisily; the breeze carried the salty tang of the sea, and a faint waft from the fish canning factories on the foreshore. Julia, swatting at flies, seemed all at once aware, as she looked at these alien trees and heard those unusual birds, that she was indeed somewhere very different, and very far, from home. I knew she was an inveterate traveller, but she had never come this far, as if to another world.

Rutherford looked at me, concerned, and I could see he was wondering if bringing Julia here was a wise decision. I, too, was having second thoughts about this, but resolved to adhere to my plans. I told him to take the car around to the garage and give it a clean; it was white with gravel dust. “Yes, ma’am, as you say.”

At once pleased to be home after the ordeal of travelling to the “big smoke”, and yet also concerned at what the future might bring, I went inside. Regardless of all other considerations, I still had a writing deadline, and I meant to beat it. I left Julia in the care of my staff.

In the quiet coolness of the house, with its high ceilings, polished jarrah floors, tasteful but unfashionably minimal furniture, I breathed in the complex aroma of home. I could never describe its exact scent. Part of it was the very air of this region of Western Australia, part was the native-plant pot pourri, part was the fresh smell of a house kept meticulously clean, part was the lingering traces of last night’s fire in the big fireplace. There were many elements, and I treasured them all. No house in England would ever smell like this. I remembered the grand, stuffy, echoing manorial homes in the old country, much like my own family’s house, with its thirty-two rooms, all of them cramped with too much heavy furniture, maddeningly busy wallpaper, ancient heirloom floor rugs, hunting trophies, sombre portraits of long-dead ancestors looking like they hated the artist and the fuss of having to get all dressed up when they’d much rather be out with the hounds and the horses and all their inbred chums. By contrast, I had determined, this house I bought would be full of air and light; it would never be stuffy, it would be welcoming not intimidating, and comfortable without that cloying, cramped

feeling I still remembered and hated from my old life.

Post had accumulated during my absence; nothing that could not wait—mainly bills. The great mahogany clock over the mantel in the drawing room showed it was not quite noon. As if reading my mind, Murray appeared. She smiled politely. “You look starved, ma’am. Can I get you something, just to tide you over ’til lunch?”

“How is Julia doing?”

Murray sighed. “She’ll manage, ma’am. Now if I—”

“A sandwich, I think, would suffice. And coffee.”

“As you say, ma’am,” she said warmly, and left the room. I had recruited Murray, like all my staff (other than Rutherford, who had come with me from Britain), locally. They had taken some time to settle into their roles and duties—all except Rutherford, who had displayed a natural talent for his job that had surprised me.

I joined Julia in the Yellow Room, where she was having a word with Vicky. Before entering, I heard Julia ask, “What on Earth would make a sensible young girl stay in such a place, I ask you!”

I interrupted, knocking pointedly on the door. “Now now, Julia, you mustn’t harass my staff like that. Is everything under control, Vicky?”

“Yes, ma’am,” she said, not stuttering too much today. I sent her to help Sally.

“Well,” Julia said, sitting on the bed as if worried it might eat her. “You appear to have created a very nice little realm in the midst of all this chaos.”

“Chaos? What do you mean?” I knew very well what she meant.

“Do those birds ever shut up? And what’s all this...” She lacked a word for it but simply waved a hand at the view through the window, which showed extensive natural bushland: gum trees, wattles, grevilleas; it was marvellous, and I had gone to great trouble to preserve as much of it as I could. It was exotic, alien in every respect. When I first arrived, I could not stop looking at it, marvelling at how such unusual plants could

possibly survive in such an arid environment. The people who sold me this house had offered to get people in to clear all this “clutter”, to make it, “you know, suitable” – whatever that meant. The only concession I had agreed to was to allow a clear area around the garden’s perimeter. I found out about this from the land agent when arranging the purchase of the house. He told me the perimeter was in case of bush fire, and I stupidly asked what exactly that might entail. He said, “It’s the end of the world, Mrs Black.” Feeling foolish, I agreed, and allowed a clear perimeter. Trying to get a lawn to grow on the cleared land, however, was another matter.

I explained to Julia about the bush, that it was something fundamental to the landscape in this country. Julia glanced at me as if to suggest that I was the one with problems in my head. “But it’s just so awful! It’s so wild and uncontrolled!”

Later, Julia and I sat in the drawing room. She kept looking around the great room. “How do you manage with all this...all this *space* everywhere?”

