



Chapter one may be found on the website: <http://users.tpg.com.au/genetree/catseye7.html>

Pebbles in the Stream

An Australian saga in several episodes by Graham Price Chapter 2

The long drive back to Melbourne had wearied him. Tom wasn't sure he had that many years of driving left in him. Perhaps he would be confined to running around the suburbs, getting food and requirements when necessary, and perhaps visiting Tina and her husband Joel, until . . . well, until it was time. Any further than that, might be dangerous. He certainly didn't wish to be the cause of someone else's grief. There was too much of that on the roads these days. He'd made a mistake coming into Koo-we-rup and nearly ended on the wrong side of the road.

But he had enjoyed his trip to Penifeld to pay his respects to Caroline, and the surprise of seeing Frances had made it really worthwhile. You only get one chance at it, he thought; grasp the bull by the horns and go for it. He'd done that quite a lot during his life and the bull had never failed him, but even so, he thought, sometimes there were repercussions that surfaced in other's people's lives. He shrugged. Well, can't be helped, they should have seen it coming. They weren't wise enough. But then, some things come at you like a whirlwind without responsibility on anyone's behalf, and the result can only be, acceptance.

But he had never accepted the reason why Caroline had gone off with that other man. Money perhaps, better sex? Something perhaps more stable than he could offer her at the time? And he never had closed the door. It was always there in the background, like an octopus reaching its tentacles out toward him, and he wondered if he should slice them off or allow them to entangle him. Confusion. At such times he had pulled the white pebble out and stared at the initial C. If he could turn the clock back! Did she still have the other pebble, perhaps locked away in the back of a drawer somewhere?

Stephanie had come along several years later when he seemed to be fumbling around trying to sort out his life — a top illustrator with Swallow books, and they had seen something of themselves in each other — both somewhat bruised from the world, the parties, the high living. It had been a wild ride for a decade or so, but then the truth had hit — this could not stay as it was, something needs to be settled. And by the time of his first novel, they had married.

When Stephanie was pregnant he had been over the moon — a daughter. And she stole his heart from the beginning and every day of many years as she grew in stature. Then by the time of his sixth novel Tina had met Joel, a sub-editor with *The Independent* newspaper. Tom considered that the man was stuck in a dead-end job, would rise no further than sub-editor, but at the same time perhaps would be an anchor for Tina, so with some reservations he had agreed to the marriage. They would have gone ahead without his permission, anyway. It was a different world. He sometimes laughed over that when the wine had taken over. The new breed, he called them, the new global enterprise. But Tina had branched out, becoming an artist in her own right and leaving Swallow, while her husband slogged away daily within the newspaper world. Somehow, Tina had discovered Tom's earlier relationship with Caroline and had searched for some time online before she discovered the whereabouts of Tom's ex in London.

They met. Tina had organised a meeting at the Felina Art Gallery in London. They were living in Chelsea then, Tom, Stephanie, with Tina joining them during a holiday out from Australia. They were not all that far from where Tom's great great grandfather had been living in one of the mansions at Queen's Elms, Chelsea. Tina, twenty-five and in the full flush of life had looked up Caroline and cheekily asked for a meeting.

As it was still early morning, the gallery just off Oxford Street was almost vacant. It was one of the smaller, but generally popular and successful, galleries in London, one of those often often shored up by a rich benefactor. It was drizzling rain as she closed off her umbrella and left it at the entrance in charge of an assistant — a young almost crew-cropped dark-eyed girl about seventeen. "Five pounds," said the girl.

"Oh, right," said Tina, pulling the banknotes out of her purse and frowning a little.

"It's for expenses, you know."

"I'm sure. Will the umbrella be safe with you? It's a birthday present from my father. I wouldn't want to lose it."

"I've two here already! No problem. Here's your ticket."



