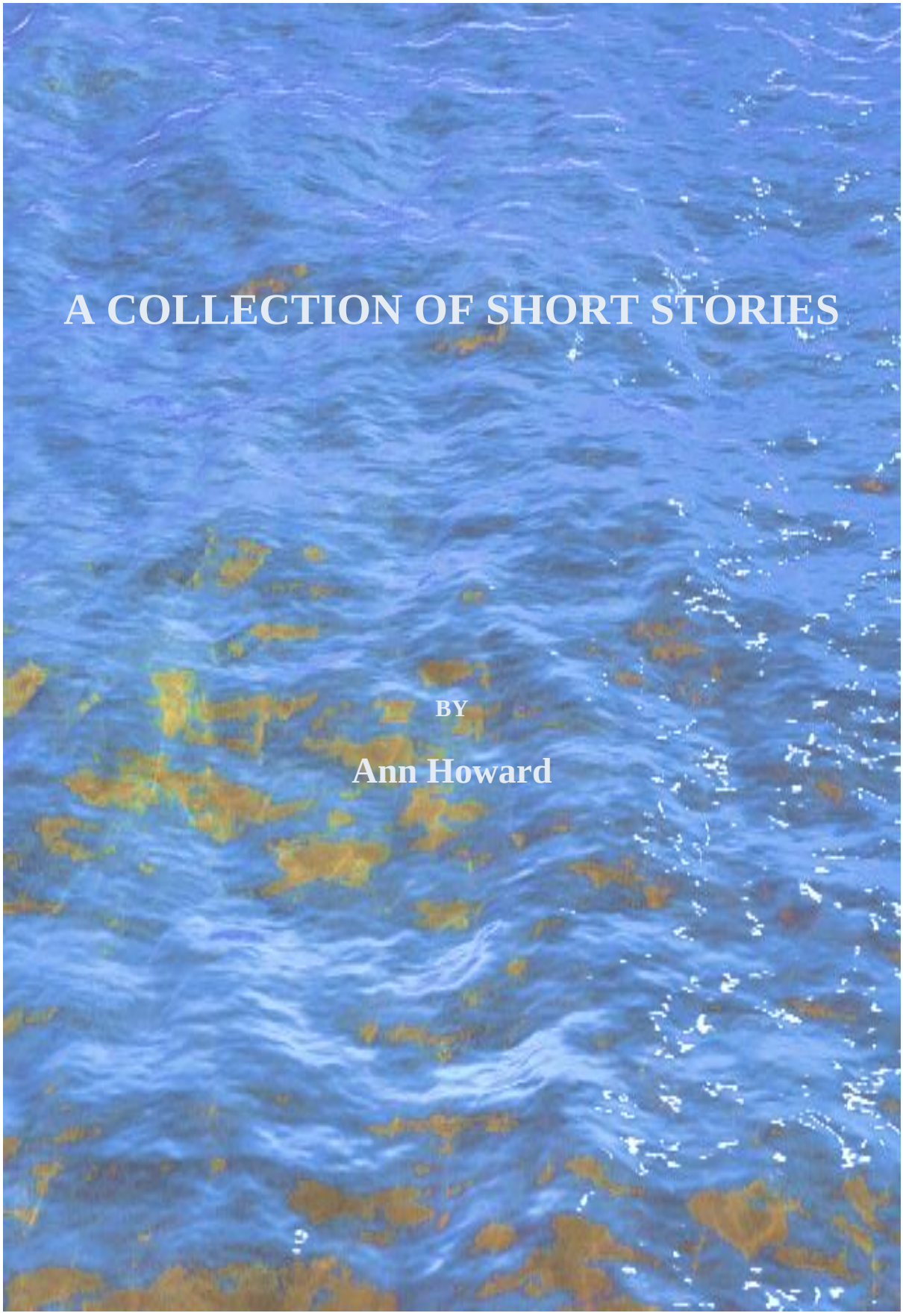
A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES
BY
Ann Howard

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Ann Howard loves life. She is an enthusiastic traveller and adventurer. She has ridden elephants through the Sumatran jungle; climbed Anak Krakatoa when part of it was erupting; made a 14,000 feet free-fall from a plane and rock climbed in Tahiti. She brings this enthusiasm to her writing and studying. She enjoys; watching her grandson's brilliant

progress through university with admiration, her garden, and a good single malt (not necessarily in that order).

Ann Howard lives in a heritage house she restored on Dangar Island on the Hawkesbury River, where the four-time, prize-winning local histories she wrote are very popular.

1. THE RUNNING OF THE DEER

The edge of the threepenny bit pressed into her hand, colder than snow. As she climbed the steeply rising corner overhung with holly and ivy to the school bus stop, she saw their feet.

Hopping, stamping, some of them had their father's old khaki socks over their shoes and socks. One whirled a jam tin with a lighted paper inside, against the leaden sky on the end of a hairy length of string and then warmed chapped hands around its blistering service.

She became aware of their over-attentive eyes.

'There she is!'

She was thrust against the holly prickles until she hit the wall and the breath was knocked from her body in a silver stream, hands grabbed the rim of her hat and lifted high above her head so that the elastic bit into her chin. With a triumphant *thwack!* the hat hit her head. Three times they did it, and then banged her head with Snorey Morgan's, who the nit nurse always picked on first, before the bus swung around the corner and she followed the jostling backs of ill-fitting coats inside. The light was golden, reflecting off chrome and glass, a warm haven for a while. She put the hat carefully beside her on the seat.

It was a velour hat, the kind worn by private schoolkids at the new end of town. For her mother, it was a symbol of the life she could never provide for her only daughter, *my precious Eleanor*, as she had written on the fast-fading baby photo, a *studio photo* as her mother always remarked.

Her mother admired the sort of people who had studio photos taken, who sent their children to private schools, who ate dinner instead of tea, who owned their houses, did not struggle to pay rent, who had shiny black telephones and whose husbands wore white collars. Each morning, during a silent ritual of putting on the velour hat, her mother sighed in a dreamy

way, while adjusting it on Eleanor's flat blonde hair. Eleanor kissed her mother and wore the hat to the school bus stop, where she was attacked every morning.

She then considered her part of the bargain complete and tried her best to lose the hat. Unfortunately, it was well known on the housing estate and St Mary's Church School, where it was proof that Eleanor did not belong.

The hat was returned by a wide variety of people from an increasingly inventive variety of places, even one day by the dustman, who found it partially submerged under cauliflower stalks and cold ashes. Her mother cleaned it reverently.

The bus children relinquished their threepenny bits, except one who cried noisily and claimed he'd lost his. Their hands and pockets were then quite empty.

One morning, her mother had given her twelve farthings and the bus conductor had flung them to the furthest corner of the bus with a long skinny arm, insulted in his position by the tiny coins inscribed with wrens, the bus children watching avidly, large eyed.

She had told her stepfather at tea. He had considered the information while carefully scraping the crumbs of his cake within the inner circle of his plate. He had regarded her with his small grey eyes behind thick glasses, eyes behind which were many terrible real and imagined wrongs against which he had erected insecure defences.

After a while, he said triumphantly, 'legal tender. They are legal tender.'

His favourite saying was, 'it is as broad as it is long.'

At each school day's end, after the bus children had disappeared, Eleanor ran freely down a windy avenue of Sycamore trees, sometimes through whirling, gliding seed pods. At the end of the avenue was an orchard with apple tree branches overhanging a high wall.

She always ran and jumped to touch the branches, sometimes bare twigs, sometimes fat buds, sometimes with lacy pink and white blossoms, sometimes with fat apples.

One night in a dream, Eleanor ran and jumped for the apple tree branches. She ran and jumped and each time she floated a little so that the jump became slower and slower and then she reached the branches and they were thick with downy leaves and delicious blossoms and crowds of red shining apples. Bees hummed amongst the riches and pollen spun in the air. She was exhilarated. She flew and hovered above the earth.

In the morning, she awoke to feel limitless possibilities stretching before her and caught her breath. At breakfast, her stepfather glanced at her once or twice. She stood before the mirror over the sink and touched her lips dreamily. Her stepfather made a sound of alarm in his throat. Her mother stayed him.

She crushed the velour hat into a school bag outside the gate. At the bus stop, the children stood back for her to get on the bus first. Her golden hair floated. The bus conductor winked at her.

Near the school gate was a crossroads. The sign lurched drunkenly, one arm pointing at the sky. Two young men were staring at a map under the signpost. They looked up and smiled at Eleanor. She drew close.

'Which way is best to get here?' smiled one, pointing at their map. Eleanor gazed at their sun-kissed bare legs, their wind-tousled fair hair, their clean, pressed shirts and shorts. One had a badge with a lizard embroidered on it. The other wore a badge with a mountain with snow. Their bulging backpacks had more badges and signs, none of which Eleanor knew. Their map was old and creased.

The bus children watched open-mouthed from a slight distance as Eleanora talked and laughed with the confident young men. The three turned together and walked to the next corner. Eleanor stood and watched their disappearing backs, then she turned and swaggered back. To the watching bus children, it seemed that clouds of golden pollens sparked around her.

2. THE BONSAI BALLERINA

He moves crabwise over rocks towards me where the Indian and Southern oceans collide, the horizon jagged with energy. Fields of water smack together, foam spitting and curling, but it's sheltered in our cove. He is naked, unconcerned. He reaches some picnickers, and stands steadily before them, staring at their food with blue pinpoint eyes. They laughingly proffer a red slice of watermelon. He grabs it, turns, and staggers to me. He is eleven months old, my child.

He squats his back to me, my child, shoulder blades smaller than playing cards, sun in the tendrils of his hair that are blown and blown. I still haven't named him, for the pleasure of saying ‘my child.’

I love it here, where Dutch and English spun over waves, with eyes of plunderers, in salt-caked wooden ships. Water like this is what Earth is all about. The moment I met his father, the wind was so strong, it lifted our heels. Nine of us, leaning into the force, cheeks whipped painfully by collar ends, were making for the Leeuwin lighthouse.

Two turned and staggered back. We edged along, almost on all fours. An elderly man tumbled over. Luke glanced at a crimson trickle and gestured he'd return to the guide's hut with him. He could have been a Viking on that wild day, with broad leather-clad shoulders, and shaggy hair stark against the greyness.

An ambulance arrived. Luke returned with a guide, and we started to climb the 186 steps. A man, already dizzy when he took the first step, fainted halfway, was rested, and given oxygen. The wind did that. Tore the air from your mouth. The thick limestone construction was, as the guide said on twenty feet of foundation, but up at the top, it moved unnervingly. I put my hand on Luke's shoulder to balance. The crowd in the small space chuckled. Luke

pretended to stumble, standing on my foot ‘Did I tread on you?’ he murmured, with mock concern. He had a very sweet smile.

