

STRAIGHT

Old Ground

A hazardous switchback road plunges down the northern slope of Isolation Pass, so my first glimpse of Mawson in twenty years was interrupted by guardrails and rockface. Mawson is one of those drowsy wheat and wool towns on a treeless plain, a place where they know the cost of everything and the value of nothing. It's named for Governor Mawson's son, who in 1841 set out from Adelaide to survey the range that now shelters the town and the merino stud properties, failed to return, and was found a year later with a spear pinched between two bones of his rib cage. That was about the first thing they taught us at the primary school. Later I learned how the sheepmen replaced the Aborigines, but I didn't learn it in Mawson. I was only going back there because my brother had expressed some doubts about a death.

The road straightened and I accelerated. Before long I could make out MAWSON painted on the roof of the pub, a landmark for the buyers who fly in from New South Wales for the ram sales. I could also see the cemetery, a dusty patch of gum trees and gravestones on a rise beyond the Elders-GM saleyards. The cemetery was somehow linked to why I was coming back.

I slowed at the outskirts of the town. For a moment I had that old sensation—Broken Hill to the north, Adelaide to the south, Mawson at the centre—but shook it off to concentrate on the present. The first few houses had not changed—walls of local stone; low, broad verandahs; golden cypress hedges; TV antennas twenty metres high. The RSL hall where Mick and I used to dump empty bottles for the annual Legacy drive was still there. The changes began in the main street. The craft shop was new, and so was the coffee shop, called the Copper Kettle. Every facade had been renovated in late colonial styles and there wasn't a Coke or Marlboro advertisement in sight. I knew what it meant: Mawson had got itself a conservation-cum-historical society.

I angle-parked outside Mick's office. 'Michael Ryle: Taxation and Accountancy Services' was painted in old-fashioned script on the main window. I knocked and went in.

The woman at the reception desk didn't acknowledge me, but I recognised her all right. There is a mulish family named Clancy in Mawson. Clancys never leave the place but marry into struggling sharefarming families, drive trucks for the district council and populate the convent school and the football team. This was a Clancy. She had the same bulky jaw and affronted air.

'Is Mick in?'

'Mick?' she said.

A Clancy, all right. I said, 'The man who pays your salary. Is he in?'

She resumed chewing her gum and flicked on the intercom. 'Mr Ryle, someone to see you.' The speaker crackled and she looked at me and said, 'He wants to know who.'

'Tell him his brother.'

She did, and Mick stepped out of his office. He wore a tweed jacket, a shirt and tie, and grey trousers, all of them wrinkled-looking. He didn't come forward but gestured. I nodded at the Clancy woman and went by her into his office.

He closed the door and we shook hands warily and said things like, 'How have you been?' These days we see each other only every couple of years, usually on Christmas Day and never in Mawson.

'Sit down,' he said, and we settled into a couple of old club chairs on either side of a faded rug. We regarded each other for a few seconds, looking for an opening. Mick seemed to be tense. He held his thin body stiffly and his hands worried each other.

'I'm glad you could come,' he said at last.

I nodded encouragingly. I like to let people explain things in their own way, in their own time.

He jerked his head, indicating the outer office. 'I couldn't explain on the phone.'

We both grinned. When we were kids, all our conversations had been coded with Clancy references. Mick grew sober again. 'You remember Geoff Lyle?'

I did. We'd been contemporaries, but where my family had drifted into the district after the Second World War, his had been there for generations. As a child he'd been a bully. As an adult he was thrusting, vigorous and successful. 'Took over his old man's undertaking business,' I said.

'Right. Well last Friday he wrote himself off coming down the Pass. They buried him yesterday.'

I said nothing.

'I handled his insurance,' Mick said.

Apart from genes and Mawson, all Mick and I had in common was Eagle Provident. He was their agent in the mid-north; I investigated fraud for them from time to time.

'Go on,' I said.

'About two months ago he tripled his life cover,' Mick said, and he looked at me and waited.

'Who benefits?'

'Who else? Lisa.'

