

# TALES OF THE METRIC SYSTEM

A NOVEL

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**1970**  
**SCHOOL TIME**



The Jaguar wouldn't start. Ann sat behind the leather steering wheel and watched the ruby-red light fade in the dashboard. Neil's late mother had donated the car to them at a time when she had been lying in a hospital and writing letters to parliament in fountain pen despite a catheter in the neck. It was difficult to refuse her mother-in-law's gifts. Sometimes the old woman seemed to have crockery in her face.

Ann spied her neighbour on the porch. She got out of the car and tried to attract his attention. Mackenzie was her shot. He liked to help her. When the mains tripped Mackenzie had his man bring the step ladder and climbed up to the panel. He would reset the stiff green switches, one by one, until he found the broken fuse. In July the Security Branch had arrived while Neil was away. Mackenzie had sat in the lounge for moral support. He had read his own magazines on the couch—*Scope*, for men, and *Creamer's Illustrated News*, an engineering gazette—while the policemen had examined Neil's desk, checked the numbers circled in the directory, and searched the cupboards.

Mackenzie brought his servant, a muscular old man who must have been in his sixties and who sat perfectly upright

in the back of the Hillman Avenger when accompanying his employer.

For a moment Ann thought Mackenzie was going to put his hand on her shoulder. Instead he placed it on the bonnet of the car.

—It's the salt in the air. The same engine that runs for five years in London may only survive eighteen months out here. But your husband must see to the maintenance.

—I'll tell him.

—Get in and release the handbrake. This fellow will push you to the top and you can start the engine. Coming back you should be fine. The battery will charge on the motorway.

Mackenzie's man, as old as he was, started to push, the thick brown veins standing out on his dark arms. He began to perspire immediately, his body shining, and allowed the car to stop at the top of the road. The engine caught on the downhill. By the time she went past the Caltex garage the car was moving fast.

To see Mackenzie's servant in the mirror, standing exhausted in the road, reminded Ann that she had never learned the man's name. She wasn't sure of her own. From her first husband she was Ann Rabie. She had once been Ann Bowen, whose father, commodore in the Royal Navy, met her mother at a ball during shore leave in Durban. For some reason which lay between herself and Neil she had never completed the switch to Ann Hunter.

In town, she parked near Greenacres. The shop assistants were dressing the plaster-of-Paris mannequins in the window, holding pins in their mouths as they went over the clothes. Something to do with the wirework and the gluey

brush strokes on the dummies' arms disturbed Ann. They would hex the car. After her conversation with Lavigne, she would have to wait in their papier-mâché company until the truck arrived from the Automobile Association.

She hurried. Her son Paul had been caught with alcohol on the school grounds. Curzon College was strict. The penalty could be as severe as a suspension for the whole of Michaelmas term. Lavigne represented the school board. In his first letter home, Paul said Lavigne defined College as a place where punctuality came second to godliness. She couldn't afford to be twenty minutes late.

She went past the telephone booths occupied by white men and women. The newsagent was setting out the overseas newspapers, his blue shirt rolled up above the elbow. The shops sold signs and flags claiming the province of Natal as the last outpost of the British Empire. Curzon College was a school of the same empire, attracting the sons of factory owners and Midlands farmers, members of the United Party who proposed extending the franchise to educated Bantus, Durban lawyers and bank managers.

Ann found Lavigne at the entrance of the Royal Hotel. He was compact in the shoulders, wearing a gold-buttoned blazer, grey trousers, and black shoes, which she imagined him brushing as fiercely as his teeth. Every Curzon College man, new boy or prefect, housemaster or headmaster, shone his own shoes.

Lavigne stood in his perfectly buffed shoes between the doormen, looking straight onto the road as the tram came clattering along, and didn't see her until she was at his side.

—Mr Lavigne, Edward, I apologise for being late. My car refused to start. Every red light I was petrified it would stall.

—It's of no consequence, Mrs Rabie. I must remind you, however, that my next appointment is set for 1 p.m. across town. These few days I spend in town are booked end to end. I reserved a table in the tea room.

Ann went past the doormen, noting their long white leather gloves and high red hats.

—Are you staying here?

—College has an arrangement for a reduced rate.

—I wasn't objecting.

—The chairman of the hotel company is an Old Boy. It is the express wish of the board that the school maintain a certain standard. It should be this way to the tea room.

Ann went past wallpapered rooms and a procession of fronded plants in big brass pots. There was a long brass-framed mirror beside the lift in which she caught sight of herself while a clerk in a waistcoat pushed a cart in the opposite direction. The staff were lying in wait, looking for any reason to approach a visitor. Since returning from Paris, she had started to resent the omnipresence of servants and clerks over here.

The tea room was cordoned off by a rope looped through the eyes of four gleaming brass stands. She and Lavigne sat across from one another at a table beside the wall. The waiter, an Indian man with the pitted skin of a smallpox victim, wore a turban in addition to the stiff red tunic prescribed by the hotel. He spoke through his long moustache as he distributed the items for tea, placing them on the clean linen as if setting up his side of a chessboard, and then retired to his post to stand and watch.

Neil was right. To be a so-called European, here where you were supposed to be top of the heap, was a predicament. You were under surveillance, first of all by other Europeans,

and second by the natives, who might have something to gain or to lose, and by Indian waiters beneath their turbans. European women were the most severe on women like Ann. She couldn't escape the suspicion that, beneath his unshakable business manners, Lavigne was acting to punish her on behalf of the general opinion.

—Mrs Rabie.

—Call me Ann.

