

## 6

### **Sovereign of the Wicker Throne**

“Was that my agent? Was that my agent on the phone?”

From his wicker throne on the back porch, Alan could hear the hand piece going back in the cradle, the conversation having been tantalisingly on the cusp of earshot.

“Was that my agent?” he queried again as Janice kicked open the fly screen door and came to him with his tea.

“No, it wasn’t your agent,” she replied, rolling her eyes at the tedium of having given her husband the same answer after every telephone call for the last two years.

“Ridiculous,” he humphed. “There must be a bit part in a commercial or a voice over or something out there. Richard’s just not trying hard enough.”

He flapped his Sydney Morning Herald like he was laying out a new bed sheet. “I’ll phone him in a minute and give him a blast.”

The old man noticed Janice mouthing the words with him. “Don’t be insolent,” he growled. “Richard’s just not trying and I will phone him.”

She sat down in her own wicker chair and braced herself as Alan took his first sip of tea.

“Oh, not hot enough, Jannie! Not hot enough.” This too she might have lip-synced with him, but she dared not. “You call this a cup of tea! It has to be hot, Jannie. Hot.”

“I boiled it three times,” she protested, “then I brought it straight out as soon as it had drawn. It’d be too hot for anybody else!”

“Well, I’m not anybody else. You know I like it burning everything as it goes down.”

“You’ve deadened all the nerves in your throat,” she breathed to herself as she took the cup back to the kitchen. “Stupid man.”

“And not in the microwave,” he called after her. “Warm it the proper way - on the stove.”

In the kitchen Janice muttered to herself, knowing it would do no good to argue. He would only shout her down with his opera-trained voice. She closed the kitchen door so Alan wouldn’t hear the ding of the microwave, then dialled seventy seconds, praying he wouldn’t come in looking for biscuits.

“Oh, bring the biscuits when you come back,” he called, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

“Well who was it?” Alan asked, as Janice returned with a suitably hot cup of tea.

“Who was what?” she replied.

“Who was on the phone? If it wasn’t Richard, then who was it? One of your no talent students, I suppose.”

“Plenty of my students have plenty of talent,” Janice replied. “They get their fair share of auditions. And call backs. And parts.”

“So much for standards,” he said flapping his broad sheet, “So which nonentity was it this time?”

“It wasn’t a student,” she said. “It was Lorelle.”

“Pah! What does your stupid sister want now?”

“Nothing. Nothing really.”

“Don’t say nothing, when it was clearly something!”

Alan insisted. “It all seemed pretty animated from what I could tell. That’s why I thought it was Richard. Thought you were giving him a serve. Suppose I should

## Sovereign of the Wicker Throne

have known better. You always take his side.” He sipped his tea. “Humph. Nearly hot enough. Suppose that’ll do. So, what were you talking about?”

“What?” Janice snapped, having almost raised the open page of *The Great Gatsby* to her eyes.

“What were you discussing so intensely with your sister? And don’t tell me, ‘nothing’.”

“Oh just Cathy,” Janice answered fumbling for a change of subject before he could probe further. “Biscuit?”

“Oh, not the savouries. Is that all we’ve got? Savouries! I wanted the chocolate ones. I’m sure I saw chocolate ones.”

“They’re not good for your diabetes,” Janice goaded him, knowing a fully blown argument about his health and eating habits was more palatable than his usual line on her sister and niece.

“Probably right.” He acquiesced, recognising her game and realising he was onto something. “So, what about Cathy?”

Somehow, she wasn’t surprised he’d forgotten. “The surgeon took the lot, and a little bit of bowel too, but he doesn’t think it’s spread to the stomach, although they took a biopsy.”

“Is she up and walking?”

“The surgery was only yesterday. Give her some time.”

“Oh Jannie.” He laughed. “Come on. When I had cancer surgery I was up the next day - both times!”

“You were not.”

“Of course I was. When they took that section of bowel I was up just a few hours later.”

“Hoh!” she coughed. “What rubbish. You slept through a whole day, then moaned for the next twenty-four hours.”