Another contemporary. Lisa Heinrich had been called Lisa Acres by the farm kids because the first thing she ever asked them was how much land they had. Being a railway ganger's son, I wasn't even in the running. Then Geoff Lyle inherited his father's business and she hauled him off to the altar.

'People increase their cover all the time,' I said. 'It doesn't mean anything's wrong.'

Well, it often does, but I wanted to hear what Mick had to say.

'It's a bit more complicated,' he said.

I waited.

He sighed. 'The thing is, the Lyles had a big development scheme on the drawing board.'

He handed me a glossy brochure from the coffee table next to him. The hype was about what I expected from the Lyles:

There is one certainty, even in this time of recession: people die. G. & L. Lyle

Funerals are proud to announce The Pines, a development offering landscaped grounds, Mercedes-Benz hearses, chapel with soothing piped music, and the latest in crematorium technology from the United States of America. All types of interments catered for, from a simple plaque to a family vault. Serving the entire mid-north of the state. Invest now!

'I gather work hasn't started yet.'

Mick shifted uncomfortably. 'And it's not likely to.'

I watched him. 'How much are you in for?'

This time his whole face twisted. 'Seventy-five.'

'Thousand?'

He nodded. 'If I don't get it back, I'm stuffed.'

It had taken us a while to get to this point. I've stopped being surprised. Some people have an innate love of suspense, some are hesitant, others are fearful. I said, 'What makes you think you've done your dough?'

'The first dividend payment was due last week. It didn't come. The next day Geoff Lyle ran off the road.'

'Payments like that are often late.'

'Consider this, then. Two weeks ago Lisa came in here all apologetic and said they wouldn't be needing me any more, they'd decided to hire a full-time accountant.'

I stared at the pattern in the rug for a while. I said, 'Who else did they sting?'

'I hoped you'd be able to find out. You know people here, you know how the place ticks.'

'If there *is* a problem here, how do you see it?'

'Geoff Lyle leaves Lisa well-provided for—insurance, investments salted away somewhere—then commits suicide.'

'Was he ill? Cancer?'

'I hoped you'd find that out too,' Mick said.

Mick's wife and I don't get along so I booked into the motel. By then it was midday. I rang the Mawson clinic and arranged to see Rob Turner after lunch, then wandered down the street to buy a sandwich. A little sign in the window of the Copper Kettle said, 'Breakfast and lunch served all day'. I went in.

It was a curious place. The decor suggested art-and-craft, sidewalk-café bohemia, and the food consisted of croissants, Devonshire teas, open rye sandwiches, eggs-all-styles and good coffee. I nodded at a farmer dressed in a tweed jacket, moleskin trousers and R. M. Williams boots. An Akubra hat on a hook above his table accounted for the stark white forehead above his creased, sun-browned cheeks. When last I'd seen him he'd been wearing a school uniform. The other customers represented a fair cross-section of the district: shopkeepers, townspeople, kids from the high school. There hadn't been anything like the Copper Kettle in my day.

At 1.30 I walked to the clinic, which is on the eastern edge of the town, next to the hospital. A brass plate named the town's two doctors. Rob Turner had returned to Mawson after graduating. The other was Alison Smart. For all I knew she'd lived in the town for twenty years, but she wasn't what the locals called 'a local'.

It was 2.00 before my name was called. The first thing I noticed about Turner was his new confidence. At school he'd always hovered on the edge of things,

hot-faced and envious and disapproving. Now he thrust a pudgy, dampish hand into mine and pumped it weakly and said, 'Long time no see.'

We went on in that vein for a couple of minutes, Turner telling me about the clinic and his tax write-off farm, and then I showed him my card and said, 'I was wondering if Geoff Lyle was your patient.'

Turner's lips narrowed and he seemed to sniff. 'He was.'

'Was he in good health?'

'You're asking me to betray a confidence.'

'He's dead, Rob.'

'Even so...'

'Put it this way: did he have a major illness of any kind?'

'I'm starting to find this offensive.'

'I'll put it another way. Had he heard anything from you that would make him want to take his own life?'