—Ann, then. I have followed Paul since he entered the school in standard seven. I believe he won a scholarship at that time, a minor exhibition. Subsequently I acted as his housemaster, not to say his Geography teacher. I am delegated to take care of our best young scholars, the ones who might proceed to Cambridge. After the last rugby match, I invited Paul, along with three other promising young men, to dine at the Balfour Hotel.

—I know you have a good relationship, Edward. Whatever has happened has never altered my son's loyalty to the school.

—Loyalty is a virtue the school endeavours to inculcate. Allow me to do the honours.

Lavigne poured the tea through the strainer, offering her the first cup without turning his face. He added a sugar cube to his own cup and then two drops of milk as carefully as if he were using an eye-dropper. He sat up straight and drank, his blue blazer with its heavy gold buttons done up and his long hands almost disappearing into the sleeves. She saw that he was wearing cufflinks and remembered Neil's pair, inherited from his father, which had been borrowed and never returned by Sartre.

—I regret you and your husband have been unable to attend any of the important matches that make up our calendar.

—My husband is busy, Edward. He has taken a big part at the university since we came back from Paris. Sometimes it means that other things go undone.

—There's no obligation whatsoever. Some of the boys travel from homes in Johannesburg or London. Others come from remote farms located in Rhodesia. We understand that parents have different circumstances. Nevertheless, it is a shame that our first real conversation should be under these circumstances.

—I agree.

—Then we understand each other. You understand the situation. A prefect brought his suspicions to me. Naturally it fell to me to investigate and to search Paul's locker. That's when I found the spirits.

—Should you be encouraging the boys to spy on each other?

—Spying is not a term I would use. The prefects have a duty to keep good order in the houses. The same system is in effect at leading schools in the United Kingdom, so there can be no question of our fairness in this matter. I found two bottles of Klipdrift, cheap brandy. Paul has refused to explain their provenance, which has only worsened his situation. Did he bring the brandy from home? Some students have been known to raid their fathers' liquor cabinets in an attempt to win popularity.

—That doesn't sound like Paul. But Neil doesn't touch spirits. There is usually some wine in the house. I sometimes have a glass in the evening.

—And that's no sin.

Lavigne and his dry laugh acted on her nerves. There was some intimacy in their conversation which Ann disliked, as if the housemaster wanted to show that he was in on

her secrets. She thought that he didn't mind offending her. She watched him more closely. Even in Neil's utopia there would be a Lavigne.

—Paul probably went to an Indian shop, Mrs Rabie. They operate just beyond the limits of the Curzon estate. By law, they cannot obtain freehold in the area. So who rents them the land? At the board's request, I am investigating the proprietors who allow these traders to operate. When we discover the names of the culprits we will take action. They must conform, or their tenants will have their licences revoked.

—It sounds severe, Edward.

—Severity is called for. I am not a racist, believe you me, but I know that there will never be a peaceful settlement in the country until we have brought everyone up to a certain standard. I take an interest in the university. In which department does your husband work?

—Neil's in Philosophy. We came back early from Paris so he could take up the position. I would have stayed in France longer if I could have. I married early, the first time, and never had a year to wander around Europe.

Ann wasn't sure why she was saying more than she had to. She tried to be on good terms with other people. She wanted to help Paul.

—I had three years on the continent, Mrs Rabie, at Oxford. It convinced me that my place was here, because this is where our civilisation is being put to the test.

Lavigne excused himself for the toilet. Ann watched his solid figure striding down the corridor, confident that this life and the next belonged to him. In his Anglican afterlife he would shake hands with the boys whose backsides he had deliciously caned in the privacy of his study. They would thank him for putting them on the right track.

Ann was born Catholic, the product of Irish grandparents. She had been confirmed, but did nothing more than light a candle when she entered a chapel. She was divorced, moreover, and did not fit in the same category as the other parents. It occurred to her that the private schools resembled the church. They shared the assumption of universal rule. Edward Lavigne could have been a bishop.

Ten years ago Ann would have been impressed. But she had enjoyed the years in Paris, living on the Boulevard Saint-Michel, visiting the houses of Lévi-Strauss and de Beauvoir. She didn't mistake a Natal private school for the height of civilisation. She simply didn't want Paul to lose a year. He had adapted to Curzon College, arriving on the bus at the end of term in black blazer and tie, eager to relate to her the great schoolboy debates about motorcycles, batsmen, and bowlers, and the rumours about the border that filtered down from older brothers.

Neil had been Dux at a similar institution. The table of punishments hadn't changed since his time. Boys could be beaten with a cricket bat or cane, privately in the housemaster's study, or in a line in the gymnasium in the case of a group offence. A boy could be forced to run cross-country miles, denied the privilege of going home on a long weekend, or made to reproduce tables of Latin conjugations.

It was a prodigious schedule of human sacrifice. Between her and the mother of an Aztec there was not so much difference as the historian supposed.

By the time Lavigne returned Ann had resolved to ignore the subtle current of his mockery. He had combed his sandy-blond hair so severely across his head that his grey scalp was exposed to her. When he spoke he set his head at an angle as

if he were deliberately revealing a part of his nakedness. He wanted Ann to see the thinning top of his head.

His vanity offended her. The same quality had been harmless in Parisian men and women, playwrights and university philosophers, pianists and surgeons, who were so fierce talking about themselves and their doctrines. It reminded her that Edward Lavigne was the unusual man with a French surname and an English accent.

Lavigne wanted to complete his piece of business.

—At this stage of the term, we cannot refund Paul's fees. That is the view of the school board, having taken legal advice on the matter. We will allow you to remove Paul from the school at your own initiative. I am willing to make a favourable call to my good friend, the headmaster of Kearsney, or, if you prefer, send a letter to an excellent public facility like the Durban High School, assuring them of his character. Many boys who have been asked to leave College go on to become substantial personages in the world.