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After lunch, I rode my purple Imperial Racer bicycle around to Gordon Duncombe’s house. My staff would take care of Julia, and I felt my time could more usefully be spent consulting with Gordon about what had happened. Gordon lived on a small farm on the outskirts of town; he had converted the great barn, its old wood long turned greyish-silver, into a workshop-laboratory. Even before I arrived, his dogs – twelve of them – erupted into a deafening barking frenzy. As I opened the front gate, and wheeled the bicycle inside, the dogs, mutts all, swarmed around me, jumping, barking, wagging their assorted tails. Expecting this, I had brought a small bag of meaty offcuts which I doled out with great care. None of the dogs lunged or made as if to bite me. They accepted the idea that they would have to wait before receiving their treats. Once it was all handed out, the dogs wagged off, going about their own business on the extensive property, and I walked my bicycle up the long gravel drive to the house.

Gordon, who would have heard the dogs, stood waiting on the

front porch, under the verandah. He was in his fifties, a soft sort of man with a slight stoop, as if having trouble bearing the weight of the world. Losing his beloved wife, Alice, several years earlier had left him gutted and broken, much the way I still felt about Antony's loss. Seeing me, he stepped down onto the path and walked down the drive to meet me halfway. He shuffled along, clad as ever in clothes that looked too large for him, including one of his three oft-patched grey cardigans, which he liked to wear because they reminded him of Alice. He had his own way of doing things, and he would not be shifted. Back in the old country, eight years ago, he had cared for Alice night and day for months as she withered away from stomach cancer. After she passed, he sold everything, including his workshop and its contents, and booked himself onto a ship leaving for Western Australia. We had never spoken about what he did during those endless months at sea, but I had the impression that somehow it had been a profound experience for him. Something had happened to him during that voyage. By the time he arrived at Fremantle Harbour, bearing only a small shabby bag containing not even a week's worth of clothes and some toiletries, he had somehow learned to live without Alice, to be his own person.

I wished he would teach me how that was done. I put on a good front, and carried on like a fearless, independent and colourful woman, but I knew I was, as people here would say, "having a lend of everyone". I still wore black, and wore it like a shield, not to keep the world out, but to keep myself in. I still woke up in the mornings thinking that Antony was already up and about, in the kitchen making coffee, or reading the newspaper, or in the bathroom shaving. In bed, almost entirely asleep, I still found myself rolling toward my memory of him, wanting to hold him, to warm me and my cold hands and feet—only to find nothing but empty bed.

I still dared not look at old photographs or the bundles of letters he used to send me from overseas postings, especially during the War.

I had also never cried for him. Never. Secretly, I wondered if there was something wrong with me.

Gordon smiled, “Ruth! What a grand surprise—and here, I’ve just put the kettle on, too. Coffee?”

I thanked him, and he took my bicycle, as usual, and walked it up under his verandah, where it would be safe if it rained. I followed him inside, careful the dogs didn’t bowl me over as they boiled around my legs. I knew they each had names, but I had not yet learned them, even though I heard him talking to these dogs all the time. They kept him busy. He, for his part, kept his home surprisingly tidy and clean. The odour of dog was rarely detected in his modest house, despite the menagerie.

In his kitchen, I watched an elaborate contraption of metal containers, levers, springs, pivoting things made of wood, and gas burners boil the water, percolate the coffee and pour it into separate carefully placed cups, without spilling too much. This was Mark VI of his continuing coffee-machine project—I suspected he would say it was a quest—which had occupied him during much of his life in Pelican River. He had other unlikely contraptions around the house, many of them failed devices that he had stripped for parts to use in newer machines. His plan for a machine that would do the laundry and hang it out to dry on a clothesline that folded out of the back of the thing had never quite worked out, despite great enthusiasm. And then he had large-scale ideas, like his plan to irrigate the vast interior deserts of this country, and thus open up all that land for development. Unfortunately, it also depended on a reliable means of influencing the weather. The idea of simply carving immense canals into the land, taking existing rivers far inland, had occurred to him, and he thought it “had some merit” but there weren’t enough moving parts for his taste. He was a man who liked to see lots of things turning, going up and down, making intriguing noises, and to have lots of knobs and dials, even when such ornamentation was not required.

Then there was his Grand Project. As I sipped my black coffee, scalding hot as ever, and as Gordon adjusted a knob on the coffee machine’s thermostat, he told me about his latest findings. At length, when he noticed that I was not making the right appreciative noises—and no doubt wishing I was an engineer

instead of a novelist—he took me out to his barn, where the beginnings of his great work lay under tarpaulins. He pulled the tarps clear of the basic framework, which was a structure of long steel pipes, almost as large as the barn itself, and there would be a small cabin where two passengers might sit. He showed me huge and intricate drawings illustrating his latest thoughts, and went on about “chronodynamics” in a way that did not seem healthy.

“I’m still having trouble coming up with a good name for it,” he said, finishing his coffee, and setting the empty cup in a rack which itself was mounted on a toy train line, and which would, once he activated it, take the cup into the house for refilling. “I feel I can’t simply call it ‘Time Machine Mark Four’, for example. It needs something...something more, you know, catchy, that captures some aspect of how it actually works...” He was looking at me for some germ of inspiration.

