FAY WELDON

Mary Fisher lives in a High Tower, on the edge of the sea: she writes a great deal about the nature of love. She tells lies.

Mary Fisher is forty-three, and accustomed to love. There has always been a man around to love her, sometimes quite desperately, and she has on occasion returned this love, but never, I think, with desperation. She is a writer of romantic fiction. She tells lies to herself, and to the world.

Mary Fisher has $ (US) 754,300 on deposit in a bank in Cyprus, where the tax laws are lax. This is the equivalent of £502,867 sterling, 1,931,009 Deutschmark, 1,599,117 Swiss francs, 185,055,050 yen and so forth, it hardly matters which. A woman's life is what it is, in any corner of the world. And wherever you go it is the same – to those who hath, such as Mary Fisher, shall be given, and to those who hath not, such as myself, even that which they have shall be taken away.

Mary Fisher earned all her money herself. Her first husband, Jonah, told her that capitalism was immoral, and she believed him, having a gentle and pliable nature. Otherwise no doubt by now Mary Fisher would have a substantial portfolio of investments. As it is, she owns four houses and these are cumulatively worth – depending on the state of the property market – anything between half a million and a million dollars. A house, of course, only means anything in financial terms if there is anyone to buy it, or if you can bear to sell it. Otherwise a house can only be somewhere to live, or somewhere where those connected with you can live. With luck,

Mary Fisher is loved by my husband, who is her accountant.

I love my husband and I hate Mary Fisher.

Now. Outside the world turns: tides surge up the cliffs at the foot of Mary Fisher's tower, and fall again. In Australia the great gum trees weep their bark away; in Calcutta a myriad flickers of human energy ignite and flare and die; in California the surfers weld their souls with foam and flutter off into eternity; in the great cities of the world groups of dissidents form their gaunt nexi of discontent and send the roots of change through the black soil of our earthly existence. And I am fixed here and now, trapped in my body, pinned to one particular spot, hating Mary Fisher. It is all I can do. Hate obsesses and transforms me: it is my singular attribution. I have only recently discovered it.

Better to hate than to grieve. I sing in praise of hate, and all its attendant energy. I sing a hymn to the death of love.

If you travel inland from Mary Fisher's tower, down its sweep of gravelled drive (the gardener is paid $110 a week, which is low in any currency), through the windswept avenue of sadly blighted poplars (perhaps this is his revenge), then off her property and on to the main road and through the rolling western hills, and down to the great wheat plain, and on and on for a hundred kilometres or so, you come to the suburbs and the house where I live: to the little green garden where my and Bobbo's children play. There are a thousand more or less similar houses, to the east, north, west and south: we are in the middle, exactly in the middle, of a place called Eden Grove. A suburb. Neither town nor country: intermediate. Green, leafy, prosperous and, some say,

beautiful. I grant you it is a better place to live than a street in downtown Bombay.

I know how central I am in this centreless place because I spend a lot of time with maps. I need to know the geographical detail of misfortune. The distance between my house and Mary Fisher's tower is one hundred and eight kilometres, or sixty-seven miles.

The distance between my house and the station is one and a quarter kilometres, and from my house to the shops is 660 metres. Unlike the majority of my neighbours I do not drive a car. I am less well co-ordinated than they. I have failed four driving tests. I might as well walk, I say, since there is so little else to do, once you have swept the corners and polished the surfaces, in this place, which was planned as paradise. How wonderful, I say, and they believe me, to stroll through heaven.

Bobbo and I live at No. 19 Nightbird Drive. It is a select street in the best part of Eden Grove. The house is very new: we are its first occupants. It is clean of resonance. Bobbo and I have two bathrooms, and picture windows, and we wait for the trees to grow: presently, you see, we will even have privacy.

Eden Grove is a friendly place. My neighbours and I give dinner parties for one another. We discuss things, rather than ideas; we exchange information, not theories; we keep ourselves steady by thinking about the particular. The general is frightening. Go too far into the past and there is non-existence, too far into the future and there you find the same. The present must be exactly balanced. These days spare ribs are served, Chinese style, daringly, with paper napkins and finger bowls. It smacks of change. The men nod and laugh: the women tremble and smile and drop dishes.

It is a good life. Bobbo tells me so. He comes home less often, so does not say so as often as he did.

Does Mary Fisher love my husband? Does she return his love? Does she look into his eyes, and speak to him without words?

I was taken to visit her once, and stumbled over the carpet – a true Kashmiri rug valued at $2,540 – as I approached her. I am six foot two inches tall, which is fine for a man but not for a woman. I am as dark as Mary Fisher is fair, and have one of those jutting jaws which tall, dark women often have, and eyes sunk rather far back into my face, and a hooked nose. My shoulders are broad and bony and my hips broad and fleshy, and the muscles in my legs are well developed. My arms, I swear, are too short for my body. My nature and my looks do not agree. I was unlucky, you might think, in the great Lucky Dip that is woman's life.

When I tripped over the rug Mary Fisher smirked, and I saw her eyes dart to Bobbo's, as if this were a scene they had already envisaged.

'Tell me about your wife,' she would have murmured, after love.

'Clumsy,' he would have said. He might have added, if I was lucky, 'No beauty, but a good soul.' Yes I think he would have said that, if only to excuse himself and deny me. A man cannot be expected to be faithful to a wonderful mother and a good wife – such concepts lack the compulsion of the erotic.

Would he also have remarked, in guilty and excited mirth, 'She has four moles on her chin and from three of them hairs grow'? I imagine so; who could resist it, giggling and squealing and tickling in bed, after love, assessing life?

I am quite sure at some time or other Bobbo would have said, in the manner of husbands, 'I love her. I love her but I'm not *in* love with her: not the way I'm in love with you. Do you understand?' And Mary Fisher would have nodded, understanding very well.

I know what life is like: I know what people are like. I know that we all make common cause in self-deception and wishful thinking, and who more so than adulterous lovers? I have time to think about it, when the dishes are done, and the house is quiet, and life ticks by, and there is nothing to do except wonder whether Bobbo and Mary Fisher are together *now, now* – how strange time seems! And I think and think and I act each role, sometimes him, sometimes her. It makes me feel part of the whole both make. I, who have been made nothing. And then Bobbo rings and says he won't be home, and the children come back from school, and a strange familiar silence descends upon the house, a thick, white muffling blanket thrown over our lives: and even when the cat catches a mouse, the yowls and yelps seem to come from a distant place, another world.

Bobbo is a good-looking man, and I am lucky to have him. The neighbours often remark upon it. 'You are so lucky, having someone like Bobbo.' Not surprising, their eyes go on to say, that he's away every now and then. Bobbo is five foot ten, four inches shorter than I am. He is six inches taller than Mary Fisher, who has Size 3 feet and last year spent $1,200.50 on shoes. In bed with me, all the same, Bobbo has no potency problems. He shuts his eyes. For all I know he shuts his eyes when he's in bed with her, but I don't really think so. It's not how I envisage it.

