

Waiting for the Nestor

My Darling Jimmy,

Beloved, I cannot tell you how happy the telegram saying that you were out of danger made me. I walked through that Valley with you, in my heart, and now I feel as though Spring has come after a long Winter.

They say that you may be sent home for recuperation, so I may see you before you read this letter, but I must write anyway, to express my love and hope and desire to be with you once more.

What else could she say? Writing about her daily activities seemed silly, after Jimmy's ordeal, but what else did she have to write about?

The home front, perhaps.

We are all involved in the Red Cross effort here. Maree is a mainstay of the Annandale group, and she has even the children in the schoolyard knitting socks and scarves. You know I've never been much of a knitter (I'm not very good about turning the heel of a sock) but I can manage a scarf and on Thursdays I go with Maree to the bandage rolling night at the Town Hall. Who knows, one of the bandages you have

No, that was too unsettling to think about. She crossed that out and wrote instead:

Who knows where our bandages go? All the way to France, perhaps.

Something silly, something to take his mind off the War, she thought.

You should see how fashions have changed – walking down the street, now, you can see all the women's ankles. The new skirt length is so much more practical, but the older people are having trouble adjusting. I must admit, it seems a little strange to me to feel the wind on my ankles as I walk! (Don't imagine me in one of these new shocking styles – my skirt is only just above my feet.)

Beloved, I think of you and pray for you constantly, and hope for your safe return soon,

your

Ruby

She knew what he would be most interested in, but the censors would never let a letter about the Liverpool Riot get through. The newspapers weren't even allowed to report all the details, and it was only through rampant gossip – especially from the carters Curry's used to take the lumber to the Liverpool barracks – that they had heard the shocking truth.

Fifteen thousand men had mutinied against the conditions in the training camps. The government was saying that they had objected to an extra hour's training per day, but Henry the Carter said that some of them had been going for more than 24 hours without sleep or decent food, and they'd got jack of it and walked out.

They'd found the pubs in Liverpool, of course, and after that the 'strike' had degenerated into a drunken rampage, looting and stealing, ending with a pitched battle with the police at Central Station, where at least one man had been killed. Not that the newspapers were reporting that, just a 'protest march' through the city.

Ruby was furious with them. And furious with the Army. And furious with anything which interfered with ending this horrible, terrible war as soon as possible.

It was all so *stupid*. And somewhere, today, some wife or mother or sister would hear about their loved one, dead not in battle but in a ridiculous skirmish against their own police. What a shocking waste. It made her want to slap the ringleaders' faces and then do the same to the generals who organised the training camps.

No, she'd better not write what she thought about the Liverpool Riot.

If Jimmy's ship had sailed, he might never receive the letter, but she would post it anyway. She had written and posted several similar letters in the last two weeks.

Ruby lifted the hair off the back of her neck – it was a humid February night and there was no breath of air. February, Maree said, was the worst month to be in Sydney, and she was right. A blanket of damp air pressed down on her and every fold in her body was moist with perspiration.

In their old house in Bourke, where she could lock the door, she had slept in her thin cotton slip on nights like these – although there was never humidity like this in Bourke. She couldn't do that in Maree's house, so she was sweltering in her long nightgown. Perhaps she should use part of her Christmas bonus money to have the electricity connected to the house. Then she could buy a fan. There were models which connected up to the light fittings, so they would only have to get lighting in, not the more expensive wiring for power.

Maree was so lucky to have this house. It had been her family home; she had slept in this room through her girlhood, just as Ruby was doing now.

For a moment, she imagined herself and Jimmy living in a little house like this. It was a lovely daydream, of curling up on the settee together, kissing, cuddling, going to bed and sleeping in each other's arms, and then waking, breakfasting, getting dressed and going off to work... her imagination stuttered at that point. If Jimmy was home (and able, a small voice whispered), she wouldn't be going to work. She would be at home, doing all the things a woman had to do to keep a house running.

She looked around the room, and pictured the tiny parlour in her mind. How many hours could it take to run a house this small? Maree managed to do it *and* organise

the Red Cross. It would be different, she supposed, if there were several children; then indeed you might need all the hours God sent. But until they had children, what would she do all day?

A tremor of unease ran through her. Were the men right? Had working at a man's job made her unfit for womanly duties?