It was as bad as if Lavigne had reached over the table and slapped her with one of his finely shaped hands.

—We haven't established that Paul needs to be taken out. Other boys misbehave. They haven't been asked to leave.

—Mrs Rabie, I simply cannot compare one boy's treatment with another. The facts change with the individual case. Permit me to be frank. So far you haven't given me any reason to consider Paul's case in a new light. Therefore, so far as I am concerned, the headmaster's decision stands.

They waited for the bill. On the borders there were new guerrilla armies. The rouble and the dollar had replaced the pound sterling. The kilometre and the kilogram and the litre were new ways of measuring miles and imperial pounds and fluid ounces. In Zaire, Patrice Lumumba had

been murdered on the instruction of the White House. They wanted to expel her son for possessing two bottles of brandy. The measurements made by Curzon College were as outdated as yards and inches. They didn't know what counted.

Without arranging it, Ann found that she was walking Edward Lavigne to his car. He had parked on a parallel street, behind the City Hall where they hadn't installed meters, and accepted her company.

Ann thought that they had come to an impasse. She wanted to make him aware that Gert, Paul's father, had a close connection with the old families of the National Party. Gert's own father had been Transvaal Minister of Education. The private schools remembered that their subsidies came from the government. They never crossed a sponsor, whether it meant removing *Lady Chatterley's Lover* from the library, excluding non-whites, or accepting the son of an expatriate Japanese businessman as an honorary European. The Special Branch might well have advised the school against enrolling Neil Hunter's stepson.

Lavigne's car stood in front of the post office. Paul had told her that his Geography master drove a Bugatti, the Italian sports car noted for its attractive lines. Lavigne was a bachelor, usually splendid in a bow-tie, and was sighted tooling around the town of Curzon, the seaside resort of Margate, and hotels in the Drakensberg around Champagne Castle. Who he visited was a mystery. Could it be another man? Ann considered the possibility that he was a homosexual as Lavigne took his car keys from the striped silk lining of his blazer. It explained his style and his exactness with a phrase, his way of holding himself as well

as his sentences, and his uncomplicated sadism. She should blackmail him back. Fair was fair.

—If you don't mind, Edward, before you leave. You run a school for young men, not a convent. Boys get up to high jinx. So I have to ask you, does this turn of events have anything to do with my husband? As it happens, Paul is not Neil's son. Paul is the son of Gert Rabie. I understand the school is politically sensitive but you cannot punish Paul for my husband's beliefs. That is not fair play.

Lavigne unlocked the car door, then put his hand on the green bonnet and looked, for the first time, as if he was confused about what to say next. Through the windscreen Ann saw a pair of men's gloves on the dashboard. They were cream-coloured, heavily stitched around the fingers, and latched together by a string and two beads. They were driving gloves, popular among automobile-club members, who drove for the pleasure of being on the road. She imagined Lavigne fitting them onto his hands in preparation for a particular piece of work. She was his item of business.

—Mrs Rabie, if you ask for my own opinion, then, privately, yes, I will tell you that Paul is not being treated leniently. But then you must come so far as to comprehend our position.

—I fail to understand how it serves Curzon College to push my son out.

Lavigne bent down and took the gloves out of the car. He held them without putting them on, as if he were testing their weight. They must have been too hot from sitting on the dashboard to put straight on.

—Let me offer you two insights into the thinking of the school board. It's not merely a question of drinking. Paul circulated a petition against cadet training. He didn't tell

you? Mrs Rabie, political agitation is something we cannot have at our school. You may confer with your husband how far it is proper to impress his own ideas on the mind of your son. I can tell you that James Nicholson does not change his mind easily. He makes an assessment based on the relevant facts. Nevertheless, it is not impossible to change the facts. For example, Curzon College is currently raising money for a new music building.

Ann's family, on her mother's side, had been bakers, ships' chandlers, naval accountants, and clerks in Southampton before moving to what was then the South African Republic, a country without a port to call its own, in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The Rabies, a family Ann hadn't managed to leave despite the divorce, produced teachers, priests ministering to congregations in the Boland, a mining engineer who served in the command of Jan Smuts before being elected to parliament, and Gert Rabie, who ran a surgical practice between Dundee and Newcastle in the Natal interior, tending to agricultural towns and isolated households and farms in the high country. As a houseman, Gert was already noted for the delicacy of his hands. When a birth cord needed to be disentangled, or an infant heart needed its ventricle repaired, they summoned him. He was younger than her by a fortnight. When they met, at university, he had been interested only in rugby and medicine. They had been twenty on their wedding day. He talked about her as an old woman.

Gert had a loner's temperament and would book a trunk call with his son once a month. The other Rabies stayed in closer contact. They visited Paul at Curzon Col-

lege, driving hours to watch Saturday rugby, to talk with the captains of the opposing teams, consider the performance of the fly half and the flanker, and unpack their hampers in the stands. Paul stayed with them during the July holidays. The Rabies continued to invite Ann along whenever they took Paul. She had the sense they didn't see her as an individual, therefore didn't hold her accountable for the separation. They didn't seem to mind that she never accepted an invitation.

Then there were the Hunters. They turned out redheads and great eccentrics. Neil's mother ran the family farm for twenty years. His aunt had been the first anthropologist to live in a Fingoland village and record the traditions. Neil's great-uncle played the piano on a cruise liner, wrote detective novels, had been a friend of Randolph Churchill, and disembarked in Durban from time to time to arrange séances.