What I think is that the other women up and down Eden Grove are better than I am at telling themselves lies. Their own husbands are away often enough. How otherwise but by lies do they live, do they keep their self-esteem? Sometimes, of course, not even lies can protect them. They are found hanging in the garage, or cold and overdosed in the marital bed. Love has killed them, murderous in its own death throes, flailing and biting and poisonous.

And how, especially, do ugly women survive, those whom the world pities? The dogs, as they call us. I'll tell you; they live as I do, outfacing truth, hardening the skin against perpetual

humiliation, until it's as tough and cold as a crocodile's. And we wait for old age to equalise all things. We make good old women.

My mother was pretty enough, and ashamed of me. I could see it in her eyes. I was her eldest child. 'The image of your father,' she'd say. She'd married again, of course, by then. She'd left my father long ago, far behind, despised. My two half-sisters both took after her; they were delicate, fine-boned things. I liked them. They knew how to charm, and they charmed even me. 'Little ugly duckling,' my mother said to me once, almost weeping, smoothing my wiry hair. 'What are we to do with you? What's to become of you?' I think perhaps she would have loved me, if she could. But ugly and discordant things revolted her: she couldn't help it. She said as much often enough: not of me, particularly, of course, but I knew the patterns of her thought, I knew what she meant. I was born, I sometimes think, with nerve endings not inside but outside my skin: they shivered and twanged. I grew lumpish and brutish in the attempt to seal them over, not to know too much.

And I could never, you see, even for my mother's sake, learn just to smile and stay quiet. My mind struck keys like a piano dreadfully out of tune, randomly played, never quiet. She christened me Ruth, wanting, I think, even in my first days, to forget me if she could. A short, dismissive, sorrowful name. My little half-sisters were called Jocelyn and Miranda. They married well, and disappeared, no doubt into contentment, bathed in the glow of the world's admiration.

3

Mary Fisher, dweller in the High Tower! What's for dinner tonight? Perhaps you don't even know. Perhaps you leave that to the servants. And who's for company? Perhaps you have yet more lovers to choose from: to gaze out with you, through plate-glass windows, over harbour and sea; to watch the moon rise and the sky turn colour? Perhaps you never eat, but with a mind half on food, and half on love to come? Lucky you! But tonight, whoever else, you shan't have Bobbo. Tonight Bobbo is eating with me.

I shall open the French windows from the dining room on to the garden; that is, if the wind doesn't get up. We have some very pretty night-scented stock growing up the side of the garage. We have double-glazing.

The bill for keeping Mary Fisher's windows clean was $295.75, only last month. The sum was transferred from the bank in Cyprus into Mary Fisher's housekeeping account. Bobbo, on the occasions he is home, often brings Mary Fisher's accounts with him. I don't sleep much on the nights he is with me: I get out of bed, quietly, and go into his study and look through Mary Fisher's life. Bobbo sleeps soundly. He comes home to rest, really. To catch up on lost sleep.

I clean our windows myself: sometimes to be tall is quite an advantage.

Tonight, at No. 19 Nightbird Drive, we're going to have mushroom soup, chicken vol-au-vents and chocolate mousse.

Bobbo's parents are coming to visit. He does not want to upset them, so he will play the quiet suburban husband and sit, for once, at the head of the table. He will look out on to wallflowers and hollyhocks and vines. I like gardening. I like to control nature, and make things beautiful.

Bobbo is doing very well in the world. He has become successful. Once he worked humbly as an official in the Revenue Department but then he resigned, threw caution to the winds, risked his pension and began to do private tax work. Now he earns a great deal of money. It suits him to keep me tucked away in Eden Grove. Bobbo has a pleasant apartment in the centre of the city, fifteen kilometres further still to the east, fifteen kilometres further from Mary Fisher, where he gives occasional parties for his clients, where he first met Mary Fisher face to face, where he stays overnight when business presses. So he says. I very seldom go to Bobbo's apartment, or his office. I let it be known I am too busy. It would be embarrassing to Bobbo if his smart new clients saw me. We both know it. Bobbo's graceless wife! All very well, I daresay, for an income-tax collector; hardly for a tax expert working in the private field, growing rich.

Mary Fisher, I hope that tonight you are eating tinned red salmon and the tin has blown and you get botulin poisoning. But such hope is in vain. Mary Fisher eats fresh salmon, and in any case her delicate palate could be trusted to detect poison, no matter how undetectable it might be in other, cruder mouths. How delicately, how swiftly she would spit the erring mouthful out and save herself!

Mary Fisher, I hope such a wind arises tonight that the plate-glass windows of the tower crack and the storm surges in, and you die drowning and weeping and in terror.

I make puff pastry for the chicken vol-au-vents, and when I have finished circling out the dough with the brim of a wine glass, making wafer-rounds, I take the thin curved strips the cutter left behind and mould them into a shape much like the

shape of Mary Fisher, and turn the oven high, high, and crisp the figure in it until such a stench fills the kitchen that even the extractor cannot remove it. Good.

I hope the tower burns and Mary Fisher with it, sending the smell of burning flesh out over the waves. I would go and fire the place myself, but I don't drive. I can only get to the tower if Bobbo drives me there and he no longer does so. One hundred and eight kilometres. He says it is much too far.

Bobbo, parting Mary Fisher's smooth little legs, shiny-calved, shiny-thighed, inserting his finger, as his habit is, where presently his concentrated self will follow.

I know he does the same to her as he does to me, because he told me so. Bobbo believes in honesty. Bobbo believes in love.

'Be patient,' he says, 'I don't intend to leave you. It's just that I'm in love with her and at the moment must act accordingly.' Love, he says! Love! Bobbo talks a lot about love. Mary Fisher writes about nothing but love. All you need is love. I assume I love Bobbo because I am married to him. Good women love their husbands. But love, compared to hate, is a pallid emotion. Fidgety and troublesome, and making for misery.

My children come in from the midsummer garden. A pigeon pair. The boy, slight like my mother, and like her given to complaints. The girl, big and lumpy, as I am, voicing a vindictiveness that masks the despair of too much feeling. The dog and the cat follow after. The guinea pig rustles and snuffles in its corner. I have just turned out its cage. The chocolate for the mousse bubbles and melts in the pan. This is the happiness, the completeness of domestic, suburban life. It is what we should be happy with: our destiny. Out of the gutter of wild desire on to the smooth lawns of married love.

Sez you, as I heard my mother's mother say, on her deathbed, when promised eternal life by the attendant priest.

4

Bobbo's mother Brenda stole around the outside of her son's house at No. 19 Nightbird Drive. She had a playful disposition, which her son had not inherited. Brenda meant to surprise Ruth by pressing her nose against a windowpane. 'Coo-ee, I'm here,' she would mouth through the glass, 'the monster, the mother-in-law!' Thus she would apologise for her difficult role in the family and get the evening off, so she imagined, to a good start, any tension there might be dissolving into laughter.