“And when they took the kidney,” Alan ignored the interjection, “I was eating and walking around the ward inside a day.”

“You were moaning and groaning the ward down,” she said. “And you never let up on that poor nurse’s buzzer.”

Alan’s thoughts were on such a roll he hardly noticed Janice’s interruption. “Cathy’s too weak-minded. You have to have some fight to beat cancer, and Cathy just doesn’t have it. I’ve lived with cancer for twenty years and I’ve never let it get the better of me. That’s the key. I’m not surprised she’s giving in. All her life she’s been weak. So self-centred. It’s always been about her getting the easy life and now she has to fight a bit she just doesn’t have it.”

“Go easy.” Janice tried to slow his momentum but there was no stopping it.

“Cathy’s brought this on herself. She ignored the signs months ago,” Alan said finally. “She’s just getting what she deserves.”

The greatest shame Janice felt was not that the man she had married thought this way, but that after thirty-five years of marriage, she found herself agreeing with him as a matter of well-worn routine.

Alan flapped his newspaper pleased with his triumph, then sipped his tea and took a handful of savoury biscuits. Even with his mouth full, Janice dared not break the silence.

He squinted at the crossword. “That can’t be right. Eight down - seven letters. Japanese for tidal wave. Starts with ‘t’, an ‘n’ in the middle, it has to be tsunami, but to fit it has to end with an ‘i’.”

“That’s right, isn’t it?” Janice said, relieved by the indifference of a crossword. “Tsunami does end with an ‘i’.”

“No it doesn’t,” he patronised. “It ends with an ‘e’.”

“Hand me that dictionary,” Janice said, certain this was a bet she could win.

“I’m telling you, it’s an ‘e’,” he said.

She thumbed through the pages mumbling the index words at the top of the pages.

## Sovereign of the Wicker Throne

"It's not here," she grumbled.

Alan shook his head. "Ha! What do those Oxford dons do with their time, if they can't put a perfectly common word like tsunami in their dictionary?"

"I'm sure it ends with an 'i'," Janice insisted.

"No it doesn't, Jannie," he persisted. "Never once have I ever seen the word with an 'i'. Always an 'e'."

"I'll get the Dictionary of Geography," said Janice, certain that for the first time in her married life she might be able to actually prove him wrong.

"No, don't worry. The crossword's definitely wrong. I'll write to the Herald about it."

Janice went inside to the bookshelf and pulled down the Dictionary of Geography. The nervous excitement created by the unfamiliar scent of victory made the pages too thick to turn and the print too small to focus, but eventually she found it.

"It's an 'i'," she called from the drawing room.

"No, no," came his reply. "You're wrong Jannie. You're wrong. Definitely an 'e'."

"Well if I'm wrong," she said kicking open the screen door with newfound conviction, "then the Penguin Dictionary of Geography is wrong too."

Janice thrust the paperback under his nose.

"Oh really! Unbelievable!" he coughed. "Even the Penguin dictionary has it wrong. I'll have to write to them too!"

Janice returned the book to the shelf, and the biscuits to the pantry, where she pondered the encroaching coolness on the back porch.

"You better come in and get ready for dinner. Rohan will be here soon," she called to her husband from the kitchen.

"Does he have to come around?" Alan said from the porch, his voice now a little raspy with the colder twilight.

"It is Mother's Day," she said. "A boy's entitled to see his mother on Mother's Day."

The screen door clanked behind him as he strode with the gait of a man thirty years his junior, down the hall to the kitchen putting his tea mug in the sink.

"I don't see why. My son doesn't come to see me on Mother's Day. Why should yours?"

"You're not a mother," she answered.

"You know what I mean," he said trying unsuccessfully to clear his throat.

"Graham's relationship with you is different to Rohan's relationship with me," she said. "Graham has a lot on. He's very busy."

And besides, she thought, he hates your guts.

"Graham's all wrapped up in himself," he replied. "He's not the man I raised him to be. Not that Rohan's much different. All those years when he was a kid I tried to have some influence on him, but he's just like his father. A real bore."

"Go have your shower," she said, cutting him off before he started on her first husband. "Rohan will be here any minute."