Neil himself was not entirely handsome. He had a flat face, bony arms, and legs that made him six feet and two inches. He always had a project. When they met, he had been constructing an alternative system of English spelling with the potential to reduce illiteracy. He was the only person who had prepared for the adoption of the metric system by trying to use metres and litres and kilograms in his head before the conversion started in the shops.

Neil didn't have to be the model for her son. Paul might never come to believe, like his stepfather, that the Bantu were wiser and more honest than Europeans. Paul was interested in school. He didn't listen to any and every passing Indian like her husband did, sitting on the patio, his lovely leathery red-freckled hands spread out on his thighbones, attending to the wizened Tamil electrician Chunu's small-minded opinions, his lectures on Ayurvedic

diet, marvelling at the fenugreek seeds Chunu spread out on his palm. Neil admired Chris Padayachee, an advocate who associated himself with Gandhi's remaining relatives in Natal and the cause of the Phoenix settlement he had founded. The very dark-eyed lawyer, with his detailed knowledge of Nehru and Jinnah, was as pompous as a professor. Neil wouldn't have listened for a minute if he had been raised in the province.

On Ann's return Mackenzie and his man were in the yard, stringing chicken wire above the concrete fence. They communicated with grunts as they paid out the thin knotty wire from a spool. In front of them were the hadedahs tipping and rising, dredging the grass with intelligent beaks. They weren't aggressive but neither did they move aside as Mackenzie's assistant edged a wheelbarrow past loaded with scraps of wire and uprooted poles. He made no sign of noticing her.

She came in through the kitchen. The radio was on in Neil's study. She hadn't expected him to be back. He often returned after dark with a stack of mimeographed articles that had to be read by the next morning. After years of marriage Ann still felt a tightening at the heart when she expected to see her husband. She went up to complain about Lavigne.

Instead she discovered Nadia Paulson, one of her husband's graduate students, sitting cross-legged in a short dress surrounded by books and open dictionaries and encyclopaedias. At first Nadia didn't budge. She continued to take notes. Then she turned the radio down, and moved her dyed hair to the other side of her face. She still didn't get up, but she smiled.

Each time they met it took half a minute before Ann wanted to slap the girl. It wasn't jealousy. The girl intended to cause aggravation.

—I thought it was Neil here.

—There was a demonstration. The police closed the library. Neil gave me the key so I could concentrate on checking the footnotes. We're finishing that article for the *Labour Bulletin*, you know, the one about Pixley Seme, Clements Kadalie, and the difference between national rights and workers' rights.

—I'll leave you to get on with it. I want to get something in the oven.

The kitchen was Ann's favourite room. Everything was useful. There were big windows and a Dutch half-door opening onto the yard, wooden shelves on which were set a bowl of glazed fruit and a stack of gold-rimmed plates. Pans hung on nails. In the glass-door cabinet, she kept an array of pewter mugs and spoons, and the collection of Paul's engraved school trophies.

In the lowest drawers, which she opened no more than once in a year, were streamers and box kites, thimbles, egg-timers, and other fossil footprints. They instructed Ann that life was in progress, distributing junk, and that any strange sensation in her heart today was inconsequential. It reassured her to run her hand along the chipped blue tiles on the kitchen counter and think that they were almost cold on the hottest day. She believed, as she did it, that her life with Neil was as solid as the tiles.

Nadia was her husband's most assiduous graduate student. She was from Cape Town, but had some family connection to Mauritius, where she had spent a year and

picked up French. She did rough translations for Neil from Merleau-Ponty, Fanon, and Alexandre Kojève, and kept the minutes for the Free University, writing them in secretarial shorthand. Her looks impressed, her light-brown skin and her large, slow, and nearly stupid almond-shaped eyes. In Durban, where Group Areas kept people to their own locations and the buses and drive-ins and restaurants were segregated, Nadia had few options for adventure. Naturally she wanted to belong to Neil's sphere. And it turned out you couldn't keep somebody out when they wanted to come in.

When Nadia came down, her satchel loaded with books, Ann found that she was pleased at the intrusion. After Lavigne, anybody was a relief.

—You're going?

—I reckon the library must be open again. The police go in and find anybody who was protesting and then they leave.

—I can drive you to the university once I manage to get this cake out of the oven. I am trying a recipe from *Fair Lady*. If it's successful I'll make it again for my son.

Nadia put her satchel on the table.

—Paul was in Neil's office last term. He was waiting to go to a lecture in Botany. Something about ferns. He is the mirror image of you.

Ann was already putting out forks and plates for the cake, and set the kettle on the stove. She cut two thin slices for her companion, one on top of the other, and another for herself, rejoicing in the texture. It was light and aerated. She was good at baking. It was rare that something refused to rise for her.

—Paul knows everything there is to know about ferns. He is really a Rabie, his father's son. He trusts authority.

Although here you can see through the pretence. I was just meeting with his Geography teacher who wanted me to contribute to their music building to help Paul. They're brazen about it.

—Neil said something was going on at the school with Paul. I'm not surprised. My first boyfriend went to Kearsney. We had to keep our relationship a secret from his family. It taught me about their way of doing things. They insist there are rules that have to be followed, but then, when they want, the rules suddenly don't apply.

Ann poured two cups of tea and brought the milk from the fridge.

—What did Neil tell you about Paul?

—He just said there was trouble and he wasn't surprised and didn't want it to interfere with Paul's schooling. You know that, for Neil, everything comes down to education, how you liberate your mind. He won't allow us to get involved in demonstrations at Howard College like today. He knows how quick they are to expel a non-European.

