

CHOICES

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Cover photo: own archives

Other books by Karin Clapton:

Time Developed – Poetry
Hoge Bomen – translation Choices
Koningspalm

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You will see the sun
in our winter, without the snow
with the twilight in the eyes of time.

The short days, in the background disappear.
Storms in their mind
using the painted lives of the future
showing the desire
to separate the option from the illusion.

Sitting in the train to Liverpool, a sudden strange feeling swept over her, when she recalled the telephone conversation she'd had with Bo the evening before, and this settled her a bit.

"Hi Ellie, it's me. Listen, have you got any plans for tomorrow? If not, get yourself over here, 'cause I've got a great proposition to put to you..... Don't you think it's about time you put Isaac behind you? You've got to start thinking of yourself!"

After some protest by Ellie, Bo answered "No, not on the phone. I'll tell you all about it in person, tomorrow. I'll pick you up from the station, alright?"

The rattling of the refreshments trolley brought her back to the present, and she ordered a cup of tea. She took a sip, set it down, and sank back into herself.

It really would be best for her to forget her time with Isaac, but how do you forget the years you've spent together with someone? Good times, and certainly at the end, not such good times. Now the divorce had been finalised, it was as if it had happened to someone else, as though she were on the outside looking in. A stranger to her own emotions. And yet, despite all the sorrow and the tears, she knew the decision had been inevitable. Luckily they didn't have any children. Would it have made any difference? Would they have stayed together if they'd had kids? These were questions which still haunted her, and there was no easy answer.

The journey took longer than usual. At Crewe junction, the train from Manchester had caused a delay. Something to do with the signals, apparently. The train came to a halt, and the passengers had been allowed to stretch their legs. Many of them annoyed, had paced from one platform to the other, losing all track of time, which made it worse.

At last, the heavy train lumbered out of the station and began to pick up speed. She took a sip of lukewarm tea and began to relax, all the time wondering what Bo's mysterious proposition held in store for her. For them?

The cathedral came in sight, a few more minutes and they'd arrive at the station. Ellie noticed how the grey clouds made way for the fast approaching dusk. Putting her book away in her bag, she realized she hadn't read one line. Her concentration had suffered from the recent events. With her coat folded across her arm, she headed for the door, and leaning out of the open window, spotted Bo waiting for her.

Throughout the years, their freindship had become a strong one, and just recently it had become a working relationship too. After university they'd both gained varied work experience, and at a certain point they'd decided it was time to set up something of their own. They'd always had the dream of starting their own magazine, and as coincidence would have it, Ellie had spotted an advert in the local paper for just such a business. She'd replied straight away, and after a fair bit of discussion on the phone they'd closed the deal, and Bo had come over as well to sign the

papers. So, now they were the proud owners of a magazine, and were faced with the question what to do with it. They'd spent their evenings together with take away food and countless glasses of wine, the floor strewn with sheets of paper containing vague outlines and ideas, and had finally come up with the concept. It was to be an extensive magazine with a modern outlook on life, aimed at the twenty to thirty age group, and containing columns on lifestyle, work, hobbies and the interests of this section of the public.

At first it had been very hard work, and there'd been so much to organize. Should they take on a helping hand? The first issue had hit the newsagents' shelves according to schedule, but it had indeed beentoo much work for just the two of them. Ellie had put it to Bo, who'd immediately agreed, that they definately needed a third hand. They'd started the search in their own circle of friends and acquaintances, and soon came across Chris, who was extremely enthousiastic.

Ellie herself did the interviews and most of the writing, and she helped Bo with the layout. Bo also did the photography, and advertisement was Chris' department, one that was not to be underestimated.

Months passed, and the modest success they achieved was enough to pay the bills. They'd sorted out the teething troubles, and were able to come up with new topics more easily than they'd first thought. The months became years, and the magazine seemed to publish itself after a while.

It was also a welcome distraction to Ellie, what with the divorce and all the rest of it. She immersed herself in her work. "Hi! Come on, let's go. I'm double parked."

"Typical." Thought Ellie as she embraced her friend, and they walked off briskly towards the car chatting. There was so much to talk about, but Bo's lips were still firmly sealed on the subject of the proposition which had made Ellie so curious.

Ellie's bag landed in the boot with a thud, the lid slammed, and the car keys dangled, half in, half out of Bo's pocket, but Bo was by nature so absent minded that it took her a while to find them there. Meanwhile, the tension mounted as a policeman started to approach them. In the nick of time, the engine started and they roared off giggling, the tyres squealing. In the rearview mirror the cop shaking his head became smaller and smaller. They'd stopped on the way to pick up a take away, and once indoors the kettle was switched on and the table set. They chatted for some time but Ellie still didn't have a clue what the mystery was all about.

"Do you remember a while back we were talking about Australia? How do you feel about doing it now?"