The entrance widened into a vast pure white interior. She could see art on the walls and sharp corners where the gallery obviously wound further to other rooms. The pamphlet the girl had given to her indicated that there were over 200 paintings within the gallery, far more than she had expected. As she moved forward she searched the pamphlet for a sign of Caroline's entries. The third page gave her what she wanted — thirteen paintings in the second room. She passed by a row of post-modern art which did nothing for her mood, some of which looked like bent chopsticks or matches in a flood of grey cloud. Turning the corner she paused. There was a very beautiful blonde woman standing in front of a modernistic painting of the Tower of London, which Tina thought was a rather unusual addition to the gallery, but as she moved closer she was drawn to the painting with its rendition of age and medieval vision. It stood out from all the other paintings. She was suddenly back in the 17th Century, with an almost third dimension of viewing. The painting was not only a factual rendition of the Tower but when looked at closely showed some element of savagery around its perimeters. Tina couldn't believe what she was seeing. It was alive! It vibrated with the lives of those who had lived and died in that tower.

How could anyone possible paint that, she wondered? She was staring down the centuries, completely disconnected from the present. The painting drew her on, forcing her down the dark steps and into its interior and there was the guard with his helmet and lance. His face, drawn and firm, sharp eyes staring at her with wonder. Why are you here? Have you come to give sustenance to those imprisoned, or to mourn those recently deceased? The axe, you know, is always sharp and ready.

The blonde-haired woman turned and looked at her. From Tina's father's description she did appear to be Caroline. Tina shook her head slowly and gathered her composure. She smiled as the woman came toward her.

"Caroline?"

"You must be Tina? It's been a long time since . . . well, I never thought . . . I . . . I suppose I should . . . never mind, you are here and that is all that really matters. You do look like him. How is he?"

"Father's well. You seem, ah, you seem younger than I imagined."

Caroline laughed. "Thank you for that, but there are years behind this face that you would rather not see. You are young and you have a whole world before you. I understand that you have inherited your father's literary talents . . . a small but vital book of poems it seems, apart from your art."

Tina blushed. "My first effort, but it didn't sell all that well. I don't think there will be a re-print."

Caroline grasped her hand — soft, but a firm grip. "Oh, but wait, the years may yet prove you wrong. Poets have a way of being reviewed over and over, the same as certain art. I saw you were looking at my *Tower*. Something happened to you, didn't it? I have no idea how it occurred, but I felt myself back in those medieval days when I was painting it. I could even hear the imprisoned screaming. There were the jewels, the beheadings; I think you felt that, didn't you? So, perhaps we are like souls come together for a purpose?"

"You were always so close to him. What happened?"

Caroline turned away. She moved in front of the Tower painting. "We were . . . we were . . ." and then there were tears appearing in her eyes. "I . . . I don't know."

Tina moved forward, reaching for the woman she had only just met. Had she started something that she could not finish?

Mr. Stead tapped his cane onto the desk in front of him "Silence! Some decorum would be appreciated. After all, you are not here for jolly times or dancing or even romancing. So, some quiet if you do not mind. And you, Master Thomas Marshall, if you would be so kind as to turn around and give attention, that would be something in your favour when the end of year report goes to your parents."

Tom turned around from chatting with his friends and smiled at the head teacher. "Yes sir!"

"And," continued Adrian Stead, "I would be very happy indeed if whoever was responsible for bringing in the possum, would desist from these antics. Allsworth! You wouldn't happen to know something about that, would you?"

"No sir," said Harcourt, shifting his feet off the seat in front of him. "I'm not the Pied Piper of Hamelin."

The class laughed.

"Your imagination knows no bounds, Allsworth. The Piper was luring children, not possums. We all know, Allsworth, that you are reasonably good at making reed pipes, so perhaps you do pipe up possums to follow you, eh? You are a lot of miserable specimens, more miserable than what is on the shelves of this classroom in all those glass jars, but it is my task to see you educated to the best of my abilities. Otherwise, your parents will wonder why you are wasting your time here. Don't forget, my little frogs, there's always the razor strop from your father if you fail in your grades."



The class roared with laughter. They knew that Adrian Stead was simply joking. He had brought them so far from early primary almost to secondary, and they loved him for it. He had never laid a hand on any student. If there was punishment to be handed out, it was simply that you stayed back at school for an hour after class, or was forbidden to take part in football or basketball for one week. Adrian Stead was a softie.