Later purely by chance, we took the same plane from Perth to the UK. I looked up from my book as he helped put someone's luggage in the overhead locker, ‘Ah, lighthouse girl. How's your foot?’

I sighed and returned to my book. I lost part of my right foot in a car accident, and I wear a built-up shoe. It doesn't stop me doing anything, but I can't feel someone standing on it. Sometimes I tell people, sometimes I don't.

He stopped in the aisle later, leaning across an empty seat, asking if I knew the word ‘nadir’.

‘Crossword puzzle... thought you might be 'a word person'.

I glanced at his long ringless fingers. A Baker? Medico? Rings hold germs.

‘Where do you live?’

‘Er, in my line, I move around a lot. I'll give you my mobile number’.

I didn't mention my parents. No need. I sketched in 25, runs her own nursery, specialises in orchids, loves the beach, has no particular ambition, happy as she is. Actually, I wasn't particularly happy, and I didn't own the nursery, I worked there and argued with my father about it.

Luke overflowed his seat. Our bodies touched from the beginning: hands brushing against each other’s. It was a long time since I had relaxed close to a male body. At some drifting twilight hour, I half awoke with my head against his arm.

Be careful of catching a runaway horse, my grandmother's voice hovered, *you'll be left holding it all day.*

I considered moving but pretended to be asleep. The hostess wheeled along the drinks trolley. Hating the smell of alcohol since my crash, I was glad when Luke shook his head. The

hostess passed tea across as the plane lurched. Luke steadied her arm, gently taking the cup without spilling a drop. *A medico*, I guessed. *The Perth doctor!* He looks after people. Not like father, driving and smelling... lookout!!! My knee jerked upwards. A tiny trickle of sand appeared from my coat sleeve. ‘Look, I've bought Perth with me’. When we laughed, the air crackled.

A stone engraved ‘Peace’ lay by our front door, but the home was full of whispers, strange because it was bright red double brick. To escape the whispers, I fled outside where wildflowers ribboned under the fence, or to the old stables. Snow, our nurseryman, lived downstairs. Upstairs were three rooms with a skylight. You could see the stars. The corners were dark and cluttered, but I curled up with a book and hairbrush and read myself into other worlds, brushing my long black Polish hair.

We worked in the nursery all week, except Saturdays when Snow worked on the hospital gardens.

Childhood memories of her mother are of her slumped on her canvas tool, painting, her face level with mine, porcelain skin shaded by a floppy hat trailing grubby pink scarves. A whiff of turps will send me back, nearly crashing into her, whilst wheeling along as a big yellow butterfly, returning her shocked stare. Her eyes challenged me, potent like a Peregrine Falcon’s, but the beguiling scent of turps and linseed oil drew me to her canvas. She didn't like me watching her. Her paintings, of dark paths winding into smudgy flowers, like the nursery, like gardens everywhere, meant something else. My mother, Mia Slovenska, trained as a ballerina. Father crashed the truck; she jarred her spine and that was the end of that. ‘Get Mama a little glass of water, Lizbet, where's your sister?’ she'd asked tremulously. Father loitered in the kitchen.

‘Let me help’. He lurched, reeking with the sweetness of hops, often knocking something over.

I love my older sister, who is perfect. She tripped lightly through our lives, working briefly as a secretary, marrying a handsome barrister and moving to England, where she had two perfect children. One day she had caught me watching her trying on pretty high-heeled shoes and flexing her long legs. She kicked all her shoes into a pile in the corner and hugged me, her fair hair tickling my eyebrows. Julia. Jewel. Mother always asked where she was when she saw me.

Snow had worked for us forever.

‘That's a good man’, mother insisted, as if saying, 'Your library book is overdue'. Snow worked from dawn; dancing flower heads reflected in his thick lenses. He fetched father's beer, framed mother’s paintings, attempted to sell them, ordered stock, argued with tradesmen, baited foxes, drove us to school and cooked for us as mother became increasingly vague.

One afternoon in our house anyone could see how we were: cold and talented mother unable to pursue her career: drunken father consumed by guilt: plain daughter (that's me), too tall for ballet, lost part of her foot’: pretty older daughter Julia, and Snow who looked after us. The tabby cat, sprawled on one worn elbow in the daisies, blinking slowly, full of slutty acceptance. Things never seem to change, just went on being half right.

Father used to try and please mother.

‘Mia, a cushion, let me drive you to Fremantle, let me iron that, let me, let me...’

Mother shrugged, staring into corners, one black eyebrow raised, mouth sneering. ‘I am alone in this terrible country! I am without my art, my strength has gone, dear God, what will become of me? Who will come to my graveside!’

My foot was mangled, father again the driver. The missing part ached or itched. A ghost foot. I told Snow. He said, ‘I know the very thing’. He massaged the heel and triangle of flesh with methylated spirits, large gentle hands patient and warm. Looking down at his head, I felt painful stirrings and patted his curls. He was the only person I let see my foot after the hospital. When I was 14, he wouldn't massage it anymore.

‘It's not right.’

I begged and pleaded but he averted his face and went back to easing flowers into new homes. I dreamt I was a mermaid, my flap grown into a swishing emerald tail. Next night father got night cramps, rolling out of bed cursing, waking us with ineffectual stamping. He made grumbling cups of tea, followed by mother who sat flexing the strong arch of her foot as it swung. They sipped and stared at Julia's photos, where her husband's eyes were riveted on her face.

I craved love and success. I continually asked father: could I move into the stables? Could I run the orchid house? The stables would be perfect. As for orchids - well, I was mesmerised by Brazilian ones and was skilled at cultivars. To both requests, he gave that half smile. I stared at his blurred features angrily. He regarded himself as a failure and liked my company in it. I once saw a soldier with a pet monkey. At first glance, the monkey sprawled affectionately across his chest. Looking more, I saw the monkey's tail firmly wound between the soldier’s strong fingers. That's how it was with my father and me.

Father had a caged galah. What was it Blake wrote?... ‘*a Robin redbreast in a cage puts all the heavens in a rage...*’

He carried the birdcage to a different place daily. His idea of freedom. The antediluvian grey feet turned inwards, its unblinking eyes a mirror of our stupidity.

‘Let it free!’ I yelled, ‘How can you keep in a cage!’

‘Because it'll bite my bloody finger if I don't.’

‘Let it free! Let me clear the paths! Let's widen the paths and sand them. I waved a rusty broken watering can ‘I'll rake them. It'll be lovely, you'll see!’

Turning with that half smile, he took the can, replacing it. Perth has plenty of sand it's all sand. I wanted clear wide sandy paths throughout, raked every morning at first light, the best time of day. A ceremony.

When Julia sent the ticket with a sweetly worded card, asking me to mind my nephews, I did not hesitate, knowing they would be well organised, moving calmly through their days. Snow drove me to the airport, carrying my luggage and handing me homemade bread with salad. As we left, his waving figure dwindled, the sun making his lenses mirrors. I had never really looked into his eyes. I felt as though I was really flying. I occasionally took deep breaths. I laughed, shaking my long black hair, seeing Luke admire it. I felt dangerous.

By the time we shuffled into London customs, I knew he was attending a medical conference at Brighton, for a month. My sister's house at Worthing was but a few kilometres away. Luke visited several times. We sat in the borrowed house in the borrowed country smiling at each other, walking the gentle countryside with stranger’s eyes I thought fleetingly that if my sister was there, he would not spare me a glance. Conspirators. People from somewhere else, where rules did not apply. The weather grew cold. I loved taking his heavy coat and the hot man's smell unfurling.

Departure seemed indefinite. One morning, I was arranging bronze chrysanthemums in brass vars flickering with golden firelight. Luke circled a date on the kitchen calendar, glancing at me. I saw there were three last days. My whole body tightened. Luke bent his head to the pungent cinnamon scent of the flowers, catching my wrist. New line not in my sister’s house, I thought I knew line wordlessly we threw on coats, blundering into the bluish light, nostril linings contracting, the face is smarting with the foggy cold. Leaves and twigs between humps and ridges crackled underfoot like shots as we started on our favourite walk,

scrambling through hedges, down to the lonely river. A sound like a velvety exhalation of breath. A snowy owl glided low down past me, brushing my leg with its great white wing. The Milky Sun jumped back in itself from the river, pulsing with life. My blood surged and my tongue felt hot and swollen.

I remember the rough bark of the oak branch against my skin as I twisted and turned like an animal in a trap. The cold took the air from your mouth. I was already dizzy when I took the first stepping stone. The great oak seemed to move slightly in the milky crystal light. It was unnerving. I put my hand on Luke's shoulder to steady myself. There were no rules in this clean, cold world of the snowy owl and no love spilt.

That night there was an ether mist and paths everywhere, swept, raked, sandy. I floated down a path and there was Snow. I took off his thick glasses and wondered at his eyes. They were like all the beautiful blue flowers in the world.

Just before Julia's return, she asked if I could stay until Christmas. A week later, my mother died suddenly. Snow arranged everything. She had a simple cremation. Only three people were there: father, Snow and the lady from the corner shop. When Julia returned, we would fly back and pay our respects together. I thought about mother a lot and tried to remember the last time I rested my head on the bony slope of her breast.

Of course, I was pregnant. I rang Luke's mobile number. It was disconnected. I felt peaceful, resigned, sure I'd see him again. Perth is a small place. Guiltily I realised I didn't know his surname. He must be Doctor Luke or something.

‘Snow, I'm going to have a child. Be home in seven weeks, with Jewel.’ It was soothing to hear his gruff voice, reassuring me. Father had stopped drinking during the day.

Back in Perth, Julia arranged everything perfectly, her husband's eyes rarely leaving her face, her children thanking me prettily for my care, father nodding. When they left, I went through the house bundling up all the pale pink, the dusty chiffon, greying pink bathmats, pink

bedspreads, scarves, the long flounced pink robe I once saw father bury his face in, and threw them out. I hate pink.

When I went into the stables, I noted Snow stop and lean on his rake, a pixie expression on his face. The three rooms were lined with sweet-smelling tongued and grooved Cypress. One room was a nursery with a cot. There were flowers in pots on the cleaned window sills and bright red rugs on the floor. I ran down and hugged him, my swollen belly pressing comfortably into his.

'I kept a box of stuff for you to sort through.'

