

## The Cob House. 1864

### I

The coldest winds came from the south and the Cob House had been built in the pathway of the winds.

Joseph Blackstone lay awake at night. He wondered whether he should dismantle the house and reconstruct it in a different place, lower down in the valley, where it would be sheltered. He dismantled it in his mind.

He rebuilt it in his mind in the lee of a gentle hill. But he said nothing and did nothing. Days passed and weeks and the winter came, and the Cob House remained where it was, in the pathway of the annihilating winds.

It was their first winter. The earth under their boots was grey. The yellow tussock-grass was salty with hail. In the violet clouds of afternoon lay the promise of a great winding-sheet of snow.

Joseph's mother, Lilian, sat at the wooden table, wearing a bonnet against the chill in the room, mending china. China broken on its shipment from England. Broken by carelessness, said Lilian Blackstone, by inept loading and unloading, by the disregard of people who did not know the value of personal possessions. Joseph reminded her gently that you could not travel across the world – to its very furthest other side – and not expect something to be broken on the way. '*Something,*' snapped Lilian. 'But this is a great deal more than something.'

Her furious voice dismayed him. He watched her with a kind of familiar dread. She seemed lost in the puzzle of the china, as though she were unable to remember the shape of ordinary

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things. She kept moving pieces around and around, like letters which refused to form a word. Only occasionally did she suddenly discover where something fitted and dare to smear a shard with glue. Then she would press this shard into place with a kind of passionate, unnecessary ardour and her lips would move in what might have been a prayer or might have been a silent utterance of the only French word in Lilian Blackstone's vocabulary: *voilà*, which she pronounced 'wulla'. And what Joseph saw in all of this was an affirmation of what he already knew: that by bringing his mother here to New Zealand he had failed her, just as he had always and always failed her. He had tried all his life – or so it seemed to him – to please her, but he couldn't remember any single day when he had pleased her enough.

But now he had a wife.

She was tall and her hair was brown. Her name was Harriet Salt. Of her, Lilian Blackstone had remarked: 'She carries herself well' and Joseph found this observation accurate and more acute than Lilian could know.

He turned away from his mother and looked admiringly at this new wife of his, kneeling by the reluctant fire. And he felt his heart suddenly fill to its very core with gratitude and affection. He watched her working the bellows, patient and still, 'carrying herself well' even here in the Cob House, in this cold and smoky room, even here, with the wind sighing outside and the smell of glue like some potent medicine all three of them were now obliged to take. Joseph wanted to cross the room and put his arms round Harriet and gather her hair into a knot in his hand. He wanted to lay his head on her shoulder and tell her the one thing that he would never be able to admit to her – that she had saved his life.

## II

After their arrival in Christchurch, Joseph had supervised the purchasing of materials for building the Cob House, and had hired men to help him, and horses and drays to lug the tin and

the pine planks and the sacks of nails and bales of calico, and at last made ready to set off north-westwards, towards the Okuku River.

Harriet had asked her new husband to take her with him. She clung to him and pleaded – she who never whined or complained, who carried herself so well. But she was a woman who longed for the unfamiliar and the strange. As a child, she'd seen it waiting for her, in dreams or in the colossal darkness of the sky: some wild world which lay outside the realm of everything she knew. And the idea that she could build a house out of stones and earth and put windows and doors in it and a chimney and a roof to keep out the weather and then live in it thrilled her. She wanted to see it take shape like that, out of nothing. She wanted to learn how to mash mud and chop the yellow tussock to make the cob. She wanted to see her own hand in everything. No matter if it took a long time. No matter if her skin was burned in the summer heat. No matter if she had to learn each new task like a child. She had been a governess for twelve years. Now, she had travelled an ocean and stood in a new place, but she wanted to go still further, into a wilderness.

Joseph Blackstone had looked tenderly at her. He saw how ardently she wanted to embark on the next stage of their journey, but, as always, there was Lilian to think of. As always, the choices that he made were never simple.

'Harriet,' he said, 'I am sorry, but you must stay in Christchurch. I'm relying on you to help Lilian to become accustomed to New Zealand life. A choral society must be found for her.'

Harriet suggested that, with the help of Mrs Dinsdale, in whose neat and tidy Rooms they were lodging, Lilian would be able to find the choral society on her own. 'And then,' Harriet added, 'she will have no more need of me, Joseph, for it is her voice that sings, not mine.'

'There is the strangeness of everything,' said Joseph. 'You cannot comprehend the degree to which this new world is disconcerting to a woman of sixty-three.'

'The Rooms are not strange,' insisted Harriet. 'The jug and basin are of a pattern almost identical to the pot your mother kept under her bed in Norfolk ...'

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‘Different birds sing outside the window.’

‘Oh but still they are *birds* singing, not monkeys.’

‘The light is other.’

‘Brighter. But only within a degree of brightness. It will not harm her.’

On and on it went, this conversation, for it was not a conversation but a war, a small war, the first war they had ever had, but one which would never be quite forgotten, even after Harriet had lost it. And on the morning when Joseph set off towards the ochre-coloured plains, Harriet had to turn away from him and from Lilian so that neither of them would see how bitterly angry she felt.

She ran up the wooden stairs to the Rooms, went into the green-painted parlour and closed the door. She stood at the open window, breathing the salty air. She longed to be a bird or a whale – some creature which might slip between men’s actions and their forgetfulness to arrive at its own private destination. For she knew that in her thirty-four years of life she had never been tried or tested, never gone beyond the boundaries society had set for her. And now, once again, she had been left behind. It would be Joseph who would make their house rise out of nothing on the empty plains, Joseph who would build a fire under the stars and hear the cry of the distant bush. Harriet yawned. In the tidy parlour, she felt her anger gradually give way to a deep and paralysing boredom.

### III

Settlers from England were known as cockatoos, Joseph was informed.

Cockatoos? He couldn’t imagine why. He couldn’t even remember what kind of bird a cockatoo really was.

‘Scratch a bit of ground, take what you can get from it, screech a bit and move on. Like a cockatoo.’

Joseph thought of a parrot, grey and morose, fretting among seeds in a cage. He said this wasn’t appropriate to him. He said