

Prelude

THE WALL-EYED WEST Indian said he was a poet, and Eleanor saw no reason to doubt him. None of the white men in suits at Victoria Station, scurrying like semi-quavers into the new decade, had paused to help as she struggled with her luggage. Only this man, who told stories about Jamaica in a mellow baritone as he and Eleanor stood on the train to Dover, rocking intermittently against each other and laughing like strangers. On the ferry she bought him a sandwich. He told her he was going to the Continent to interview African intellectuals for an essay he had been commissioned to write, an essay that, with a bit of luck and a lot of hard work, might become a book. She told him about the young man, her lover, who would be meeting her train in Paris. At the Gare du Nord they clasped one another's hands in acknowledgment of a shared interval between cities. She wished him success with his Africans, and he wished her, of all the commonplace fictions, a happy life.

Even as she scanned the crowd for Julien, her hand still warm from the poet's tropical handshake, she watched with a little tremor of regret as he made his way through the sleek and shabby turbulence of the station – a tall black man in a Burberry in search of his diaspora.

It was the fifteenth of September 1981, towards six o'clock in the evening. Eleanor stood where Julien should have been waiting, beside the orange ticket-punching machine near the entrance to the platform. *Comptez vos billets avant le départ!* She chose a moment when no one was approaching to close her eyes, tilt her chin upwards

and listen to the seething polyphony of sound and echo.

A family man, idly waiting for the train from Lille to deliver his mistress, had been observing her. The pose she assumed was so private that he almost turned away, but blessed as he was with a Flaubertian eye, he could not bring himself to abandon such an enchanting subject. What was her name, where was she from? Was she just another young American come to suck up Paris through a noisy straw in the wake of earlier innocents? No. Too uncertain, not earnest enough, and the hand luggage didn't match the suitcase. British? Good God, no. Neither brisk nor droopy nor horse-faced, she wore that tightly-belted trenchcoat, no doubt newly acquired from some London department store, in a way that suggested she could not be so easily contained. Irish? Unlikely. Her dark hair was silken, almost Asiatic, and her lips bloomed sweet and full in an oval face. A delectable mouth, no matter what jangle of foreign sounds it might produce. Perhaps she was from some half-civilised antipodean land, for when she opened her eyes again, they darted about uneasily and seemed to say, "I have come so far; why aren't you here?" Pleased with his aperçu, and storing her away for future fantasies – *and you belong to me now, whoever you are waiting for ...* – the *père de famille* moved on.

No copy of *A Moveable Feast* lay in Eleanor Weston's cheaply un-American suitcase, nor did she much care in which cafés Hemingway had spiked his sentences with *ands* to make them truer. But what might the paterfamilias have made of these titles? *Vocal Success: A Practical Guide to the Essentials of Good Singing*; *The Book of Survival: How to Think, Act and Stay Alive in Any Emergency*; an anthology of Australian verse; and volume one of Albert Soboul's *Histoire de la Révolution française*. The first book was a gift from her dearest friend. The second had been pressed on her at the airport by her mother, and on the longsome flight from Sydney to London Eleanor had read it with mild horror and amusement. It offered terse tips on surviving nuclear attack, along with such cosy assertions as "You are never lonelier than when buried alive". She had packed the

third book because the poems might prove useful in her teaching, not because she could imagine ever feeling homesick. The last had turned up in the post some months earlier, along with a birthday card from Julien and an exhortation to study Soboul. So far she had managed only the short history of the Revolution in English.

Julien, Julien ... Why had he not been waiting for her as he should have been, twitching with impatience and bursting with love? It was too soon to be angry, for anything might have happened, but it was the right time to feel cheated. Eleanor stopped searching the crowd for the contours of his face and turned her gaze to the sallow stone wall on her right. High above the people and platforms was a row of half-circles of mullioned glass, obscure cousins to the grand arched windows of the façade. The Mercator grid of those severed circles called to mind Julien's letters – not the careful paragraphs he wrote on blue airmail paper, but the rapturous lines scribbled between lectures on the paper with the tiny squares, those meridians and parallels of projected longing. Like a soldier who wants to believe that letters from home, tucked away in a pocket of his battle-jacket, possess talismanic power against bullets and bayonets, she began to recite Julien's loving words silently to herself in a stale incantation against disappointment:

*Eleanor, reine de mon coeur, ta conquête est totale.
Tu domines mes jours et mes nuits, mes pensées et mes rêves. Jamais je ne m'adapterai à ton absence, car c'est une maladie, et tu en es le seul remède ...*

And then he was there, calmly enfolding her into the prickly Shetland wool of his pullover, saying something about the rain and the crazy traffic, lingering a little less than she would have liked over the kiss that quickened her desire.