A picture. Framed. A slender ballerina poised on a strongly arched foot, black hair in a chignon, eyes like great big black butterflies. A pink tutu. It was signed with a flourish. Mother. She lived in anguish because she thought she was still a ballerina.

That wasn't all. There were letters, documents. I learned father had been an exceptional biologist. He had been promised a research position at the leading Warsaw university. She had become pregnant with me, then in some political upheaval, his position went. They had no choice but to marry and return to the broken-down nursery. Then there was the truck crash.

He'd been laughing with mother, 'I know the accelerator is working because my toes are getting hot!'

'You didn't tell me! I shouted indignantly at father, you didn't say how clever you were, how it was all spoilt and it wasn't your fault! And don't smile at me like that!'

After I had my child, father changed. He cut up his driving licence and gave the pieces to me. He signed over the nursery and I began my dream. Most of the paths are wide and swept now. An art dealer became a frequent visitor to the red brick house. I knew he was keen on

mother's paintings because he asked about everything else and shrugged his shoulders when he had shown them. Muttering something about European angst, he bought two or three and suddenly the world wanted them.

Readers with orderly lives will be wondering, well, what happened to Luke? Did she find him? She doesn't seem to care one way or the other. Bit of a slut. I searched for Luke in every way I could. Gradually my child's needs took over. Just before he was born, Snow announced a BBQ for his hospital workmates. All nurses! he grinned, he and father raising eyebrows at each other. Well, they were all nurses, all males. A rowdy bunch. I leaned against the windowsill of my beautiful room above the stables, looking down at Snow wearing a mad apron, cooking up a storm, everyone laughing. Then, there was a shaggy head and broad shoulders. My heart stopped. As my fingers turned the window latch, my lips opening to speak, Luke turned and set a small child down. Another child ran up and hugged him. A harassed-looking woman gestured to him to take the children to the food. She was breastfeeding.

Tiny pink fingers fiddled with the latch. It takes time, but the rusty metal door creaks open. The galah cocks his head. The child sits down heavily on the raked pink sand. The bird steps delicately outside its cage and walks away. Walks! Cocking its beady eye over its grey feathered shoulder, it rolls on its ancient feet, up the path, past the alarmed tabby, totters to the corner and disappears. I watch slack-mouthed for the fierce rush of delight as it winds its way to the treetops. It doesn't come. But then I spot it, perched on the back doorstep of the red brick house. I fling the cage behind the stables into the long grass.
'Who let that bird out!' My father yells in disgust. 'It'll be bloody well-pecking somebody, mark my words!'

In the Cove, my child reaches out. I lean back into the warm circle of Snow as my child falls onto my breast. We will always be together and Snow will be there for me, his bonsai ballerina.

3. CLIVE OF INDIA KISSES THE ECHOES

Clive limped to our fence, as the morning mists cleared, anxiously sipping rum. Brushing myself down, I went to reassure him. I glanced over the fence at his feet. I felt my eyes widen. From his faded slippers protruded thick, horny plates of amber-coloured toenails in pockets of red skin. More like claws or hoofs, they were ridged with thimble-like pitting, curving down. I had seen paronychia and ingrowing toenails, but nothing like this.

‘Clive! You can't walk about like that! You must book into outpatients tomorrow!’ I used a brisk voice at which patients fell silent.

‘Yeah, I'll go.’ He averted his face.

‘Come on, Clive, that must be so painful! You can't walk properly!’

‘I'll... go. I know where it is. It'll hurt, won't it’, he finished lamely.

I'd bought the cottage almost without looking at it. During my lunch break Drove by with the agent, twice, in the rain. Stared at the two Cypress trees darkening the windows.

‘I'll take it’.

The agent had struggled between avarice and alarm, his practised speech, a *sun-drenched, leafy, character-filled 3-bedroom cottage, walking distance to Echo Point, great opportunities to modernise*, hanging in the air between us. I'd been there three weeks and was still getting used to how the cupboard doors liked to be opened and closed.

In the calm shadows of that street, your eyes quickly found those of your neighbours. That's how I met Clive. I'd seen a shuffling figure next door the day I moved in. He spent hours on his side veranda, straight-backed on a wooden seat. Two dried-up palms flanked the top step. His eyes followed me as I prowled about my new garden, wondering where to begin. Twisted crab apple tree, looped with creepers, blended into the dark power of undergrowth. Over the pungency of rotting apples hung a sweetish scent, strong in the sleepy morning mist. I failed

to see any flowers. As soon as I was home from my shift, I lugged out rusty garden tools left in the shed and laid them out. I planned how I would start clipping and cutting and sawing and trimming. I would have to oil and sharpen the tools first.

‘Bought yourself a place, then?’ my neighbour had hobbled to the fence.

‘Clive,’ pointing to his chest. ‘Taking on the garden?’

‘How about yours?’ I’d smiled towards his drunken Hills hoist almost swallowed in brambles.

‘I can fix that at any time.’. He had coughed hollowly and leaned on the fence as though it took all his strength to watch me.

I sensed the scraggy knees beneath the soiled trousers, hitched up with an overlarge belt. Everything about him and his porch was stained, dried or dirty, but his voice was soft, well educated.

I am used to all sorts of people in my profession, so I didn't mind his chin lifting when I went into the garden to work. I would call out a greeting. Occasionally a sour smell from his doorway made me catch my breath.

My whole garden was so choked I couldn't tell where it ended. The surveyor had been alarmed at my initial indifference. A path petered out a few feet from my washing line at the back. I sensed the ground dipped to the left. I decided to take out the Cypresses first, to let the light in at the front. The first one came down easily, but the second was full of knots and hard to topple, so I climbed into its dusty green arms and hacked away from the inside, misjudging its end and falling with the tree, rolling unharmed, giggling out loud.

Steadily hacking away at the undergrowth, I wondered why I always worry about other people. Why can't they find their own parachutes? All the cleaning and wiping and cutting and washing and propping up. I stared at my open hands.

‘I'm going to be a nurse, mummy’, I had announced. My mother looked away vaguely. My brother's glistening eyes regarded me with his usual contempt. He was handsome and contained even at eleven years old. Perhaps that's why his photo was always on the kitchen shelf and not mine. I have a school photo from that time still: two big white bows on auburn curls, starry eyes, two teeth missing.

If you were Sarah, aged six, you would be stretching across your bed, tongue tip out, trying to pull the sheet corners straight and tight, taking the bowls off the table from eye level so that you sometimes spilt something down your front, carrying a wobbly cup of tea into your mother's bedroom where she lay facing the wall. You would try to iron your gym slip but the box pleats would be beyond you, so you ironed it straight and it would hang off your shoulders like a navy balloon. You would carefully brush the sides and top of your hair but not the fuzzy part at the back that had rubbed on your pillow.

.. *Ah, Miss Scarecrow has graced us with her presence*... boomed the voice of the headmaster, often calling me to the front of the assembly where I prickled with shame.

My brother grew absurdly successful and more spiteful. He ignored me and never missed a chance to insult or upset mother, who fed her torturer, hovering by the phone, composing one-way letters, wiping her eyes gratefully when he phoned her too late at night on Christmas Day, Mother's Day or on her birthday.

Well, every family has one that's what I say!

I think eventually she realised that he had something big to learn or wasn't going to change or both, and I felt her full attention. I wasn't sure whether I enjoyed it or needed it then. Perhaps it was twenty-five years too late. Anyway, she left me her money: it wasn't much but it allowed me to buy this cottage in the Blue Mountains.

I was born the year Virginia Woolf drowned herself. *A room of your own* - every woman needs a house of her own! Can you run away from home when you're 32? From your mother? Family? Well, from your brother's memory, actually.

Mists hung about the treetops so I couldn't tell how high my garden was. A soft blue vapour blurred the horizon. My breath was white puffs in the chill air. I found the source of the sweet scent - a white lilac bush, stiff with flowers. I had three days off work! A steady drizzle set in, and I retreated into my haven, sorting books, making toast, and polishing floorboards to a honey colour. A bellbird's call, crystal clear, was the only intrusion. I slipped gratefully into sleep like a riderless horse, my hands, and backs sore. I didn't want Clive there at all, but he bobbed and rocked about on his deformed feet. He had gold coins hung around his forehead and small gaudy wings.

On my last day off, I was rubbing the bathroom floorboards, when I found a ring. It was it was an old rose gold band, quite large. Inside was inscribed, ... *who is there who could tell me who I am?*

I went to ask Clive about it. He ushered me in. My eye was caught straight away by two silver photo frames holding two black and white photos: a striking young man in jodhpurs, standing up in stirrups wearing polished riding boots, an elephant in the distance and an unsmiling woman with huge light eyes in a sari in the foreground.

We sat and drank Guinness I'd bought to give him some iron. Clive's soft, pleasant voice washed over me as he gently took her photograph from the greasy shelf.

... Susheela, the young widow, seven yards of peacock blue silk in a sari that floated like mist, under a frangipani tree, her slender copper-coloured fingers gathering freshly fallen flowers...

‘The silence was so great when I saw her,’ Clive stared at me with his fish-blue rum drinker's eyes, ‘that I heard the sound of stray flowers falling into the folds of her sari.

...black silky hair that had never been cut... in Hyderabad... demure but with an intelligent light in her green eyes that was too good for the life she would have had...

‘Her grandmother was widowed, and they burned her alive in suttee, a Hindu practise the British stopped. Susheela would not have been burned, but she would have been treated as nothing. She agreed to run away with me. I was disgraced of course.

‘You brought her here?’

He nodded.

‘Was she happy?’

‘I was happy.’

The following week, I made a tray of tea and cake. The milk jug was covered with a snowy cloth. I added a sprig of white lilac. I knocked on the peeling panel of Clive's door. I hadn't yet asked him about the ring I had found. Dogs barked shrilly but nobody came. I put the tray well into the side veranda and stood back. The dilapidated house stared back at me, an old person full of secrets.

The next sunny day I was off work and there we were, me pulling ivy off my house, Clyde sitting on his veranda and nodding his head graciously as though seated on a horse.

‘Where have you been Clive, I missed you.’

‘Birthday. Daughter took me out.’

Daughter? I thought.

‘Did you find the tray I left for you?’

‘Oh, the dogs got that.’

The nurse in me considered the situation.

‘Would you like a Guinness with me for your birthday?’

‘Well, I've had a few rums, but I wouldn't say no.’

