

AUTOMATIC TELLER
CONSERVATORY

IF ON THE STROKE OF MIDNIGHT you stand outside the bank in the High Street and feed some cash to the hole in the wall, then press your ear to the Automatic Teller, you will hear a story. Sometimes the story is that of the Remarkable Secret Life of Alexander MacIntosh, Antiquarian Bookseller, and sometimes it isn't. The Automatic Teller, flexi fella, knows all the stories of all the people hereabouts. But the story of Alexander is a favourite one because it is quite a story, and because Alexander's Rare Book Shop is situated hard up against the bank where the Automatic Teller has its outlet. (Forget the fact that midnight can not be said to strike in these parts, these days or nights. The bells in the convent have been silent since the nuns left and the Soil Conservation people moved in; the clock on the Town Hall is a huge digital affair, the old Swiss mechanism having been sold to a museum somewhere in Texas.) So when you read 'stroke of midnight' you take it as a figure of speech with a grain of salt and you press your ear to the Automatic Teller and what you hear if you are lucky is something like this: Alexander Macintosh was known far and wide as a curiously generous man. He would give you, they said, at the drop of a hat, the very shirt off his back.

And he was, he was a generous man. Friends, strangers, family, colleagues—everyone could tell a story of the time Alexander opened his heart or his wallet (or both) to them, gave freely of his time, his money, himself, when they were most in need. A spiritual man, a kind of saint perhaps, he gave to others while his thoughts ran on questions of typography, foxing, endpapers, colophons, cowhide, pigskin, and kid. Words appeared to him in dreams as gilt embossing on deep oxblood spines.

The books that lined his shelves were also objects of his love and generosity, dusted and fed. The spines of the books formed patterns resembling the patterns made by pieces of cloth in a quilt. To Alexander this quilt gave comfort; it wrapped his spirit in softness, in warmth, in dreams and in secret

desires. His hands like long white flowers caressed the spines, fingered the leaves; his eyes alert like the eyes of a vigilant insect sped across the lines of type, lingered with tenderness on the gloss of coloured plates.

Alexander nurtured the volumes in his custody with a care that was exquisite and very close to love.

His children were grown up; his wife Lorraine was a librarian.

In due course Alexander died. It was his heart, that generous organ. It gave out, as it were, once too often, and then gave up. Alexander gave up the ghost. Some days before he died he signed a form to say his body parts would be available for transplant, but on certain conditions. Before any piece of him could be removed and used, his solicitor was to be advised. The solicitor duly gave instructions to the hospital and Alexander's liver at once became available to a woman who would otherwise have died.

The lawyer supplied the family with Alexander's last will and testament. In the will the deceased had provided, with his usual generosity and care, for Lorraine and the children for his sister, his nieces and one nephew. The Red Cross, the RSPCA, the Salvation Army each received a gift in Alexander's will. His personal collection of fine rare books went, as was fitting, to the National Library. Alexander had owned one of the finest collection of books on Australian military history in the world. Some volumes he had left to friends. Alexander's body went, substantially, to others, strangers who required eyes and kidneys, a liver and whatever else was useful. Parts not used in this way were then available for science. His heart and lungs could be investigated for damage caused by his intake of tobacco smoke and alcohol. But with his final gift to medicine and to science, Alexander, who had always given so freely of himself, Alexander added a condition.

'My body parts I make available to medicine and science, to be used as transplants or as specimens on the condition that my skin be first removed from my body, cured and treated and fashioned into the cover of a book. It is my opinion that if my body parts are considered to be mine to will to strangers for their use, then they are also mine to will to to my beloved book. The book in question is my personal and hitherto secret journal which is to be found in the conservatory. When a firm and written undertaking on the part of all parties (in particular the hospital) concerned has been made that these conditions will be fulfilled, my organs can be made available to those who need them. It will be noted that some speed is necessary in the writing of the agreement to comply with the aforesaid condition. Organs for transplant must be fresh if they are to be effective. My skin is to be handled with as much care and expertise as any other useful organ. Rudolph Munro, Taxi-

dermist, and Colin Anderson, Specialist Bookbinder have already been advised that their services will be required. Such parts of the skin as are not used for the binding of the book are to be burned in the hospital incinerator. The bound journal is to be the property of Mrs Wendy-Ellen Bernstein of 1890 East Morse Boulevard, Winter Park, Florida 32789. Mrs Bernstein is to be notified forthwith, in writing, of this gift, upon the reading of this will.'

At the death of Alexander the solicitor was called, the will consulted, the conditions swiftly followed. The woman got the liver; two men each got an eye; the skin was removed by a plastic surgeon and preserved with utmost care until such time as the final conditions could be fully carried out.

But the shock that Alexander had delivered to his wife and family by the conditions of his will was deep and cruel.

The question on the lips of all, and in every heart was:

Who is Wendy-Ellen Bernstein?

There were also the questions of the whereabouts of the journal (and even the existence of the journal gave rise to doubt), the contents of the journal, and the meaning of the relationship between Alexander and this woman. What could there possibly be between two people that could give rise to such a state of affairs? The question of Alexander's sanity came up. Apart from the terrible condition in his will, there was no other reason to doubt. In business, in philanthropy, in family matters, in antiquarian circles, in community affairs, in the world of the orchid society—everywhere Alexander was impeccable. His judgement, his demeanour, his morality. His morality. Had something happened, somewhere along the line, to Alexander's morals?