Now that she thought about it, her own mother had never been secluded in the house. She had always 'worked' – helping in the store, ordering the stock, waiting at the counter. Like Mrs Mulligan at the Post Office. As long as you were a widow, or helping your husband, it was all right.

Jimmy wanted to be a stock and station agent. In the early years, he would have to do an apprenticeship, more or less, with an established agent. But then he would branch out on his own – they had talked it all over before they got married, planning in grandiose terms, half laughing, half serious.

'We'll make a great team,' Jimmy had said, brushing a wisp of hair back from her face, his eyes warm and loving. 'Me at the saleyards, you at home with the babies.'

It had seemed a glowing future, looking into his eyes, and Ruby was appalled at the idea that she might not enjoy it as she had thought. It was a kind of loss she hadn't anticipated. A grief.

A friend of hers, Meredith Burnett, had lost a baby the first year of her marriage. Ruby had gone to see her and held her as she cried.

'It's not just the baby,' Meredith had said. 'It's all the life that she won't have; the life we won't have together.'

This felt a little like that. As though she were mourning a life she would never live, joy she would never feel, contentment which she had forfeited, somehow, by widening her own horizons.

It didn't seem fair that she should be griefstricken when she had been pushed to work by the War; by the doubling of the price of bread. And then she laughed at herself, for melodrama, and pinned her heavy hair on top of her head in the hopes of getting some relief from the heat.

She turned down the gas and lay on the bed, but it was a long time before she slept, and when she did, she dreamt of Jimmy auctioning off baby after baby, while she swept the saleyards free of sheep dung, a never ending task.

A month later, at the beginning of March, Ruby received a letter from the Army. It was odd to open it without fear; bad news came by telegram, not letter.

'He's coming home!' she told Maree. 'On the *SS Nestor*! For three months recuperative leave.'

They were in the kitchen, after work, Maree with tea towels in her hands, getting ready to take a casserole of veal out of the oven. The rich smell filled the hot kitchen and Ruby felt her stomach gurgle. She was momentarily embarrassed; surely the news should outweigh hunger? But her body didn't agree, although her spirits were flying.

'It says he's 18th Battalion,' she said, puzzled. 'But he's 20th.'

'I read in a Red Cross despatch the other day,' Maree said, 'that the casualties in the 18th had been so great they had to move some men across from the 20th.'

For a moment they were silent, considering the scale of the loss, the depth of grief. But Ruby couldn't consider death for too long. Not today.

She read the letter again. 'The *Nestor* left on 9th February!' she exclaimed, this time truly startled. 'That means he... he could be home by the end of this month!'

They looked at each other, both realising what that meant. The end of their shared life.

'Well, I'll miss you,' Maree said. 'What will you do?'

Ruby sat on the kitchen chair and thought about it. How ridiculous that she hadn't made plans before this! But Jimmy's return had seemed so far away. Should she find a house for them to live in? But what if he didn't get discharged? If he recovered in the hospital and was sent straight back to the front? She would have uprooted her life for nothing.

'I don't think I can do anything until I find out how badly he's injured,' she said slowly. 'We don't even know if he'll be fit to leave hospital when he gets back.'

'He'll go to Randwick first,' Maree said.

The 4th Australian Repatriation Hospital, at Randwick, was where all the wounded men were sent when they came back from the Dardanelles. It had been an orphanage originally, and then a school, before the government took it over for the War effort.

It wouldn't be too hard to get to – a tram to Central and another out to Randwick Junction. But it would be a good hour's trip each way. She would have to visit Jimmy every day – she would *want* to visit him every day – so how could she continue to work? But if he wasn't fit, how could they afford her not to?

'Don't borrow trouble,' Maree said. 'Wait until you see what the situation is. You haven't had any holidays from Curry's, and you've been there nine months now. I'm sure Mr Curry would give you a couple of weeks off when Jimmy gets home.'

'It might be better to ask for half days. Then I can get the essential work done but still see him. I don't even know the visiting hours.'

Maree laughed, and turned to get the casserole out. 'Wait until Friday, and you can call them from here!'

The telephone was being connected on Friday. The men had already laid the lines and were coming back to supply the instrument, a table top model which would stand proudly on a special small table in the parlour.