Brenda's little heels sank into the smooth lawn, spoiling both them and it. The grass was newly mown. Ruth liked mowing the lawn. She could push the mower with one powerful hand, and the job was swiftly and easily done, whilst her littler neighbours perspired and complained, coping, as they always had to, with grass left to grow too long in the belief, dashed weekly and re-born weekly, that mowing the grass was what husbands did.

Bobbo's mother peered into the kitchen window where the mushroom soup simmered, waiting for its dash of cream and splash of sherry, and nodded her approval. She liked things to be properly done – so long as someone else did it. She looked through the open French windows into the dining room, where the table was laid for four and the candles were in their sticks, the silver dishes polished and the sideboard dusted, and sighed her admiration. Ruth was good at polishing. One rub of the powerful fingers and stains disappeared. Brenda was

obliged to use an electric toothbrush to keep her own silver nice – a lengthy and irritating business – and she envied Ruth perhaps this one thing: her way with silver.

Bobbo's mother Brenda did not envy Ruth's being married to Bobbo. Brenda did not love Bobbo and never had. She quite liked Bobbo, and quite liked her husband; but even there, feelings were elusive.

The smell of night-scented stock filled the air.

'How nicely she does everything,' said Bobbo's mother to her husband, Angus. 'How lucky Bobbo is!' Angus stood on the path, waiting for his wife's playfulness to abate, and for her to stop looking in windows. Brenda wore beige silk and gold bracelets and liked to feel timeless. Angus wore a brownish check suit and a yellow ochre shirt and a blue spotted tie. No matter how rich or poor they happened to be, Brenda always looked a little too elegant, and Angus just a little absurd. Brenda had a little tip-tilted nose and too-wide eyes, and Angus a great fleshy nose and narrow eyes.

Bobbo wore grey suits and white shirts and pale ties and was careful always to look serious and neutral, biding his time, concealing his power. His nose was straight and strong and his eyes just right.

Brenda looked into the family room and saw the two children watching television. The remains of an early supper stood on the table. They were washed, combed and ready for bed: they seemed happy, although graceless. But then with Ruth for a mother what could you expect?

'She's such a good mother,' whispered Brenda to Angus, beckoning him closer to admire. 'You have to respect her.'

Brenda shook her heels free of clinging earth and went round to the laundry room where Bobbo was at that moment removing an ironed, folded shirt from a neat pile. He wore

only vest and pants, but hadn't Brenda bathed him when he'd been a little boy? Can a mother be frightened of her son's nakedness?

Brenda did not notice the neat little bite marks on her son's upper arm: or perhaps she did, and assumed they were insect bites. They certainly could not have been made by Ruth's teeth, which were broad, heavy and irregular.

'She's such a good wife,' said Bobbo's mother, moved almost to tears. 'Look at that ironing!' Bobbo's mother never ironed if she could help it. In the good times indeed, she and Angus liked to live in hotels, simply because there'd be a valet service. 'And what a good husband Bobbo has turned out to be!' If she thought her son was narcissistic, staring so long in the mirror, she kept her thoughts to herself.

But Bobbo looked in the mirror at his clear, elegant eyes, his intelligent brow and his slightly bruised mouth, and hardly saw himself at all: he saw the man whom Mary Fisher loved.

Bobbo, as he dressed, was working out in his head a monetary scale for love-making. He felt happier when he could put a fiscal value to things. He was not mean: he was happy enough to spend money. He merely felt that life and money were the same thing. His father had implied it often enough.

'Time is money,' Angus would say, hurrying his son off to school, out of the house. 'Life is time, and time is money.' Sometimes Bobbo would have to walk, because there was no money for the bus. Sometimes he'd go by chauffeur and Rolls-Royce. Angus had made two millions and lost three during the course of Bobbo's childhood. A life full of ups and downs for a growing boy! 'In the time you take to do that,' he'd say to the toddler, Bobbo, trying to lace his tiny shoes with untrained fingers, 'I could make a thousand pounds.'

A monetary scale for love-making, Bobbo thought, would have to set the sum of earning-capacity-wasted plus energy-consumed against the balance of pleasure-gained plus

renewed-creativity. A cabinet minister's coitus, however feeble, could work out at some $200, a housewife's entr'acte, however energetic, a mere $25. An act of love with Mary Fisher, a high earner and energetic with it, would be worth $500. An act of love with his wife would be graded at $75, but of course occurred more often so unfortunately would yield a diminishing return. The more often sex with a particular person happened, Bobbo believed, the less it was worth.

Bobbo's mother extracted her heels once more from the well-tended earth of the new lawn, beckoned her husband, and with him made her way to the front of the house. She looked into the living room and there, behold, was Ruth's mountainous back, bent over the record player, arranging a pleasant selection of pre-dinner and post-dinner music.

Ruth straightened up, knocking her head against the oak beam over the fireplace. The house had been designed for altogether smaller occupants.

As Ruth's mother-in-law prepared to flatten her nose against the windowpane and be playful, Ruth turned. Even through the distorting glass it was clear that she had been crying. Her face was puffy and her eyes swollen. 'The suburban blues!' murmured Brenda to Angus. 'It affects even the happiest!' As they watched Ruth clawed wild hands to heaven, somewhere above the sea-green ceiling, as if entreating the descent of some dreadful god, some necessary destiny.

'I think she's a little more upset than usual,' said Bobbo's mother, unwillingly. 'I hope Bobbo is being good to her,' and she and Bobbo's father went to sit on the low bench outside the house and stare into the deepening evening that fell over Nightbird Drive, and talk in a desultory way about their own and other people's lives.

'We'll give her time to calm down,' said Bobbo's mother. 'Dinner parties, even when they're only family, can be quite a strain!'

Bobbo's mother had a calm word and a quiet and pleasant thought for every occasion. No one could understand whence Bobbo's questing, striving, complaining nature came. Bobbo's father shared his wife's capacity for positive thinking: sixty-six and two-thirds of the time such thinking was justified. Things often turn out for the best, if you expect they will: then all you have to do is leave well alone. But Bobbo, unlike his parents, did not like leaving things to chance. Bobbo's ambition was a one hundred per cent success rate in life.

Bobbo finished dressing. He took his laundered, folded clothes for granted. When he stayed with Mary Fisher the manservant, Garcia, saw to these things; that Bobbo took for granted too.

'What is Mary Fisher having for supper?' wondered Bobbo, as his wife had earlier, and longed to be one of the delicate morsels his mistress put into her mouth. Ah, to be absorbed, incorporated! A slice of smoked salmon, a segment of orange, a drop of champagne!

These were the delicacies that Mary Fisher loved to eat, working out the fantasies of others. Fastidious, impossible Mary Fisher! 'A little smoked salmon,' she'd say, 'really costs no more than a large quantity of tinned tuna. And it tastes so much nicer.'