It was like a bolt from the blue, and Ellie was stunned. They had discussed at no great length doing an article on colonial architecture in Australia. "Suits me fine, a trip to Australia, but we haven't finished the latest issue yet. You know, Chris' article, his first?"

Bo had already considered this. "Not right away, but in a couple of weeks time. Then you'll have had the chance to edit it, and the layout is almost finished. After that Chris and I will be able to manage on our own. Incidentally Eddie is heading `down under` tomorrow. He's got a contract with a club in Sydney".

Ellie stared at her with a look of surprise. There were so many things which had still to be arranged, like an appointment with the architect, and booking a ticket etc.. "I'll bet you have even made an appointment with Sir James already". "No, of course I haven't, that's your job".

Ellie should have been flabbergasted, but she wasn't, because this was just the type of thing you could expect of her. Bo's impulsive behaviour and spontaneity were qualities Ellie had envied in her friend, ever since their first meeting.

"Okay, if you think the two of you can manage without me".

Bo barely reacted, she was well aware of the challenge. Eventually she managed a measured: "Fine".

The rest of the evening was spent making plans, making notes of the addresses of contacts who might be useful for future issues, and exchanging ideas about the issue that would be compiled there. There were hotel rooms to be booked, and a rough layout had to be made there and then. The wine was brought out of the fridge, and they drank to a new future, without Isaac. With every sip a new toast was proposed.

The place was strewn with papers, pencils and rejected collages. Overtired, from the long train journey and the evening spent making plans, Ellie lay awake in bed. In the distance she heard the church clock chime, and drifted off to sleep.

The next day Chris was called and informed of the plans, which were instantly agreed to. It was like a conspiracy. At about eleven they drove over to Eddie's via the ring road to avoid the pandemonium of the city centre. It was always a madhouse on Saturdays. Ellie hadn't seen Eddie since the summer, when he and Bo had come to visit for a few days. Because they both had a place of their own, Eddie usually spent the weekdays at Bo's house, and the weekends together at his place.

"Those two really were made for each other". Thought Ellie, seeing them together. Seeing the luggage piled in Eddie's hallway, she started to get used to the idea of leaving herself. At least it was Springtime there now, and she was slowly consumed by a feeling of freedom and independence.

Bo and Eddie's voice had become very vague when a sudden tap on her shoulder brought her back to the present. "Are you coming with us to the airport? If we don't hurry Ed will miss his flight. You'll see him soon in Oz".

On the way back from the airport Bo was more fidgety than usual, it was just her way of dealing with emotional situations. Ellie could hardly get a word in edgewise. After an energetic weekend Ellie went home again, where she placed several telephone calls, among them, one to Hawthorne Limited, in Sydney, with whom she had to arrange an appointment with Sir James. He had been in Melbourne at that moment, but she had been able to get hold of his secretary, who had been very helpful and between them they'd managed to settle a date. She was just entering the kitchen when the telephone rang. "Mrs Hardie, we have managed to book you on a flight to Los Angeles on the twentieth of October, the one night stopover you requested, a connection to Honolulu the next day, and you'll arrive in Sydney on the morning of the 22nd. We can discuss any further details when you come to pick up your ticket. Goodbye."

The days at home passed quickly, all the arrangements having been made.

She took one last look at her scribbled checklist, hotel, airline ticket, appointments in Sydney, Bo had been given all the contact numbers and they'd discussed her contribution to the next issue. Everything had been done.

Bo had come over a few days ago, and together with her and Chris, Ellie had once again gone over the layouts for the next two issues. The paperwork spread out on her desk, they gave one another satisfied looks. The final product would speak for itself as usual. With all the notes placed in the in-tray, the negatives filed away, and the mugs washed up, it was time for a well earned break. They went to the little restaurant round the corner which served delicious pasta. They drank a farewell glass of red wine, and then another on the house, which the owner of the establishment himself had brought over. The atmosphere created by the soft music and the wine made Ellie feel rather emotional. She'd been here so often in the past with Isaac, he'd even proposed to her here. Now she had the feeling it was time to turn over a new leaf, start a new

chapter in her life. Bo noticed the moistness in her eyes, and started to chat about Ed, and what a fantastic time he was having abroad. "Hey, El. If you get to enjoy it out there as much as he's doing, you might not even want to come back, we'll have lost you and will have to come and join you there. Not that I'd mind a bit".

Ellie burst out laughing, which pleased Bo, as it hurt her to see her friend feeling sad. There wasn't really much left she could do for Ellie, it was like a period of mourning which she had to get through on her own. Certainly, the work rate Ellie had set herself helped, but Bo viewed it more as a form of escapism, a way of not having to confront things. They ate copiously, and their elatedness saw to it that they hardly noticed the smoke laden air which nipped their eyes.