“For you,” he said, stroking her cheek and half-smiling, “I’m missing a Party meeting.”

He picked up her suitcase and led her down the steps and out of the station, into the lights and effluvium of Paris.



If 'Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris III' had not been up in majuscules above the row of glass doors, Eleanor would have taken the university for a shoddy block of offices. Most of the windows had their blinds down, which gave the place a dull, inward look. Across the road was an undistinguished modern apartment building, whose proximity to Mouffetard offended her. A single tree and a square of grass on either side of the entrance way to the university warned students from the Anglo-Saxon countries not to expect a campus. She entered reluctantly, aware as she moved among the groupuscules of students, a few of whom looked thirtyish and interesting, that she was carrying a basket of groceries like a French housewife. And now, a day or two earlier than expected, came the dragging sensation in her womb, which would be followed soon enough by blood and cramping pain. She had to find the lavatories.

All the privacy of a concentration camp, Ruth had once quipped about something Eleanor had now forgotten. At the time she had been taken aback, but now she just wished Ruth were here to shock her again. The lavatories were unisex, no *Dames* and *Messieurs*, which she supposed was something she could get used to. But she did not see how she could ever adjust to the absence of doors to the cubicles. It was the same on the floor above, and the one above that. No doors, nowhere to hide. The damaged doors were stacked in corners, and the rooms seemed to vibrate with the echoes of recent violence. It would take strength to tear those barriers off their hinges, so young men must have done it. Why? To impose their contempt for bourgeois notions of privacy on everyone else? For the wanton pleasure of destroying state property? Or just so they could perve on a young woman as she inserted a tampon? She hated them, whoever they were.

She ran down the central stairway thinking she would leave, but when she reached the first floor she decided to give the university another chance, if only for Julien's sake. She turned right into the corridor and followed it to the end, having noticed someone else do the same. Off to the left, in an abbreviated hallway, a guard in

a dark blue uniform was sitting on a metal chair with a newspaper on his lap. He looked her up and down and gestured towards the opposite wall: *Toilettes*. Perhaps he was guarding them against the return of the barbarians. He watched her brazenly as she went in. Yes, the cubicles had doors. She splashed her face with cold water and found herself again in the mirror. Then, trembling a little from the pain in her belly, she locked herself in the furthest cubicle. She was alone, save for the guard outside who would know exactly how long she spent in here; who would always be there, watching her go in and come out, smirking to himself and thinking whatever it was that such men thought when they were bored.

She could not face the administrative staff of the university today – such people always seemed to be grumpy in France – and quite possibly not on any day. Everywhere people were sucking on cigarettes, and on the way out of the building she asked a young man if smoking was allowed in the lecture rooms. He looked surprised. But of course! How uncivilised, she replied. Oh, you Americans, he said, not unkindly. She knew that by walking away from the university she was forfeiting the camaraderie of French students, of people other than Julien and his circle, but nothing these unhallowed halls might contribute to comparative literature could be more important to her than her lungs.

She scarcely noticed her surroundings as she set off along Rue Monge in the direction of the Seine, turning into a back street at the first opportunity. Comfort was at hand, however, in the form of a fantasy more enthralling than any romantic or erotic reverie: the *Desert Island Discs* interview. She told the imaginary interviewer, with a twinkle in her voice, how she had chosen her lungs over comparative literature. Might he say, on behalf of her legions of fans, that it was a jolly good thing that she did! In the *Desert Island Discs* daydream she is a famous mezzosoprano, in demand all over Europe for her interpretations of early music. Despite her fame, however, she has never stopped performing with her original Baroque group, the Instruments of Joy. Prague, Budapest, East Berlin: they adore

her behind the Iron Curtain. She has even given a recital of Handel and Purcell arias to Soviet submariners in Vladivostok. The BBC interviewer describes her as an emissary for the unifying power of music. She lives somewhere in the French countryside – today she made it Burgundy – with Julien, who writes books and runs the local communist cell (just to keep his hand in with praxis and to annoy the mayor) and lectures occasionally to the locals on the joys of philosophical enquiry. One of the spare rooms, with a view across the vineyards to the wooded hills, is kept ready for Ruth. Eleanor didn't know if Julien had ever given much thought to *artisanat* – he seemed mostly interested in factories – but as a local *grande dame* she does her bit to keep the village's traditional skills alive. Her well-paid gardener grows vegetable offerings in a medieval *jardin potager*; her vines produce superb wine. Children, however, have not yet entered this valley of delight. Ruth had once confessed that she didn't care what some feminists thought: if she had a baby, she would never want to leave it. What mammal would? Eleanor had sheepishly agreed.