Wells St was astonished to think one of their own would have a telephone, and the neighbours – Carrie Simpson in particular – were already hinting that using their instrument would be a lot more convenient (and cheaper) than traipsing up to the Post Office.

'And,' Carriel Simpson had added, 'that old cat Bob Studdert won't be able to listen in.'

'As long as they get the operator to tell them how much the call cost, and reimburse me, it's no skin off my nose,' Maree had shrugged. 'I'll make sure they don't overdo it.'

As Maree served up the veal, Ruby was overwhelmed by affection for her. She had made life so easy, so pleasant, so *simple*. No wonder men wanted wives!

The Dead List

Tiddy came barrelling into the office with no regard for the mud he was tracking in. He spun left and shuddered to a halt in her office doorway, gasping for breath.

'Missus! Missus! There's a troop ship in!' He panted and gulped. 'Me mate Bill saw it when he wus makin' deliveries for Penfolds!'

Ruby stood up and grabbed her hat and purse. She looked wildly through the glass at Mr Curry, who waved her towards the door. She ran out to The Crescent and hailed a cab, a motor-taxi.

'The wharf for Garden Island!' she told the cabbie.

'Troopship's coming in,' he confirmed, grinning at her and putting the car in gear. 'You got a boy coming home?'

'My husband,' she said, gripping the back of the seat and only then realising that she had no gloves on. Fortunately they were in her purse. She sat back, forcing herself to be calm. 'Do you know which ship?'

'It's the Nestor, from Egypt,' he said. 'Hadn't docked yet when I left, twenty minutes ago. I've taken a couple of sheilas over there already, but they're not letting any family onto the wharf.'

But I might see him when they disembark, Ruby thought. I might at least see him – what? Carried off? Walk off? She had no idea how badly he was injured, whether he would need crutches or a wheel-chair or, God forbid, a stretcher.

Alive, she reminded herself. He's alive, and that's what's important. She took all the fear left over from those horrible days of waiting for the next telegram and threw it behind her. Alive. She was going to see him. She took her gloves from her purse, thanking God they were clean – thanking Maree they were clean – and that she was wearing a neat new blouse and fashionable wide brown skirt with ribbon edges which she had made the week after she'd finished Maree's new dress. Her hat was out of date – the brim was too wide – but Jimmy wouldn't know that.

Garden Island lay off Potts Point, and the Naval wharf which serviced it was at the bottom of the Point: Cowper St Wharf. There were big iron gates cutting off the wharf from the public, and a crowd had gathered outside them, craning to see past the wharf out to the Island, where the Naval dockyards were. A line of ambulances waited on the dock, quietly forboding. Behind them, lorries, buses, troop transport vehicles.

Unlike most crowds in public places, this one was made up almost entirely of women and children, the women with pale, hopeful faces, the children running and dodging in febrile excitement.

Ruby paid the cabbie and joined them. She looked for the old man who had been at Jimmy's embarkation, but he wasn't there. She hoped it was because his son hadn't been wounded at all, rather than because he was dead.

'Have we heard anything?' she asked an older woman in a brown suit, who was staring through the gates with a terrible intensity.

'It's the *Nestor*,' the woman said. 'That's all I know. No-one has disembarked yet.'

She spoke with an educated accent, and her clothes were expensive: corded silk jacket and handmade shoes. She shrank back as a grubby boy in patched trousers raced past her; Ruby knew that only deep devotion would have brought a woman like this out to rub shoulders with the hoi polloi.

'Your son?' she asked gently. The woman nodded, swallowing before she answered.

'He was wounded at Anzac,' she said. 'The week before the retreat.'

'My husband also,' Ruby said. '20th Battalion. I mean, 18th, now.'

'Oh, my son was-is 18th Battalion. Perhaps they know each other.'

They smiled, drawn into an odd complicity, temporarily united. Ruby was reminded of Mr Curry and his '20th Battalion is all the family I have left.'

She could see a ship moored at the Island, on the wharf closest to land, and her heart thudded heavily. It felt as though she were being kicked in the chest, over and over again. So much had happened since she'd last stood here, but none of it mattered; none of it seemed real.

A tram arrived, disgorging another group of women, who lost no time in crowding to the gates.