The old man almost power-walked back down the hall to the bedroom and its en suite.

He monitored his fitness as he went, proud that he hadn't succumbed to the maladies that had beset so many of his contemporaries, although the repeated mention of Rohan's name had set his shoulder twitching. There was this rather scratchy throat, which he attempted to see off with a few vocal exercises, as he rolled back the door to the shower recess.

"Hmmm. Hmm. Hmmm. Hummmaaaar." The voce basso did not reverberate around the en suite as it usually did. Rather than free his voice up, the humming seemed to make it worse. He tried to make it louder, but the harder he tried, the squeakier his voice became, until nothing but a thin wheeze of air would come, where most days would be a top A flat.

His shoulder continued to twitch as he noticed for the first time in his life, the claustrophobic confines of the

## Sovereign of the Wicker Throne

shower recess. He shut off the water and called out to Jannie, but all that would come was a pathetic dry whisper. He banged on the glass and shakily slid the door back to reach for his towel, dropping it twice before managing to wrap it around himself. He sat on the toilet with the lid down breathing heavily and shivering as Janice opened the concertina door to the en suite.

“What’s going on? What’s all the banging?”

I’ve lost my voice, he mouthed but nothing came.

“What? What’s the matter?” said Janice as he pointed frantically to his throat. “Have you swallowed something? Are you choking?”

Alan waved an annoyed, dismissive hand which clouded Janice in the breast, while he continued to gesticulate with the other hand around his throat.

“What is it, then?” she asked with equal frustration, to which he jumped up and wrote on the steam in the mirror, “Voice gone”, before giving her an unforgiving stare.

He had hardly finished underlining the mirror-message for the fifth time, when the door bell rang.

“Rohan! He’ll know what to do,” Janice said scurrying to the door.

“Happy Mother’s Day,” said an enormous bunch of daffodils, from behind which poked Rohan’s diminutive head.

He kissed his mother gently on the cheek and stepped through the door looking around the vestibule, his hand outstretched for a polite handshake with someone not there.

“Where’s everybody’s favourite cactus?” he asked. “Given us both a Mother’s Day present and gone out, has he?”

“He’s in the en suite,” his mother answered. “I think he’s lost his voice.”

“Really?”

"I think so. He just staggered out of the shower pointing at his throat and wheezing. He doesn't seem to be able to say a word."

"So there is a God who answers prayer," said Rohan, with a half smile that his mother willingly exchanged. "Maybe tonight I'll get to finish a sentence."

They wandered into the bedroom and found Alan prostrate on the bed in a well-rehearsed theatre-corpse pose.

"All hail, old man," said Rohan, an habitual greeting that rankled with his step-father at the best of times, let alone in such a moment of septuagenarian helplessness.

Alan tossed a nondescript gesture at Rohan, a gesture that balanced awkwardly between a reluctant 'hello' and a petulant 'go away'.

"He doesn't seem to have a temperature," said Janice, as she placed a palm on her husband's head, prompting an unambiguous 'leave me alone' gesticulation from the patient.

"Oh well, if that's the way you're going to be," she said pulling away from the bed. "Are you getting dressed to have dinner with us, or will I just turn off the light and see you in the morning?"

No answer, so she turned off the light and guided Rohan back through the door with the words, "He's getting worse, you know."

Alan lay there in the dark, straining to decipher the distant kitchen chat, but all he could hear was the punctuation of Janice and Rohan's laughter.

Behaving like school children, he thought. She changes when she gets with him. Loses all maturity.

In the end, Alan was seated at the table before the soup had been served, pen and paper in hand. He hammered his spoon on the table with the vigour of a woodpecker seeking termites in a tree, then held up a note, 'What are you talking about?'

"Oh nothing," said Janice.

"Nothing," agreed Rohan.



## Sovereign of the Wicker Throne

‘Don’t say nothing!’ came the frenetic note underpinned by trademark glare.

“It was just a time with Dad,” Rohan offered, then burst into laughter with his mother.

‘What about your father?’ Alan scribbled.