I managed to get four Guinness down him quite easily. As soon as he was slumped, snoring, I fetched a bowl, disinfectant, scissors, instruments, oils, ointment, and a towel and laid them out, planning what to do. I cut away the old slippers and slowly immersed his feet in warm, oily water, my forehead against his stiff trousers. As soon as the nails were soft, I paired them right back. They were thick and resilient, but I was determined. I scraped and massaged the skin with creams until it looked pink. I'd bought new slippers, leather with lambswool insert and I eased them on. He barely moved for the hour that it took, just coughed a bit.

The next morning, he didn't comment - just looked at me curiously, sipping his rum.

I drove him to Echo Point.

He walked awkwardly at first, in his new slippers. When we reached the viewing platform, he leaned on the barrier and called, ‘*Su--shi--laaaaa*’. It made him cough. *There is always one who loves and one who is loved*, I thought.

As the wind rose upward, the sound went leeward. Harmonic waves flowed to the mountains over the eucalypts and back, washing the air, crossing boundaries, celebrating his love. I know because the next day I went there alone, and I heard it.

Shortly afterwards, I returned to my husband, who changed his stories as easily and often as he changed his shirt, and my three teenage sons, one of whom muttered, ‘Glad you're back, mum - the can opener broke!’

I've kept the cottage and returned to it often. They don't know about it. It was the best gift my mother could have given me.

I sometimes climbed down to Echo Point. Once more, as the light jabbed at the sky and I stared across the old land that is known for so many souls, I heard it again... *SU-SHI-LAAAAA.* There was no one there and Clive had been dead for years.

4. THE TIES OF TIME

‘Mum, can I take a bottle of water and some bread and see how far I can row upriver?’

Without pausing, 'Of course dear, not the brown bread in the front of the fridge 'cause that's the freshest.’

He scowled. He had red hair, light grey eyes, and freckles, but when he scowled not only his face but the whole room seemed to darken.

'I hate you.'

'Why is that dear?'

'Because you give me nothing to fight against!'

'I like to think we are present-giving – I know we're strapped for cash at the moment, but a present can be a nice thought or just a flower or some lovely grasses,' I averted my gaze from his stony face.

We'd had this conversation before where he listened but refused to accept my words.

'That's what you say, mum.’ He lifted one shoulder.

'Look, it's my birthday next Wednesday. Find something for me and say happy birthday, 'cause it's good for you, it's good for me and I a good example for your brother. And draw me a card as well,’ I added, feeling I was pushing my luck. True, we were a present-giving family except for him. Even my errant husband bought me expensive gifts that we couldn't afford, the other extreme. So, Wednesday came, and he stood in the doorway muddy and dripping wet and said, 'Got you a present,' I felt a shiver of anticipation. In one hand he held a length of very heavy chain, each link bigger than a hand span, the rest of it coiled by his foot.

'Well, Noah,’ I marvelled, ' that's lovely of you, how did you get that?'

'Been working on a boat at the Marina.' I remembered two of our towels disappearing and one found in the garden later with machine oil smears.

'The skipper.'

That chain was so heavy that I couldn't lift it. If I'd used it to anchor *Laura Jo*, my boat would have stood up straight and sunk. At dinner, I mentioned how lovely it was for Noah to give me a present and his brother sniggered. In vain, I sought a way to use it. It lay outside the door in a glistening coil.

Not only did he test himself, he tested me.

A great sea kite hanging on an updraft, its black feathers stark against the enamel blue of the sky, would look down on my latest test. My runabout with a 25-horsepower engine was towing Noah's rowboat into the mouth of Patonga Creek. As the Creek narrowed, winding up through Brisbane Waters National Park, the hawk's great eyes would mirror the boats coming alongside, the rope being untied, the small boat going in front of the powered boat and the teenaged boy taking the oars.

Sitting in that powered boat, I acted nonchalant. I had dreamt the night before that I was howling, 'Please no more. I'm begging you, please, as great waves crashed and hovered above me...I loved the water, but the first part of this journey was very dangerous in such a small craft. I could hear my father's voice, *...goes to the other side of the world, runs away from her husband, gets drowned and leaves two boys behind for us to look after. Well, I can't say I'm surprised.*

Getting into the Creek meant braving rolling waves from the Tasman and navigating a bar at the entrance, which my engine was powerless against. I felt so exposed as we left the

shoulders of cliffs for the open stretch of sea. Fishermen on the rocks paused to watch us run along the top of a wave-like surfers. The boats could have been matchboxes in the swell. I could feel the strength of the great mess of water pushing against my boat's thin sides.

At last, safely into the creek, we moved under power, or paddled and waded, pulling and pushing our boats, Noah and I. The tide was high, and the water was still salty from where Brisk Bay flowed into this ancient tidal inlet. Peaceful waters at last. A creamy white stingray rippled slowly past, touching my leg as I waded. I called out a warning. He was always in front, my eldest - had to be in control. Aged fourteen, without a father.

We left a couple of empty houses on our right and we glided through the great hushed green shadows of the coastal heath forest, branches dancing towards each other overhead. Where the creek was shallow and bled into mangroves and estuarine mudflats, a white-bellied snake edged lazily around a heron and crabs popped and bubbled. The Blue Gum high forest over thousands of acres of worn Hawkesbury sandstone hills throws a mantle of strong, eucalyptus. The decomposing stink of the mangrove mud below competes. Bush flies hung on our ears and mosquitos whined around our ankles sometimes.
You can't call the Scottish countryside gentle, but in summer, with the bees humming in the wild campion and heather, and the sheep peacefully grazing by clean streams, there is a cool promise of harmless plenty. And now!

He was christened Noah, my eldest, after my grandfather, which means 'the heart of a bear'. His grandfather was an Antarctic explorer who had died on the Ross Ice Cap.

Noah's narrative was that it was entirely my fault that I had left his father, and who was I to contradict him. From a happy golden child, as he grew older, he became contemptuous of the life I provided. He sneered at the gravy beef and day-old bread, which was our staple diet. He shrugged off my teaching job because it was poorly paid. He sighed about the rundown house I'd managed to buy. I had written back to my father and stepmother, '*...I've bought a pretty little cottage by the water and the boys, and I have a bedroom each, and guess what, they have Scottish shortbread in Australia'*. Well, part of that was true. I didn't mention the sloping floor, the holes in the roof, the lantana inside broken windows and birds flitting through. Cockroaches scrabbled inside the wall linings and lizards darted in and out of patches of sun where walls didn't meet. I saw how it would be restored to how it was - loved and comfortable, like a happy older person. I tried so hard.

Noah's brother, Oliver, always helped, daily pulling off ant-eaten wood for a fire outside, to save costs on cooking. He laughed as he watched his ball roll to one corner of the room over the uneven floor. He even laughed when slashing lantana, its blackberry smell clinging to our clothes, arms smeared with bloody scratches. My oyster farmer neighbour, Higgo, brought around plants and books and scratched his head at the state of the place. He arrived with a mate and a car jack and winked. They put the jack under one corner of the house on a supporting pillar and as they cranked the handle, the whole structure shuddered and moved more or less upright. Every day we won a small victory, Oliver and I and helpers, while Noah retreated to his room and scowled.

The river flooded. Caravans and bales of hay, bar stools and pumpkins bobbed crazily seaward. Noah came home with boats low in the water with spoil - one of the few times he

smiled. There was a bedside cabinet I gave to Noah, although he still slept on floorboards in a sleeping bag while I saved up for a bed.

If the authorities knew how we were living they would probably have taken the boys away, but we had running water and were safe and remote and nobody knew about us except the neighbours, who didn't want trouble... My husband had no idea where we were and did not make an effort to find us. I basked in the peace, knowing what to expect as I shut the back door behind me, only facing challenges with solutions and without violence.

Patonga Creek narrowed and wound into the hills, Noah ahead of me. How could he fail to see the grey antediluvian feet floating flat on the water: the half-submerged pelican. I read they have air pockets in their bones and wings for buoyancy and can't stay submerged. It looked recently dead. From the white floating back, I guessed it had dived down to grab a fish and got caught in a crevice by its great beak. To see such a powerful flyer helpless in the grey-green water was eerie. I decided to try and pull it into the boat for the boys. I was always calling their attention to a spider wasp making its mud nest or a bee drinking from water in a cupped leaf or other marvels. It was revered in the past and now by me, deep in the Hawkesbury bush. I grasped the cold, black clawed scaly feet and gave them a tug. There was a strange give. Perhaps decaying had started, although there was no smell. Taking a deep breath, I tugged the legs again, but the body was tightly caught - of course - it was that's why it couldn't escape. I ran my hand down over its head and felt the top of its great beak. It was wedged securely. I looked for Noah, but he'd vanished round a bend. I called and called, waited and called. The great silence of the bush hung where everything moved under its own special relationship and momentum, and I was just a minuscule part. My armpits prickled with sudden sweat. What if something had happened to Noah? There was no sign of him, not

a ripple on the surface of the creek water mirroring the great Blue Gum trees above. Everything indifferent. Silence, silence, silence in the endless Australian landscape.

Panting, I started the motor, gently edging the boat forward, standing up and resting on the windshield, watching for a submerged log which could catch the propeller and dislodge the split pin. I had to survive being alone in another country, with only the money I could earn, looking after two youngsters and being tested by the eldest. I was keenly aware of my existence.

As the creek curved, my eyebrows lifted. Noah stood on some mangrove roots talking to a man and woman in a kayak. Looking towards me, he smiled briefly. In a flash, I knew that he had taken no small pleasure in the fact that I had encountered the dead pelican and become unnerved when he didn't answer my calls.

The man was saying angrily, *'There's nowhere left*, *nowhere*, everywhere is choked by people.' His companion nodded.

I sympathised because I lived in a beautiful place where solitude was easy to find, with no sign of man-made structures along the soft curving horizon of the hills.

It was time to go back. The mood between the two boats altered. Noah was cheerful and delighted when a startled flock of ibis, flew in a cloud about us. The tide was running out an easy ride from the end of the Creek back into the Bay.

As we moored the boats, I ventured to Noah, 'we don't have to stay in Australia we can go to New Zealand, where your grandfather had his Antarctica base. Do you know they've just

discovered these great holes in the Waddell Sea – there are so many places where no human foot has set down. I chose this place because you can have this ... this wilderness ... in a shrinking world. We are so lucky, and it will not last.

Young Oliver was showing me his school project. Noah appeared at the door.

'I'm taking this chain back because you're not using it.' Strong young arms gathered up the chain.

'Dinner's ready,' I called.

'I'm busy,' he called over his shoulder as he went down to his boat taking the chain with him.