Sometimes you have to push. It puts people's backs up, but in the process they might give you an answer. Turner got out from behind his desk, held the door open and said, 'There was nothing wrong with him. I think you've got a bloody nerve, Ryle, coming back and sticking your nose into the lives of people you grew up with.'

You can't operate in my game without a system of favours owed and owing. I went back to the motel and called investigator contacts in the Securities Commission, the Corporate Crime Squad and the fraud department of the Lyles' bank. Then I went about sticking my nose into the lives of the people I'd grown up with. After some coaxing, the local bank manager said that The Pines account had been closed and the funds transferred, but he wasn't prepared to say where, or to comment on the extent of local investment. The editor of the *Mawson Weekly* let me look at her file on the Lyles, but it didn't tell me anything new. I spoke to other people too, but, in general, everyone seemed to be wary and reluctant to say anything about the Lyles or The Pines scheme.

But when you push, something generally gives or pushes back. I was walking to the Copper Kettle for breakfast two mornings later, having decided that Clancys cooked the motel's breakfasts, when Lisa Lyle pulled up alongside me in a dusty white BMW. She turned off the engine, leaned across to open the passenger door, and said, 'I want to talk to you.'

I got in and settled my shoulder against the door. She looked angry, her glossy hair tossed back, her patrician nose at an angle, her eyes flashing. It was a look I remembered from primary school.

'I don't like sneaks,' she said. 'If you want to know about Geoff, ask me direct.'

I watched her for a moment. Any one of a dozen people might have told her what I'd been doing. 'All right,' I said. 'Was he in trouble financially? Had he been suicidal?'

'No to both questions. You're incredible, thinking you can come back here and poke about when we're all still mourning him.'

'Where's the money, Lisa?'

'What money?'

I said, 'Will you stay in Mawson, or have you got other plans?'

Her fine head tipped back another inch. 'You always were pathetic.' She started the engine. 'If you're finished, I've got work to do.'

I got out and watched her drive away. It's the same in every country town: Clancys at the bottom; a middle rung of people like Mick; and Lisa Lyles at the top, who have wealth and privilege but no intellect at all, a combination that can baffle the best of us.

I unwound with strong hot coffee in the Copper Kettle. It had been an odd couple of days, discovering the present and rediscovering the past. A voice, a gait, the hot-wood smell of a verandah post—these had aroused powerful memories of school days, weekends, idle vandalism, boredom and longing. I'd felt the same hostility or indifference toward some people, the same affection for others.

And the same desire. Rose came into the Copper Kettle, said, 'Give us a kiss,' and threw her arms around me.

We disentangled and she stepped back, her clever face lively and assessing. 'A few grey hairs,' she said.

'But distinguished. Coffee?'

She joined me. 'Been a while since we did this,' I said.

'I don't recall that we ever did this. We spent all our time behind Dad's woolshed in the back seat of your father's car.'

I grinned. Soon after I had learnt to drive, the word 'discotheque' had reached beyond the cities. I hadn't been alone in combing my hair forward, driving fifty miles to pick up a farmer's daughter, then another fifty to dance to a Beatles look-alike band at a country hall, then back again, finally getting home as the sun was rising, feeling tossed and edgy after a few mostly unconsummated hours under a tartan rug somewhere.

'I always knew you wouldn't stay in Mawson,' she said.

I couldn't think of an answer to that. Twenty years ago I'd been on the edge of staying, but Rose had seen something in me she didn't want and I didn't know was there, and she'd chosen someone else. I said, 'How's Ken?'

She looked at me, faintly troubled. 'Didn't Mick tell you? Ken died five years ago. Cancer.'

'Oh. I'm sorry.'

'I run the business now.'

A grain and seed firm. After a while I said, 'Bad luck about Geoff Lyle.'

Rose looked instantly wary and alert. 'Yes.'

'Do you think Lisa will stay on? Be a shame if The Pines fell through.'

Rose had never been slow. She dropped her voice and said, 'Good old Andy Ryle, back after twenty years. But not for old time's sake. If you want to know if I've got money invested, that's none of your business. If you want me to say Geoff Lyle was a shit, I won't do it. He was my friend.'