Outside the chill autumn wind cut through them, and hands stuffed deep in their pockets they headed for the taxi rank. The fallen leaves were swept around in circles, constantly bashing against the kerb. The streets were almost deserted, save for a car which waited at the lights, its engine pumping clouds of exhaust fumes into the cold night air. Someone appeared on the other side of the road, wrapped in winter clothes, walking their dog. Without a doubt, Ellie was looking forward to warm weather. A taxi appeared, and she flagged him down, the hiss of air brakes as he pulled up alongside them. Once they were seated and had given the driver the address, they continued their conversation. At a certain point the driver joined in uninvited, he related a few anecdotes and asked rather a lot of questions, which irritated Ellie. She had a mind to tell him so, but Bo beat her to it and quipped:

"Hey, mate! Are you a quizmaster in your spare time? Well, if you don't mind, we're trying to talk. Thanks".

That had shut him up immediately, but he'd taken the next bend a bit too sharply and caught the kerb with his rear tyre, which stopped Ellie in mid sentence. It was a pity the taxi ride had put a bit of a damper on things. She'd paid him the exact fare.

The stars winked at them as they walked up the garden path, they were always much clearer here, away from the city's smog and glow from the streetlights. The new moon slid silently behind a cloud, the leaves on the trees rustled softly, and the neighbours' dog ceased barking on recognising Ellie's voice.

Bo was staying at Ellie's, and would continue to do so in the time that Ellie was abroad. It seemed more convenient now she would have the extra workload, and it meant Ellie wouldn't have to worry about the place while she was away.

The last few days seemed to drag by, the temperature had dropped and the nights were drawing in. It was dark when Ellie went to work in the morning, and dark again when she returned in the evening, which made her feel dejected. A pile of papers under her arm, she walked the short distance home from the station. It wasn't quite short enough to stop her getting chilled to the bone. She sometimes asked herself why she didn't take the car, but there was the constant problem of finding a parkingplace. No, the train had its pro's and con's but was reasonably quick, and better in the long run. As a matter of routine, she removed her gloves to get her keys out. Strange, Bo wasn't back yet. She'd taken the car that morning, as she had to drop in on a new client to show them the copy for their advert. Oh, she'd be back soon enough.

Ellie was thankful for the heat of the hallway which rushed to meet her. Her post lay spread out across the doormat. She deposited the pile of papers on the hall table, and sifted through the post. The usual bills, trade magazines, and other mundane correspondence. Suddenly she held an envelope bearing Isaac's handwriting. She was in no hurry to open that one either, and placed it at the bottom of the pile.

Just two days to go, she thought, lovely. She loved the sunshine, not that winter didn't have its charm, but she couldn't bear the cold that went with it. Ah, the long days, the sunlight creeping

through your bedroom window in the morning, together with the sounds of children playing, the migrant birds who've returned, playful dogs. And yes, the long evenings with the seductive smells of the barbeque bringing water to your mouth, as the setting sun sets fire to the distant horizon.

She heard the sound of Bo's tyres on the gravel driveway, and setting the frontdoor ajar, she felt the draught. From the kitchen the kettle summoned her with a whistle.

"Hi, I'm back." shouted Bo. "That guy was really enthusiastic, and wants a full page spread in the next issue." In the living room they talked some more about the client, and about Isaac's letter. It lay on the table unopened, and that's the way she wanted it to stay. "I'm not interested in anything Isaac has to say." She said staring into the flames of the open fire. It was getting late in the meantime, and they had one last day's work together ahead of them. Most of her things had still to be packed, apart from her hand baggage which was half done, and stood by her writing desk. Just a few odds and ends still, and her laptop, which lay patiently beside it. She was really looking forward to the long flight, it might give her the chance to finally finish reading the book which had lain untouched on her bedside table for quite some time now. The time to get things into perspective, do some writing, and do some of the ground work for her article, go over the questions she would pose to Sir James. She wondered why they called him 'Sir', as far as she was aware he'd never been knighted. With this thought she dozed off.

The next day passed uneventfully. She'd exchanged money and carefully read the small print on her insurance policy, which she renewed each year automatically and which covered her throughout the world.

That evening they planned to go for a drink with a few friends, in the local pub, but she still had to pack before then, so she left a message on the computer for Bo, and left work early.

A rather boisterous couple was seated at the bar when they entered, and the barman seemed mildly irritated by them but had decided not to take any action yet. They ordered drinks, and seated themselves at a table in the corner beside the old fashioned jukebox, from which hits of the seventies emanated. The music, the sound of the customers and the empty glasses on the table gave the place a rather nostalgic ambiance. All too soon it was closing time, which brought the evening one which she would often reminisce on spent with her friends to a close. The next morning, Ellie rose slightly hungover, Bo was already in the bathroom, singing and whistling to herself. She took her clothes from the wardrobe, laid them out on the bed, and knocked on the bathroom door. "Bo! Are you just about finished in there?"

At that moment the phone rang. "Hi Ellie, Ed here..... No, don't bother calling Bo, I'll phone her later. Listen, I'm afraid I won't be able to pick you up from the airport, but if you give me a call when you're settled in your hotel we'll be able to arrange something.....Right, bye. See you in a few days time."