5. IN LOVING MEMORY

Women are often silent about grave matters. They wait their time. When I was a teenager, my mother told me how full of hate and trickery her sister-in-law had been. Aunt Alice, jealous of her happiness, made trouble constantly, my mother told me in a flat tone, looking out of the window. I listened silently, with a dry mouth. My heart felt like bursting at the thought of someone being unkind to my mother.

'Alice was clever, convincing. It was always little things. Cruel words. Sometimes I caught your father looking at me questioningly.'

'My Alice only means the best,' he would say.

'How did you stand it?' I wondered why she had not left.

'Loving never empties the heart.' she smiled. She told me of the inheritance, the trouble over money, how Alice had tried to cut out her brother's share. After he saw her spitefulness, he left the big house in South Africa and brought my mother to Italy. They had been happy. Now, my mother refused to come to Australia, asking to be left alone in the Ospedale with her memories. She had never recovered from a slight fall that had happened in the twinkling of an eye. All we could get out of her was that she turned her head to look behind her and fell over a kerb. The ankle had been set badly twice and had never properly recovered.

The light finally filtered through. The sign said caduta massi [falling rocks]. It is marble, not rock - the mountains are cervaioli, white marble beloved by Michelangelo, lying like thick snow.

My walk began in the Apuan Alps, green, soft-clad hills, with rambling old man's beard, chestnuts, blackberries and willow. I walked alone. I like travelling alone. Unless I was with

him- my forever love. So different from as a child, being awake, drowsy, uncertain, and tiptoeing into the big, darkened bedroom in Johannesburg to climb softly into the foot of the big, wooden bed. Stray moonlight lit their posture: heads inclined towards each other, my father holding my mother's right wrist, her hand across his heart. I lay between their feet, making a triangle, my safety complete. At the first streaks of dawn, I slipped away, satisfied, somehow keeper of secrets out of my reach.

Climbing the narrow, winding paths past tiny churches, I watched a hedgehog snuffling trailing rose hips. The Bay of La Spezia stretched into the shining Mediterranean. Salt tinged the air. Velvety black butterflies drifted by as I drank thirstily from a clear spring gushing from a fissure, water so pure I drank and drank. Shielding my eyes, I looked up high into the mountains where cranes perched on the marble.

Partisans hid in these mountains in wartime. I imagined darkened figures passing swiftly along the tracks, grabbing handfuls of grapes, beans and tomatoes before fading into the woods. Women must have impassively registered broken stems and bruised leaves at daybreak, working on silently.

I reached a deserted quarry, strewn with idle machinery: a womb of pure blazing white undefined shapes. Massive tumbling shards were recognisant of many things, yet formless. I thought of London museums, of graveyards. Of mausoleums. All the serious, cold, hard, high art, immutable records of death, sacrificing beauty. No birds sang here. It was full of potential, yet already heavy with the past, sacred to sight and touch.

The sun hung high in the sky.

I had flown out to be with my mother for three weeks. My heart was full of questions I had not thought to ask before, as I hurried back to her.

Kneeling by the white narrow mound of her bed, I held her hand.

‘Why was Alice so unkind to you, why?’ she smiled into my eyes ’because of my colour’.

I thought of my father, the tall, brown-haired Scotsman, gangly, with steady grey eyes. I flinched, pressing my pale face into the cinnamon skin inside her arm. ‘But you are so beautiful.’

She smiled again. ‘It was unheard of - a professional marrying a black African. When I broke my ankle, it was Alice. She caused it.’

‘What do you mean, Alice died years before your accident? And you left that country.’

‘Yes, but she called out my name - in a horrible way. Vengeful. I was just crossing the road in the sunshine. I turned to look behind me and tripped over the curb. It happened in a moment it was definitely her voice.’

My skin prickled uncomfortably. The air felt dark around us as I heard her words. She believed every life had an evil, destroying presence. She and my father had so much love that she felt guilty and that somehow it had to be paid for. A price.

‘Because of my colour, your father lost work and contracts. Alice's fiancé left her. However hard she tried; she couldn't stop us loving each other!’

Holding my mother’s thin, dark wrist with both hands while she dozed, I gazed at her soft, lined face and dark eyelashes. After she had rested and we could talk again, I would tell her about our baby. I felt it was a daughter. Maybe she would have our white skin and freckles or my mother's thick black curls and beautiful strong white teeth. Surely my mother would come back with me then.

With a start, I realised how hungry I was, and hastening back to Pietro Santo, bought a *panino* - sun-dried tomatoes, rare beef *rucola* and *pecorino* - biting into the flavours with relish.

I wandered through busy sheds and yards full of huge rough-sawn chunks of marble, where blocks were wheeled, cut columns polished and shaped. Ropes and pulleys squeaked and groaned as blocks were manoeuvred into place. Sculptors chiselled local blueish grey *bardiglio,* and imported marble, from rose pink from Portugal to the black with gold veins, *portoro*. Black Belgian is the king of marble.

Long white limbs ended in classic feet, the second toe longer than the first. Hounds reclined gracefully. Angels with still white feathers and chuckling cherubs hovered above the *scutterice,* women sculptors, of all ages, who chipped and soared away, their long white coats covered in dust, looking like moving statues. They were absorbed. It's *Fellini!* I thought. Signs of the old marble trade were everywhere, even to marble chips lining the railway tracks. Nobody glanced at me, just another tourist.

Sauntering among pastel houses, I found an old summerhouse built for the Medici family. They liked trout fishing, one woman in particular. A trout painted on a ceiling commemorates her. I stared at the brightly stippled trout, lively enough to swim away and disappear colourfully between the cool marble columns.

6. LEILA'S PATCH

‘I'm so glad you contacted us. We have a Mr Zed Rizen for you - non-smoker, social drinker, was a dentist - some trouble with nitrous oxide some financial trouble.’

‘Nitrous oxide?’ Leila ventured timidly.

‘Laughing gas, madam. Some dentists use it as a recreational drug. Zed just overdid it, that's all. Yes, well, he is seeking reinstatement, but the board is... ah well, he's a perfect gentleman, very quiet, pleasant manner, just don't lend him any money.’

A week later, Leila's front door glass darkened. After all the prevarication, discussions, phoning, and signing, the man from the agency was actually there.

Did she realise what she was taking on? Why did she request a male? Well, he stayed in her granny flat - he wasn't really in her house, was he? His rent was offset by his wages. Of course, she's never had to worry about money, especially since her parents died. It's a beautiful old home, she seemed very happy there - I suppose the garden was too much for her. She was very security conscious. One doesn't know who one can trust nowadays...

Leila tucked in her stomach and patted her hair as she opened the door. A wagtail on the lawn twitched its tail left, right, left, right.

Leila beckoned Zed to follow her to the kitchen. He did not comment as she unlocked and locked all the internal doors with a flourish of keys.

‘Don't want to be too formal,’ she glanced across the kitchen with her shiny brown eyes.

She made tea, glancing at his concerned expression, his long tapering fingers. *Filbert nails show a gentleman, Leila,* her mother breathed in her mind, *long fingers are good, eyes too close together are bad, a soft generous mouth is good - in horses also.*

‘When will your things be coming?’

‘About an hour. There's not much. Books. Clothes… a small cedar table that was mother's.’

‘Oh, really. How was it at Goulburn?’ the agency had informed Leila Zed had been in there for three years.

‘Alright. They told me there was no mail for me several times when there was.’

‘You have mail here already. I'll always leave yours on the porch.’

Leila and the dentist drank tea. He looked deeply into her eyes, or was it his own?

‘You can't claim another's paradise,’ he said, ‘but it's lovely here. Beautiful garden. Glad you decided to have someone live in and you chose me. I can do all the heavy work for you as well - I'm a keen gardener myself and I'll enjoy the work. Canberra gardens are very impressive, especially in the autumn dash but yours is exceptional!’

Leila had known it was a good idea to get a gardener, in spite of what others said. She felt a flutter of pleasure, like in school days tug-of-war when the other team gave up. The lawnmower was heavy for her and broke down: there were branches to prune, logs to cut and leaves to sweep. Canberra always seemed covered in dead leaves. She flexed her fingers. Artist's hands. She was always careful with them.

‘I want you to be happy here. There aren't any rules really, we're both adults - no smoking, keep the side gate closed, oh, and the grasses at the bottom of the garden, they are left to grow. I want you to be happy here.’ she repeated.

‘I like a good laugh.’

She opened her eyes wide, raising fair eyebrows.

Careful, whispered her mother's voice, *don't say too much. Least said, soonest mended.*

Leila had been fascinated by grasses ever since she had asked her mother, ‘Who owns grass?’ At the ballet, each girl in her pink Tutu, poised in position three, had been asked what they visualised when dancing.

A rose, they had breathed in unison to saccharine mother's smiles.

Leila, her head full of wind-tossed green, had piped up, grasses.

‘Why shouldn't I choose grasses?’ she had demanded of her mother on the way home.

‘What's funny about that? Roses are boring!’

‘Why try so hard to be different?’ her mother said.

‘Well, I don't want to go there anymore if they don't even know what you're thinking!’ Leila was perturbed that they could not see what was in her mind in the garden - where every moment was poetry.

When Leila was seven years old, her stepfather ran out of fuel when mowing, leaving a large rectangle of unknown orchard grasses. Over the weeks the grass grew lush and tall. The family asked him about it, but he just smiled and looked down at his plate. The grasses grew and grew. Leila felt somehow it was for her. She was practising her flute on the veranda when suddenly she stopped. Her stepfather looked up from his newspaper.

‘Is it for me?’ she asked slowly.

He nodded solemnly with a sly smile, wondering what she meant, happy to have found a chink in her armour, a clue of how to live with this strange girl child with tangled blonde hair and insolent brown eyes, who pushed him away and did not like his presence.

Leila ran barefoot to the wall of green, flute in hand. It seemed a magic thing, a miniature forest, sweet smelling, strange and wonderful. Her stepfather's unease with fatherhood fled as he watched her bobbing head. She tiptoed into the green heart and fell to the grass. When she sank into the dank softness she vanished. With a sigh of contentment, she raised her flute and soft plaintive notes seeded the swaying tops.

Fat magnifying drops of rain slip down jointed green and brown stems. A pale green beetle with hinged legs was over toppled by one drop and struggled on its arm. Leila gazed at the

grass tips on the sky, blissfully floating in her own existence. Her throat ached with perfection.

At supper, she grinned at her stepfather, who triumphantly swept back his slick hair. He always seemed so tall to her, even when she was grown. For weeks, this grassy place was her heaven and she loved him for it. He had not made it for her, but he understood how she loved it and he left it for her.