And she got up and walked out.

I went back to work. By late afternoon I'd taken the investigation as far as it would go. I sensed that many locals had invested in The Pines, but if they were anxious they weren't letting on. They had an automatic regard for the Lyles and felt that my questions were in bad taste.

Time to check with Adelaide. I learned from my contacts that the Lyles' new accountant had a history of moving money sideways and off-shore. Also, owing to heavy borrowing and recent losses by an investment company associated with The Pines project, the bank was about to issue the directors with a 'please explain' notice.

I asked for details about the directors. The fax came through to Mick's office for me at 5.00. The directors were Lisa Anna Lyle, Geoffrey Paul Lyle—and Robert Anthony Turner.

There was no indication that Turner was a doctor. He'd listed his occupation as 'farmer'.

Eagle Provident has plenty of clout. By Friday we had an exhumation order.

'So when The Pines went bust,' Mick said, 'Lisa and Rob killed Geoff for the insurance. Shouldn't be hard to prove.'

It was a few days later and we were on our way to the Council Chambers behind the Memorial Hall. The chambers had been set aside for the coroner after it was discovered that the RSL hall had a rotten floor and exams were being held in the high school assembly hall.

'That's up to the police,' I said, 'and they won't act unless the coroner finds that Geoff died as a result of foul play instead of the car smash.'

But things didn't go like that. The first to give evidence was King, the forensic pathologist, a fussy man with clean, slender fingers, and he said immediately: 'The deceased man is not Geoffrey Lyle.'

He held up two large buff envelopes. 'A simple comparison of X-rays establishes that. This X-ray of the deceased man reveals an old pelvic fracture. This one of Geoffrey Lyle, taken recently for a chiropractor treating him for sacroiliac pain, reveals no pelvic fracture.'

He paused. The coroner, a smiling, lazy-lidded man, said, 'Any other discrepancies?'

The pathologist seemed to recite: 'The deceased is a male Caucasian aged about fifty-five. The body weighs seventy kilograms and is 170 centimetres in length. The lungs indicate that he was a heavy smoker. The teeth are crooked, worn and heavily filled.' He coughed. 'Geoffrey Lyle was'—he paused significantly—'or is, forty-two years old, and is both heavier and taller. He is a non-smoker. According to his dental records, his teeth are in excellent condition.'

The coroner said, 'Put simply, the man who drove to his death in Geoffrey Lyle's car was not Geoffrey Lyle.' That was when the pathologist dropped his second bombshell. 'Correct. Except that he didn't die in the crash.'

The coroner blinked. So did I. 'Go on, Dr King.'

'The face and hands were burnt beyond recognition, and the head, trunk and pelvis were badly traumatised—all consistent with the injuries one might expect when a car crashes and burns. However, not all of these injuries showed signs of bleeding, and there were massive internal injuries that are not consistent with a car smash. In addition, the lungs, throat and nasal passages revealed traces of dust. Now, if death had been instantaneous one would not expect to find traces of smoke from the burning wreck, but there were dust traces, and these—together with the other injuries—seem to point to death by crushing, possibly in a landslide.'

His opinion was supported by Alison Smart, Rob Turner's partner. She looked tired, and revealed in a subdued voice that around the time Geoff Lyle's car went over the cliff, she had treated a prospector injured when a mine shaft had collapsed on him. Accidents like this were not uncommon, she said. Every couple of years someone was injured or killed in the arid gold-bearing country east of Mawson.

'He died without regaining consciousness,' she said, 'and I signed the death certificate.'

She paused. The coroner said, 'The body, Dr Smart?'

'Normally we release a body to the deceased's family, but this man didn't have any, so we obtained authorisation to assign the body to the local undertaker for burial in the Mawson cemetery.'

Well that made us sit up. The coroner said, 'You are satisfied that the man who died of injuries sustained in the collapsed mine is the man found in Geoffrey Lyle's car?'

'Yes. I assisted Dr King with the autopsy, and matched his X-rays with X-rays I took when I treated the man.'