The best part of *Desert Island Discs* was not the country house, which sometimes gave rise to a queasiness such as had come over her a few days earlier when she had looked too long in shop windows at beautiful clothes that she could never hope to buy. The best part, always, was roaming the musical centuries, sifting and selecting songs, movements, performances, according to her mood. What an embarrassment of riches was the European art music tradition, she would remind her radio audience. The tonal system alone was surely one of the great monuments of Western civilisation, an edifice of collective cultural genius! The embodied Eleanor, the young woman who was feeling the city percussively through her feet, negotiating bollards and dog turds, wearing jeans and carrying a basket of groceries, knew that she had much music yet to discover. As she evolved, so would her musical preferences. Like music itself, the *Desert Island Discs* fantasy was a companion for life.

“It's chastening to remember, in the context of cultural and

intellectual fashion,” she told the interviewer as her body carried her past the Collège de France, “that Beethoven did not know of the unpublished *St Matthew Passion* or the *Mass in B Minor*. One can only imagine how such works might have enriched him. It was, of course, a composer of Jewish origin who resurrected the *St Matthew*, on the 11th of March, 1829 ...” By the time she arrived at the dark-green front door of her building, she had almost decided that she would choose an aria from the *St Matthew* instead of a great choral passage from the *Mass*. Ah, but which one?

From behind the spoiled American’s door came the strains of Indian classical music. Perhaps Julien had mistaken oddity for self-indulgence. What did he know of individual Americans, anyway? His disdain was the standard left-wing prejudice, nothing more. Unless Eleanor’s neighbour was a CIA agent in Paris to keep an eye on people such as Julien – and the man would hardly blow his cover by announcing it – or he worked for the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund – and he would not be living in the shabbiest building in Rue Dauphine if that were so – she was not going to hold all the trespasses of the United States against him. He was far more likely to be the apologetic kind of American, in awe of European culture. If she felt better after lunch, she might even pay him a visit.

She turned on the radio in her room – the program was *Woman’s Hour*, with its simpering signature tune – and unpacked her groceries. She longed to sink into a hot bath but had to settle for standing in a washing-up basin while she grappled with the plastic hand-held shower attachment. It had seemed like such a smart idea, but the object was hostile, intent on thwarting her. Time and again the cup that fitted over the hot tap would bulge and then burst off, whereupon she would curse it and quickly turn off the other tap before she was doused with cold water. In the end she resorted to the saucepan, which at least was not temperamental. As much water fell outside the basin as in, and she spent several naked minutes mopping it up.

She dressed in a skirt and a lambswool cardigan so as not to feel like a student, and then made herself a lunch of bread and goat's cheese and salad. When she dropped the woody ends and outer leaves of the endives into the garbage bin – when they didn't land in the scrap bucket for Ruth's compost heap or Mavis's chooks, to be returned, one way or another, to the earth – she felt a pang, as if she had wilfully severed a connection. The cramps had eased now and made way for fretful thought: even as a gap in the future, comparative literature was a problem. She would not mention to Julien that she had abandoned it unless he asked, and even then she wouldn't tell him about the guard outside the lavatories and the special claims of her lungs but would simply say ... She would think of something when the time came. It was Thursday. On Saturday Julien was taking her to Normandy for the weekend. In the hotel at Honfleur she would have his warm body next to hers. She just had to live with herself until then.

“Ah, an Anglophone! Come in, come in. Would you like some coffee? I was just having breakfast. I keep unusual hours, you see – bed at four or five a.m., up at lunchtime. Oh, and would you mind taking your shoes off? It's just that I spend a lot of time on the floor meditating.”

The name of Eleanor's American neighbour was Roland, and he was from Columbus, Ohio. He said 'Columbus, Ohio' as if it were some kind of cosmic joke, like Wollongong. Roland was pale and slightly stooped in the way of tall men who are not sturdily built. He was dressed all in black, but the black of his shirt was of a less intense order of blackness than his trousers. The effect was ascetic: he looked as if he had never played mud pies. His fair hair was long and combed off his face like Liszt's, but his hands were unremarkable.

Eleanor was prickling with Parisian envy, which masked any uneasiness she might have felt at being in the home of a man she did not know.