'They take the worst cases off first,' a girl said in a knowing tone. 'I saw it last month when my brother came back. He was walking wounded, and we had to wait for hours.' Ruby turned to her and saw that she was heavily pregnant, ready to drop as the midwife in Bourke used to say. She did a hasty calculation: Yes, if she and Jimmy had made a baby on his last night in town, she would be in this state now.

'Your husband is coming back?' Ruby asked her.

'My intended,' the girl said, blushing furiously. 'My mam said I shouldn't be seen in public but I *got* to see him, don't I? I wrote and told him and he wrote that we'd get married as soon as he got back, but we can't afford to waste any time.'

The woman in the silk suit sniffed loudly and moved away, but Ruby smiled sympathetically. She wasn't the first unwed mother Ruby had ever met, and she felt an unexpected understanding. If she and Jimmy hadn't been married, how difficult would it have been to send him off without, well, without loving him as much as she could?

'I'm sure he'll be pleased to see you,' she said.

'They're docking!' a boy cried.

They all crowded to the gates, trying to see. The *Nestor* was being led in by a tug, the small boat looking like a boy with an enormous balloon on a string. They watched, hearts in their mouths, as it came to dock only yards from them. They could see the sailors clearly, and men lining the rails, some with bandages on their heads or arms, but all with wide smiles. A cheer went up from them as the first rope was flung to the waiting sailors on the dock. An answering cheer came from the waiting families, and some boys threw their caps in the air as the gangplank was rattled up to the waiting sailors.

The officers ran onto the dock where their families were waiting for them, but there was no movement from the men at the railing, as though they were waiting for permission.

'Oh yes, the navy wives get to go in!' a disgruntled voice commented. Ruby watched the loving reunions with tears in her eyes. How wonderful to welcome back a husband in full health, even if it were only for a few days.

One of the men, carrying a doctor's bag, came to the gates and gave a sheet of paper to the guard on the other side. The guard was a junior sailor, only 18 or so, and he looked at the paper with a pale face, then nodded at the doctor and came out a small gate to the side of the larger ones. There was a bulletin board there, and he tacked up the paper on the board. The women held back. Ruby looked at the pregnant girl, who had seemed to know the drill.

'It's the dead list,' she whispered. 'The list of men who died on the ship.'

The heavy pounding of Ruby's heart stopped abruptly, and then resumed even harder, shaking her whole body. She hadn't even *considered* that he might die in transit. Surely God wouldn't be that cruel?

None of the women wanted to be the first to read the list, but Ruby couldn't bear not to know.

She walked forwards, slowly, and the pregnant girl said to her, 'Rogers. Look for William Rogers.'

Ruby was shocked by the size of the list. At least twenty men. It was in alphabetical order, and she looked for Jimmy first. James Hawkins. Garnett, Golds, Harrison, Henry... he wasn't there. She breathed in, shakily. Pagett, Perkins, Ransome, Rogers... William Rogers, Private. Oh, no. Oh, no. With terrible pity, she turned to the girl, the truth in her eyes.

'No,' the girl said.

'I'm so sorry,' Ruby said. 'I'm so sorry.'

The girl screamed. Screamed and screamed, her fists clenched at the end of straight arms at her side, her head thrown back, her whole body committed to the sound.

The woman in the silk suit slapped her face.

‘Control yourself!’ she said. ‘You’re a woman of the Empire. Act like it.’

‘Fuck the Empire!’ the girl said. ‘What do I bloody care about the Empire? I want my Willy! What’s my baby going to do without a father?’ She started to sob, rocking back and forward. Around her, whispers and shocked comments echoed.

Other women crowded around now, checking the list, some weeping afterwards, others moving away with a spring in their step, uncaring of the grief around them.

Empire woman read the list last, and came away composed.

‘I knew he wouldn’t be dead,’ she said to Ruby. ‘I would have known if he died. I knew the moment he was wounded.’

‘Yes,’ Ruby said. ‘I understand.’

‘A mother knows,’ she said, with a touch of complacency which made Ruby want to hit her. The pregnant girl was sitting in the gutter, weeping, and Ruby couldn’t bear it. She felt she should have been shocked, as the other women were, but she’d overheard so much swearing from the men that she could look past it to the real distress in the girl’s face.