It took some time for Ann to see the cause of her feelings. Nadia dressed tightly, in her thin dress and blue cotton blouse, so that when she was across the table you could not but be aware of her body living and breathing beside you. Before coming downstairs she had repaired her lipstick. You became conscious of her mouth. It was strong and beautiful and nevertheless insinuating. It said to Ann that she would soon be obsolete, that before long her skin would be cracked by sunshine, that her sinews and thighs would dry in the heat, that her body would never again breathe and love and blush and burn as it had with Gert, and that no man would ever run his hand with so much pleasure along her side. It said that her second marriage,

this dream of connection to the Hunters, was also finished, and instructed Ann not to resist the alteration.

Ann was impatient when dealing with a foregone conclusion. She turned to the end of a book before she made it halfway. If a problem put her in suspense, she would do almost anything to bring it to an end. It was for this reason that she had made the decision to marry so rapidly when she met Gert, and, after that, Neil. Now, for a minute, she found she was looking forward to the end of her marriage.

On the way out she didn't say anything more to her companion. The car started without further difficulty. She drove to Howard College. The wind was searching through the trees and along the ground among the flower beds in front of the bookshop and the red-brick tea room and the dormitories. There was no sign of police. Two men were pushing a roller over the tennis courts at Golf Road, the cylinder moving ponderously across the clay. The new library building had bronze windows.

—Thanks for driving me, Ann.

—You're welcome. We'll see you.

Nadia got out. Then she put her head back into the car.

—Isn't the Free University meeting at your house tonight? I might have to take the minutes.

—Neil doesn't give me a word of warning. I turn around and the house is full of people wearing disguises. Do they really think it will stop them being picked up? Last time one of them left his false beard next to the sink. I couldn't make head or tail of it until Paul put it on.

—I would expect visitors tonight. They also closed down the hall at Howard College, where the workers' councils were meeting. They used teargas. Some of those people are friends with Neil. They need somewhere to go.

—I didn't realise it was so bad. Why didn't you tell me before?

—I thought Neil had warned you. He was worried that they were going to come to his office next. Just in case, he was moving some of his books to the department tea room.

—They may come to the house as well. I should clear up.

Ann called Neil from the telephone outside the library but the switchboard couldn't connect her to his office. On their home telephone she sometimes heard the clicking of the recording machine when she picked up the receiver. She drove back home, locked the gate onto the street, and began to collect the books and pamphlets in the lounge. Neil tried to keep them on one shelf: Marx, Kropotkin, and the red-starred workerist journals, silkscreened in the Art Department, which had not been banned because nobody knew about their existence.

It was a routine. You heard from somebody that a raid was imminent. You put the chain on the door. If it was late and Paul was home from school, you called a friend to collect him. You checked the passports, drivers' licences, the level of petrol in the car, and the spare money in the glove box, although you couldn't imagine skipping the country. You made sure there was nothing that could be read on the typewriter ribbon and tore up the blue-and-gold sheets of carbon paper under the Olivetti. You couldn't remember where you last left the cheque book with the column of subtractions along the side.

If there was time you called your sister in Schweizer-Reneke to give her advance notice to fetch Paul in case there was trouble, and then the other sister in Graaff-Reinet, the one who was married to a captain in the navy. You hadn't

heard her voice for so long that you wondered if she would recognise you. Your heart was in your mouth until she said your name and it was as if nothing had ever come between you.

You listened for the rapping on the door, which might come in the early hours of the morning, and tried to think if there was anything you had missed. You went upstairs again and checked the shelves and made sure that any entries in the telephone book had been scratched out. It was impossible to live without creating clues. Suddenly, as if a knife was buried in you up to the hilt, you yearned for life in an ordinary country, ordinary happiness and unhappiness.

Ann packed the material in one box and moved it into the kitchen. She sat down at the table and realised she had no idea what to do next. Neil usually took charge. Sometimes they heard an hour beforehand there was the chance of a raid. He would put the box of books in the trunk of his Valiant and take it to a friend's garage, where it sheltered under a warped table-tennis table. Otherwise he would leave the car parked across from the gaudily lit hamburger restaurant and walk the ten minutes back down Essenwood Road, past the old-age homes, in full view of the racecourse. He would be in time to receive any policemen who did arrive.

For all the energy invested in the problem of their books, multiple visitations from the Security Branch had produced no great interest in the contents of Neil's library. The major in charge might confiscate a volume or two, if it was prohibited, but it wasn't his real concern. He wanted to know whether Neil had a certain individual's current address, whether he had been in touch with any of the persons on a list that he read aloud, whether Neil had advance no-

tice of the student council's plans and could remember the members of a particular union or branch of the Black Sash, whether either of them knew the whereabouts of the son of the woman who did the neighbour's laundry. It was only in a place like Paris where knowing the books someone loved, whether they followed Lévi-Strauss or Sartre, was the yardstick by which to measure them.

Ann was still thinking about what to do with the box when the telephone rang. She rushed to get it, picking up the black receiver, which was as cold as a hammer.

—Neil, I tried to call you at the department.

—You heard about the library? I had to go to the bank to make bail arrangements for some of the students. It's been a tough day.

She wanted to tell him that the day could only improve. It might even turn into a day like the one, five years before in a jeweller's shop in Rome, on a holiday subsidised by her mother-in-law, when Neil settled an off-white pearl necklace around her neck, running his fingers around her collarbone until Ann believed she would faint.

—Nadia was here when I came back. She told me about the demonstration. She thought that we were about to get a visit here from our friends. Before that I was busy with Edward Lavigne. Now I am trying to think of what to do about some of the books. Why didn't you let me know, Neil?