I smiled helplessly and finished my coffee. “Chrono-Traveller? The Time Hopper?”

“Hmm,” he said, stroking his beard. “Time Hopper isn’t too bad, considering. Except the whole craft doesn’t hop, as such; it largely stays fixed in one’s local frame of reference. In our latest correspondence, Mr Wells said something about inertial transitions and it gave me a bit of an idea...” He peered at his drawings again, and made lots of “hmm” noises. I was looking around at everything. In amongst countless odd bits of hardware and machinery, not much of which was recognisable, were the frankly terrifying Tesla towers Gordon was assembling, and which would, he had explained previously, provide the prodigious power for his time machine. Meanwhile, up in the rafters, I saw three bird nests, a great many elaborate spiderwebs in the upper corners of the barn, and there was a smell of oil, machinery, electricity, and dirt. Gordon had large metal drums containing kerosene, different kinds of oil, a wide variety of paints and glues—and a comprehensive collection of tools, all of them pegged up on the walls of the barn where he could reach them if he needed them, and every tool had a black painted silhouette to which it belonged. No tools were missing; they all looked clean; many gleamed in the dim electric light. It had also long

ago occurred to me that everything in this barn was a dreadful fire risk. Just being in there made me anxious. How it would feel once everything was running?

“Listen, Gordon, could we pop back inside? Some things have come up that I’d like to ask you about...”

He glanced up, surprised, “Oh, you should have said. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to drag you out here to show you all this nonsense when you had something on your —”

“It’s quite all right, really. I’m glad you’re making progress with the time machine. Just promise me this: when you finish it and take it for a test flight, do wear protective clothing of some sort!”

He smiled, a little chagrined. We both remembered the last two times, when he’d managed to get earlier time machine prototypes almost working. No actual time travel took place, but the explosions could be heard for miles around.

Back in his cozy lounge room, I took a seat on the old couch and Gordon sat across from me in his favourite overstuffed brown chair, with its very large rounded arms. No sooner had he sat than two of his dogs appeared and leapt straight into his lap. He yelled, shooing them off, “Come on, you lot, get out of here! We’ve got company! Yes, that’s right. There’s someone else in the world apart from you mongrels!” The two dogs stared for a moment, then trotted off, tails high. He looked at me, a little embarrassed. “Sorry about that. What a madhouse!”

I rather liked that it was such a madhouse, to be honest, but I didn’t want to tell him that, in case it sounded somehow condescending. I liked that things were always happening here, that there was such a lot of life about. I loved my own home, for its peacefulness, for its grounds and for its view of the distant estuary, but it was a house for quiet contemplation and reflection. Gordon’s house, by contrast, was a place for making things happen.

I explained the situation with Julia.

Gordon’s manner changed, growing serious and thoughtful. His lounge room, as with much of the small house, was full of jammed bookcases, none of which matched, just like his dogs.

The whole collection looked like something put together over time by someone with limited funds but a great passion for books and knowledge. The shelves, bent and straining, managed to hold some wonderful old books, and not all of them were science and engineering texts. He was soon up on his feet and perusing his shelves, squinting hard because he was too proud to get spectacles, and then he would complain about fierce headaches. This was something we argued about a lot. I knew he would much rather buy a book than something as useful and practical as spectacles. He would rather buy a book than clothes. Most of the time he would rather buy a book than food, too, if it came to that. He managed on sandwiches and crackers and soup, and was generally hardly even aware of food. It was a tedious necessity. I had only seen him sit down and enjoy a good meal for its own sake when I invited him to my home for a friendly dinner; he always had to have a notebook with him, or a technical journal, or a new book open on his lap or next to his plate. And his plates often went cold if inspiration should strike mid-meal. I understood this; I had found that intriguing ideas for stories popped up at all kinds of inopportune moments, including over dinner. While I didn't have a notebook next to my plate, I did have a well-trained memory for things. Gordon and I talked a great deal about creative impulses and what they meant, how they worked. Such conversations inevitably boiled down to Gordon ruminating about the functions of the human brain and how it must work in order to produce the kinds of things it could produce.

He came back into the room, bearing a thick book. "You say she seemed to speak in a different voice, almost, describing things she had never seen, but describing them correctly..."

"Yes. And, of course, killing me."

"Hmm, yes..." Already he was off again, skimming lines of minute text. "How do you feel about hypnosis?"

Surprised, I stared at him. "Pardon?"

"Do you think she'd agree to going under?" He sat in his old chair again, book open in his lap.

"She might..." I really had no way of knowing. I did know she

was deeply worried about what might be going on in her head, though I had not discussed with her my darkest, most alarming fears: that something had taken root in her brain, in a place where it would not appear to her consciousness. “I suppose it couldn’t hurt,” I said.