As a cab pulled up to deposit yet another woman with children at the gates, she flagged it down and helped the girl in.

‘I can’t afford it,’ the girl said.

‘Never mind,’ Ruby assured her. She gave the girl ten shillings for the fare, a vast overpayment, and told the cabbie to take the girl home.

‘Thanks, missus,’ she said, exhausted. ‘ere, what’s your name?’

‘Ruby Hawkins.’

‘Ruby. That’s a nice name for a girl.’ She rubbed her belly and nodded. ‘Thanks.’ She was trying hard to be polite, but the tears continued to stream down her face the whole time. And yet, Ruby couldn’t give her any more time – her whole attention was directed towards the *Nestor*.

‘You shouldn’t waste your husband’s money on that little slut,’ Empire woman said.

‘It’s *my* money,’ Ruby said, deriving an unholy amount of satisfaction from seeing her blench.

In the time it had taken to put the girl in the cab, the wounded had started to come down the gangplank. Some were on stretchers, heavily bandaged, most with faces and heads covered in white. They were carried to the ambulances, accompanied by nurses. There was no chance of identifying those men. Some were in wheel-chairs, and were carried off first, then their chairs were hauled off and they were replaced in the chairs before being taken to the ambulance.

As the men moved across the open space, the ones who were capable waved at the waiting women. Occasionally a voice would exclaim: 'Stan!' or 'Pete!' or 'Look, there's Daddy!' but for the most part the disembarking happened in silence.

One by one, the ambulances approached and the guards opened the gates, forcing the women back until the gates closed again, when they crowded back. Ruby knew that it was undignified and possibly silly to crowd so close, but she couldn't help herself any more than the other women could. She *had* to see him if she could. She had to confirm with her own eyes that he was back.

A half hour and still there were stretcher cases, although these had fewer bandages and more faces were visible.

Over and over Ruby thought she had caught a glimpse of Jimmy, but these men were so thin, so wasted, so yellow with fever, that she wasn't sure she would recognise him.

Then he was there, on a stretcher. Unmistakable. The strong lines of his face shadowed by a beard and scars, huge bandages across his chest and arms and, oh God, blood showing through on his shoulder. Her entire body thrilled to see him, as it had on their wedding day when she had seen him waiting at the altar, but the thrill was as much fear as joy.

'Jimmy!' she called, yelling as no lady ever yelled. She didn't care. He must hear her. He must. 'Jimmy! Jimmy!'

They were carrying him across the dock to an ambulance. He stirred and looked over, weak. Clearly very ill, still. He looked like a stranger, like some distant cousin of Jimmy's; a family resemblance, no more. Too thin. Too pale.

She called again, 'Jimmy! It's me!' He moistened his lips with his tongue and tried to smile, raised his left hand a few inches. He couldn't quite see her, she realised, and fought to get right to the front. The women fell back, understandingly, and she waved wildly. A tiny smile shaped his lips and suddenly he was her Jimmy again and her eyes filled with tears as he was carried into the ambulance and the doors shut behind him.

'He'll go to the Repat Hospital,' a woman behind her said. Yes. Randwick.

Ruby thanked God that she had kept an emergency fund in her purse for precisely this moment. She grabbed the next cab and as Jimmy's ambulance trundled slowly out of the gates, she said to the cabbie, 'My husband's in that ambulance.'

'Right you are, missus. We'll stick with him.'

They followed the red cross on the back of the ambulance down Cowper's Wharf Road, up Bourke Street, past the narrow terrace houses whose shiny black front doors opened straight onto the street, across Oxford St and into Flinders, and then the long run past the Cricket Ground and up by the tramway workshop and the racecourse to Peter's Corner. Ruby was glad that she'd taken the tram out to the hospital on a trial run the week before; at least she had an idea of how close they were.

Right at Peter's Corner and then down Avoca Street to the hospital, a long two-storey sandstone building with high chimney pots. It looked... reassuring, until you saw the bandaged men in wheelchairs in the garden and the nurses in white veils striding quickly along the balconies.

They lost the ambulance as it went through the emergency gate.