Then Rob Turner was called. His confidence had disappeared. He looked anxious, and immediately began to stammer explanations and apologies.

The coroner held up his hand. 'Dr Turner, please, we are not assigning blame here. Simply tell us what happened when the body from the crashed car was brought to the hospital.'

Turner gathered himself. 'I was on duty when the body was brought in. I examined it and signed the death certificate. I'm sorry, it was my fault, I just assumed it was Geoffrey Lyle. It was his car and we found his wallet.'

'The clothing wasn't burnt?'

'Scorched. It was a woollen suit.'

The coroner assessed him. 'You admit that you based your identification of the body on superficial evidence?'

Turner winced. 'The face and hands were unrecognisable, but everything else seemed to point to its being Geoff Lyle.'

'He was your patient?'

Turner raised a twitchy pale face. 'He was also a friend. I suppose I was too upset to see beyond the car and the wallet.'

Then Constable Lovell gave evidence. The Mawson policeman was a sandy-coloured man with a half-amused manner. He did not refer to notes and, mercifully, did not use police-speak. 'The dead man was Karel Pavek, a Czech who migrated to Australia in 1954. He had no friends or relatives here or in Czechoslovakia. I learnt all this from his partner, who was only slightly injured and managed to raise the alarm at Anlaby Station homestead. He's gone back to the mine and wasn't interested in claiming the body.'

That left Lisa Lyle. She looked pale and drained of energy. The skin was tight over her cheekbones but pouchy under her eyes.

'Mrs Lyle,' the coroner said, 'who took delivery of Mr Pavek's body?'

'My husband, the day before he disappeared.'

'Speak up, please, Mrs Lyle. And he took responsibility for the funeral?'

'Yes. A simple burial.'

The coroner nodded, thinking it through, along with the rest of us. 'Did you witness this burial?'

'No.'

'Where were you?'

'Taking care of the laundry. The business generates more than you'd expect.'

'I see.'

Lisa said heatedly, 'I didn't see my husband bury an empty coffin. I didn't see him put poor Mr Pavek's body in his car and stage the crash.'

'Mrs Lyle,' the coroner said mildly, 'you are not on trial here. Getting back to the burial—wouldn't cremation have been easier and cheaper?'

Lisa looked down at her hands and muttered, 'We don't have a crematorium.'

Then her manner changed. She looked challengingly around at us. 'We were going to build one,' she said. 'Our friends, our neighbours, they all had money invested. At first I thought we were victims of the recession—that's what Geoff said. I didn't know he was stripping the company.' She broke down. 'He even cleaned out our joint savings account. There's nothing left. He's run off with everything.'

'They'll be happy at Eagle,' I said later. 'No body, no payout.'

'Poor bloody Lisa,' Mick said. 'From ogre to victim in the space of a week.'

'She's not the only victim.'

He nodded gloomily. 'They'll never find the money.'

'They'll never find Geoff Lyle.'

We were in the motel's licensed bar. They didn't have Clancys working there: the glasses were clean and no-one was wiping a greasy rag over our table. We were discussing the coroner's findings, which simply implied what we all knew: Geoff Lyle had staged his own death and run off with the investors' money.

'You think he's overseas?' Mick said.

'I'm positive. But his real name won't show up on the computers. He'll be using a false passport.'

Mick sighed. Then someone opened the door, admitting noise and a band of sunlight. It was Lisa Lyle. She crossed the room to our table. When she spoke, her voice was throaty with accumulated emotions.

'I owe you an apology for the other day.'

'Forget it,' I said. 'Will you join us for a drink?'

'Scotch,' she said, sitting opposite me.

Mick went to get it and I said, 'It's me who should apologise. I thought you were somehow behind everything.'

She seemed to shiver. 'I can't get over how calculated it all was, even to arranging for increased life insurance so I'd be provided for. He must have had some feelings left for me.'

I didn't respond to that. If it gave her comfort, let her think it. I said, 'What will you do now?'

Her face twitched bitterly. 'I've got no money, the business is about to fold, the town hates my guts. What would *you* do?'

