

Slow golden smoke drifts over bare tables, over dusty jars of mussels steeped in brine. Here and there, under the dim lamps, old men sag, sipping rank tea. A far clock tolls a dull nine. Ten. Eleven. Twelve. A gull squalls.

A green tram sails clanking past, a boat of lights on the rain-furred street seamed with four sleek rails.

Beyond the squat tin arch of the café the river and the still street run softly to the silent docks and the marsh-rimmed sea. The moon is up. Long bridges glow and waver in black, slow water. Stars wallow and split. River lights rock on dim panes.

The moon hoists high its yellow bladder, swells, spills shrivelling over the water.

Furled in this haze, in slow goldensmoke, I have sat hour after hour over two tepid coffees, munched a dank pie with sauce, read and reread *The Waste Land*. She has not come after all, knowing I would be here tonight, to sit opposite me again as she used to, lamplight tangling in her harsh hair.

I am bloody, bold and resolute. I am golden in the dark. This is my dying day.

Gulls squall.

‘Good fer you, Bob! Three cheers fer me ole cobber!’

‘Ow come yer still on yer pins, Bob?’

Hoots and backslaps for Bob as he swaggers in, burly and tawny, wading through the lamplight.

‘Ged orf yer fat arses,’ he roars. ‘Lazy lod a buggers. Whadda bout them sheilas I got lined up? Yer still game?’

I know Bob of old. He's my landlady's fancy man. She fancies she has a mission to seamen. A wag in a cloth cap points me out to Bob, who of course comes reeling up to stumble on to the chair opposite me. He leans forward on his red-furred elbows to stare at me. I fix my blank eyes on the page. Blood shaking my heart.

'Ullo, gorgeous. Whad's yer nime?'

I wish she would come in now and see a man talking to me.

'Can I buy yer a cup a coffee?'

Red sullen faces are watching, everyone in the dark café. On this bank of the tumid river.

'Arncher talkun?'

I remain self-possessed. Ruffling his foxy hair, he slouches away at last to his sneering cronies.

'Nod a hope. Doesun know whad she's missun, eh, Charl?'

Which is true, as it so happens. They nudge and wink and roar. Their red faces sprouting cigarettes bend glowing over a single match passed round. I hate them.

Stiffly I stalk up to the counter and order another, a hot coffee this time and stand staring out at the glinting street as the sallow, pustular boy pours it from under the thick grey skin in the jug, boils it up on the steam pipe, shoves it spilling across the counter at me and rings my money up. I strut precariously back to my table, not spilling a drop.

'Watch yerself, gorgeous. Yer don' wanna go an spill it.'

I stir sugar in and sip my scalding coffee. My heavy eyes are mirrored in it, and my lip, and fragments of one shaking lamp. I take another sip, my face trembling in the cup as if lit by a candle flame. I am bloody. Bold. Irresolute.

'About them sheilas, see. The joint's out Collingwood way.'

'Now yer talkun!'

'Whadda bout May, Bob?'

'She'll keep. Termorrer's another day.'

I watch them lurch out, yelling for a taxi on the street, leaving a last few huddled dank men at separate, smoke-furled tables. I sip the dregs of my grey coffee before I stand, cram my book into my black woollen bag, and stride into the night. Old Jerry's great gaunt bicycle leans propped like a mantis at the doorway. I unlock the padlock with the little brass key and cram the padlock and the chain into my bag.

I am, I have been told, and Catherine is the one who ought to know, absurdly preoccupied with the surface details of life.

But where does the surface end? I remember I protested at the time.

Nowhere. Everywhere.

Inside a dark face hunched between shoulder pads still watches me, breathing a slow swathe of smoke, impassive.

I switch on the rusty headlamp and clamber clumsily up on to the saddle, swing one black leg over the bar, clutching the cold handlebars, and push away from the wall. I wobble madly over the footpath on to the street, across the tramlines, and pump the pedals along the splashing gutters, past the dark hulks of shut pubs and warehouses, the blank shop windows, swerving left up Swanston Street, my taut legs aching, timing myself to catch green lights because if I have to stop I will fall off.

I have passed the brick fortress of the brewery, its great gates shut, sour gushes of steam hissing from grilles in the gutters, when a policeman whistles, waves at me.

'You! Ay, you!'

I stop pedalling, looking over my shoulder.

‘Bloke on the pushbike! Yair, you.’

I stop, and fall off.