It was half a lie and half the truth; it was like so much that Mary Fisher said, and wrote.

Bobbo went into the living room and discovered his large wife clawing at empty air.

'Why are you crying?' he asked.

'Because I bumped my head,' she said, and he accepted the lie because his parents would be there any mintue, and he had, besides, very little interest any more in what his wife said or did, or why she cried. He forgot Ruth, and wondered,

as these days he often did, what exactly was the nature of the relationship between Mary Fisher and Garcia, her manservant. Garcia sliced the smoked salmon, uncorked the champagne and polished the wide glass panes of the lower floors inside and out. Other household tasks, more menial, he delegated to the maids. Garcia was paid $300 per week, which was twice what live-in menservants were customarily paid by other of Bobbo's clients. Garcia carried little pots of coffee into his mistress and put them on the great glass table on its pale steel pier, upon which Mary Fisher wrote her novels, on thin, thin paper with clear, red ink. Her writing was spidery and tiny. Garcia was tall and fleshy and dark and young, and his fingers were long and sometimes Bobbo wondered where they strayed. Garcia was twenty-five and just the look on him sent Bobbo's mind at once to sexual speculation.

'But Bobbo,' Mary Fisher would say, 'surely you aren't jealous! Garcia's young enough to be my son.'

'Oedipus was pretty young too,' was Bobbo's reply, making Mary Fisher laugh. How pretty her laugh was and how easily it came. Bobbo wanted no one to hear it but himself. Yet how could he possibly be with her all the time? Certainly there was no other way of keeping her to himself and ensuring her fidelity but by being there. Yet Bobbo had money to earn, work to do, children to father, and a wife, clumsy and weeping and boring though she might be, to husband. He had undertaken marriage: he would see it through. And since he suffered, so would Ruth.

His wife seemed to him to be immeasurably large, and to have grown larger since he told her of his love for Mary Fisher. He asked her if she was putting on weight, and she said no, and stood on the scales to prove it. Fourteen stone, three pounds. A pound or so less, even, than usual! It could only be in his mind, then, that she loomed larger.

Bobbo put on a record. He thought it might drown the sound of his wife's crying. He chose Vivaldi to soothe himself and

her. The *Four Seasons*. He wished she would not weep. What did she expect of him? He had never claimed to love her. Or had he? He could hardly remember.

Ruth left the room. He heard the click of the oven opening: he heard a little cry, a crash. She had burned her fingers. The vol-au-vents were on the floor – he knew it. And so small a distance to carry them – from the oven to the table!

Bobbo turned up the volume of the music and went in to find chicken and cream sauce and pastry on the lino-tiled floor and the dog and the cat already scavenging. He kicked the animals into the garden and pushed Ruth into a chair and told her not to upset the children, who were upset enough by her behaviour as it was, and scraped everything up methodically and as hygienically as possible, reconstituting if not individual pastry cases then at least a suggestion of a large, single, chicken-filled flan. It was in the interests of hygiene that Bobbo left a thin film of food upon the floor. He estimated its value at some $2.

He required the cat and the dog to come and lick up the film, but both were now sulking outside and would not come back in. Instead they sat upon the wall, next to his parents, and like them waited for the domestic climate to change.

'Do stop crying,' pleaded Bobbo in the kitchen. 'Why do you make such a fuss about everything? It's only my parents coming to dinner. They don't expect all this effort. They'd be perfectly happy with a simple meal.'

'No, they wouldn't. But I'm not crying because of that.'

'Then what?'

'You know.'

Ah, Mary Fisher. He did indeed know. He tried reason.

'You didn't expect me, when I married you, never to love anyone again?'

'That is exactly what I expected. It is what everyone expects.'

She had been cheated, and knew it.

'But you're not like everyone, Ruth.'

'You mean I'm a freak.'

'No,' he said, cautiously and kindly. 'I mean we are all individuals.'

'But we're married. That makes us one flesh.'

'Our marriage was rather one of convenience, my dear. I think we both acknowledged that at the time.'

'Convenient for you.'

He laughed.

'Why are you laughing?'

'Because you think in cliches and talk in cliches.'

'I suppose Mary Fisher doesn't?'

'Of course she doesn't. She is a creative artist.'

Andy and Nicola, the children, appeared in the kitchen door: he little and light, she large and looming. The wrong way round. He seemed more girlish than she. Bobbo blamed Ruth for having got the children wrong. He felt their mother had done it on purpose. His heart bled for them. Children open up exquisite nerves and twang them daily, painfully. He wished they had never been born, even while he loved them. They stood between him and Mary Fisher and he had strange dreams in which they came to sorry ends.

'Can I have a doughnut?' asked Nicola. Her response to domestic crisis was to ask for food. She was very overweight.

The expected answer, 'No', in its uttering, would set up a counter-irritant and thus save her parents from more distress. They would be so busy chiding her they would forget to chide each other, or so she believed; wrongly.

'I have a splinter,' said Andy. 'Look, I'm limping!'

He demonstrated, walking through the film of food, limping on into the living room, treading sauce into the carpet. It was autumn green, toning prettily and safely with avocado walls and sea-green ceiling. Bobbo reckoned the greasy footprints would add $30 to the cleaning bill. Come its annual overhaul, the carpet would now have to go for Special and not Regular cleaning.

Outside, Angus and Brenda decided that Ruth would by now have recovered her composure. They left their wall and came up the garden path and rang the forest chimes of the front door. *Pling-plong!*

'Please don't embarrass me in front of my parents,' begged Bobbo, and Ruth began to weep the harder: she uttered great gulping sobs and heaved her giant shoulders. Even her tears seemed bigger and more watery than other people's. Mary Fisher, thought Bobbo, wept nice neat little tears, which had an altogether stronger surface tension than his wife's and would surely be worth more on the open matrimonial market. If only there were such a thing, he would trade Ruth in at once.

'Come in,' he said to his parents at the front door. 'Come in! How wonderful to see you both! Ruth has been peeling onions. She's a little tearful, I'm afraid.'

Ruth ran up to her room. When Mary Fisher ran, her footsteps were light and bright. Ruth's weight swayed from one massive leg to another and shook the house each time it fell. Houses in Eden Vale were designed not just for littler people, but for altogether lighter ones.

5

Now. In Mary Fisher's novels, which sell by the hundred thousand in glittery pink and gold covers, little staunch heroines raise tearful eyes to handsome men, and by giving them up, gain them. Little women can look up to men. But women of six foot two have trouble doing so.

And I tell you this; I am jealous! I am jealous of every little, pretty woman who ever lived and looked up since the world began. I am, in fact, quite eaten up by jealousy, and a fine, lively, hungry emotion it is. But *why* should I care, you ask? Can't I just live in myself and forget that part of my life and be content? Don't I have a home, and a husband to pay the bills, and children to look after? Isn't that enough? 'No!' is the answer. I want, I crave, I die to be part of that other erotic world, of choice and desire and lust. It isn't love I want; it is nothing so simple. What I want is to take everything and return nothing. What I want is power over the hearts and pockets of men. It is all the power we can have, down here in Eden Grove, in paradise, and even that is denied me.