It was true that the town hated her guts. After the hearing had closed I'd been approached by half-a-dozen locals who'd invested in The Pines. All were angry. All wanted me to find Geoff Lyle.

I said none of this. Suddenly Lisa grabbed my wrist. '*I want you to find the bastard.*'

'I don't have the resources,' I said reluctantly. 'And the trail is cold, and when people don't want to be found, and have the money to create a new identity, it's not easy finding them.'

She left without waiting for her drink. She looked desolate. I didn't envy her. It was all waiting now, and she might wait forever.

The next morning I packed my bags. Karel Pavék's grave was being exhumed later, but I couldn't see any point in hanging around to look at an empty coffin.

It was Friday, a market day, so the Copper Kettle was busy. I perched on a stool at the counter and waited to be served. The air was fragrant with the smell of fresh coffee and warm croissants. Dishes clattered in the kitchen, voices discussed the coroner's findings and the little bell above the gingham-curtained door pinged as people entered or left the room.

Then Rose came in. She looked tense. I felt a tug of emotions and turned away to face the counter hoping she wouldn't see me.

A moment later she was standing at my elbow. 'I need to talk to you,' she said, and just stood there waiting.

I said, 'Morning,' or something like it, marking time.

'I need to talk to you,' she said.

I looked at her, taking in the stubbornness and agitation. 'Go ahead.'

'Not here.'

All the conversations dropped to a murmur as we crossed the room. This was a small community and it wanted to know our business, but it was also essentially well-mannered, and the conversations started up again as we reached the door.

On the footpath outside I said, 'What's this about?' but all Rose would say was, 'Not here. Your motel.'

A few minutes later, the door to my room closed behind us, I said again, 'What's this about?'

'You're all so bloody satisfied. You're all so convinced he did it.'

I watched her for a moment, then counted on my fingers. 'One, he faked his death. Two, he's disappeared. Three, a million dollars of investors' money has disappeared with him.'

'No-one's seen him, though.'

'He's travelling on a false passport, living it up in some tropical paradise.'

Rose smiled then, and it was hard and glittering. 'Did you know he recently applied to have his passport renewed?'

I nodded warily. 'The police told me. What are you getting at?'

'Has anyone seen the new passport?'

'No, but that doesn't mean anything. He probably chucked it away.'

'Then why apply for a new one?'

'Part of the general smokescreen.'

Even as I said it I wasn't convinced. If he wanted people to think he was dead, he wouldn't go to the trouble of renewing his passport, especially as he couldn't risk travelling on it if the ruse failed.

The doubts showed on my face. Rose pressed her advantage. 'It doesn't add up, does it?'

I said, 'Come on, Rose. Spit it out.'

She said nothing. She opened her handbag, removed something and flung it on the bed. It was a passport.

'Aren't you going to look at it?' she said.

I picked it up. It had been issued a month earlier. The face in the photograph was Geoff Lyle's: there was no doubting the vigorous jaw and mocking eyes.

'Where did you get it?'

'He gave it to me,' Rose said. 'He also gave me these.'

She tossed two airline tickets onto the bed. They were return tickets to Auckland, first-class. I looked at her.

'We're lovers,' she said, using the old-fashioned term unselfconsciously. Her eyes filled with tears. 'Or were—I think he's dead.'

I waited. I didn't think she'd want me to touch her.

'It's impossible to hide things in this town, so every year we slip away for a holiday together. Last year Fiji, Bali the year before that. Only for a few days, but still worth it. I can't believe he'd go to the trouble of renewing his passport if he was meanwhile working on some elaborate scheme to stage his own death and run off using a false passport. It doesn't make sense.'

'What about the missing investments?'

'The business may have been going under, but if I were you I'd ask his co-directors.'

I watched her, thinking about it. 'How come you've got the passport and tickets?'

'So Lisa wouldn't find them.'

'How strong was it between you and Geoff?'

If she said Geoff had sworn undying love and was intending to leave Lisa any minute now, I was going to say 'Pull the other one.' But she didn't. She shrugged and said, 'Strong enough, but no-one was promising anything and I wasn't in a hurry to get married again. I think Geoff's long-term plan was to wait until The Pines was running profitably so he could sell out to the others and try something new.'

