

Claire navigated, with a paper map on her knees, while Allie drove. The old stationwagon had just emerged from the strenuous switchback road that climbed up out of the valley, and they now drove through a flowing landscape of green paddocks on every side.

“You might as well accept that you’ve got us lost,” Allie said. “It’s probably your age. I’ve noticed a bit of fog creeping up on you.”

They’d been warned that the plateau was a warren of little farm roads with none of them sign-posted. Allie stopped the car, barely pulling to the side of the graveled road. She pulled the map from Claire’s unresisting hands.

“Be my guest,” Claire said.

“I’ve hurt your feelings and you’re the pragmatist.”

Claire bit the inside of her lip to stop herself saying something equally hurtful. She opened the car door against the sugarcane growing along the road, and stood on the lower jamb to peer over the cane, to see what she could see. Evidence of farm buildings and or farm houses would be good. *There*. She grinned, stepped down and got back into the car.

Allie had the map upside down and was tracing the way from the switchback laboriously with her red laquered fingernail.

“It’s the next on the left,” Claire said.

“I really don’t think so.”

“There’s a sheep with a rainbow across its flank in the next paddock,” Claire said.

Allie thrust the map at her, turned the ignition, and accelerated back onto the road. Gravel spat up and hit the underside of the car.

Claire re-folded the map. “Slow down or we’ll miss the turn.”

A child stepped from a roadside bus-shelter. He waved a little rainbow-flag to request them to stop. “Are you here for the dye workshop? Oh yes. I see your little flag on the dash. I painted that one.” He smiled at his work before becoming professional again. “Drive down there.” He pointed left toward an entry to a farm track, fenced both sides. “You’ll see a gate on the right. Another flag. That’s the camping paddock. We’ve set the tents up. I think you have Number Three. You’re Miz King and Miz Timpson?”

Allie nodded.

“Thank you, Darian,” Claire said. “Lovely welcome!”

“You know him?” Allie said as she negotiated the potholes in the track.

“A little.”

“Hope it stays that way.”

“What? Why?”

“I mean, don’t use up all your grand-mothering on kids who don’t need it.” Allie steered into

the paddock and stopped in front of a tent with a '3' on the closed canvas door. She cut the ignition and walked round to the back of the car to get her bags.

Claire snapped shut her amazed mouth. *I'll have to do some digging. There is definitely something going on.* She got her bags too and set them onto the bed by the door flap, not already spread with Allie's gear.

A note pinned to the inside of the door-flap gave them directions to their private washing facilities, a bucket on a stool behind the tent and hand-towel hanging from a guy rope, and a little hand-drawn map where to find the bathrooms. "You should hang on to that," Allie said. "Your iffy memory."

*No answer required*, Claire thought as she stepped to the back of the tent. She poured water from a bucket into the basin on a three-legged camping stand and washed her face and hands—home-made lavender soap—and dried them using the rainbow-hued handtowel.

After they had both changed into their socialising wear, they walked across the paddock toward a marquee beside the farm house. They both carried their share-plates for the dinner. Claire had muffin pan fritatas on a platter wrapped in a teatowel.

The paddock was grazed only lightly. The cow-footprints left after the last rain were disguised in the dark green grass. Claire made heavy going of the hidden hollows in the paddock grass, even balancing her plate awkwardly and clutching at Allie's arm at one stage.

Allie shook her off. "Don't! You're just *acting* old now. Probably because of what I said. I'm totally disappointed in you. I researched you and Nalbo before we came. You were the perfect solution. You certainly haven't turned out who I thought you'd be."

Claire stopped, almost open-mouthed again. The sun had set and the sky flamed orange in the west. Even Allie stumbled two or three times as she stumped ahead. *Allie is disappointed in me? Nalbo is the perfect solution?*

"Claire!"

Someone came up behind her. Claire turned. "Maeve?" She smiled, nodded at Maeve's hot-bag. "I should think you know all about carrying your dinner with you."

"Being the Hillet midwife? You bet. Was that Allie I saw marching forward with a bee in her bonnet?"

Claire laughed. "One minute she tells me to stop acting old, the next that I shouldn't spend all my grand-mothering on kids who don't need it."

"She told *me* that she and Tim came to Hillet purposely," Maeve said. "They're expecting twins."

Claire stopped Maeve with a hand on her sleeve, noticing the weave of Maeve's coat and the fullness of her breast. Though she was years younger than Claire, Maeve wore gold-rimmed spectacles and had silver-grey hair.