She never mentioned her fascination with glasses to anyone in her family until she told her mother when she was 12, ‘I’m going to be the person in the world that knows the most about grass.’

‘That'll be right miss,’ her mother's mouth went down at the corners, ‘always trying to be different.’

‘You know what she said in class when her teacher asked who would like to own a pony?’ Her mother looked over the top of her glasses at her stepfather. ‘Pegasus - and I'd fly right out of here and stay in the clouds for a week! She takes after her grandfather!’

Grandfather had flown too high in his glider. Caught in a storm he was whirled upwards. He bailed out, the machine falling away, but he was sucked into a storm cloud. He hung there, layered with ice as hailstones formed a grey powdery coating rushing out of the mauve and grey mist, invading his ears and nostrils, feathering his eyebrows, freezing his crotch. He was torn up once again and packed around with ice, plummeting to earth. It hadn't prevented him from becoming a flying instructor, but her grandmother never entered a plane after she heard this story, stolidly embroidering, two feet on the ground while her husband waggled his wings overhead. Her grandmother contracted Parkinson’s, and no one could ignore the winking shaking jewels she wore that had been earned by her husband in the air. She died while Leila was at boarding school, her grandfather soon afterwards.

Leila nursed her ambition and played her flute. She was accepted as a member of the Canberra Orchestra. She met Luke, also a flute player. They lay in the grass together and, for a year, planned their future blissfully. He died suddenly, on tour, away from her. She felt their time together was like when the wind blows over a field of wheat, gone as fast as the ripples. The wind was gone and so was he. *The glory of man is as the flowers of grass*... she had read somewhere. There was no man in her life after that. She thought long and deeply about love and loss and decided to escape the pain that each brings.

Leila became an acknowledged expert on grasses, and as her publisher said, 'Leila's work is too important not to be published, regardless of lists and budgets,' so she had a handsome advance. This was gratifying but her parents had been good providers and their parents before them, and further back. In her hallway, a framed advertisement dated April 1831, read: Thomas Barker is now able to supply vessels for long voyages, with a biscuit of a very superior description, at the lowest Price, with liberal Credit at the Steam Engine Flour Warehouse, Darling Harbour. The old wealth had flowed from there. Leila was 40 now, slim, white-haired, health good, friends for bridge, professional acknowledgement, lectures at the herbarium and yet...

Two days later, Leila went to her granny flat with Zed's mail, although certain he was not there. Her smoky grey cat wound itself about her ankles. She glanced briskly at the envelopes. One had a Dental Association header. She let herself in with her spare key. The flat, silent, and tidy, reproached her. In the bathroom, a comb threaded with grey hairs lay on the side of the basin. There were no photographs. She withdrew. Back in her own kitchen, she realised the cat was probably locked in the flat. She hurried back down, to shoo it off Zed's bedspread, guiltily brushing away imaginary hairs.

It was almost too easy. There were no wrong silences. By the end of the month, they shared a history of quirks about their house and large garden, while avoiding anything of a personal nature. Zed knew the washing machine tip should be turned off in, the case of washer blue. He knew the mail came around 2:00 except on Fridays, when it was early. I shared a coffee after he finished work, and he made it exactly how Leila liked it. He consulted her before doing anything in the garden and kept the side gate locked. His red was paid in advance. He never smoked and enjoyed just an occasional glass or two of red wine. He left Leila's grass to grow as requested.

'It's perfect! We're like an old married couple,' Leila squeaked to a friend on the phone upstairs.

She liked having a man around the place. She enjoyed the centre after shaving the kitchen after they had sheared off coffee, glimpses of his head and shoulders as he padded about the garden, his deep cough in the night, while she worked on her new book, National Grass is of significance.

It was autumn. As Ted came in stamping his muddy feet on the porch mat, she paused in the kitchen to listen. As he cradled his warm coffee cup, she ran her eyes over his long fingers.

'Mrs Barker, I have a splinter in my thumb. I wonder whether you would be so kind...'

They stood against the light from the window, she cradled his forearm steadying it against her breast. She paused over her book that evening and thought about that moment.

The length of Zed's stay was never discussed, as he paid his rent monthly. Leila found him so acceptable that she decided he would be there indefinitely without discussing with him whether he had plans. She supposed he was disempowered by having been imprisoned and now at the mercy of the middle classes. A week later, Leila was in her bathroom on the ground floor previously a conservatory, it had plants grouped around the outside of its solid

door. It had a large, old-fashioned lock that could be locked from the outside or inside. With the old house, there were problems with condensation and Leila often opened this door to air the bathroom. She reasoned it was quite safe because that all side gate in the garden was always locked.

She was standing looking at her body in the full-length mirror through the steam of the filling bath when she heard the steady snipping of garden shears. She had seen dead finished edges by hand shears, kneeling on a pad. The steel clip, click-clip was loud and rhythmical. Her smoky cat stared intently at the keyhole of the outside door, stock-still as if watching an animal. She called the cat, which did not move. Leila's neck prickled. After a moment she shrugged and returned to her appraisal, stroking her body, which was moist, pink, slender, closeted and kept away from the world, bearing no children, suffering no pain, never being hungry, cold, unrested, or moisturised.

The next morning, she ran around the outside of the house to the bathroom door. The grass was neatly clipped in 1/2 circle... she knelt and peered through the large old-fashioned keyhole. It offered a view of the place in front of the mirror where she had been standing naked. She stood and unlocked the door, opening it looking at the bathroom from a different angle, then left the key under its usual stone without re-locking the door, so enchanted was she with her mental image of Zed on his knees looking regarding her.

That sort of thing doesn't happen in Canberra, surely... was that her mother's voice again.

Leila smiled secretively to herself, licking her pink lips.

The next day she invited Zed into her study.

'I can't tell you how pleased I am with your work; the garden is flourishing.'

'Well, I'm happy to be of service. While I make my plans. My plans for my future.'

'I'm putting finishing touches to this painting of grass.' she said. 'It's native to southeastern Australia. See how the flowers resembled tiny shuttlecocks.'

Zed leaned forward and looked intently. ‘How complex grass is’, he murmured. ‘Who would have thought it.’

‘Yes, yes.’ Leila was pink with enthusiasm, ‘look at this one Kayla the compound inflorescence is very hairy and has many paired racemes, each with a large bract or spectrol. See here, the spikelets on the seams are also arranged in pairs - the larger one produces a seed, and the smaller one, on a tiny stalk, is sterile or male. Each Racine is terminated by a triplet of 1 fertile and two stalk sterile spikelets.’

After said showed this initial interest, they spent several evenings together because she just thought about a wonderful, scented grass that she had not yet told him about. Zed interrupted her with a plan, carefully laying before her the details in it. ‘Sure, return on any capital, absolutely foolproof...’ hung in the air.

Leila brushed his words aside with a light laugh.

‘You're quite happy here, aren't you? Is there anything more you need?’ she did not look at his face when she spoke.

He approached the subject twice more, but l Leila simply turned away with a sigh.

One evening, Leila stroked her soft flat stomach in front of her bathroom mirror, investigating a small brown mole that had appeared.

When a dead shadow appeared in the frosted glass of the outside door, Leila stopped breathing. He came slowly in through the plants, the cat streaking past him in alarm. His eyes were the colour of autumn smoke from leaves. His hands and clothes were grass-stained. ‘Oh Mrs Barker, I do apologise, I was just trying the door to make sure it was locked, I had no idea...’

Leila reached for a towel and wrapped it slowly around her.

This sort of thing just happened doesn't happen in Canberra, she thought.

7. TWO HEARTBEATS AND A STEP AWAY

Dad is creaking about the kitchen, his socks in his right armpit. Sometimes he wears a sock in each armpit but only when it's really cold. The toes flop out like rabbit's ears. For a moment he looks to me like a hybrid. I wonder vaguely whether I should put *Beware of the Rabbit* on our gate. My dad came into my life late. I was 38. He rang me up and said he thought it would be a good idea if I knew where I was conceived.

'Where then?' I had asked, staring at the widow's peak of his hair, and fingering my own.

'Steps of Saint Patrick's. I was 13, your mother 14.'

I never knew my mother. She was whirled off with the rest of the flotsam and jetsam in my life. I did not know whether she was still alive. My dad didn't either.

Dad used to turn up unannounced and stay for about three days. He sauntered about our house as though he owned it. I didn't really care if he came or went. I couldn't say loyalty pumped through my arteries. He met Don and the two boys briefly before they were off to Canada for a six-month trip. We'd planned it for years. They went before going to university. They were both going to study geology, Don's passion. He wanted to take them on an exploration trip in a forest up in Alaska. Long hours but well paid. Hardship allowance to boot.

'Is everything alright with you two?' dad was uneasy at this information. 'It's a bit of a long time, isn't it? And a bit far away.' He warmed to his subject.

I just smiled and put the kettle on.

'Done alright for yourself, anyway,' he nodded approvingly at the lounge heaped up with books and rock specimens. 'Blood will out, that's what I say, and you can put that to music.'

My foster parents looked after me from six months old. They lived at Echuca on a big rundown farm, and I don't remember one day of unhappiness with them. I caught polio from

mosquitoes from the Murray River, the only victim for ten miles. I was left with a withered foot. My foster mother taught me to swim in that river (lightning never strikes in the same place twice), hanging onto empty Tate and Lyle golden syrup tins tied into her old stockings. I learned to walk again, but the wizened muscle in my leg was never any good.

I said to my dad,' Why didn't you visit me? I had a tragic childhood.'

'What's the good of a happy childhood,' he replied. 'I didn't have one and it never did me any harm.'

I have a good life with Don. I feel calm with him, safe. I love his enthusiasm for rocks.

'See how they're folded like layers of pastry by massive plate forces,' he murmurs, in wonderment, taking my finger and tracing the old, old lines.

I'm tall but he is taller and much stronger. He picks me up sometimes and with my forehead in his brown beard, I feel like a child instead of a professional woman with two sons. He carries my books for me. Some genealogical books are very heavy. I trace people's family trees, following the branches, the veins. Like veins in European autumn leaves when the matter dies, and delicate tracery is left. The way families are joined over hundreds of years seems more important to me than the people themselves. The deeply coloured veins and exotic minerals of Don's metamorphic rocks are the result of tectonic plates squeezing, under, over and by one another. What processes and forces were applied to our past? How much are we the result of the chains of people before us, back, back to the long-haired ones crouched against sea shelves, eyes fully open underwater? My DNA tells me I was once Jewish Ashkenazi. And I'm one per cent African.