Ann remembered, a minute too late, that the call was likely to be recorded. It was an impossible situation. She couldn't live her entire life in code. They didn't care about the books.

—You know everything I know.

—Then why do I hear it from Nadia?

—Ann, how could I predict any of this?

—You couldn't.

Nothing could be foreseen. Unpredictability was a force to be reckoned with. It was no less relentless than the Special Branch. There was no place in Durban for extravagant jewellery or listening to music. Ann felt that the veneer furniture they bought at Joshua Doore, on a hire-purchase plan, and the lines of brown-brick warehouses along Umbilo Road proved something dismal about their own state. It would be an offence to try to live better. What had been attractive in Paris was twice as expensive here, not at all beautiful, in this context, but repulsive. A gullwing Mercedes was ravishing on a street in Rome but abhorrent over here.

On occasion Ann thought that she would die at the hands of her thousand worries. There was hardly the space to be taken up with one when another was knocking and then another and another. They were soon hammering out any other idea that might have been in her head. Neil was more efficient. He put out of his mind anything that could not be mitigated.

—You're making a fuss out of nothing, Ann. I sent Nadia to the house to complete some work. If you want, I will ask her to return the key tomorrow. Does that suit you?

—And come home now, please.

—I want to hear about Edward Lavigne.

—When you get here.

Despite the suspicion that it was a false alarm Ann took the box of books out of the house. In a section of the outside wall, adjoining the Mackenzie place, was a garden cupboard. She opened it to reveal the neat heaps of tools, stiffening green coils of the hose, a jam jar filled with a gravy of snail poison, and a shovel.

She put the box under the hosepipe, which was heavy to lift. It would do nothing to keep the books away from the Special Branch. If they wanted to confiscate Neil's contraband they would be sure to look outside and in the trunk of the car and at the bottom of their suitcases. And where would they put everything they had confiscated? One day, under the new government, which was coming as surely as the day, people would use this library of everything that had once been forbidden.

The house was old by Durban standards. Over time it had developed a sound and structure of its own. It had a good position at the top of the Berea. It had been put up by a sugar baron for the use of his manager, a man who promptly contracted yellow fever on the ship from Lourenço Marques. The place closest to it, in Ann's opinion, was the house in Amiens, in the French countryside, to which they had been invited by Neil's cousin, a baronet expatriated from the United Kingdom.

The baronet drove at reckless speed along the flower-lined roads, kept the two of them in residence for a fortnight when Neil wanted to return to his dissertation in Paris, and subsisted on pigs' knuckles and luckless rabbits which tasted of gunpowder, litres of red wine, and, most memorably, the Atlantic lobsters, whose speckled green brains he grimly but proudly beat into a sauce. The Amiens house had been calm, undecorated, and filled with lengths of sunshine.

Ann wanted to hear Paul's voice. However, they wouldn't connect her to Newnham House if she called at this hour. You could telephone your son at school between eight and nine in the evening on a week night, or between three and six on a Saturday afternoon when the sports teams had finished their matches.

Ann didn't know which person she would have to battle next. She went on with dinner. The leg of lamb came out of the refrigerator. It was hardly colder than when she bought it yesterday, and still so perfectly pink that she believed the butcher's boast that the animal had been playing in the Midlands on Sunday. The meat reminded her of a polony. In Paris their butcher and his apprentice had been professionals, as impeccable in their aprons and unswerving in their opinions as doctors and lawyers. They didn't say too much. Whereas you could rely on a Durban butcher, with his smudged red hands, to patter on, never noticing that the customer across the plywood counter wasn't smiling.

Ann put on the oven to heat. She washed the lamb under the tap, turning it around to clean the entire leg. Then it was dried with a paper towel, stretched out on the cutting board to be hammered flat, and rubbed with salt and rosemary she took from the kitchen window. She waited for the oven to reach two hundred. The cleaned scent of the meat and the clatter of the water in the sink, the branches of rosemary, the dogs finding each other's ears in the evening, the children being called indoors, servants standing on the road for the Indian bus, and the rising heat of the oven against the remaining heat of the day made her aware of her own happiness. This happiness was like the sea wind when the temperature of the water and land reversed and everything was free in new darkness.

She put the radio on. It was Radio Port Natal, playing translated copies of American pop music, a programme that commenced when the English service ended for the day. The voice of the announcer was as thick as gravel. It was odd that she could be happy when she had been married twice to two such different men, odder still that she had

cried to leave Gert although she had made the decision to get a divorce. Ann saw that she wouldn't cry for a minute if she and Neil should separate, and yet she was closer to him than she had been to Gert by a factor of a thousand. That was her contradiction.

The contradiction was Neil's all-purpose explanation. This country was in a state of contradiction, starting with an economy which made many rich and far too many poor. The individual was also in contradiction between his heart and his mind, his angel and his demon. Anywhere there was life, there was contradiction.

It was a contradiction in which Ann found herself, settling the lamb into the roasting pan, trying not to burn her hands, while wishing for the end of her marriage. She would rather see her second divorce decree on the luxury paper the solicitors employed than find Nadia in the house again. She would give her husband to Nadia in gift-wrap to keep from having to look into her long mouth for one minute longer.

Did she have anything to worry about? The students at Howard College, along with the members of the Free University, idealised her husband. In his thirties, he was the local equivalent of a Sartre, a king of the revolution. There were no queens. While there were women overseas who smoked in mini-skirts, spoke openly about abortions, bombed aeroplanes, it was also true that heroic men like Sartre and Che Guevara assumed the same rights over women as kings and millionaires.