I stand in my bedroom, our bedroom, Bobbo's and my bedroom, and compose my face the sooner to return to my matrimonial duties, to wifedom and motherhood, and my in-laws.

To this end I recite the Litany of the Good Wife. It goes like this:

> I must pretend to be happy when I am not; for everyone's sake.

I must make no adverse comment on the manner of my existence; for everyone's sake.

I must be grateful for the roof over my head and the food on my table, and spend my days showing it, by cleaning and cooking and jumping up and down from my chair; for everyone's sake.

I must make my husband's parents like me, and my parents like him; for everyone's sake.

I must consent to the principle that those who earn most outside the home deserve most inside the home; for everyone's sake.

I must build up my husband's sexual confidence, I must not express any sexual interest in other men, in private or in public; I must ignore his way of diminishing me, by publicly praising women younger, prettier and more successful than me, and sleeping with them in private, if he can; for everyone's sake.

I must render him moral support in all his undertakings, however immoral they may be, for the marriage's sake. I must pretend in all matters to be less than him.

I must love him through wealth and poverty, through good times and bad, and not swerve in my loyalty to him, for everyone's sake.

But the Litany doesn't work. It doesn't soothe: it incenses. I swerve: my loyalty swerves! I look inside myself: I find hate, yes: hate for Mary Fisher, hot, strong and sweet: but not a scrap of love, not the faintest, wriggling tendril. I have fallen out of love with Bobbo! I ran upstairs, loving, weeping. I will run downstairs, unloving, not weeping.

6

'But why was she crying?' asked Brenda of Bobbo, as Ruth lumbered upstairs and the house shook. 'Is it the time of the month?'

'I expect so,' said Bobbo.

'Such a nuisance for a woman,' said Brenda, and Angus coughed a little, embarrassed at the turn the conversation was taking.

Presently Ruth came down, smiling, and served the soup.

Twelve years now since Bobbo first met Ruth. She was one of the girls working in Angus's typing pool. Angus was in the stationery business, working up to his second million, which the introduction of Value Added Tax was later to whittle away to nothing. Angus and Brenda were for once living in a house, not an hotel, which Bobbo appreciated, although he himself was away at his Further Studies. Accountancy exams go on for many years, keeping the son (it is usually a son) unusually dependent upon the father.

Ruth was a helpful, willing girl, able to concentrate and not for ever staring at her reflection in mirrors. If anything, Ruth avoided mirrors. She lived away from home, although still in her teens. Her bedroom had been needed to accommodate her step-father's model train set. She and the train could not safely share a room, because of her clumsiness and the delicacy and sensitivity of the equipment. One of them had

to go, and Ruth was the easier to move. It can take months to adjust train tracks properly and permanently: a young woman can settle anywhere.

So Ruth had taken up residence in a hostel mostly inhabited by shop girls; a particularly light and fine breed of young woman. The belts that cinched their tiny waists would scarcely encompass one of Ruth's thighs.

The leaving of the childhood home had been unemotional: it was obvious to everyone, including Ruth, that she had outgrown the place. She did not like to make a fuss. Her school had been a convent, run by nuns of the more superstitious, less intellectual kind; it concentrated on teaching the female and household graces, and examinations, apart from those in shorthand-typing, were not taken. The training encouraged stoicism, not selfish emotions, nor attention-seeking tears.

Ruth's half-sisters Miranda and Jocelyn did well enough at St. Martha's, especially in Greek dancing, which they demonstrated very sweetly at end-of-term concerts. Ruth was useful, too, on such occasions, shifting props. 'You see,' the nuns said, 'everyone has a value. There is a place for everyone in God's wonderful creation.'

Shortly after Ruth moved into the hostel, her mother left home. Perhaps she too felt driven into a corner by the ever-growing train set, or was disappointed by the lack of sexual enthusiasm so often displayed by those who get caught up in this rewarding hobby, or perhaps it was – as Ruth imagined – that the sudden absence of the daughter set the mother free. At any rate Ruth's mother ran off with a mining engineer to Western Australia, on the other side of the world, taking Miranda and Jocelyn with her, and Ruth's step-father presently made do with a woman of fewer expectations, who saw no particular reason why Ruth should visit. Ruth, after all, was not a blood relative, not remotely family.

These facts, coming to Brenda's notice by way of Angus, made her feel sorry for the girl.

'She needs a helping hand!' said Brenda.
Ruth was always the one at the switchboard when Brenda rang through early, late, or in the lunch hour, courteous, calm and efficient. The other girls would be out shopping for little scarves and earrings and eyeshadow and so forth and all in Angus's time (no wonder he was so often bankrupt); but never Ruth.
'I was once an ugly duckling,' Brenda said to Angus, then. 'I know what it feels like.'
'She's not an ugly duckling,' said Angus. 'Ugly ducklings turn into swans.'
'I think,' said Brenda, 'the girl needs a proper home at this, the turning point in her life. She could stay with us. I could help her make the most of herself and she could do a little cooking and cleaning in the evenings, after work, in return. And I really have to have someone for the ironing. She would pay rent, too, of course. She is a very proud girl. Probably about a third of her wages.'
'There isn't room,' said Angus. The house they lived in was very small, which was how they both felt comfortable. But Brenda pointed out that while Bobbo was at college his room was empty during term-time.
'It's wrong,' she said. 'An empty room just *feels* wrong.'
'You've lived in so many hotels,' he said, 'you're beginning to think like an hotel manager. But I know what you mean.'

Brenda and Angus both felt, but did not quite like to say, that Bobbo's childhood and dependency had been going on for a long time: for too long, in fact. His room should by now be free, surely, for them to use as they wished. Parenthood could not go on for ever. And if they wished to fill the room up Ruth would do the filling very well indeed. 'Bobbo can always sleep on the sofa,' said Brenda. 'It's very comfortable.'

Bobbo was surprised and annoyed, coming home for Christmas, to be offered a sofa for a bed, and to find his old schoolbooks moved out of his cupboard to make way for Ruth's flat, trodden-down shoes.

'Look upon Ruth as a sister,' said Brenda. 'The sister you never had!'

But Bobbo had that preoccupation, common to the only child, a fascination with sibling incest, and took his mother's words as justification for the fulfilling of his fantasies and crept into what after all was his own bed, by dead of night. Ruth was warm and soft and broad and the sofa was cold and hard and narrow. He liked her. She never laughed at him, or despised his sexual performance, as did Audrey Singer, the girl whom Bobbo currently loved. Bobbo felt that his seduction of Ruth, this vast, obliging mountain, served Audrey right.

It was sexual suicide of the most dramatic kind.

'See what you have done!' he said, in his heart, to Audrey. 'See what you have driven me to! Ruth!'