“Oh just this one time years ago,” offered Janice before Alan could scour a hole through the pad with the inevitable note. “I made a pavlova. First time I’d ever got a pav to sit right. And William came home and I had him taste a bit, and he hardly reacted at all. Just swallowed it and said, ‘It’s a bit salty.’ And I suddenly discovered,” Janice prepared her laugh, “I’d mistaken the salt canister for the sugar!”

“Two cups of salt in the pavlova,” guffawed Rohan, “and Dad just says, ‘Oh, it’s a bit salty!’” Janice and Rohan split their sides laughing, while Alan raised an eyebrow.

‘Typical William,’ came Alan’s notation. ‘He never could express himself.’

The note was alternated from Janice’s face to Rohan’s until their flippancy subsided. An awkward silence followed as soup was ladled out of the tureen and into appropriate bowls.

“Have you heard from Aunty Lorelle?” Rohan asked, searching for a more circumspect topic of conversation.

“Yes,” said his mother, “Cath’s in a pretty bad way. They want to start chemo straight away but she’s too weak after the surgery. They took all her women’s bits, you know - and some bowel, and they took a biopsy of ...”

Alan suddenly started banging the blunt end of his butter knife furiously on the table, leaving a small dent in the teak. He tossed the knife down on the bread plate, then scribbled a note: ‘PLEASE! We’re eating!!!!’ then underlined it three times.

Janice continued, “Like I said, they took a biopsy of Cath’s stomach, but the surgeon thinks it’ll be clear. If

there's cancer in the stomach of course, well there's nothing they can do."

Alan held up his note again flapping it in their faces and tapping it with his pen.

"Get a grip, Gramps!" said Rohan. "You'll have a conniption. The pen and pad were slammed down on the table, before a slightly crooked but fully-loaded index finger waggled all over the bread basket and nearly sent a bottle of sparkling apple into Rohan's lap, followed by a barrage of silent expletives.

Rohan and Janice smirked at each other.

"So how's Aunt Lorelle holding up?" asked Rohan.

"Ok. She has her faith and everything - you know. Says God's going to heal Cathy, all that sort of stuff. I was thinking of going down there for a few days, when Cath's at home after the chemo. Lorelle's going to need a hand."

Total horror etched its way across Alan's face and he took the trouble to write, 'Damn it all. Drat the blithering woman' on his pad, although he only underlined it twice.

§§§

The meal presently came to an end and they rose from the table, Rohan to take the dessert dishes to the kitchen, Alan went to the back porch to fetch his wicker chair and put it in front of the television in the lounge room.

"I'm just going to powder my nose," said Janice as Rohan came and sat down on the couch next to his step-father, who was flicking through the television guide.

The main bathroom door shut and locked with a click.

Rohan looked at the old man who leaned forward to pick up the remote. Rohan slid his hand under and grabbed the remote first, snatching it to himself as Alan scowled and snapped his fingers wanting the 'boy' to

## Sovereign of the Wicker Throne

hand over what had suddenly become some sort of primal power stick.

With his free hand Rohan brushed the pad and pen across the coffee table, out of his step-father's reach.

"I've been meaning to have a talk with you for some time, Alan," said Rohan, hurriedly calculating how to make best use of the opportunity. He felt no need to blast - why, when the old man couldn't shout him down? And why risk his mother hearing the exchange from the bathroom?

"Thirty-five years is a long time," Rohan said. "A very long time to put up with someone." Rohan was surprised by his total sense of calm. For once he could speak in a whisper and the old man had no choice but to listen.

"You know Alan, for my whole life, since I was ten years old, you have absolutely tormented me. Not just mild irritation, Alan. Utter torture. The way you'd force-feed your opera into me twenty-four hours a day. Your stupid carry-on every time you came home and wanted your phone messages delivered to you before you even got the key out of the door. The way you had to cut across every second I ever tried to spend with my mother. The way you tried to crush the life out of anything I achieved.

"Even now, I'm forty-five years old and you still treat me like I'm a preschooler. It doesn't matter what my opinion is on anything, it's always wrong.