One afternoon in Paris, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre had made a pass at her while she was slicing a ham on the dining table, using the other hand to keep it in place. Neil had just run down the stairs to find a tin of mustard. Sartre had been examining Neil's poor student library, holding the volumes

of Kojève and Heidegger in his hands and making comments about individual passages which he read out to her in excited French. He found his way closer to the table, set the books on the edge, advised her on the best cutting procedure, and, without moving his wall eye from the direction of the ham, established his astonishingly strong, bony, and discoloured hand on Ann's thigh. Yet it seemed to interest him less than the texture and fineness of each slice she carved. Ann removed the philosopher's hand, once she understood what was happening, set his plate on the opposite side of the table, and allowed him to continue examining the bookshelves, where, after a minute of displeasure with her, he was pleased to find several editions of his own books.

Ann kept her distance from Neil's supervisor for the remainder of their time in France. He treated her as if she had let him down. He looked disappointedly in her direction at gatherings, although his mistress and his wife were present as well, and then, as if to punish her, monopolised her husband's attention. She could still summon the memory of Sartre's touch, too hot and yet too cold at the same time.

It had taken Ann a fortnight to tell Neil. He hadn't been nearly as exercised by her story as she expected. She didn't want him to fight with Sartre and lose the work he had done on his dissertation. He never took up the matter with his professor. It wasn't something that mattered to him. Neil had the strength of his convictions. It made him inhuman in certain respects. Gert would have hit the man.

The lamb had begun to sizzle. Ann opened the door and admired it, watching the creepers of flame rise and fall at the back of the oven, and the burned brown crust appearing along the sides. The kitchen was warm with the smell of the meat. She rinsed a handful of mint leaves, tore them up, and

mixed them into a pat of Crown butter. Outside it rained out of a clear sky, pouring for ten minutes, chattering on the roof.

She stood at the window to watch the dark rain, which disappeared to reveal lines of white and blue stars across the heavens. On the far side of the harbour, where the seaside lights hadn't yet been turned on, she thought she saw the flash of a shooting star. You didn't often see them so close to sea level.

The lamb was done long before Neil returned, along with an amount of potatoes, carrots, and turnips, which Ann placed out on the table under upturned dishes where the entering members of the Free University came to admire them.

Every two or three minutes somebody rang the bell and she would go and escort them to the sitting room, where they waited for the session to begin, talking quietly among themselves or coming to ask her if they could use the telephone for some emergency. She didn't mind the telephone bills, although she didn't show them to Neil either. He would have been shocked, but then, like many people who were old-fashioned at heart, he couldn't adjust to changes in the value of money. The rand was not as stable as the pound. It was a harbinger of the metric system.

The Free University was open to anybody who wanted to expand his understanding, from government workers and municipal clerks to students from the Philosophy Department and others from Black Consciousness groups.

No register was taken. Often, several Anglican clergymen arrived, both black and white. They had asked the permission of their bishop to attend. There were some

young photographers who had started to document the townships, taking pictures of the magistrates' courts and the municipal beer halls, as well as following the Black Marias in their patrols around the giant locations of Umlazi and KwaMashu. There was a young man, Lelo, who worked as a security guard at the petrol refinery on the Bluff and made it to their house by taking three different buses, and John Mantis, who wrote poetry and drew cartoons for the newspapers and collected books and pamphlets concerning freemasonry and demonology.

Communists and liberals refused to participate. Nevertheless, Neil had recruited a number of workers and strike leaders from the councils that had appeared on the Durban docks and in the textiles factories.

Some participants in the Free University had become friends. Archie Msimang, in his late fifties, had manners as impeccable as any of the Hunters'. Employed as a machinist in a workshop in Pinetown, Archie was the product of a former mission school, a barrel of a man coming to her shoulder, almost purple on his large and expressive countenance. His way of speaking, his way of halting halfway through a sentence to survey it to the end, reminded her of the priest who officiated over her wedding to Neil.

The friendship went in both directions. Archie came to consult with Neil on a matter that had nothing to do with the Free University, some issue to do with his pass book or opening a savings account, but ended up sitting in the kitchen with Ann and talking, slowly and courteously, about his dilemmas until the afternoon vanished from the windows. She knew about the wife who had died suddenly on Boxing Day, his brother who left the country after Sharpeville and had never been heard of again, the woman he had begun

to court who worked behind the counter of the BP garage.

Ann was pleased when Archie came to see her. He was wearing a white shirt that bulged over his belt, and polyester suit trousers that must have been bought second-hand from his employer. Many of the small-business owners around Durban weren't rich, having come with nothing from places like Edinburgh and Belfast to join in the boom. They brought their frugal habits, supplementing their income by selling their old clothes to their workers.

Archie stood in the corridor, waiting for her to invite him inside.

—Comrade Ann, good afternoon. Or I see it is already good evening.

—Hello, Archie.

He smiled at her and sniffed the air ostentatiously. She saw that the heel of his shoe was bound with Sellotape. He must be the same size as her son. She had bought extra pairs of shoes in Paris for Paul and was keeping them in boxes until he wore out the others.

—I have been sent by the other comrades to inform you that, while we are waiting for Neil, you have truly awakened our appetites.

—It's a leg of lamb, Archie. It's done and I am still waiting for my husband to pitch up. You think I should make everyone a plate?

—I believe it would be appreciated.

Archie came inside and took his usual chair at the table. He helped her to carve the lamb and put it on plates. She thought that Archie didn't seem to have distinct political views. He seemed to be listening and trying to make up his mind. He was unusual by the standards of the Free University, which ran the gamut from outspoken commu-

nists to Christian socialists, pan-Africanists, black nationalists, revolutionary Muslims.