'See,' he said to his mother, in his heart, killing off any number of birds with one stone, 'see what happens when you turn me out of my own room, my own bed. I'll simply climb back into it, no matter who's there.'

Ruth was happy enough with the arrangement. She hugged the knowledge of her secret love to her heart, and felt healed, and a great deal more like everyone else, just taller, which didn't after all notice when she was lying down. When her step-father's new wife rang at Christmas to see how she was getting on she was able to reply, with truth, that she was getting on perfectly well, thus enabling the guilty couple to forget her properly. Ruth's mother presently wrote to say this would be the last letter ever, since her new husband wished her to put her past behind her, and they both now belonged to a wonderful new religion which required total obedience from the wife to the husband. In such acquiescence, wrote Ruth's mother, lay peace. She gave her blessing (and the Master's too, for she had been allowed to consult him personally about Ruth: the Master was the Oneness's representative on this earth as the wife was the husband's representative) and was thankful that Ruth was now fully grown and able to look after herself. She was more

worried about Miranda and Jocelyn, who were still so young, but the Master had told her everything would be all right. This letter was a last, final, loving goodbye.

'Our parents,' said Bobbo, 'are sent to try us!' He enjoyed Ruth's dependence upon him: the way her dark, deep, bright eyes followed him about the room. He loved to sleep with her; she was a warm, dark, eternal sanctuary and if the light was on he could always shut his eyes.
'Perhaps they'll get married,' said Brenda to Angus, 'and both move out.'
Ruth used up rather more hot water than Brenda had anticipated, especially in the bath. In hotels hot water comes free, or appears to.
'I hardly think so,' said Angus. 'A boy like Bobbo needs to marry wisely, with an eye to money and connections.'
'I had neither,' said Brenda, 'and yet you married me!' And they kissed, longing to be alone together, to be without the younger generation.

Bobbo went back to college, passed the last of his accountancy exams, came home and contracted hepatitis. Ruth found that she was pregnant.

'They'll have to get married,' said Brenda. 'I'm far too old to be nursing an invalid.' Ruth was sleeping on the sofa while Bobbo was ill, and had broken its springs.

'Marriage!' said Bobbo, appalled.

'She's a peach amongst women,' said Brenda. 'I don't know how your father will manage without her. She's efficient and conscientious and *good*.'
'But what will people *say*?'

Brenda pretended not to hear and put the house up for sale. She and Angus were moving back into an hotel, now Bobbo could stand on his own feet. Audrey Singer announced her engagement to another. Bobbo drank half a bottle of whisky.

had a bad relapse, and married Ruth when she was five months pregnant. Hepatitis is a depressing and debilitating illness, and it seemed to Bobbo, at the time, that his mother was right and one wife was much like another. The great advantage of Ruth was that she was *there*.

Ruth wore a white satin wedding gown to the Register Office and Bobbo realised perhaps he was wrong. There could be a considerable difference between one wife and another. He thought he saw people sniggering. As soon as the baby was born, she conceived the next.

After that Bobbo insisted that Ruth should wear a coil and looked around for more suitable recipients of his affection and sexual energy. As the effects of hepatitis faded, he found them easily enough. He did not like to be dishonest or hypocritical and would always tell Ruth what had happened and what would happen next, if he could manage it. He told her that she too was free to experiment sexually.

'We'll have an open marriage,' he'd told her before they were married. She was four months into pregnancy and still being rather sick.

'Of course,' she said. 'What does that mean?'

'That we must both live our lives to the full and always be honest with each other. Marriage must surround our lives, not circumvent them. We must see it as a starting point, not a finishing line.'

She'd nodded in agreement. Sometimes, to stop herself being sick, she would hold her mouth together with her fingers. She did it now, while he talked about personal freedom. He wished she wouldn't.

'True love isn't possessive,' he explained to her. 'Not our kind of domestic, permanent love. Jealousy, as everyone knows, is a mean and ignoble emotion.'

She had agreed and run to the bathroom.

Presently, rather to his dismay, he found the pleasure of sexual experiment enhanced by the knowledge that he would eventually report it to his wife. He stood outside his own body as witness to erotic events. It made the excitement greater and the responsibility less, since he could share it with Ruth.

It was obvious to both of them that it was Ruth's body which was at fault, for what she saw as difficulties and he did not. He had married it perforce and in error and would do his essential duties by it, but he would never be reconciled to its enormity, and Ruth knew it.

Only his parents seemed to expect him to be faithful and kind, as Angus was to Brenda and Brenda to Angus. They treated Bobbo and Ruth as proper husband and wife; not somehow accidentally espoused.

Ruth had wheeled the babies' pram around the park and taken comfort from licks of their ice lollies and read romantic novels, amongst them those by Mary Fisher; and Bobbo had got on in the world.

Shortly after they had moved in to Eden Grove Bobbo had seen Mary Fisher across a crowded room at his own party and she had seen him and said –
'Let me be your client.'
And he had said –
'At once.'
– And the past paled for Bobbo, including even the agony and ecstasy of Audrey Singer, and the present became all powerful and the future full of wonderful and dangerous mystery.

This was how the affair began. Bobbo and Ruth gave Mary Fisher a lift home from the party. Mary Fisher had parked her Rolls-Royce impetuously, the sooner to enjoy herself, but

unfortunately, for she had obstructed the flow of city traffic, and while she flickered and glittered at her host, the police arrived to tow the vehicle away.

She would, she said, send her manservant Garcia in the morning to retrieve the foolish thing. In the meantime, she said, could Bobbo and Ruth give her a lift back, since they were on her way home?
'Of course!' cried Bobbo. 'Of course.'

Ruth thought that Mary Fisher somehow meant *she* was on *their* way home, but when Bobbo stopped on the corner of Eden Avenue and Nightbird Drive to drop Ruth off, realised her mistake.

'At least take her to the door,' protested Mary Fisher, in an act of condescension which Ruth was never to forgive, but Bobbo said, laughing –
'I don't think Ruth is a natural rape victim, somehow. Are you, darling!' and Ruth said, loyally, 'I'll be perfectly all right, Miss Fisher. It's just that we live in a dead end and reversing's so difficult in the dark! And we've left the children without a baby-sitter: I really must get back as soon as possible.'

But they weren't listening, so she got out of the back – Mary Fisher was in the front, next to Bobbo – and before the door shut heard Mary Fisher say – 'You'll never forgive me. I live ever such a way away. Almost to the coast. Actually, on the coast itself,' and Bobbo said – 'Do you think I didn't know that?' and the door closed and there Ruth was, standing in the dark, while the car zoomed away, and the powerful red rear lights shot off into blackness. Bobbo never drove like that with her: thrum, thrum! And she never caused Bobbo any inconvenience: never asked for a lift here, or an errand there: he always made such a fuss if she did. How did Mary Fisher dare? And why did her presumption charm him, and not offend him? A lift to the *coast* while Ruth would walk in the rain, rather than delay Bobbo fifteen seconds.