Breakfast was cooking as Ellie readied herself in the bathroom, the table had been nicely laid, and a small wrapped package a farewell gift lay by her plate. At first she'd wanted to wait till after breakfast before opening it, but her curiosity had got the better of her, and she'd removed the paper to find a music cassette which she'd been keen to have. "Oh, nice one! I've been trying to lay hands on this for so long now." "At least now you've got some decent sounds to listen to on the plane." They both fell about laughing, since Ellie always played the same old tapes, wherever she went. She knew their contents like the back of her hand. A new tape would indeed be like a breath of fresh air. When they'd finished eating Ellie packed her suitcases and brought them downstairs to the hallway, along with her laptop and handbag. Just one last check to make sure she had everything she'd need. Passport, visa, cash, toothbrush etc. Ah never mind, if she'd forgotten anything else it was trivial, and she'd buy a new one there. Bo went out to warm up the

car, and her cases were put in the boot. Still dressed in warm clothes for the moment, she got into the car. The heater was still blowing cold air, which woke her a bit more. As they left the driveway she looked back at the house with a feeling of melancholy. This was no time to get sentimental she told herself, and launched into light conversation with Bo.

Traffic en route was chaotic, the tailbacks on roads leading to London seemed to get longer every day. Car pooling hadn't worked as well as had been expected, and almost every vehicle held a solitary occupant. Car-radio in the background, the roar of jet engines above, and passengerslike ants manoeuvring baggage laden trollies hastily towards the terminal to check in. They soon found a vacant spot in the car park, parked the car, and loaded her baggage onto a trolley. Bo had lost the pay and display card she'd just purchased from the machine and had started to empty her pockets when she spotted it lying on the dashboard where it belonged.

On checking in Ellie had asked for a window seat, she was glad she was flying business class instead of economy as she used to. It depended on the destination, but economy could often be compared to the Exodus, loudmouths drinking in the aisles, screaming babies. No, that was all in the past now she could afford to spend more on a ticket. After bidding Bo farewell, she cleared customs, spent a while in the duty free shops, and then headed for the exit gate. The plane wasn't boarding yet so she sat down, took a magazine from her bag and started to flip through it.

Her concentration, however, was otherwise engaged and she dumped the magazine and started to look at the people round about her. A nervous, restless feeling took possession of her as she realized to a certain extent what lay ahead of her now. Nervously she started to poke about in her bag as if looking for something. She noticed a few people queuing at the counter, tickets in hand, stand-by's no doubt, hoping for a cancellation which would give them a seat. One by one their names were called, and smiles appeared on their faces as they realized they were among the lucky ones. Some of them choose to sit and wait for boarding, while others paced up and down impatiently. Ellie thought back to the time when she herself had flown stand-by, she'd worked for the airlines which had entitled her to cheap flights, but it had also meant everything was last minute. One couldn't book an hotel in advance, or anything else for that matter. It had been exciting all right, and she'd seen a fair bit of the world that way.

Suddenly, it was announced that her flight was now boarding, and there was a last call for passengers who hadn't checked in yet. She heard the ground-stewardess calling the businessclass passengers first, they were to board first. Her's was among them and picking up her bag and laptop she headed for the exit gate. A cold wind seemed to suck her down the umbilical leading to the plane. A selection of newspapers lay in a basket by the door, she took one and was directed to her seat. She seated herself and arranged her things round about her, her laptop within reach by her feet. The cabincrew bustled about getting passengers seated and performing their pre-flight checks, then the doors were placed on their airtight locks, Ellie was offered a drink as the plane began to taxi towards its appointed runway. In the meantime the safety video had been started, the cabin crew stood in the aisles by the emergency exits using gestures Ellie looked out of the window with mixed feelings at the grey skies and the motorway in the distance. On receiving permission from the tower to take off, the pilot opened the throttles and the jet engines' whistle became increasingly high pitched, then he released the brakes.

As the plane hurtled down the runway Ellie was pushed back into the padded seat by the G-force. She stared out at the ground below, where things became more diminutive by the second, and thought how some things could appear so trivial when compared to the immense space through which she now flew. Leaving the miniature figures and buildings below the clouds,

they reached cruising altitude, and burst into the sunlight of a completely different world. Her thoughts were interrupted by the voice of a stewardess. "We'll be serving a light lunch shortly Mrs Hardie. Can I fetch you something to drink in the meantime?"

Ellie ordered a glass of mineral water, and took out her book. She spent the first few hours reading and writing, and when the film began she switched on her reading lamp, and continued to work for a while. Later, as she became tired she tilted her seat back, and because the seat next to her was not occupied, she had room to stretch out. She draped the blanket over her legs, and in no time had nodded off.