There were the more practical members of the Free University who believed in a non-racial future, but pursued their business in the interim. That meant Royal Saloojee, the dentist who also had a stake in an insurance brokerage. Roy had latched onto Neil when he sold them life cover. Now he was selling insurance for fire and water damage, for illness and death benefits, to comrades, not to say doing their teeth on the side. He had put a bridge in for her.

Archie helped Ann take the plates to the living room. He gave everybody a serviette, knife and fork, and then sat down to eat in front of the telephone. Nadia arrived and made herself at home. She sat beside Roy the dentist. He had brought some forms for her to sign dealing with the annual renewal of her policy. She tried to read through them while keeping half an ear on the proceedings. The discussion, which had been scheduled on Fanon, began without Neil.

Ann watched without wanting to take part. She didn't have any ideas of her own. There was some other principle in her heart today. She saw that, in each hour of this day, she had been unwilling to concede any defeat, whether to Lavigne or the Jaguar. Not to the Rabies nor to Curzon College, not to Neil, not to her son Paul, who needed to drink at sixteen and had landed them all in hot water. It was only at the spectacle of Nadia that her heart had turned over. She was sure that she had lost even before she started to resist. Her husband wouldn't leave her in the lurch. At the same time he was capable of making her leave him.

What was there to do? Her adversaries had the upper hand. Curzon College was as secure in its mentality as the Vatican. They made her ashamed to use the same language.

The degeneration was there in the schools, in the misery of offices where they fingerprinted native men and where young white men scolded older men like Archie, and in the drumhead courts, and the racial signs posted along the beaches and in the bus stops, enforced by the Black Marias, which carried a dozen men in their cages.

Neil appeared as the members of the Free University had begun to drift away. Archie had already left in Roy's car. Lelo, Nadia, and John Mantis were at the door, where Neil talked to them for a few minutes and walked them to the end of the driveway. Then he came into the kitchen, looking surprised as if he had heard something unexpected, and unbuttoned his jacket to put it over the back of a chair. He sat down.

In his shirt Neil was thinner and younger than the image fixed in her memory, his beard scarcely speckled with grey. He was again the man she had married in an Arniston church. In London or Paris, at thirty-five, Neil would count as a young man. Here he had Methuselah's responsibilities.

—I'm sorry, Ann. I should have warned you when the day went to pieces.

—You should be sorry.

She forgave him at once.

—I really didn't have time to get to a telephone. There was the issue of bail money. I had to go to the bank to get a draft. Some of the students had to be ferried between the police station and their homes. One lived far into Springfield, next to the power station. He says all the youngsters have asthma. He wanted me to write a petition for them. But forget about all of that. Tell me what happened with Lavigne.

—He had a new complaint about Paul's objection to

military cadets. In any case he had nothing to offer. Unless we come up with a donation to the music building he's planning to put Paul on the bus at mid-term, with all his belongings.

Neil settled into his chair before he looked back at her.

—He's blackmailing us over a bottle of brandy?

—Two bottles. And the petition Paul started.

—This country is full of surprises, Ann, but I have never heard of a school blackmailing the parents before.

—Given what crooks they are behind the scenes, Paul might be better off at DHS. For a government school, it gets good results. Didn't Sartre want them to shut down every French private school?

—I'm not defending the existence of these schools, Ann. You and Gert wanted to send him there. It wasn't my choice. But now Paul is well established. I suppose if we have to pay Lavigne, we can pay him with the money left over from my mother's estate. I have never had to draw on that capital before.

It sounded as if Neil, who was without emotion under most circumstances, was growling at her. He was in the grip of some unfamiliar emotion. Ann wasn't sure that her husband was adapted to real frustrations. He wished for a world in which fair play was the norm and believed, following Sartre's example, that injustice must be strenuously opposed in each detail. And yet politics, even in this country, was one grey thing opposing another. She couldn't teach him this, didn't necessarily want him to submit to this fact, and therefore had the sensation of being far away from Neil. He had said nothing to push her away and yet the prick of it was as real as when her hand found a safety pin in her purse.

Neil had some news of his own.

—You won't believe what I heard today. I worked out why Edward Lavigne's name sounded familiar. It turns out his older brother Percy is the deputy dean. He may be the acting dean next year.

—I don't believe you.

—I have no idea why nobody said anything to me either. I just never put two and two together. And it's an unusual last name. They must be quite a pair. I've had dealings with this Percy character and he's every bit as slippery as you describe Edward. Rumour has it that he feeds the Security Branch information on the lecturers. You can't take rumours for granted, of course, but it sounds as if the younger one might also have a similar understanding with the police.

—I don't believe it.

—Wait a minute and I'll tell you something else. They say a few years ago Edward was arrested in Pretoria. They dropped the homosexuality charges before the Sunday newspapers could get hold of it. You know how they'll print anything on the back page if they get the chance. But why did they drop the charges? It's not impossible that the younger Lavigne is their man in the private-school system.

—If he insists on expelling Paul, then we have to show him up, Neil. We must go public.

Neil was solemn.

—If you go to war with the system Paul will have to leave anyway. The easiest way, assuming we want him to stay, may be to give Lavigne the donation for his music building. How much harm can music do? Do you want to hear something else?

—I'm not sure that I do.

—I didn't either. Some people, who don't want to be named, suspect Archie is also working with the Special

Branch. There's no real proof, from what I understand, but people have noticed that he has more money in his wallet than they expect him to have, considering the shoes he wears. They have seen him in certain parts of town when there was no reason for him to be there. Now there may be nothing to it at all. Nevertheless, once it gets started, something like that can take on a momentum of its own. But I can make neither head nor tail of it.