She went home and thought about it, lying awake all night, and of course Bobbo did not come home, and in the morning Ruth shouted at the children, and then told herself it wasn't fair to take her distress out on them, and got herself under control, and ate four toasted muffins with apricot jam when the house was quiet and she was alone.

Bobbo came home very tired and missed dinner and went straight to bed and fell asleep and didn't wake until seven the next morning when he said, 'Now I know what love is,' and got up and dressed, staring at himself in the mirror as if he saw something new there. He was away the next night, and after that two or three nights every week.

Sometimes he'd say he was working late and staying over in town; but sometimes, if he was very tired or very elated, would confide that he'd been with Mary Fisher, and he'd talk about the dinner guests – famous people, rich people, whom even Ruth had heard of – and what there'd been to eat, and the witty, charming, naughty things Mary Fisher had said, and the dress she'd worn, and what it was like afterwards, when at last he could take it off –

'Ruth,' he'd say, 'you're my friend; you must wish me well, in this. Life is so short. Don't begrudge me this experience, this love. I won't leave you; you mustn't worry, you don't deserve to be left; you are the mother of my children: be patient, it will pass. If it hurts you, I'm sorry. But let me share it with you, at least – '

Ruth smiled, and listened, and waited, and it didn't pass. She wondered, in the quiet days, about the nature of women who cared so little for wives.

'One day,' she said, 'you must take me to dinner at the High Tower. Don't they find it strange that your wife is never there?'

'They're not your sort of people,' Bobbo said. 'Writers and artists and things like that. And no one who's anyone gets married, these days.'

But he must have passed the remark on to Mary Fisher, for presently Ruth was asked to the High Tower. There were only two other guests: the local solicitor and his wife and both elderly. Mary Fisher said the others had cancelled at the last moment but Ruth did not believe her.

Bobbo had done his best to stop Mary Fisher issuing an invitation to Ruth, but had failed.
'If she's part of your life, darling,' said Mary Fisher, 'I want her to be part of mine. I want to meet her properly, not just as someone you discarded on a street corner in the middle of the night. None of my heroines would stand for that! I'll tell you what I'll do. We'll make it one of the duty dinners, not the fun ones.'

Sometimes Bobbo asked Mary Fisher why she loved him. Mary Fisher said it was because he was lover and father and what was forbidden and what was allowed all rolled into one, and anyway love was mysterious, and Cupid was wilful and why did he want to know, couldn't he just *accept*?

Bobbo did. Ruth came to dinner. She'd tripped and blushed and the hairs on her upper lip and chin caught the light at dinner: she had spilled wine on the tablecloth and said the wrong things to the wrong people, surprising and upsetting things.
'Don't you think,' she'd said to the solicitor, 'that the more police there are the more crime there is?'
'You mean,' he'd said, kindly, 'the more police, the less crime. Surely.'
'No, not surely at all,' said Ruth, excitedly, spinach quiche slobbering down her chin, and Bobbo had to silence her with a kick under the table.

Sometimes Bobbo thought that Ruth was mad. It wasn't just that she didn't look like other people: she couldn't be relied upon to act like them either.

Bobbo feared that since Mary had properly met Ruth she nad cooled a little towards him. It did no one any good to

be associated with the unhappy and unfortunate. Love, success, energy, health, happiness went round in a closed circle, self-perpetuating and self-energising, but precariously balanced. Alter one spoke of the wheel and the whole machine could falter and stop. Good fortune so easily turns to bad! And now he loved Mary Fisher and he loved Mary Fisher and he loved Mary Fisher and his parents had come to dinner and his wife had wept and made a scene, and thrown the dinner about and he did not like her at all. Ruth stood between him and happiness: full square! And in all the history of marriage had there ever been such full-squaredness?

Bobbo had said to Mary Fisher, 'Mary, don't you feel guilty about having an affair with a married man?'
And Mary had said, 'Is that what we're having, an affair?' and his heart had pounded in terror, until she'd added, 'I thought it was more than that. It *feels* like more than that! It feels like for ever,' so that joy had silenced him, and she'd gone on to say, 'Guilty? No. Love is outside our control. We fell in love: it is no one's fault. Not yours. Not mine. And I suppose because Ruth expects nothing, she will never have anything. We can't spoil our lives because she was born with so little joy. You acted out of kindness when you married her, and I love you for it, but now, my love, be kind to me. Live with me. Here, now, for ever!'
'And the children?'
'They are Ruth's crown, and her jewels. They are her comfort. She is so lucky. I have no children. I have no one except you.'

She said what he wanted to hear. It was entrancing. And now he sat at a suburban table, with his mother, his father, and his past and thought of Mary Fisher, and how she needed him, and longed for a future, and Ruth came in at last with the soup tureen.

Ruth's brave smile faltered over the soup. Her parents-in-law stared up at her in calm and pleasant anticipation. And Ruth gazed at the three dog hairs in that greyish foam which

is good mushroom soup, thickened by cream and put through the blender.

The dog's name was Harness. Bobbo had bought him for Andy on Andy's eighth birthday. Ruth looked after him. Harness did not like Ruth. He saw her as a giantess, an affront to the natural order of things. He accepted the food she gave him, but he slept where she told him not to, slunk under cupboards and snapped at searching hands, chewed the upholstery and set up a din if left anywhere he did not want to be. He shed hairs, stole food, ate butter by the pound (when he could find it) and vomited it up directly. Bobbo, on those Sundays he was at home, loved to go walking with Harness in the park, and Andy would go too, and father and son would feel happy and ordinary and comfortable. Ruth would stay behind, removing dog and cat hairs from fabric of one kind or another with a special vacuum brush, battery powered. She did not like Harness.

'Don't let the soup get cold, Ruth,' said Bobbo, as if this was her usual habit.

'Hairs!' was all Ruth said.

'It's a nice clean dog,' said Brenda. 'We don't mind, do we, Angus?'

'Of course not,' said Angus, who did. As a child Bobbo had always wanted a dog, and Angus had always prevented him from having one.

'Can't you even keep the dog out of the soup?' asked Bobbo. It was the wrong thing to say, and he knew it as soon as it was said. He did try not to say 'can't you even' to Ruth, but it did slip out whenever he was feeling at odds with her, which of late had been more and more.

Tears appeared in Ruth's eyes. She picked up the soup tureen.

'I'll sieve it,' she said.

'What a good idea!' said Brenda. 'Then no harm's done.'

'Bring the soup back at once,' cried Bobbo. 'Don't be so silly, Ruth. It isn't a disaster. It's three dog hairs. Just pick them out.'

'But they might be the guinea pig's,' said Ruth. 'He was running along the dresser shelf.' She liked the guinea pig least of all the children's pets. Its shoulders were too hunched and its eyes too deep. It reminded her of herself.