When she eventually awoke, the stewardess brought her a moist tissue for her hands and face, and she went off to the lavatory to freshen up. While there she heard the pilot's voice announce that they were in a holding pattern above L.A. airport. As they circled in the air, she'd filled in the necessary forms required by U.S. Customs and Immigration, and once landed she joined the queue at the appropriate counter, her passport and papers in hand. Things took just as long as the last time she'd been here, she remembered, but once cleared she picked up her baggage and made for the minibus which would take her to her hotel.

She was expected, the driver told her the latest local news, and asked the usual questions; where she came from, how long she'd be staying, and where she was bound. It was a pleasant change of conversation, she thought, realizing at the same time that tomorrow she be in the same minibus, heading towards the airport for the final stretch of her destination.

Once she was signed in at the hotel, the porter took her suitcases and showed her to her room. She quickly deposited all her things on the bed, and went to take a nice long hot bath. It was a beautiful room with deep pile carpeting which her feet sank into as she walked. She switched on the kettle to make a cup of tea, and sank down on the bed. Turning on the television with the volume down, she realized that though she'd rested on the plane, her eyelids were becoming heavy. She set down her empty teacup and crawled under the covers, leaving the T.V. turned on. Subconsciously she heard the sounds of sirens, and the voices of guests who'd just arrived or had been out for the evening. It seemed she'd left the peace and quiet of home, at home. She rose and showered early, dressed casually, and went for breakfast. After a delicious breakfast, she decided to check out the neighbourhood, and stepping outside she felt the warmth envelop her. The streets still bore the scars of recent earthquakes. She tried to absorb every thing at once, the mingled smells of breakfast and exhaust fumes, and the melting pot of cultures. The beach spread out before her, the odd paddler in the water trying to avoid the surfers, the inviting little restaurants along the seafront. She decided there and then she'd have lunch in one of them on her way back. There was activity everywhere young men working out, joggers, cyclists etc. all trying to stay in shape, they whizzed past her on roller skates and racing bikes too. She laughed to herself, wondering how many of them weren't doing it so much to stay in shape, but more to get noticed. Whatever the case, it was certainly a colourful sight, the multicoloured clothing and equipment, and she strolled on taking it all in. Lunchtime found Ellie in the first restaurant in the row, seated under a parasol, sipping Perrier and studying the menu. She made her choice, and the waitress was soon back with her food. Setting the plate down she asked Ellie where she came from. Visibly enjoying her lunch and the fresh air, Ellie stared dreamily ahead of her. The temperature had increased substantially by then, and just the perspiring faces of the passing joggers was enough to make her feel hot too.

Back at the hotel Ellie packed the things she'd used, paid her bill, and ordered the minibus to take her back to the airport. The road looked different now, or was it her imagination? Yesterday, it had been dusk, and she'd been tired ofcourse. She tipped the driver, who'd put her cases on a

trolley for her. And as she put them on the conveyor belt at check in she thought: "Phew. At least soon I won't have to lug these bags about any more."

The baggage-receipts were stuck on the back of her boarding pass, and she continued on her way through customs. She put her laptop and bag on the belt of the X-ray machine, and stepped through the metal detector. It pleased her to think it would be the last of such formalities for some length of time. She was surprised at the difference between this airport, and those in Europe. The flight passed quickly, mainly due to the fact she'd slept most of the way. The smells from the pantry, and the pilot's voice (announcing that they were approaching Sydney and that before they would be allowed to land the cabin would have to be sprayed with insecticide) woke her. Those were the regulations in Australia. The aerosols were emptied into the air, then deposited in the bags provided which would be inspected later. Here too, there were forms to be filled in, and with these in hand, along with her passport, she followed the arrows to the exit.

Once outside she noticed that the flora was just as she'd often imagined it. Someone seemed to be calling her, was there someone there to meet her after all? Ellie looked around and saw it was a taxi driver who was asking if she wanted to go into the city. Gratefully, she wheeled her trolley over to the cab, and gave the driver the address of her hotel in Kings Cross.

The city centre at least, proved on arrival to be a lively area. At home she'd read a bit about the city, and Kings Cross, or "the Cross" as the locals called it, had read: "An area which never sleeps, home to a lot of night clubs, pubs, hotels, and prostitutes. However, we wouldn't advise you against staying there."

She now realized why. It had a certain ambiance, an atmosphere of excitement. Her hotel was situated centrally, near the station, and within easy walking distance of both the harbour and the city centre.

Her room had a view of the harbour, with the Opera House in the middle, Harbour Bridge on the left, and to the right the Botanical Gardens.

Ellie watched the ferries sail back and forth, and sailing yachts bobbing along behind one another heading for the sea.