"You're thinking I look more a grandmother than you ever will," Maeve said.

“Not wrong.”.

“I told Allie she’d made a mistake,” Maeve said. “Probably why she turned snippy. My apologies. I was trying to save you and Nalbo from being dumped on.”

“Dumped on?” Claire said faintly. “Allie mentioned that she’d *researched* us? That we were the perfect solution?”

“They came to Hillet purposely so their babies could be *fostered* by you-know-who. They aim to scarper as soon as, Nance and I suspect. They aim to be cuckoo parents, you could say.” Maeve set down her bag, set Claire’s plate on it, then hugged Claire. “They know all about how you lost your beautiful four year old baby girl.”

Claire slumped. “I’m not sure I want to continue with this thing,” she said about the wool dye workshop.

“Nonsense,” Maeve said as she put Claire’s platter back into Claire’s hands, and took up her bag. She drew Claire with her with a hand under her arm. “The shallow conviviality of the evening will give you a chance to marshal your defenses.”

Another child of the house, a long-legged girl this time, met them at the corner of the garden. “Mother invites you to drinks on the terrace,” she said. “The trestle table there is ready for your dinner contributions.”

The meal *was* convivial. Claire watched Allie chatting with a couple of women of her own age. They looked to be in their early thirties. Allie was being the life of the party. Now that Claire knew, she noticed Allie’s slightly swelling abdomen. Presumably she showed early because she was having twins.

Claire frowned. How *much* had Allie and Tim researched her and Nalbo? A fury began to grow under her breastbone. And they knew about Marina. Was that why ...?

“Look at the sky,” Maeve said. “Almost purple. Strange shade. I wouldn’t mind dyeing a hank of that, for a shawl for Nancy.”

Maeve’s stay-at-home partner. Claire wrenched her thoughts from Allie and seized on the subject Maeve gave her. Maeve and Nancy were friends from the first days that Nalbo and Claire arrived in the district. Nancy ran the Hillet Emporium.

The strange colour bled further into the sky. A bright pinprick, like an early star, bulged larger and larger. So therefore not a star. “That surely cannot a plane?” Claire said. Planes were a youthful memory. The mysterious spacecraft’s arrival in a near orbit around Earth fifty years previously had put an end to air transport.

The object, getting larger with every second, swung over them west to east and disappeared from view.

After everyone oohed and aahed over the mysterious object, the colour of the sky and the balm of the evening, they congregated around the table and chose their food. Their hostess and one of her sister’s circulated with the wine, blueberry or dandelion. These as wine made with grapes rarely reached their valley. Allie archly put her hand over her glass and wondered

if there was orange juice.

“Ignore her,” Maeve said. “What I said. Marshall your defences. Let’s talk about Nancy’s project for a bit.”

“The Chinese Emporium Day?” Claire said. “You have reservations?”

Maeve laughed. “It’s well past the time that any reservations I might have are going to change anything. It’s more that I fear that there is no way that Nancy’s expectations for the event can be met. There are only the two of us on the ground. I know we’ll have friends and their relatives coming, like you and Nalbo, but where will the tourists come from?”

Twenty years before Nance and Maeve had moved into the derelict local building known as the Chinese Emporium, and after renovating the place, had opened their emporium in the form of a historical dry goods store. The Chinese Emporium Day was to commemorate the emporium’s beginnings.

“Nalbo is looking forward to helping paint the place red,” Claire said. “I have a bunch of notes—invitations—in my bag for you, to take with you on your rounds. Nance can slip invites into all her deliveries. Most locals have family in the surrounding districts. We’ve told Matt and Belle, they’ll probably come.”

“The paint came yesterday. Half a pallet’s worth. Lots of gold as well. Fabric and cordage. Nance has her sewing machine out to run up the flags.”

“Sounds like we have it in hand. Doing what we can.” Claire sipped the blueberry wine. “Not a bad drop, this.”

“Grows on you, you mean? Likewise. I hardly notice the chewy flavours these days, my tastebuds go straight to the sweetness.”

Claire glanced at the clock their hostess had brought out for the occasion of the fly by. “Nearly time for the second loop.” She set her glass on the nearby table. She’d parted from Nalbo in a foul temper. He told her only this morning that he’d sent for a mechanical telescope. “Bought it, you mean?” she’d said cuttingly.