Don gives me presents. The morning he left for Canada he put two love messages in my slippers. I felt one with my good toes and guessed the other was there.

My dad was never a present giver. I mean after 38 years, you think he'd be falling over himself to buy me and the kid's things, but no. He never bought anything with him, not even

an extra milk, just sat at our table, sucking in his cheeks and leaning back on his elbows, nodding as though he had always been part of my life.

I read once that King Victor Emmanuel II of Italy used to reward his mistress every year with one year's growth of his big toenail, polished by a jeweller, framed in gold and studded with diamonds. Well, dad wouldn't think to give you his nail clippings.

There was the smell of a soft northerly on a dark July morning, and I was staring at the step by the front door. It was cracked and stained.

'What are you looking at, girl?' dad appeared sporting white socks from one armpit. His hair was parted rigidly, his shirt crisp. It was the war that did that, the army training.

'That step'. I gestured towards it.

Dad squinted, trying to see what I saw.

'Needs a spot of paint'.

'You want the step painted?' Dad's head was on one side, blue eyes regarding me shrewdly.

He bought a tin of red paint and set it down with a flourish. Something fluttered in my breast. That simple act was the wand of the fairy godmother, del meaning, *yes you can go to the ball*. I was two heartbeats away from joining the army of people who had a father of their own to stare up at and request things like: *untie this knot: stop that big kid, buy me that, take me there, carry me high on your shoulders.* Even though I was 38, it was still a delicious feeling, a transformation, like that giving long-buried rocks a subsequent uplift.

The tin of paint sat by the step. Dad came and went for months, whistling purposefully, I never knew what about.

The weather grew hotter and hotter. The bees were dying. I said to dad, 'That paint?'

'What about it?' he looked at me warily.

I shrugged. 'Just thought it might go off in the hot sun.'

‘You're trying to tell me something aren't you?’ His face was streaked with red. His eyes bulged. ‘Next thing, you'll be saying I don't do anything for you. I am here at your beck and call. But no, Miss High and Mighty, you've landed on your feet, and you don't need your old dad anymore, that's for sure.’

‘Dad,’ I smiled. ‘We don't want to waste the paint, that's all. I'll do it.’

‘No’, he said, too quickly. ‘I don't want you saying I don't do anything for you and if there's one thing, I'm a dab hand at, it's painting.’

He stood outside, briskly polishing the insteps of his brogues. The sunlight fell upon his plump, freckled shoulders, which shook with the effort under his clean shirt.

‘That's my father.’ I thought to myself and smiled.

‘Well, I'll be off’.’ He held an admonishing finger up, his head on one side like a bird, his face close to mine eyes rolled up. ‘Now, I-don't-have-to-say-it, do I?’

After that, before his visits, he'd phone and say, ‘I'll be down to do that step.’

About two weeks before Don and the boys came home, I realised I hadn't heard from dad for a while. I had been tracing a family descended from the Huguenots, who were French Protestants who fled to European countries, the United States and Africa. It was absorbing. I sat for long, suspended moments, murmuring names from other people's families, meeting unblinking sepia eyes in brown and cream features from people I'd never met, who walked in other places where the rules were different, wondering in the end whether I was looking at them or they at me in their enigmatic way. Have you noticed there is no guilt in the eyes of people in old photographs? It's the time-lapse of the technology. Whatever they were thinking at the start of the sitting, they eventually felt as frozen in time as they look to us now. The

children are unsmiling because they are worn out with waiting! Waiting for us to look at them, maybe.

I rang the number dad had left on a scrap of torn, lined paper, for the first time. A cranky female voice told me he *up and left, without so much of how's your father?*

‘Did he leave anything?’ I asked curiously.

‘Nothing to leave. Rent paid up. Room clean. But he could have told me. I could have been getting in the next one.’

The paint tin by the step became discoloured. You couldn't read the label and I forgot what colour it was. The side caved in. Brownish liquid oozed from the lid.

My boys were full of their adventures, and we had photographs everywhere.

‘Mum, the team let us analyse drill cores - how will that look on our CVs!’

‘Hey, mum, we were mapping the terrain and there was this bear...’

I leaned against Don's chest, feeling the warmth seeping into me, smiling at their animation, and twirling a bit of his beard between my fingers. I'd kept all their postcards and stuck them around the windows, and they read them out loud again. The three of them had earned most of the money needed for each boy's university course.

‘The place looks the same’, Don said, ‘I missed you all the time. Big time.’

‘I know. I nearly flew over about April, on my birthday.’

‘I wondered. I thought about you all day. It was pretty rough terrain. I think it would have been too much for you most of the way. And you would have hated the mosquitoes! But I tell you what - I'm never leaving you again, no matter how hard you beg!’

Nobody asked about my dad.

8. THE RULES OF RAIN

The rules of rain new line Queenie tide the baby to its white highchair with rope, inserting two fingers between the rope and the warm flesh, like one does a dog collar to see it's not too tight, and left home, whistling for less to follow. The baby stared after her and then at the trees through the window, wondering why the leaves bent this way and that. It's mild and puffed out its cheeks.

Waiting for the bus, Queenie drew a face in the dust with the toe of her shoe, realising she missed Arnie. Staring back at her was the outline of his small nose and rounded chin, the thick muscled neck that she liked to soap, sitting behind him in the bath. She rubbed the base of lasses warm ears. The bus rumbled to a halt.

Chloe! She reached up for her sister's shiny bag. Next slide Chloe's long gleaming legs emerged, a tightly bodied red rose tattooed on one thigh. She stumbled on her high red heels. The driver chuckled, whoops! Which meant many things.

Queenie sighed as they started back to her place. Chloe hardly mentioned her baby. She was already brimming with enthusiasm about the latest mail she was enthralled with.

'Never knew it could be like this,' Chloe walked half sideways, her face close to Queenie's, eyes wildly blue, arm affectionately linked in her sisters.

Lass circled them, tail plume waving. Queenie was already half-listening. She'd heard it all before. 'This time I'm going to settle down, this time I'm not throwing it away...'

Queenie had made ugly plans as a little girl. There was a reason for this. What she took home from school were dead butterflies, screwed-up notes, birthday invitations and other girls' hair ribbons. But what she never mentioned at school were evenings watching her mother through a crack in the door, nursing Chloe, the thin blanket trailing on the floor, her mother draining

her glass and shouting, ‘I’m going to do it this time!’; to an uncaring world.

Their father, often up at Sandy Hollow, working as an engineer, made plenty of money but only gave some of it to his family, sometimes. When he came back., he bought bags of watches and cameras that miners had left behind.

‘Don’t say I never give you anything,’ he’d laugh, throwing them on the tablecloth, a jumble of dusty plastic uselessness.

Queenie’s plan was not to marry, but find a really handsome, rich partner. She would never have children and never trust her man. Ever.

Their mother died of a heart attack. Queenie went from room to room, closing the house down, wondering why it was called an ‘attack’. Father’s raincoat hung behind a door cloaked in spider’s webs, and that said it all, really.

Walking under the just visible stars, Queenie remembered holding her mother’s shoulders, shaking over a white enamel bowl, then her mother’s bird-light hand.

It’s all right’ she’d said firmly to herself. That seemed to make it so. I can do this on my own, she muttered and did not call Arnie.

At the funeral, Queenie arranged everything, while Chloe and her father sobbed together. Not long after, he drifted away. What lingered in Queenie’s mind was their mother’s voice thrusting with light in energetic bounds, while their father’s trailed away.

She had never told Chloe of her childish resolve never to trust a man. She’d caught Chloe staring at her Arnie, who was ‘undeniably sexy’; Chloe said she could not understand why Queenie didn’t ‘snap him up’.

Queenie was at her happiest when Arnie was coming to see her, not when he arrived. She congratulated herself on her distant love, hugging herself in her big bed, waking happily and neatly from dreams of warmth and desire.

Arnie was sentimental, with a wallet full of reassurance. He lived on his boat in the Hawkesbury. He'd taken over Chloe's other dog, Bosun, which had fallen in the river twice. 'You put your house in order. I'll put my boat in order' he'd said to Chloe, in the way of plans for the future.

Money flowed from him to her and through their lives in a golden river. He didn't pay Queenie's mortgage, but he was paying rent on the old house next door to Queenie's. The idea was to settle Chloe and her baby there, giving her a base, with Queenie to keep an eye on her. Chloe was as tense and brilliant as a hummingbird.

'She's really very clever, Arnie,' Queenie had reassured him. 'Just needs someone to look after her'.

Back at Queenie's house, she made her sister a meal but, halfway through, Chloe was up at the window lighting a cigarette, tapping her foot.

'Tomorrow. Mine's coming tomorrow!'

'What's his name?'

'Tack. Don't you think that's cute!'; She waltzed around the room.

The afternoon sun shone on the blank television screen, giving the tied-up baby his reflection. He waved his bottle and nodded backwards and forwards, absorbed. He wondered how he'd got on television. Perhaps you have to switch it on or maybe you have to switch it off, he pondered.

Later that night, the gate to Chloe's house next door pulled at Queenie's arm as it leaned on one hinge. No male coming through that gate had ever fixed it, including the baby's father. Paint was stacked outside, with rusting lids. She picked her way through dusty geraniums to the half-open door.

Chloe was trying out lipsticks, a pink cocktail in one hand.

'I met him at this party, and, sis, I didn't know it could be like that…'

The baby, tied to the blue highchair in Chloe's kitchen, was staring through the window at an enormous moon. He was thinking, sometimes the moon covers the trees and sometimes the trees cover the moon. 'Unnnnh,'; he said.

Queenie asked Chloe if her baby had been changed. She shook her head, swigging her drink. Queenie untied the baby, changed him and put him to bed, replacing the pink dummy. She tied the bedroom door handle with rope.

The baby lay, comparing moving triangles of light cast through a prism in the window by headlights of passing cars, wondering at the bright blue at the edges and why it was only on one side of the triangles. 'Smmmm,' he said in the dark.

The girl's road usually stretched emptily to the hilly horizon, so mid-morning noises sent Queenie to her window. A ramshackle car shuddered to a halt outside Chloe's house, the radio emitting a thudding sound. Lass gave a few desultory barks, rattling her chain, then lay down, growling softly. Queenie fetched a coffee and watched, running a finger along the windowsill for dust.

A man with hairy, slightly bowed legs jumped out of the car and kicked it. He stood, lighting up a cigarette - no, two - and held one in each hand, puffing at them alternately with short, angry pulls. The sun glinted on his gold watch, rings and grease on his thick black hair. His singlet was a startling white. His brief, shiny shorts puffed out in a frill. Chloe hurried out and stood in an attitude of submission. He barked something at her and she scurried inside, returning with a beer, which he directed her to open and put down.