At last, she could unpack everything, she opened the wardrobe and began to hang up her clothes. She put aside the garments which were badly creased for the laundry service, and walked barefoot to the window to admire the view again. This was to be home for the coming month, she realized. The first few days she'd reserved for herself, to get acclimatised and see a bit of the city, play the tourist. She took a shower, dressed in light clothes, and armed with her camera and personal cassette player, left the hotel. Outside, the first rays of sunshine beat down on her bare arms. It wasn't clear whether the prostitutes on the street were finishing late or starting early, trying to earn an extra dollar, but nobody seemed to be paying them much attention. A cleaning crew of the City council appeared, spraying the street with a high pressure hose, chasing the stale clamminess ahead of them. Stalls along the way were selling fruit and vegetables, and the smell of oranges made Ellie aware of the terrible thirst the dry air in the plane had given her. She spotted a restaurant on the corner, and decided to go for a drink there. Seating herself by the open window, she ordered tea and a croissant. She'd bought a newspaper along the way, and browsed through it in search of local news and coming events. Ellie took pleasure in every sip of tea, she felt totally relaxed as though she were at home.

Was it *deja vu*? She folded her paper and wandered off in the direction of the harbour, in thoughts. Back in her school days, and in her spare time, she'd always had an interest in the history of Oceania, and now she was here, there were certain things she just had to do and see. In the meantime the sun had risen high in the sky, and the plants and flowers in the botanic gardens were in full bloom, their colours breathtaking. She'd walked a fair bit, and laying eyes on

an inviting spot on the lawn, she took off her shoes and lay down on the grass. Her feet breathed a sigh of relief on being freed from their bonds. The sea breeze made her feel dozy, and dreamily she lay there enjoying the peace and quiet. Before returning to the hotel she'd taken a look round the harbour area, picked up ferry timetables which she'd study later in her room.

"Mrs Hardie, there was a call for you while you were gone."

Said the receptionist, handing her a written memo. In the lift Ellie read the note and discovered that it was from Eddie. After taking a quick shower and getting changed, she phoned him.

"Hi Ellie, how was the flight, and how's the hotel?"

They'd chatted for a while, and Eddie had invited her out the next evening. "I'll pick you up. Shall we say seven o'clock? Then we can have dinner first."

Looking forward to it, she'd said goodbye and hung up. Although it was still early she felt tired, the jet lag had got to her. In the middle of the night she awoke, her stomach rumbled, and despite the double glazing the noise from outside caught her attention. She realized she'd fallen asleep still dressed, got her keys and money together and went downstairs. "I can't sleep I'll just take a walk and will be back soon!" She said to the receptionist waving her keys in the air.

Because it was dark, one knew it was night, but you wouldn't have thought so by looking at the number of people out and about, all being part of a colourful spectacle.

With her hands in her pockets she crossed the street, bought a magazine and some picture postcards. She suddenly realized that until then she hadn't bought anything of that sort. The sultry evening air mingled with the fragrance of the foodstalls and passers by, and all at once she felt terribly alone. She entered one of the many restaurants along the way, and ordered pasta and a bottle of mineral water to take back to her room. The receptionist smiled at her as she re-entered the hotel. "Anything I can do for you, Mrs Hardie?" Ellie shook her head as she left the lobby. She just couldn't banish the thought from her mind, and went back to the time when she'd still been married, right in the beginning as newly weds.

"How could things change so radically." She asked herself, sadly.

Tears began to cloud her eyes, and she could no longer hold it in, all the tension of the previous few weeks came pouring out. The last few weeks, months with Isaac had been dreadful. His egoistic behaviour, which she'd not noticed before, had made it impossible to communicate, and they'd hardly talked their troubles over, if at all. She remembered one specific evening, they'd just had a row when the phone rang. Isaac had had no intention of answering it, so she did, and on hearing her voice the caller had hung up. She'd thought no more of it until later when she wanted to make a call.

On lifting the receiver, she'd heard Isaac in conversation with a woman, the mysterious caller? She thought for a second and then quietly replaced the receiver. When she'd given him the chance to explain, he'd denied everything, but later it became clear that he'd been having an affair for quite some time. Their relationship became steadily worse, he hadn't even made the effort to pretend anymore, and finally and ironically Ellie felt on a warm summers day, they'd decided to split up. All this was so far behind her now, but she had to sigh, nevertheless. She was so far from home, and felt so lonely, that it brought things back so vividly. She has nobody to phone here, or visit just for a chat. Briefly, she considered Eddie, he was after all the only person she knew here, but then again not that well. After all was said and done, she'd come here to work, and at that moment she longed for it to be next week, so she'd have something to do.

Her eyes felt puffy, and she went into the bathroom to dab cold water on them, then catching sight of herself in the mirror, she vowed not to let the past ruin her visit to Australia. Switching on the radio, Ellie grabbed her laptop and began to plan ahead.

She studied the map to find the places she had to go to next week. The architecture she'd seen up until then could be put into a few different categories. Here and there, there was the obvious influence of the colonial period. The first old buildings she'd seen that afternoon down by the harbour, had recently been given a facelift. The high pressure spray had given their exterior a clean new look. Though they'd been built back in the early 1800's. The area had a special feel to it, despite it having become a tourist attraction, its history was still perceptible. The narrow alleyways, leaning houses, a pub dating back to the early days of colonialisation, filled to bursting with both locals and tourists. It wasn't difficult, she mused, to imagine the hard times here.