"If you dumped your own son with half of what you've dumped on me, then no wonder he doesn't want anything to do with you. You crushed the life out of him just the same as you tried to crush the life out of me.

"And as for Mum. Well, you're just bone lucky. A lesser person would have sneaked in on you one night and sliced you into little pieces like a Christmas turkey. In fact, I'm surprised someone else hasn't done it."

Rohan spoke quietly, but directly.

“Someone had to tell you, Alan. You’re the nastiest, most mean-spirited person on the planet. The reason I reckon you’re still alive is that God just doesn’t want your company. But you’re going to have to die sooner or later, and perhaps there’s a few things you need to think about before then. A few bridges you need to build before you go. Because the way things stand, no-one’s going to come to your funeral. And that’ll be pretty hard on Mum.”

The toilet flushed signalling the end of the moment as the bathroom door latch clicked open.

“Bloody lucky to have her,” repeated Rohan under his breath, convinced it had been in vain, but at least he’d unloaded just a little. He shuddered to think of the repercussions once the old man got his voice back.

For his part, Alan defiantly breathed one long breath through his nostrils and flicked the corner of the television program flat, before holding it up to read.

“What’s on tele?” said Janice seeing the remote in Rohan’s hand. He handed it back to its keeper.

“Alan’s pick,” said Rohan. “It’s all up to you, Alan. Like it always is.”

Alan pumped the relevant number and the television burst into the ABC Nightly News.

Janice sat down next to her son on the couch and whispered in his ear, “I heard every word, son.” She patted him on the thigh.

§§§

As Janice pushed her overnight bag through the front door, the phone rang.

“I’ll get it,” called Alan from the bedroom, “it’s probably Richard.”

Janice placed her bag at her feet and thought about the last few days. He’d not flinched when she made arrangements to go and help Lorelle care for Cathy. He had convalesced in an almost conciliatory manner as his

## Sovereign of the Wicker Throne

voice returned. And once it had, he never mentioned the 'chat' Rohan had had with him on Mother's Day, although his shoulder started twitching at any mention of her son's name.

"It was just one of your students," he said as he came through to meet her at the front door. "I told her you'd be away for three days, and to ring you after that."

"Why'd you say that? I could have spoken to her."

"Just thought it was best," he said.

Janice could feel the old irritation rising. "Oh, Alan, think! Who was it?"

"Didn't take a message," he said blithely. "I think she said Sonia or Sophia or something like that."

"Sophie Saltimbanco?" she asked.

"Possibly."

"Oh Alan, she was auditioning for Nancy in Oliver. She's probably got a callback and needs some coaching."

She trudged back into the drawing room. Looking after Cathy on chemo for a few days was starting to look like a pleasant escape.

She dialled Sophie's home number but there was no answer, and her mobile had been diverted to voicemail. Janice left a message and with the muscles on either side of her jaw clenching, she marched backed to the front door and took a number of deep breaths before stepping outside where her overnight bag and her husband both waited.

"What are you doing now?" she asked.

He had opened her bag and had both hands inside. "Just putting in some good reading material for you," he replied. "You've taken weeks to get halfway through this dreadful Gatsby thing." He waved it in her face. "You're obviously not enjoying it, so I put in some Voltaire and Jung."

She gave a thin, exasperated smile. "Thanks. If Cath feels like discussing the French Enlightenment or the integration of personality between throwing up, then I'm sure they'll come in handy."

She stood on tip-toe to peck him on the cheek then took back her Gatsby.

“No need to snatch,” he said.

“Now, are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?” he asked. “I could be packed in a few minutes.”

“No thanks,” she replied, wondering just what possible use he could be, looking after Cathy or Lorelle. “You’ll be fine once you’ve worked out the microwave. It’s not hard. The instruction booklet is in the third drawer. I’ll be back on Thursday night and Rohan will call or drop in to check on you.” There was a single rotation of the old man’s shoulder.

“See you in three days,” she said, then dropped into the driver’s seat of the 1980 Honda Civic. She backed out of the driveway, waved and called with a smile through the open window, “Look after yourself, dear.”

