

Loss

One sweltering morning in the worst year of the Great Depression, when kerosene-tin shanty towns were starving along the city's creeks and the farmers of the northern highlands were walking off the land, a cruising shark snatched a young wife from the shallows at Henley Beach, compelling the stricken husband to flee inland with his baby son, to the main street of Pandowie, where dangers lurked above the ground. He never remarried but the son flourished, joining Stock & Station and marrying an Ison, an old name in the district, settling with her in the big house on Isonville and beginning a family of his own: Anna Antonia Ison Tolley, born in 1949; Hugo Walter Ison Tolley, born two years later. When Anna started at the primary school, it pleased her to come into Pandowie and see her surname above her grandfather's shop: Tolley's Four Square Store. Perhaps Anna resembled her lost grandmother -- leggy, wilful, auburn-haired, always talking back -- or perhaps Grandfather Tolley was reminded of how tenuous life could be, for when she sliced her knee open on the coils of barbed wire displayed in his shop window one afternoon after school, he panicked, staunching the blood with his vast khaki handkerchief, shaking her until her teeth rattled: You're a wicked girl, Anna, unmanageable. The children's other grandfather warned them to watch out for flash

floods, which had been known to barrel down the washaways on Isonville in the blink of an eye. Bucketing rains, Grandfather Ison explained, indicating the pink-smudge Pandowie Hills, then he bent his well-fed back and slash-cleared the star thistles that collared the gravestone of the shepherd boy lost in Ison's Creek. *James Son of Geo. Taken by the Flood 5 April 1875 Aged Six Years and the Angel Sayeth Unto*, the rest indecipherable, every carved S tilted forward as if straining against the waters. Anna and Hugo squatted nearby, their chins cupped in the palms of their hands. Anna was forever asking why: Why did the shepherd carve his S's that way? Because, Grandfather Ison replied. When Grandfather Ison died of asthma, leaving Isonville solely to Kitchener, his son, the Tolleys found themselves living on borrowed time in the big house. Anna's mother inherited nothing but a dusty sideboard from the will, and suffered a loss of faith in one of life's certainties, the regard of a father for his daughter. The little family moved out of Isonville to a struggling farm farther along the sunken road. The school bus from Bitter Wash passed by the front gate, and it pleased Anna to sit where Lockie Kelly could peer along her slanting thighs. Anna was away at the university when the boys she'd known at school began to fall in a foreign war. Matt Heinrich was the first, and Anna heard the news on the day she skipped lectures to march down Frome Street to a subsidiary of the Raintree Corporation, tied to the manufacture of napalm. She sat in the road, refused to move on, and when she got back to her room at Women's College, paint-streaked and hysterical, there was a note under the door: Call home. Matt Heinrich, shot by a sniper at Nui Dat. Little Matt. Terrible, but still, a week later Anna found herself being jostled outside the US consulate, and a month after that some of her acquaintances were arrested on a loitering statute that dated from the 1700s. Oh, they were puerile. Then a second boy was shot dead, a third torn apart when he stepped on a Bouncing Betty. In Anna's mind, those dead boys were

transmuted into friends, not simply kids from Pandowie High who'd tried to touch her up in the scungy back seat of a car. All those beautiful boys. Of the eleven in Anna's Leaving Honours class, the ballot had selected eight for service in the Army. When a fourth drowned in a rice paddy and a fifth died of wounds, Anna began to tremble. She was trembling for Lockie. He'd been her one true love, a wild, laughing, beautiful boy, but she'd hurt him and now she trembled for fear that he'd be taken from her forever. Her luck was turning bad. She could not breathe. She stopped studying. She would not sing 'Military Madness' on the steps of Parliament House again. She had been little Miss Smart-Arse, the first from Pandowie to go to university, turning her back on boys who were content to be farm fodder, girls content with kids and a wedding ring. Well, Anna would not be thinking offhand unkindnesses like that again. She came back to Pandowie, where she belonged. Of Anna's own children, Michael slept through the night and Rebecca struggled against her from the very start. Yet sweet, peaceful Michael it was who died, lost in a car wreck on the sunken road, and Rebecca developed the conviction that Anna might, through inattention, kill her, too. Whenever Anna negotiated the devil's elbows, headlights burning in the roiling dust, she felt her daughter's gaze settle upon her from the passenger seat, eyes like coals and ice in the little face. There's been another foreclosure in the district, another farm lost to the banks, and the Showalter Park artificial breeding scheme has collapsed, owing the banks, taxpayers and local investors sixteen million dollars. The strain is showing: jobless sons are apt to shoot themselves, loved ones to aim their speeding cars at SEC power-line pylons, and last week a young mother ran exhaust gases into the family station wagon at the Showalter Hill lookout above the sunken road, asphyxiating herself and her baby daughter. Pandowie is suffering a loss of spirit, and Anna has argued so in her column in the *Chronicle*, arousing a string of bitter letters to the editor: Surely we

deserve better than this from the very person who has been commissioned to write a book celebrating our 150th Jubilee? Anna is taking a thematic approach for the Jubilee history. Scratch notes: Death on the frontier. A hundred and fifty years ago we lost our loved ones to diphtheria, dysentery, scarlet fever, pneumonia, jaundice and typhoid. Snake bite. Spears. Even tar -- according to the old records, a shearer on the Showalter Park headstation tossed a Ngadjuri suffering from smallpox into a tub of boiling tar. Rebecca has announced that she and her lover intend to have a baby. Anna will watch her granddaughter grow. She'll make a point of not hovering with nervy fingers. When her great-grandchildren come to visit, Anna will be pleased, and pleased to see the backs of them. She won't offer advice. She'll have none to give. A loved one may be lost to you in an eyeblink but Anna will not be the kind of old woman who says things like that.