“And if it is fine by Master Thomas Marshall who keeps turning around to view a certain young lady behind him, we shall continue with Shakespeare’s rendition of King Lear.”

Caroline felt the blood rushing to her face, because it was she to which the teacher was referring. Tom simply couldn’t help himself. He had to show her off to the class, after all, she was his girl.

Frances, sitting next to Caroline, laughed and prodded Caroline in the chest. “Luvy boy is onto you.”

The air was filled with the sounds of magpies and corellas as they trudged out of the school. An all embracing hot and dry afternoon that seemed to make the eucalyptus weep. It was a dizzy smell that enraptured the children’s lungs, allowing them to breathe easily as they ran each to their own destination. Frances, Caroline and Tom headed for the river. The bird life was abundant and raucous. The children threw their school satchels onto the sand and laid back, staring into the blue sky, with its slight wisps of white cloud.

“Do you reckon Harcourt did it?” said Frances, looking across at Tom whose hand was already woven into that of Caroline’s.

“Sure, who else?”

“He’s mad,” said Frances. “He had that air gun the other day, shooting at birds.”

“Takes after his old man,” said Tom. “Supposed to have been a soldier in the First World War; story is that he captured a machine gun nest almost single handed, then shot all the Germans who were there, one by one. I wonder if they had already surrendered?”

“That’s murder, isn’t it?” said Frances.

“If you two don’t mind! That’s my father you’re talking about. He was a hero! We have medals to prove it.”

“Well,” said Tom, “Medals don’t mean much. You can buy them in the second-hand shops.”

“Go to hell!” spat Caroline, and stalked off, kicking sand in their faces.

“Whew, what’s with her!” said Frances. “Such a bitch! Can’t take the truth, eh?”

Tom stretched out on the sand. “Oh, I don’t know. Sure, it’s a strange family, but I guess no stranger than any of us. This war seems to have brought out the worst in some of us, don’t you think?”

“Well, they’re filthy rich, and I suppose if you have all that property and stuff, you can say anything you like and people will believe it. Going to the dance on Saturday, Tom?”

He took her hand. “Yeh, might as well. Thought it might be with Caroline, but if you’re keen, why not?”

Saturday mornings required Tom to be working in his parents grocery shop in Penifeld. He’d started early, was bagging potatoes into eight pound bags by 7.00 a.m.. Then there was wheat and pollard to be bagged up for the folk who only had a small group of roosters and hens. A rat ran out from under one of the big potato sacks and he watched it searching for some avenue of escape. He let it go. He could have smashed it’s head open with the mallet that was near him, but that wasn’t his style. Let it live to enjoy another day or two, or even perhaps meet with a lover somewhere in the shed at the back of the store. He’d washed his hands, then started on bagging the sugar up into two and four pound bags; salt was next and it was heavier than the sugar, looking small in the one and two pound bags. He yawned. No more, no more for that morning. It was past 8.45 a.m.. already and the store would open at 9.00. He left the back store-room and wandered into the shop, where the smell of strong tea and coffee smacked at his nose. Robur tea, Bushells tea, coffee grounds; mild, semi, and matured cheese on the bench near the cash register. He sliced a small piece of the matured cheese for himself, careful to make it thin enough not to be exposed to his parents. The tang of it on his tongue was a delight. He laughed. He could have eaten the whole cheese block, he reckoned. He so loved that strong matured cheese.

The front door opened. His father entered. “You look as if you’ve been up to something or other?”

Tom took solace from behind the silver cash register “Finished all the bagging up, dad. Saw a rat run out of the potato bags, but couldn’t get to him. Too fast for me. You oughta put some traps in, eh?”

“Huh, might just catch your fingers or toes, aye! Anyway, what about the flour, have you done that?”

Tom flushed. “Oh, I forgot. But I think there’s enough here on the shelves for today. For Monday, well, I don’t know.”



“You don’t know? Tom, I’m paying you to know, to look forward and appreciate the need of the customers tomorrow, the day after and so on. After all, one day all this will be yours.”