Alan watched her disappear around the corner before turning to go back inside. He looked at his watch. Half past four. She’ll be at Cathy’s place in about two hours, he thought. I’ll call her then just to make sure she’s arrived.

Two hours. Suppose I’ll cook dinner. By the time it’s cooked and eaten, it’ll be time to phone.

He opened the freezer to find the three pre-prepared meals Janice had made for him sitting neatly stacked and labelled. Lasagna, chicken cacciatore, and chilli con carne.

“Lasagna methinks,” he said as he removed it from the freezer and turned to square off with the microwave. He hadn’t wanted her to buy this ‘blithering damned machine’ in the first place. Now it stood between him and his meal.

He looked the machine over. How hard could it be? He’d watched her use it dozens of times. Just pop it in, press the buttons and stand back waiting for that annoying ‘ding’. Remove from oven and serve. Easy.

Alan opened the door of the machine. It was like a huge mouth that was going to consume his dinner

## Sovereign of the Wicker Throne

before he had a chance, but still he placed the plastic Chinese take-away container full of frozen lasagna into the belly of the beast, closed the door and stepped back to see if it all looked right. So far so good.

He pressed the minute button twice, hit 'start' and the microwave hummed into action.

There were a few minor sizzles and pops here and there but presently the two minutes expired with a resounding 'ding'. He opened the microwave door and removed the lid from the lasagna to see nothing but a crisp layer of frost covering the still frozen lasagna.

"Drat the stupid bloody ..."

He shut the door and stepped back to think. Microwave. Microwave oven. Well, it is an oven. Let's use it like an oven. A lasagna this size would take about thirty minutes to cook. Now these things are supposed to be fast, so let's take five minutes off.

He dialled up twenty-five minutes, hit the start button and trotted out to the back porch to settle into the World News page. He was just enjoying an article on all this suicide bombing nonsense in Palestine, a loud bang came from the kitchen.

"Damn and drat the fool thing!"

A grey-black pillow unfurled itself from the microwave's gut as he hit the 'open door' button. Bits of lasagna dripped all over the innards of the beast and the lid of the Chinese container teetered at forty-five degrees.

Frantically fanning the monster's belch, he peered in to see what it had done to his dinner. Nothing but charcoal embedded with melted plastic. He fetched the tongs and after a few vigorous shakes, removed the remnant to the sink. It hissed in protest as it disappeared down the insinkerator.

"Blast it all, and damn the thing."

He slammed the microwave's mouth shut and opened the pantry.

“Humph! Breakfast cereal.” It was better than nothing and with Janice away he could have lashings of sugar, as well as ice cream for dessert.

§§§

For the first two days Alan had phoned Cathy’s place every two hours. Where are the kitchen mittens? Where do you keep the spare soap? How should I get boot polish off the bathtub? I want to program the VCR. Not a word about the microwave however.

So it was no surprise to anyone when on the third day, the phone rang yet again. “Bloody hell,” said Janice. “Can’t he leave us alone for just one day?”

But Lorelle returned, “It’s Rohan. Says he’s been trying to call Alan but he just keeps getting the answer service.”

“Hello Dear,” said Janice as she took the phone.

“How’s Cath?” he asked.

“Fair. A little bit dehydrated, I think.”

“Give her my love, will you. Look Mum, I’ve been trying to reach Alan but I think he’s screening the calls.”

“That’d be right,” said Janice. “After Mother’s Day - you know. I wouldn’t worry about it. He’s been ringing here every other minute, so he’s OK. Or as OK as he can be without someone to wait on him hand and foot.”

“I figured as much,” said Rohan, “I just didn’t want him having a go at me saying I didn’t ring. Just covering my own back, you know.”

“Yes, well he seems to be his usual self, whinging and complaining about everything, and I’m going back this afternoon, so thanks for trying. I’ll call you from home tonight.”

They rang off and Janice had an uneasy feeling. She dialled her home number. No answer, just the answer message.

“Hello Alan, it’s me Jan. If you’re there, pick up.”