The cabbie let her off at the visitor's entrance. She paid distractedly and almost ran to the doors, which were set wide. The lobby was crowded with women who had come straight here instead of going to the dock. Behind a small reception desk, a harried looking VAD girl, barely 18 by the look of her, expostulated with a covey of older women demanding to see 'our Barry'. Half a dozen other women were trying to interrupt.

Ruby looked around. Too many eager family members, not enough room, not enough time – she sympathised with the VAD girl but she was just as impatient to see her man as any of them. If she had to wait until the VAD girl dealt with everyone else, it would be nighttime. She couldn't wait. She couldn't *bear* to wait another minute.

'Be quiet!' she said at the top of her voice. It wasn't exactly a shout, but it was heard. 'Everyone be quiet and let the girl talk!'

The women closest to her, and a couple of men she hadn't noticed at first, quietened down, and a wave of 'Shush' and 'Shh,' spread across the room.

'Now, miss,' Ruby said, moving forward. The others parted to let her through, and she was astonished at what a little brassiness could accomplish. 'My husband is here. I followed him from the wharf. We all want to see our men. When can we see them?'

The girl looked at her desperately, as though begging for understanding.

'Tomorrow.'

The room erupted with protests. Ruby kept moving, trying to get closer to the desk, almost deafened by the shrill vociferations around her.

'What is the meaning of this?' A stentorian alto cut through the noise and silence cascaded after it. A woman of fifty or so stood in the doorway which led through to the wards, dressed in nurses' garb, with a red cape on her shoulders. Matron. It had to be.

Like schoolchildren seeking a culprit, the women near Ruby pushed her forwards. She put on her best ladylike voice and calm manner, knowing that Matron was not going to be impressed by hysterics.

'We're trying to ascertain when we might be able to see our men, Matron,' she said.

'Tomorrow,' Matron said flatly. 'Visiting hours are two until four.'

There was a dead silence, but it wasn't a good one. Then mutters started at the back. Ruby couldn't hear the words, but she didn't need to.

'I'm very eager to see my husband, Matron, even,' her voice faltered, for all that she could do to keep it calm, 'even if it's only for a few moments.'

Matron's face softened, just a little.

'Of course you are. But this precaution is for *your* protection. Some of these men are still infectious and every man who is repatriated must be cleared by the doctors before he can receive visitors. We can't take the chance of some foreign disease making its way out to the general public. We work as fast as we can but it will take until at least tomorrow.'

It made sense. Of course it did. But she felt so *cheated*. The murmurs around her had changed their tone; less angry, more resigned.

'Can we send messages to them, at least?' she asked, desperate for any contact.

'If you have your own notepaper and pen, and can write it yourself, you may leave a note with Carrie here and we'll do our best to get them to the men today. But I can't promise anything.'

'Thank you, Matron,' Ruby said. She had a pen. Did she have notepaper? She dug in her purse and found the little housewife her mother had sent her as a Christmas present. It had scissors and needle and thread and a tiny notebook. She moved to the desk. It seemed that the women closest accepted that she'd earned the right to be first, because they moved back. It was such a small piece of paper. What could she say?

They won't let me see you until tomorrow at 2. I love you. Ruby.

That was all she could fit in. She folded the paper and wrote his name and rank and unit on it, then handed it to Carrie, the VAD girl, who took it with a nod and consulted a list she had on a clipboard.

'He'll be in ward 4,' she whispered.

'Thank you.'

There was nothing more she could do. All around her, women were frantically looking for paper. She gave out pages from her notebook until they were all gone, and then she walked out and up the little hill to the tram stop. She was exhausted, and it was still morning.

There was a tight ball of resentment and longing inside her. To be so *close* and not to see him! It was torture.

But there was nothing to be done but go back to work.

It took her over an hour – she had just missed a tram at Central Station and had to wait another fifteen minutes.

She trudged down Johnston Street in the late summer heat, limp and dejected. The men were alert as she pushed open the door, and she tried to summon a smile, but it brought her close to tears.

‘They won’t let me see him until tomorrow. It’s a kind of quarantine.’

Mr Curry came right out into the office and took her by the arm, moving her to a seat at her old desk.

‘Get her a glass of water, Wesley,’ he ordered.

Surprisingly, Wesley didn’t even make a grimace as he poured and gave it to her. She must look bad.