Who was, what was Wendy-Ellen Bernstein? (In a moment of pure hysteria Lorraine, who was choking with raw emotion and a black and horrible grief, volunteered the information that she recalled Alexander had given such a name to one of his new orchids. 'There's a Mrs Wendy-Ellen Bernstein in the catalogue,' she said, 'as well as a Margaret Whitlam and a President Herbert Hoover.')

At this point in the narrative the Teller pauses as if for breath. It is a pause of dramatic effect. Silence falls and you can just perceive the quality of something like an open telephone line. You become aware of the sound of an occasional truck on the road behind you, of the wail of a distant siren. You turn your gaze to the window of the Rare Bookseller, the window of that generous man, Alexander Macintosh.

The front of Alexander's shop curves out into the street, a quaint old window made up of many panes of glass flawed with streaks and bubbles. The sweet dark volumes etched in gilt and softened by the years hold between

their boards the wisdom of the ages. Take, in this breathing space between one chapter of the story and the next, a little journey through the shop and house where Alexander worked and lived.

Behind the window is the shop, a dark inviting cave of books, with old leather armchairs, and floor rugs from Iran.

And then, behind the shop, the house, the gloomy narrow staircase where a Persian runner snakes up the steps, slithering across the landings which lead off into the warren of the rooms. These rooms were furnished in the sixties, in a sort of Edwardian revival, imagine, and never changed since then. They are, in a word, claustrophobic, revolving dimly round the spindly staircase that runs like a fragile spine through the centre of the building. Fashions came and went, but Alexander's house remained the same. From this den of shadows and cobwebs and legacies of the past, the house opens up quite suddenly on the ground floor at the back. It opens up into a room of glass and light and flowers. What bright thoughts might engage us in this airy place? This is the conservatory.

Alexander built the conservatory with his own flower-like hands, to his own designs. Attached as it was to the back of the closed and breathless house, the conservatory was a kind of enigma, and it was considered as a joke, with gentle tolerance, by Alexander's family, friends and colleagues. Long graceful windows were shaded by pale green linen blinds. The floor was tiled with golden marble. This was the home of Alexander's orchids, and no human being was welcome there unless invited in by Alexander. His open and generous nature had always stopped short at the door of the conservatory. Alone in the warmth and light of this glass room where could be heard the strains of Schubert and Brahms, Alexander tended his orchids, and sat for hours at a bureau reading books, writing notes. Writing as well, as it turned out, a full and detailed journal of his life. And letters to Wendy-Ellen.

Behind him in the centre of the house a dull, dark ordinary life went on with daily life and newspapers and television, and cooking and washing. After the revelation of his secret life, it seemed that Alexander's participation in this daily life was play-acting. Who is to say?

The Teller takes a good deep breath and continues with the tale.

Wendy-Ellen was Romance. The conservatory was Fantasy. And yet it was perhaps the whole reality of Alexander's life. When the journal was discovered in a drawer of the bureau in the conservatory, the story was revealed in all its beautiful or horrible (depending on how you look at things) detail.

Long long ago when Alexander was a young man just starting out in the antiquarian book business, he went from his home in Sydney to a conference

in New York. There he met a woman who was the daughter of one of the most important antiquarian booksellers in the world. Alexander and Wendy-Ellen fell in love. Their love was doomed. Star-crossed. Was the most important antiquarian bookseller on the Eastern Seaboard going to consent to the marriage of his only daughter Wendy-Ellen with an unknown young up-and-coming nobody whipper-snapper from nowhere? He was not. The lovers made a pact, and, strange to tell in these unlovely and unromantic times, they kept to it through thick and thin.

They agreed that no matter what the twists and turns of fate they would be true to each other. They would meet just twice each year at the time and place of international antiquarian book meetings. They would be absolutely strict about this; at no other times would these lovers tryst. Through marriages and time and tide Alexander and Wendy-Ellen pursued their beautiful romance, their secret love affair. Until death would part them. Alexander made only that one little, irresistible slip, the naming of the orchid. On Wendy-Ellen's part there was no mistake, not the smallest chink in her armour of secrecy.

A widow she was now, living in Florida, her sons and daughter all leading their own lives in other parts of the United States. She lived alone in a large house with her dogs and books and music (Brahms and Schubert) and every luxury. Once a week orchids would be delivered from a flower shop downtown. When she received the news that Alexander was no more she wept, but knew she had the purity of memory to treasure. And in due course, when the woman with the liver was getting on with her life, and when the two men were seeing the world through new eyes, Rudolph Munro and Colin Anderson did their stuff and the Journal of Alexander Macintosh was delivered to its rightful owner. Wendy-Ellen had a glass room—it resembled a conservatory—and there she placed the journal in a glass box. Wendy-Ellen kissed the cover of the journal and caressed it fondly. The book lay open, resting gently on its spine, at a page describing a day in Venice, a day when Alexander and Wendy-Ellen had been as happy as could be. And words appeared to Wendy-Ellen in her dreams as gilt embossing on the covers of old books.

Lorraine turned the conservatory into a much-needed storeroom, took down the green linen blinds and put up shutters. The light and life and spirit of the thing had gone with the journal. As if a book had closed, as if night had fallen. The shadows from the centre of the house spread outward and enveloped the conservatory, and gradually Alexander's secret life was forgotten, only half believed in this part of the world. 'Alexander Macintosh,' people would sometimes say, 'yes, he was such a generous man, you know. He would do anything for you. Give you the shirt off his back.'

If stories such as this were not recorded in the memory of the Automatic Teller, and played over once in a while in the middle of the night, they would probably disappear forever.