## Sovereign of the Wicker Throne

No answer. She looked at the time - mid-morning. He's probably up the street getting his paper.

Two hours later there'd been no call back. Three hours. Four hours. It came time to return home so she called him again. Same result.

"Why don't you call the neighbours?" Lorelle suggested.

Janice suddenly realised that they had lived there for fifteen years, as had the neighbours, and they hadn't spoken for fourteen years and eight months.

She'd forgotten their names. In fact, there wasn't anybody she could think of who could get there inside the two hours it would take her to drive back home.

So she drove.

With each mile the vine of guilt wound its way around her conscience. I shouldn't have left him. He's hopeless on his own. What if something's happened to him? Has he been taking his medication? Stupid man - he's probably forgotten.

Thorns of panic grew from the creeper of guilt. Every traffic light teased her with elongated periods of red. Every crossing bore dawdling schoolchildren. Every pensioner seemed to conspire to be driving the car in front of her.

Finally she pulled the Honda into the driveway, and leaving her bag in the boot, she ran to the front door. It fell open without a key, so she called, "Alan! Alan."

She checked the bedroom. The bed was made. An unopened bottle of pills on the bedside table.

In the drawing room, she noticed the red message light blinking on the answer service so out of habit, pushed it and listened as she searched.

"Alan! Alan!" she continued to call as she checked the bathroom and en suite and the kitchen. The beeps and drones of messages from Rohan and herself formed a backdrop until a different voice arrested her attention.

"Alan, Richard here. Sorry things have been a bit slow of late. There's a Cadbury commercial I've put you up

for. You'd be perfect. You have to be an old conductor with an orchestra.

You're exactly what they're after. Pay's very good too, so give us a call back as soon as you're in. Waiting to hear from you."

"Alan!" she called even more desperately as she burst through the back door. His wicker chair was gone from the porch.

"Where the hell are you?" She squinted toward the willows that hung their weeping over the back fence from the neighbours and there in the shade was Alan. Sitting on his wicker chair.

Having found him she didn't know whether to run down to him or walk more casually, so she hesitated and called.

"Alan?"

He didn't move. She took a haunting step towards him. Then another. "Alan?" She was quieter, almost resigned. As she parted the fronds of the willow she saw he was sitting slumped with a booklet between his fingers.

She bent down and took it slowly out of his grip. The microwave manual. What was he doing in the backyard reading the microwave manual?

As tentatively as someone opening bad-news mail, she placed her hand gently on his forehead. Even before she touched it, she could feel it was cold, then, as her hand made contact with his skin, he jumped violently.

"Damn it all to blazes, woman!" he shouted as he leaped out of his chair, almost knocking her to the ground with the flailing of his arms. "Do you have to sneak up on me like that? You could have scared me to death."

"I thought you were ..."

"Blithering blazes and all, Jannie!"

"Well, don't get all high and mighty," she protested. "We've been looking everywhere. People have been phoning! Why don't you answer the phone?"

## Sovereign of the Wicker Throne

“Well what’s a message machine for then?” he said gruffly.

“You are supposed to answer the messages.” She turned from him and made for the back door, muttering to herself and suddenly fully aware that her bag remained packed and still in the boot of the car.

“What messages?” he retorted.

“We’ve all been trying to phone you, to see if you’re all right. Rohan. Me. Lorelle. There’s even a message there from ...”

“Of course I’m all right. Why wouldn’t I be all right?” he said, starting to raise his voice and catching Janice as she flung back the wire door, almost hitting him.

“Now settle right down, Jannie! Everybody panics just because I don’t answer the messages the minute they’re left.”

Janice went into the drawing room and took a few deep breaths, first looking out the window to her car in the driveway, then staring at the blinking red light on the message machine.

“So who else rang?” he said coming down the hall.

She continued to stare as the red light on the message machine continued to blink.

“Jannie!” he called more forcefully from just outside the entrance to the drawing room. She grabbed her coat.

“I asked you, so who else rang?” Alan had just entered the drawing room from the hallway.

“Oh, no one important,” said Janice as she pressed the delete button.

The red light stopped blinking.