Well, it wasn’t to be. Tom had gone on to High School and majored in English Literature. His parents had eventually resigned themselves that the store would end with them. Tom enjoyed the dances with Frances, and eventually even Caroline as she slowly came back to him. After all, thought Tom, those white pebbles were a sign of commitment and love, which nothing in the universe could ever separate. But Caroline had won an art scholarship, which meant tripping off to Great Britain in 1959. “I will follow you,” said Tom, as they stood before the railings of the SS Orsova looking down at Station pier. “Wait for me. There is a chance for me to come over as a correspondent, if I can twist my boss’s fingers. He reckons my reports are emotional and crowd gathering. Well, so he says. There might be an opening for me in London. Caroline, wait for me.”

The Daily Mail was flourishing and the owner editor considered it was all due to his star reporter, Thomas Marshall. The readership had jumped by almost one third over the past twelve months. James McGregor had raised Tom’s salary substantially, leaving Tom caught between two of the greatest decisions a man could ever face — his newspaper career at home, or his love for Caroline who was still in London making a name for herself in the art world. And there was something else that disturbed him — the letters from London had been staggering longer apart in their reply. Two months now and he had not heard . . . something was up . . . had she found someone else? He’d telephone if he could, but she had never left him a telephone number. He was fortunate that his work in the city was only fifteen minutes drive to Penifeld, so that he remained most nights sleeping at his parents home — a small two-bedroom Federation home on the edge of the town, overlooking Penifeld lake. It had been his grandparents home, chosen initially due to its position among the lustrous fields, set on a low rise above the shining lake. Tom reckoned that the white and black swans that lazily swan in the lake were as old as his paternal grandparents, both gone now and in the cemetery. Many a summer’s night he had sat out under the verandah as a boy, then a youth, and finally a man on his grandfather’s rocking chair, watching the blazing sun gradually lose its luminescence and casting wide distorted shadows over the town. A good place to live, he’d often thought, a good place to be settled and raise children. The town was fed by the farmers all around and the farmers also came to buy produce at Marshall’s store. Almost heaven, thought Tom. But he knew his future was not here, that eventually he would have to leave and write about the world out there — a world that was already teeming with new wars and conflicts. He’d even thought of signing up as a war-correspondent. The strong rope that was tying him to the area was James McGregor. They had formed a bond, a firm partnership, and Tom had become reluctant to break it. It was almost as if they were joined by umbilical cords; they often drank together, ate together, and James had invited Tom to his home on numerous occasions, not only to meet his wife Eleanor, but also to befriend James’ two daughters. Beatrice was nineteen, a sultry dark-eyed beauty about the same height as Tom, who worked in a photographic store in the city. Jennifer was of auburn hair, green eyed, closing on twenty-one, a little shorter than Beatrice, and had curves in all the right places, thought Tom, a stenographer at a law firm, and he knew that he would be invited to the 21st celebrations coming up soon. He was friendly with the two girls and liked being in their company. Jennifer made it very clear to Tom that she was more than simply interested in him, and Tom saw the look on her mother, Avril’s face, and he knew that Avril approved if ever there was to be a match. The problem was that there appeared to be some jealousy by Beatrice, and Tom was not sure he could handle that. Better to cut all ties, perhaps?

Harcourt Allsworth had taken over from his parents as the general manager of the pub in Penifeld. Tom called once in a while when he was home. He knocked down the occasional beer, played darts with some of his companions and watched how Harcourt dealt with the locals. He felt that behind the smile and cheery greetings, Harcourt was another person. Once in a while he would become angry with a customer, grabbing him by an arm and forcibly ejecting the man out of the door. Tom thought that was unnecessary and had raised his eyebrows at Frances, who had been taken on earlier as barmaid by Harcourt’s parents. Frances generally shrugged and went on with her work, checking with the cook to see if meals were ready. She doesn’t wish to be involved, thought Tom, and she’d be better off out of here. She’s far more intelligent than to be working for that mongrel, who was the same blood as that of Caroline. How could two people born of the same parents be so much unlike each other? And he thought, I might write about that one day. It has the age old drama of families torn apart, sometimes reunited, then torn apart again. Then he took his notebook out of his pocket, a pen from inside his jacket, and began to write. When he had finished three pages he wrote in parentheses on the bottom of the last one (“Beginning”)