Towards the city centre, the style rubbed shoulders with the post modern, without too much upheaval.

She read some trade literature, took a last bite of her food, and staring out at the night sky, fell asleep.

The first few rays of sun through Ellie's window woke her, and she made broad plans for the day: a couple of museums, a lunch down by the harbour. The weather was a pleasant change to that of home, strange to find oneself in a different climate, a different season. She'd never really given it any thought before, but now she realized it was inevitable. After a long day, she returned in time to have a long bath, and choose her clothes for that evening. When the receptionist called to say there was someone to see her in the lobby, she grabbed her key and bag ready to leave the room. Suddenly she noticed her shawl lying on the bed and realized she'd need it later in the evening when it cooled off. The door clicked shut, and a bell announced the arrival of the lift.

Eddie looked well she thought to herself as he embraced her warmly.

"The sun's done you good. Not a trace left of your English complexion."

She couldn't resist saying, as they headed towards a taxi parked opposite the hotel. Eddie told the driver their destination, and after quite a long drive, the taxi slowed, turned into a side street, and pulled up in front of a restaurant called the "Premier". As Eddie payed the driver, Ellie couldn't help noticing that it was quite busy inside. He held the door for her, and as they entered the doorman greeted him.

"Do you come here often that the staff are on first name terms with you." She laughed. "This is where I work." "Oh. I thought...."

Was as far as she got. Bo hadn't told her exactly what it was Eddie would be doing in Sydney.

Well, yes, that he'd be working in a club. Eddie listened, knowing that it was typical of Bo not to go into detail. He took Ellie by the hand and led her to the table he'd reserved. She gazed around and realized it was a combination of bar, disco and restaurant. It was a deceptively large building, which one would never have thought from the outside. The small dance floor was empty, the band's repertoire consisted of popular tunes, and the suitability of ambiance and food was reflected in the happy faces of the clientele. Eddie's dinner conversation had been charmingly entertaining. What a delight to be able to laugh and chat about home with someone. She'd probably be too busy working to get lonely she convinced herself. She apologized to Eddie for her distractedness and promised to pay him more attention from then on. "Oh, don't apologize, it's probably just jet lag" Said Eddie who was always so cheerful. During dinner Eddie had told her about his job, and promised to show her round, and introduce her to the staff later. They'd just finished eating when a figure appeared at their table, casting a shadow over Ellie.

"Hello Albert, nice to see you. Have you got time to join us briefly."

Said Eddie, looking to Ellie for her approval. She nodded her assent, and was introduced to Albert. He sat opposite her, and Ellie had the feeling that he looked directly at her more than was necessary. She felt herself blush, but was saved by the subdued lighting she realized. Initially,

Eddie and Albert discussed work, and from the conversation Ellie gathered that he came here regularly. "Are you here on holiday?" Albert asked. "Yes, partly." She replied. She explained briefly the purpose of her trip to him, whereupon he insisted on showing her round before she went to work seriously.

"How about Paddington market on Saturday?" She smiled and thanked him, it sounded nice. The evening passed all too quickly, Eddie showed her round and introduced her to a lot of friendly faces. He seemed to be quite at home already. Now and then Ellie glanced over at the table where Albert was still seated. She went over what he'd told her in her mind that he was single, and his profession, writer, that had surprised her, what a coincidence. On first appearances, she'd liked him, but now she knew he was a writer, something inside her opened to him. A mutual interest, it appeared, connected them. She noticed Albert call the waiter and order more drinks, which were there waiting when they returned to the table. "To round off a beautiful evening."

Said Albert raising his glass, and their eyes met again. It was getting late, and they said goodnight and Eddie and she took a taxi back to her hotel. "Thanks for a wonderful evening Ed." "My pleasure." "Nice meeting Albert too, wasn't it." The expression on her face told him everything. "Sleep well, and I'll see you soon."

Eddie said goodbye again to her as the taxi pulled away. Ellie picked up her key from reception, and stepped into the lift. She kicked off her shoes. What had happened to her? These feelings that had overcome her frightened her to some extent. How could she feel anything for Albert? She didn't even know him, they'd met for the first time that evening. Was it the distance she was from home, or was it that she was recently divorced, or just the jetlag still? All these thoughts flooded her mind. No, she decided at last, he was simply a nice person. It was impossible, she'd come here to work, yes and to forget. Nonetheless, the feeling made her question things. She took a shower. Who was she trying to fool? She'd asked herself as she slipped on her bathrobe and dialled her own telephone number. It was a while before it was answered. "Hi, Bo here!" Said Bo, panting. "Hi, how are you?"