I digested this. 'Lisa and Rob...?' I said, leaving the sentence unfinished.

Rose smiled coldly. 'Lisa would rather be a doctor's wife than an undertaker's wife.'

'Was anything said?'

'We were all playing a waiting game. Except someone stopped waiting and it wasn't me and it wasn't Geoff.'

I watched her carefully. I said, 'Why did he increase his life cover?'

'Oh Lisa made him do that. He said she went on and on about the recession, what if he died tomorrow, etcetera.'

'You don't like her much.'

'Geoff told me he'd wake up sometimes and she'd be lying there watching him.'

I felt my skin prickle as she said it.

A runaway wheat truck had killed my father, and my mother had died of heartbreak, and they're buried together next to a gravelly path in a boxthorny corner of the Mawson cemetery. I could feel the pull of their headstones but I didn't go to look. I was with the coroner, Constable Lovell, Lisa Lyle and a scattering of others, watching two Clancy cousins digging up Karel Pavek's coffin.

We were a cheerless lot. A gritty wind was blowing, the Clancys were surly, everyone else looked bored. As far as Lovell and the coroner were concerned, today was routine. They expected to find an empty coffin.

I didn't. I glanced at Lisa. A complicated expression passed across her face—part tension, part irritation, and, when she met my gaze, part challenge. I was asking myself why she hadn't taken advantage of a fifteen hours' head start, when the coffin appeared. 'Let's get this over with,' she said.

It was a cheap varnished coffin. The Clancys didn't waste any time. They prised off the lid. Lisa stepped forward before anyone else, looked in, turned triumphantly and said, her voice ringing out: 'Empty. Now perhaps you'll all put your energies into tracking down my husband.'

Empty, all right. I don't deny that I was disappointed. The coroner said, 'Thank you, Mrs Lyle, we're finished here,' and he walked back to his car, accompanied by Lovell. Lisa gave me another complicated look, told the Clancys to fill in the grave again, and hurried away after the coroner.

I stood for a while, looking at the hole in the ground, while the Clancys sat on the coffin and smoked cigarettes. I heard one of them mutter, 'Bitch.'

I said, 'Did Geoff Lyle supervise this job?'

'Pardon?'

'Was Geoff Lyle here when you buried this coffin?'

Kevin Clancy took his cigarette from his mouth long enough to say, 'We'd of known it was empty, wouldn't we. Wouldn't of weighed anything.'

It was my turn to say, 'Pardon?'

Bevan Clancy spat on the ground. 'Wasn't us what buried it. The boss rings on the Thursday, says there's this unclaimed body to bury, but when we get here on the Friday *she*—he jerked his head—'says don't bother, it's been buried. A bloke could of slept in.'

'So who buried it?'

'Wouldn't have a clue. Lisa did, for all I know,' Bevan said.

'But weren't you suspicious?'

'Mate, she's the boss.'

'She gave you something for your trouble?' I asked.

Kevin winked. 'Might of.'

'I'd like you to do me a favour,' I said.

That alerted them. Five minutes and fifty Eagle Provident dollars later, their spades struck something soft and yielding and coated in what looked to be lime.

I was about halfway up the torturous road over the Pass before I found where Geoff Lyle's car had plunged over the side. New posts and rails marked the spot. The place and the means had become so strongly associated with his death that I wondered how long it would take before the locals adjusted to the actual place and means.

According to the autopsy report he was heavily doped but still alive when dirt and then the coffin and then more dirt had been dumped on top of him. When the coroner heard that, he said, half-admiringly, 'If there had been no inquiry, the wife and Turner stood to get the insurance on top of everything else. If there was an inquiry, suspicion would fall on the husband. Either way they'd get to keep the invested money. Smart plan.'

Yes and no. I've encountered smarter. Right now I want to believe I'd have seen through the plan and Lisa's greed much earlier if time, place and memory hadn't got in the way, but only a chance conversation with a pair of Clancys had helped me, and that's a cruel realisation.