“Of course, Claire. Go and enjoy yourself.” He’d been setting the telescope up for the well-publicized fly-by of a comet. But Nalbo’s group, he told her, thought that the satellite—is what we’re calling it—originated in the orbiting spaceship, and the group calculated that the satellite might circle the Earth twice for it to lose enough speed to then be able to crash-land somewhere and survive. A circle that might take approximately forty minutes.

She hadn’t listened very well, being extremely angry about the money he spent without telling her, and weren’t they trying to live on a budget? And because he reminded her that *she* was going to the workshop. He never went to workshops. So surely they could afford him a telescope or three? Which would’ve been his logic. Sorry now, she’d walked away without making it up.

Right on time the object re-appeared in the western sky and it was definitely bigger. Nearer to the Earth, that meant. Now everyone stared at the thing.

“There it is!”

“Look at the size of it!”

Claire could barely look at the football-sized object, it was so bright.

All their upturned faces were tinted gold, Claire saw. “Don’t look at it!” she called. “It’s hotter than the sun. It’ll blind you!”

This time, as it sank behind the eastern flank of the Earth, the object’s light reflected in the ocean that lay that way. *Flash.*

All of them listened now. Surely it would crash to Earth on the other side somewhere? How fast would the sound travel? If they could at least hear the explosion, they’d have shared in it.

People gulped what they had in their glasses. The dandelion champagne was passed around for a top-up. Everyone waited with drinking it, wanting to toast the comet’s fall.

And while they waited people chattered in quick bites. No one wanted to get involved in a serious discussion.

The object leapt out of the west. A thing looking like a glowing garbage bin hurtled past overhead. Low enough to see flames! Over the valley—their valley—it exploded into a shower of fragments.

BOOOOM!

Windows, vehicle windshields, glass, ceramics exploded all around them as—deafened and numbed—and not hearing the usual pingling and shattering, everyone swung to see the downward spiralling of multiple fiery fragments.

Claire expected the cinders to arc to the ground and if they fell in the swamp—it looked to be happening above the swamp—to douse on the moist ground. Starting no fires as a result. She rubbed her eyes.

The cinders fell too slowly! Several seemed to sway. To and fro. She blinked to moisten her eyeballs in case she was seeing double. *No, still the swaying.*

It must be that the violence of the light had done something to her sight. She looked around. Everyone was as deaf as she was. Everyone gabbled madly telling each other what they saw. No one heard. All of them wondered about their homes in the valley. The sparks and whatever they were might not have fallen in the swamp. Appearances in the dark are deceiving.

Several of the women prepared to leave there and then. And were talked out of it by friends and their hostess. The switchback road, people described it with exaggerated sweeps of their arms. Down the side of the valley. The landslide and the detour over a fire-trail that some people would have to negotiate. Night time driving, especially with smashed windcreens, was out of the question.

Everyone helped tidy up. No one wanted their beds yet. The excitement knit them in a cohesive night-time crowd. In the morning, only the mechanical cars could be made to work

despite their broken windows and windscreens and lamps and headlights.

Claire thanked Nalbo's insistence that they pay good money for their ancient car to a broken-down old garage tucked away behind an abandoned shopping mall before they left the city. And his insistence that she and Allie use it to drive to the workshop. He wasn't going anywhere, he said.

Maeve, in her grocer's van, led the cavalcade down the hill. Five kilometers per hour, if that, due to the broken windscreens. Lots of time for looking.

Claire drove. Navigating wasn't a problem now that she and Allie knew the way. They could now both hear a little.

Allie told Claire everything that worried her. Being pregnant, three months already. Twins. Tim was a worry. Not the father type. Nor did Allie feel completely ready for mothering.

Claire studied the bush as she drove. No fires here. Nor along the road straight through the valley.

Allie laughed, hardly embarrassed. "It's sort of the reason we chose to live next door to you and Nalbo. They're girls. When we heard about your little girl, we thought, perfect. Like it was meant to be, don't you think?"

They passed the turn-off to the spiraling road up to Hillet. Claire's heart flashed back to Marina. Four years old. Skin softer than velvet. Hair a cloud. Her eyes ...

"So they'll have grandparents at least, Claire, if you don't mind. It's why I worry so when we quarrel."

Claire stopped the car at the bottom of Tim's and Allie's drive. "Your stop, I think." She waited woodenly.

"Claire, please."

Claire stared out front, refusing to cross gazes with Allie. "I'll drop your stuff off later."