Ruby took the water thankfully and drank it all down.

‘At least he’s not dead,’ she said, and told them about the death list and the poor pregnant girl. She glared at Wesley, daring him to say something about the wages of sin being death, but he merely shook his head and said, ‘I’ll pray for her,’ and she was abashed.

When Mr Curry went back into his office she followed him and closed the door.

‘I’ve been thinking,’ she said. She had been thinking, too, all the way back. ‘Visiting hours are from two until four. I *have* to visit him every day.’

‘Yes,’ Mr Curry said. ‘That’s important.’

‘So I thought... if I came in a little earlier, say at seven, and took my lunch at one, it takes about an hour to get to Randwick and an hour to get back. If I stay an hour, I could be back by four. Then I could collect whatever still needed to be done and take it home. Work on it at night.’

‘You’ll exhaust yourself,’ he said.

‘We’ll hope it won’t be for very long,’ she said steadily. All the reasons it might be longer reared up in her mind, but what was the use of borrowing trouble?

'You'll know more tomorrow,' he said, dismissing the subject. 'When you know how long he's likely to be in hospital, we can discuss ways of working around it. Don't concern yourself about it now.'

'Yes, sir,' she answered dutifully, but she chafed at the delay. She wanted to achieve *something* today, and if she couldn't see Jimmy she wanted to organise herself.

She offered to work back but Mr Curry refused the offer.

'And don't come in tomorrow,' he said. 'You've earned a day off.'

'Thank you, sir, but I'd rather come in for the morning at least. Who knows when I might need the time off later?'

He nodded. There was a quiet sadness at the back of his eyes, and she knew he was thinking of Laurence; of how he would never get even the painful pleasure of visiting him in hospital.

The next day, Mr Curry didn't come to work, for the first time in weeks. Ruby let the men in and went straight to work. No use worrying over him yet.

'If he's not here tomorrow I'll go up and roust him out,' she said baldly to Wal and Wesley. They nodded, faces grim.

She worked at breakneck pace all morning, trying to get the whole day's work done before one o'clock. At quarter to, she packed up; she had to go back to Maree's to change and visit the lavatory.

Mr Curry's office was still empty, and she had the only keys.

'I'll try to get back by four-thirty,' she said to Wesley, 'but if I don't...' She handed him the keys. She'd never quite figured out the seniority between the two of them, but she knew which one she trusted with Mr Curry's valuables.

Wesley nodded his head slowly, up and down and up and down, buying himself time to answer.

'Then we might see you tomorrow.'

'First thing,' she confirmed.

'Good luck, missus,' Wal said. 'Hope he's all in one piece.'

He meant well; he meant well. Didn't mean to pierce her heart with fear and pain. She smiled her thanks, with some difficulty, and left, walking briskly the quick way, up Trafalgar Street. Maree had her blue dress ready pressed and insisted she eat a sandwich quickly before she left.

'I have to go!' Ruby insisted, possessed by an insatiable impatience. He was waiting for her; how could she eat?

‘Take it with you,’ Maree said, putting the sandwich in a paper bag. ‘Eat it there. And here.’ She pressed a tin of chocolates into Ruby’s hands. ‘He might not be able to eat these yet, but there’ll be others who can. Share them out.’

Maree was so kind.

Ruby took everything and put it into her largest purse, then ran out the door down to Booth St. She jumped on a tram just in time and counted the seconds until Central Station. There were fruit barrows there – she bought black grapes and two apples, Granny Smiths, then ran to catch the Randwick Junction tram.

Door to door, it took her an hour and three minutes. She arrived at two minutes before two, shivering a little in a brisk breeze off the sea. Randwick was up the hill from Coogee, one of Sydney’s pleasure beaches, and today she could smell the salt in the air.

There was a queue at the reception desk, women trying to find out where their men were. She blessed Carrie the VAD girl and followed the signs for Ward 4. The ward doors were closed and she waited with some other women – only a few. No doubt the other men were from the country, or even interstate. How terrible to be here without visitors; she would share Maree’s chocolates with the abandoned ones.

None of the women wanted to talk: they all stared at the doors, willing them to open.

At five minutes past two, a nurse, a pleasant-faced woman with high Irish colouring, pulled the door back and let them in.