‘You orright?’

‘No bones broken.’

‘That’s a bloke’s bike, isn’ it?’

‘Anything wrong with that?’

‘Yours, is it?’

‘It belongs to a friend of mine.’

‘Yair, well, yer’ll hafter walk it ’ome ternight, sister. There’s no lights on it.’

Sure enough, I bend and see the last glimmer of light flicker out in the headlamp and the red tail-lamp. I sigh.

‘Got much further ter go?’

‘No. Just Carlton.’

‘Student, are yer?’

‘Sort of.’

‘Well, it just goes ter show, doesun it? Girl your age oughta have more sense than ter go ridun roun’ on a pushbike on ’er own this late on a Saturdy night. An’ a university student what’s more. ’Ow old are yer?’

‘Eighteen.’ Today.

‘Let alone ridun wivout lights. Get yerself run over before yer know what’s ’it yer.’

I haul the bike upright.

‘Look ’ere, it’s not safe. I’ll walk yer home if yer like.’

‘No, thank you, officer. May I go now?’

‘Suit yerself. ’Syour funeral. On foot, mind.’

I sigh, gazing at the long black street, moonlit, lamplit.

‘Well, ged a move on. Whaddyer waitun for? Shove orf.’

I walk the creaking bike all the way up Swanston Street, prop it against a wooden pole looped with spitting wires and struggle up on to the saddle, launch off with a kick and an insane clatter along the still, yellow-pooled streets of Carlton to the rooming house at last. All the long grey windows are in darkness behind its filigree of balconies.

My legs shaking, aching with tiredness, I wheel the bicycle across the verandah, down the dank carpeted hall with its leaded stained glass, and past the kitchen doorway. Snores and mumbles issue from the greasy darkness. Bloody abos, carn seem ter get rid of ’em, no matter what I do, moans Mrs O’Toole. Bloody boozed-up tribe of ’arf-caste pimps an diri-licks. One lamp above the gully trap glosses the wet cobbles. One window is lit, next door to Jerry’s. As I hesitate, the light snaps on in Jerry’s window, his door swings open and Jerry skips to the gully trap and squirts an arch of piss hissing on to the grating.

‘Jesus!’ he yells, catching sight of me. He fumbles with his fly. ‘Whatcher come creepun up on a man like that for? Give a bloke a bloody ’eart attack, yer will.’

‘Sorry, Jerry. Here’s your bike back.’

‘Me bike? Oh, yair, righto.’

‘Sorry if I gave you a fright.’

I never know what to say to people.

‘Not ter worry, girlie. Me ’eart’s as sound as a bell, as a matter a fack. It’s me prostrate keeps playun up on me. Didun see yer comun.’

He zips up, turning his back, before opening the door of his yellow room and waving me in with the other knotted hand.

‘Prop it up against the fireplace, will yer, love? That’s it. No doctor can do anythin for it, not one of um. I been through it all. Even ’ad the op once, the works. Jeeze, did that ’urt! Agony, it was. The catheter! An’ after all that, the bloody thing grew back. Even got me a bag of ’erbs from a Chink down Liddle Bourke. Whadda hope. Jus’ afta resign meself to it, I s’pose.’

There are two milk bottles full of his piss propped in the grate of the fireplace. Next door I can hear the creak and thump of a bed, and smothered groans.

‘Well, thanks a lot for the bike.’

‘That’s orright, yer welcome. Hey, yer didun ferget ter get me a pine, did yer, girlie?’

‘Oh, it’s up in my room. Sorry.’

‘Not ter worry. I’ll ged it termorrer.’

‘Well, goodnight, then. Thanks again.’

‘Tooroo.’

The white moon shakes on the cobbled yard. There is lamplight in the warm rooms of the whores. Warm lamplight and love of a sort, or lust, or whatever. The light in Jerry’s window goes out.

I creep with shaking knees up the dark staircase and down the endless passage creak creak to my room, and throw the door open. I snap on the light. In the sudden glare I see that no one has been here. She has not come tonight. I switch the hard light off and fumble my way by dark moonlight to the dressing table, where I bend and strike a match and light the candle in front of the mirror. The flame flares, spires. I puff out the acrid match. The slow mirrored candle wavers. I step out of my clothes and look into my mirror. I am candlelit, moonlit, my tawny teated breasts and downy belly. My grooved back glows. Between my thighs I have gold-bearded lips.