'You're tired,' said Bobbo. 'You must be tired, or you wouldn't talk such nonsense. Sit down.'

'Let her sieve the soup, dear,' said Brenda, 'if it's what she wants.'

Ruth got as far as the doorway. Then she turned back.

'He doesn't care whether I'm tired or not,' Ruth said. 'He doesn't think of me any more. He only ever thinks about Mary Fisher; you know, the writer. She's his mistress.'

Bobbo was shocked by this indiscretion, this disloyalty, but also gratified. Ruth was not to be trusted. He'd always known it.

'Ruth,' he said, 'it's very unfair to my parents to involve them in our family problems. It's nothing to do with them. Have pity, will you, for once, on the helpless bystanders.'

'But it *is* something to do with me,' said Brenda. 'Your father never behaved like that; I don't know where you get it from.'

'Kindly respect my privacy, mother,' said Bobbo. 'It's the least you can do after the childhood I led.'

'And what was the matter with your childhood?' demanded Brenda, turning quite pink.

'Your mother's right,' said Angus. 'I think you should apologise to her for that. But fair's fair, Brenda, I think you should leave the young people to sort things out in their own way.'

'Father,' said Bobbo, 'it was just that kind of attitude in you that gave me one of the most appalling childhoods any child could have.'

Mary Fisher had lately been explaining the roots of his unhappiness to him.

'I never made your mother unhappy,' said Angus. 'Say what you like about me, but I never deliberately did harm to any woman.'

'Then all I can say is,' said Brenda, 'you did it by accident.'

'Women are always imagining things,' said Angus.

'Especially Ruth,' said Bobbo. 'Mary Fisher is one of my best clients. I'm very lucky to have her on my books. I certainly value her both as a creative person – she's remarkably talented – and I like to think as a friend, but I'm afraid our Ruth has a suspicious mind!'

Ruth looked from one parent-in-law to the other and then at her husband and dropped the tureen of mushroom soup, which flowed over the metal rim where the tiles stopped and the carpet began, and the children and the animals returned, summonsed by the sound of new disaster. Ruth thought that Harness was laughing.

'Perhaps Ruth ought to get out and get a job,' said Angus, on his knees on the floor, spooning soup back into a bowl, but less fast than the carpet absorbed it, so that he had to press

the spoon hard into the pile to extract the precious grey liquid. 'Keep herself busy: less prone to imagining things.'

'There *are* no jobs,' Ruth pointed out.

'Nonsense,' said Angus. 'Anyone who really wants one can get one.'

'That's not true,' said Brenda. 'What with inflation, recession and so on . . . You don't mean us to *eat* that, do you, Angus?'

'Waste not, want not,' said Angus.

Bobbo wished to be far, far away, with Mary Fisher, to hear her bubbly laugh, hold her pale hand and put her little fingers one by one into his mouth until her breathing quickened and she wet her own lips with her pink, pink tongue.

Nicola kicked the cat, whose name was Mercy, out of the way, and the cat went straight to the grate and squatted, crapping its revenge, and Brenda wailed and pointed at Mercy, and Harness became over-excited and leapt up against Andy in semi-sexual assault, and Ruth just stood there, a giantess, and did nothing, and Bobbo lost his temper.

'See how I have to live!' He shouted. 'It's always like this. My wife creates havoc and destruction all round: she destroys everyone's happiness!'

'Why won't you love me?' wailed Ruth.

'How can one love,' shouted Bobbo, 'what is essentially unlovable?'

'You're both upset,' said Angus, giving up the soup to the carpet. 'You've been working too hard.'

'It's a lot for a woman,' said Brenda. 'Two growing children! And you were never easy, even as a boy, Bobbo.'

'I was perfectly easy,' yelled Bobbo. 'You just resented every moment you spent on me.'

'Come along, Brenda,' said Angus. 'Least said, soonest mended. We'll eat out.'

'A good idea,' shouted Bobbo, 'since my wife has already thrown your main course on the floor.'

'Temper, temper,' said Brenda. 'In Los Angeles they build houses without kitchens, because nobody bothers to cook. And quite right too.'

'But I spent all day doing this,' sobbed Ruth. 'And now no one's going to eat it.'

'Because it's uneatable!' shouted Bobbo. 'Why am I always surrounded by women who can't cook?'

'I'll ring you in the morning, pet,' said Brenda to Ruth. 'You have a nice bath and get a good night's sleep. You'll feel better then.'

'I shall never forgive you for being so rude to my mother,' said Bobbo to Ruth, coldly, and loud enough for his mother to hear.

'Don't you go putting the blame on her,' said Brenda, cunningly. 'It was you who was rude, not her. I am a perfectly good cook, I just don't care to do it.'

'Marriage isn't easy,' remarked Angus, putting on his coat. 'It's like parenthood, something people have to work at. Of course, usually it's left to one partner rather than the other.'

'It certainly is!' said Brenda meaningfully, drawing on her gloves. She was not focusing properly: she had forgotten to put anti-perspirant under her right arm, and her pretty tan

blouse was beginning to show a single dark under-arm stain. She had a lop-sided look.

'Now do you see what's happening?' Bobbo turned on Ruth. 'You've even set my parents quarrelling! If you see happiness you have to destroy it. It's the kind of woman you are.'

Brenda and Angus left. They walked away down the path, side by side but not touching. Domestic strife is catching. Happy couples do well to avoid the company of the unhappy.

Ruth went into the bathroom and locked the door. Andy and Nicola took the chocolate mousse from the fridge and shared it.

'It would serve you right if I went to see Mary,' said Bobbo to Ruth, through the keyhole. 'You have worked terrible mischief here tonight! You have upset my parents, you have upset your children, and you have upset me. Even the animals were affected. I see you at last as you really are. You are a third-rate person. You are a bad mother, a worse wife and a dreadful cook. In fact I don't think you are a woman at all. I think that what you are is a she-devil!'

It seemed to him, when he said this, that there was a change in the texture of the silence that came from the other side of the door; he thought perhaps he had shocked her into submission and apology: but though he knocked and banged she still did not come out.

7

So. I see. I thought I was a good wife tried temporarily and understandably beyond endurance, but no. He says I am a she-devil.

I expect he is right. In fact, since he does so well in the world and I do so badly, I really must assume he is right. I am a she-devil.

But this is wonderful! This is exhilarating! If you are a she-devil the mind clears at once. The spirits rise. There is no shame, no guilt, no dreary striving to be good. There is only, in the end, what you *want*. And I can take what I want. I am a she-devil!

But what do I want? That of course could be a difficulty. Waverings and hesitations on this particular point can last a whole life long – and for most people usually do. But not, surely, in the case of she-devils. Doubt afflicts the good, not the bad.

I want revenge.
I want power.
I want money.
I want to be loved and not love in return.

I want to give hate its head. I want hate to drive out love, and I want to follow hate where it leads: and then, when I have done what I want with it, and not a minute before, I will master it.