Bo noticed immediately that something was wrong. "What's up Ellie?" "Oh I don't know. I'm in such a strange mood tonight." She answered, going on to tell Bo all about Albert. "Hey great, I'm so glad you've met someone nice." Said Bo genuinely, continuing to talk about work and next week's interview.

"Did you know that James is rather dishy? Chris came across a magazine article about the construction of his house in Sydney, and there was a photo of him in it, a bit dated of course. Oh, have you managed to get hold of a photographer yet? Well, just be careful anyway. Oh, you'll be thinking about this Albert all the time now so you'll be O.K. Well, good luck with both!"

Afterwards, it struck Ellie as strange that Bo hadn't even mentioned Ed, not that she'd had much chance. Dreamily, she walked to the window and looked out at the view which was lit up. She stood there for a while thinking over what Bo had said about Albert and James, as if they were household names, while she herself had only met one this very evening, and the other not at all yet. A flash of light in the distance grabbed her attention, the wind was rising and the rolling thunder becoming louder. She gazed out as the amazing spectacle unfolded before her eyes, the brilliance of the sharp flashes, each followed by an earth shaking crash, the clouds sped by. Ellie watched fixatedly. She barely heard the phone ring above the roar of the storm. "I hope I'm not bothering you." The voice on the line flabbergasted her. It was Albert. "No, not at all. I was just watching the storm."

Blast! She thought, what a stupid thing to say. She fumbled for words, and came up with: "How are you?" "Fine. I was just wondering if you'd like to have lunch with me tomorrow. If you've got time of course, don't change any plans to suit me!" She thought for the briefest of moments, then

agreed, to which he replied. "How about Darling harbour? Right, I'll meet you in the lobby at eleven. Does that suit you?"

She replaced the receiver, still dazed, not having expected to hear from him before Saturday. A warm feeling blossomed inside her, something she'd hardly considered possible any longer. Initially, she'd sort of felt similar with Isaac she recalled, but this was a totally different emotion. It was a mixture of feelings, and she searched desperately for a reason for her behaviour. Why was it necessary to define it, why not just submit to it? Reason didn't come into it, these were her feelings, for which she was answerable to no-one. The same applied to Albert, otherwise that might have been a reason not to get involved. If he'd had someone else, for example. She wouldn't even consider breaking up a relationship between two people, the way others seemed to do, shamelessly. She could of course just have a good time with Albert, without getting serious about it. She found it was time she accepted someone's company. It had affected her so much, in such a short time, that it confused her, especially now when she definitely wasn't in search of a relationship. Her head was in a spin, and she couldn't sit still. That he was a writer was an obvious attraction.

"Oh, I'll never fathom it out like this. I'd better just let it happen." The sleep she finally found was as restless as the storm brewing outside. The following day, there was no trace left of the squall, and the sunbeams danced merrily over her window sill. The otherwise dusty atmosphere had become more humid, she thought, as she walked towards the station complex pulling the last remnants of worn heel from her shoes. There was a shoe repair shop below the station, she'd been told. Shortly afterwards, she returned to the hotel with the pair of shoes in her hand which looked as good as new. At reception she asked for a telephone book, she did after all need to hire a photographer before next week. And she wanted the chance to check their portfolio before taking anyone on. Back at home, she'd already noted the addresses and information of a few promising candidates, but all of a sudden she had a flash of inspiration.

Bo had once done an article on an Australian girl who had an exhibition of her work in London. The theme had been modern art, and this seemed to fit nicely with her ideas about next week's article. Only, Ellie couldn't for the life of her remember the woman's name. She checked her watch, figured out what time it was back home and dialled her number. Would Bo be asleep? The phone rang for some time before Bo answered sleepily. She remembered the photographer all right, but that her christian name was Nicky was all she knew. Ellie would have to find out the rest for herself, but should Bo remember she'd phone back. Ellie flipped the pages of the book hoping that a name would ring a bell, maybe she'd be lucky, and Nicky's full name would be there among the photographers. All she could find was an N. Collins. She made a note of the number and put it on her bedside table, she'd try it later. First she wanted to freshen up, and glancing at her watch she realised it was almost eleven o'clock. There was a sudden knock at the door, which made her jump. Was that him already? Ellie opened the door and found to her relief that it was the chambermaid, who said she'd come back later when Ellie explained that she'd be leaving shortly. After one last look in the mirror to satisfy herself, she headed for the lift. Albert had just arrived, he greeted her modestly, complimented her on her appearance, and with the gentlest of touches on her back ushered her out. She didn't know what to say, so she started to talk about the weather. Albert appreciated it, as he too felt the nervous tension between them. They strolled towards the station, and Albert bought tickets to the citycentre. From there they'd walk to Darling harbour. The sun smiled down at them, the wind was friendly, and Ellie's enthusiasm indefatigable. She listened as Albert told her about the sights they passed on the way. He appeared so relaxed, but she noticed, nevertheless, that he was suppressing his emotions from the effort it cost him now and then to stick to small talk. Many tourists, refreshingly