

AN EVENING OUT

'I'm totally devoted to you,' he sings as he finishes attaching his false eyelashes. The face stares back at him out of the mirror, aloof, beautiful, scarlet lips pouting. 'No doubt about it, Virginia,' he says. 'You're a knock-out.' She raises an eyebrow, mocking him. 'Come on,' he says. 'Lighten up a little.' She turns away and then looks back at him over her shoulder. Miss Untouchable Cool. He examines her from head to foot. That silver lamé covers her like the skin of a sinuous snake. Now for the silver earrings. He feels around in his flax kete until he finds the long dangling slivers of silver, tinkling and shivering as he puts them on. She steps back from the mirror. Oh yes.

Virginia puts her hand on the bed as she slips on her silver high-heels. As she stalks out of the room she kicks his greasy oil-stained jeans under the bed, feels her nose quiver. Filth. He is filth. This place is filth. There has to be something better.

The lemon meringue pie sits on the formica bench, a ghost of steam drifting upwards. He's a good cook, she has to say that for him. And then the cat, twisting itself around her legs. 'Call this devotion, do you Marilyn?' she says. 'I know you're only after one thing.' She opens the fridge, presses her scarlet-tipped fingers to her chin in horror. Now she's going to stink of fish. Still, the cat can't starve. 'You'll have to have it on the bench tonight, darling, Mother can't bend down.'

She washes her hands with scented soap, wraps the pie in a clean tea towel, throws her silver lamé bag over her shoulder, trips along the hallway and out the door.

Along his mother's path, wild flowers and grass. Summery smells. Hoping that Dora next-door is watching the television and not looking through the window. Opening the back door, shoving the pie on the bench. Calling, 'Mum I've just left the pie. See you tomorrow.'

'Come in Joseph, I'm just watching the telly.'

'Can't Mum, in a hurry. See you tomorrow.'

Pulling open the stiff door of the Hillman Avenger, fitting herself inside, arms and legs with nowhere to go. Chugging up the hill to the university.

The dykes on the door look bored as they stamp her hand. The queen at the end of the table looks at her with envy, competitiveness, something.

'Virginia,' a tentative voice says.

She turns, looks down. 'Sheree, darling, you look wonderful.' Blonde, glistening, dewy red lips.

'Not a patch on you,' Sheree giggles. 'For a moment I thought I'd made a mistake.'

'My best creation yet,' she says. 'Even if I do say it myself.'

Faces look up at her as she sweeps through preening colourful men, and bland colourless women, to the dance floor. Stands there, feeling all eyes upon her and then she's off, *I am woman, I am strong ...*