Caroline closed the letter from Tom and placed it back into its envelope. She’d noted that he didn’t like writing on aerogramme’s, but took the time to source out proper paper and often groovy envelopes. Nothing mean about Tom, she



thought, but so far away and there's no real likelihood of him coming over. He loves his reportage too much. He won't leave, no matter how much I entreat him to come. Why does he ignore my attempts? Perhaps he's found himself another girl, eh? Oh, London, London, you've been so good to me . . . at long last I am able to support myself, and I could support the two of us if he will really come. Shan't be a problem for him to find work with one of the major dailies here. Seems he has outdone almost anyone else in Victoria with his excellence of reporting. But then, there is Brett! How do I feel about him? He thrills me, makes me laugh, takes care of me. So, I am confused? Ah, what would life be without confusion? We're all confused sometime or other.

She leant back from the balcony. Ah, great Chelsea looking over the Thames, swept with an early evening light that bounces generous reflections all over the city. Thank you old Sol, you are there, but graciously minimised. So beautiful, she thought, now that the chill of winter was almost past. It is still a certain greyness, but a colour that impresses with coming growth. I think I can capture this as it is. And she hurried inside to collect easel and canvas. The sinking sun was shining through Westminster, glittering the rooftops, as it had done for centuries, but no one, she thought, has captured this setting as I am about to do. Turner, eat your heart out!

It was her great aunt Van who has given her the chance. Coming out of that colonial country into the mother-land, so green as Vanessa Trengrove had considered her when Caroline first arrived. You are talented, my dear, but talent is useless without dedication, she had said, and Caroline wondered at that. Of course she was dedicated, otherwise she would never have received the scholarship. Oh well, that was then, but it had been fun living with a bohemian aunt, whose mother had been part of the Bloomsbury group. Vanessa's eccentric ways were tied to the past. The present wasn't really her cup of tea, but she had supported Caroline over time until the girl from Australia was able to show at galleries. The excitement at being recognised and written up in monthlies, never fazed Caroline much. Once the heady thrill had died down, and with a little celebration of champagne now and then, she went back to work — ten hours, twelve hours and more, painting, designing, often until the sun was coming up in the morning.

"You look tired," said Brett, "You are over-doing it."

She knocked back the gin and tonic. "It's my way. If you don't like it, you don't have to be here."

He laughed. His blue Scottish eyes shining. "You know I could never do that. But, perhaps you should take more care of yourself. Go to bed more often, and I don't necessarily mean with me."

She called for another gin and tonic. The hovering waiter snapped it up fast and returned with her drink. He queried Brett with a raise of his eyebrows, but Brett shook his head. His whiskey was fine.

Caroline took a sip, sighed, nodded a little and said: "It's my aunt Van's 95th next week. We're having a celebration party and I know you don't approve of some of her old friends, but they lived in another time and place and if you are coming, I'd expect you to be civil to them."

He laughed. "Don't you think they are kind of gypsies, though?"

"Just because they were mostly connected to the Bloomsbury group, doesn't make them gypsies. God Brett, where do you get these ideas from? Besides they've been through numerous epidemics, besieged a depression and a world war that you and I have never really known. Give them some grace and intelligence for Christ's sake."

"Oh ho, getting a little snarky, eh? Well, sure, I like your great aunt. I won't be much trouble, but really Caroline, some of her friends are a little archaic and saturated with strange ideas."

"Oh Brett, I don't know what to do with you. Here you are a successful London real estate broker with an interest in art, but you know, somewhere inside that heart of yours there is a piece of ice, that only shows itself now and then. Just keep that bloody piece of ice well hidden when you come, will you?"

He smiled and reached out to touch her hand. "You know very well, Caroline, that we are opposites, but opposites attract and bear all the burdens of the world. Opposites often have lovely, wonderful children. We should move in together and prove to the world that even when we're annoyed with each other, we still have that thing called love."

She took another sip of her gin and tonic. She smiled deeply. "The man with the silver tongue! You should be in movies! You remind me of someone in my past."

"And that would be?"

"He . . . ah . . . it's none of your business." •

To be continued.