Moments later, Chloe stepped over the fence with the baby. She put a lukewarm bottle of milk and a half-eaten cake on the table. Queenie watched her sister's dancing eyes and red, persuasive mouth with a weak feeling. Chloe fluffed her multicoloured curls. Queenie remembered with a pang, little Chloe, running up to her with a bunch of wildflowers, thrusting them into her hand. The stems were warm and she squirmed with the memory of her

childish unbearable rush of love and protection for her small sister.

Chloe giggled, Just for tonight, sis, you're a doll,'; rolling her eyes in mock ecstasy,

The baby silently observed the large person go. Her head looked much larger and fluffier, he thought. He wondered if she was outside when she was gone and

listened intently, staring at the door...annnnynnnynnn?'; he murmured.

Queenie tied the baby into its highchair, putting the food and drink in front of it. Lass eyed the baby and food through the glass door panel, cocking a leg to scratch its belly, its chain rattling.

Queenie discussed Chloe with Arnie on the phone.

'This Tack is the worst one yet, wait till you see him,' she groaned, sharing her worry for once…

'I suppose she's wearing that really short skirt,' Arnie chuckled.

There was a pause.

'Are you driving up on Wednesday?'

'Well, the boat goes on the slips.'

'Oh, Arnie!'

Queenie slept well that night in her white bedroom, the baby undemanding in the spare cot, the door handle firmly roped. The next morning, she changed and washed him, silently roped him in, and ironed the ends of her white towels. She steeled herself to talk to Tack. She didn't expect Chloe round that day and, sure enough, she didn't come. Queenie saw nothing of either of them, not even hairy legs protruding from the car.

Once, Chloe had handed the baby to Queenie, saying, 'I can't be looking after this now can I, sis?' disappearing for two weeks.

Four days later, walking Lass back from the corner shop she saw Chloe standing by the car. The hairy legs were on the verge.

A voice said, ‘Fetch! Fetch!’

Lass halted in surprise, yellow tail out stiffly.

‘Gertcha!’

Chloe caught sight of her approaching and giggled, head on one side, hands pressed together, arms straight. Her blouse was off-shoulder, curls tumbling in the gusty wind. She ran indoors, coming out with a beer and packet of cigarettes, placing them on the verge near the legs.

‘Back! Back!’

Chloe ran inside. Tack swivelled out, looked Queenie up and down with a look of amused cunning and contempt, took a swig, grunted, then rolled back under the car.

Queenie felt a lurch in her stomach. She felt she could hardly talk to the legs, so she went home.

It was Wednesday. Queenie had account reconciliations to be finished for work.

She phoned Arnie but there was no answer. She cleaned the house and scrubbed the high chair - white showed every mark. She didn’t want the baby there, she wanted everything perfect. Arnie had only seen the baby once, giggling in his bath. She wanted to catch up with her work, then make a fuss of Arnie.

The baby was roped in its highchair in her kitchen. The sun fell across one of his hands, which was pink. The other was blue. The kitchen was even colder than the garden. He regarded his two hands with interest. *Cold*, he thought, *cold*. He patted his highchair tray. My hand is colder than the tray, he thought. ‘*Gaah*,’ he said, to the empty room.

Queenie took the baby round to her sister’s house. The door was open, but she couldn’t find anyone. She filled the baby’s bottle, tied him to his blue highchair, put the bottle in front of him and left.

A butterfly drifted in through the doorway and fluttered lazily about, settling on a mirror,

opening and closing its wings. The baby watched, his mouth a pink star at the flashes of colour.

The man came into the room. He stared at the baby. The baby chuckled at the butterfly.

The man stood in front of the baby and pulled a face.

‘Who yer laughing at, ankle-biter?’; He grabbed the tray of the highchair and rocked it to and fro.

The baby laughed. He rocked it more vigorously. The baby’s eyes rolled up as he was tilted back, his tiny arms flailing. He started hiccupping.

There was the sound of high heels tapping. Chloe came in carrying a box of beer.

Tack walked away from the highchair.

‘Oh no!’ Chloe groaned, seeing the baby.

‘You haven’t finished yet, Chloe. More stuff. Fetch, fetch! ‘Tack shook a finger in the baby’s face. ‘I don’t want no cheek from you, understand - no racket?’

The baby stared at him. He was perfectly imaged in each pupil. The baby held his breath.

Returning from work, Queenie heard booing and whistling from TV sports. She sighed.

There didn’t seem a good moment to go and talk to the new man. She was secretly glad.

A clanking noise took her to her side window. Chloe was dragging a ladder to the side of her house with difficulty, as she was wearing her red high-heeled shoes. Tack emerged, waving his arms, shouting over the TV noise.

Chloe put the legs of the ladder in the geraniums and pulled it up, nearly losing her balance as it swung out wildly. Queenie waited for Tack to help her. He rattled the ladder against the rusty guttering. ladder against the rusty guttering. Chloe appeared to be pleading with him.

Queenie watched open-mouthed as he angrily waved Chloe up onto the first rung. She hesitantly climbed, clinging to the sides. Reaching the guttering, she put one long leg out sideways, hooked over one red high heel and started sobbing. She turned and called

something to Tack, who put his oiled black head down and waved his hands high in the air. Queenie stood paralysed.

Arnie rang, and she blurted out what was happening.

‘I’m there!’ he, shouting, slamming the phone down.

Queenie saw Chloe had crawled on hands and knees up to the bulbous orange chimney stack and wrapped her arms and legs around it. Tack ran out shouting something, pointing dramatically to the right. Chloe did not respond. He shouted again, with so much effort, the top of his body was bent parallel to the ground. He smacked a fist into the palm of the other hand.

Chloe reached out one shaking hand to change the angle of the TV aerial, which was fixed to the chimney. The man ran inside and then ran out again, gesticulating to her to move it more. This happened several times until Tack appeared satisfied. He then disappeared indoors. The sports relay became even louder.

The cheers and boos continued.

Queenie stood indecisively by the window, glancing at her watch, wondering how long Arnie would be. It began to rain. Her eye was caught by raindrops on the glass, uneven shapes, hanging, trembling, streaking diagonally across the pane. There are so many rules for rain, she thought. She couldn’t go and confront someone she hadn’t even met in her sister’s house. She couldn’t climb up and rescue Chloe because her sister was taller and heavier than she was.

Chloe’s short leather skirt gave no protection from the wind, which was what the locals called a ‘cheating wind’ - too lazy to go round you, it went through you.

Her legs were locked around the chimney, the red shoes sticking out either side. Her multicoloured curls blew sideways, her face buried in a bare shoulder. The setting sun glinted on her gold bracelets.

Queenie made tea, glancing at her watch repeatedly while the kettle boiled. She made a hot, well-sugared cup, in her best bone China. Where was Arnie? How long would the match last? Perhaps then Tack would rescue her sister? Queenie was shaking.

It was twenty minutes before she heard Arnie's car and Bosun barking at Lass.

She ran to her front door. Arnie jumped out, let Bosun loose and, without a glance at Queenie strode into her sister's house. The TV fell silent. Some shouts and the sound of blows followed and what sounded like furniture breaking. Another silence. Tack appeared, running down the path to his car in a lopsided way, nursing the side of his head, his half-open bag spilling its contents. Miraculously, the car started at the first try and he sped off down the road in a spurt of dust. Arnie climbed steadily up the ladder and onto the roof. Chloe clutched him with first one arm, then another, uncrossing her legs and letting them trail behind her as he made his way down the roof and onto the top rung. He put her over his broad shoulders and started down the ladder. At the foot of it, he took off his coat and, wrapping it around her shoulders, picked her up and carried her inside.

Queenie hastily combed her hair, putting on lipstick with a shaking hand. She poured three teas and carefully carried them next door… Chloe's door was shut. She put down the tray and opened it.

'I've been frantic' she called, hurrying in.

Arnie was half-lying across the sofa, in front of an electric fire, with Chloe lying across him. Tears spiked her long, closed eyelashes. There was a bruise on her cheek and a smear of black down one arm. Her long legs lay across his lap, resting on the arm of the sofa. Her hand was in his unbuttoned shirt, her fingers intertwined in his dark chest hair. The baby was lying between them, holding its legs in the air and then dropping them, enjoying the feel of warm human skin. Arnie was holding the baby's hand.

Arnie held up a finger, and said, 'Sssssshh!'

‘It’s just that she needs me,’; Arnie said to Queenie several times, as he packed his things, cancelled the rent on the house next door and put Chloe and the baby in the car.

As he said it, she feared that it was true.

‘And whose idea was it to tie Henry up?’; he asked, glaring at Queenie as he patted Bosun goodbye.

‘Henry? Who’s Henry?’

‘The baby, of course, your nephew?’

Queenie was puzzled. Her mother had always tied them up as babies and it hadn’t done them any harm.

‘I should have fixed that gate a long time ago?’

Arnie had given a bright shining orange to Henry to play with. He was tickling him and blowing raspberries. Chloe had tied her hair back and washed off her make-up. Before they left, she bought a bunch of narcissus at the corner shop and offered them to her sister with downcast eyes. The stems were warm from her hands.

9. THE TAIL END

The world is full of feathers, falling. Drifting. Look away, they are lost. The downy kind never falls in a straight line, but drifts in a busy otherworld, unconcerned, undirected, each finding its own path.

A creased photo of me that someone took at a backyard barbecue seven years ago: I am now under the same tree in the shadows, waiting, watching and remembering. I'd gone there to get away from my father's voice. I didn't know anyone else.

I was holding bread moist with bright red slices of tomato. The tang of the glistening slices filled my mouth with juices. I wanted salt. There was this girl holding salt. As soon as I saw her face, there was only me and her. Brightness fell through the air. My Yuka. I held out the bread and she laughingly shook out too much salt. I took a bite, she laughed again at my red face and tears. That salty bite and tinkling laughter!

My father loved tomatoes, gold seeds spilling down his unshaven chin, waving hands around before getting his words out. He arrived with nothing, yet had everything, delighting in simple things. He took and gave with gusto, working three jobs for us.

My father's words were a running mantra for my sister and me: We gave you your life. We came here, to this country. A good country. We struggled. We bought this house. Look, son, what we have given you?

I love you, Papa!'

'Don't tell me you love me, show me?'

'How, Papa?'

'Just be the best.'

They didn't make me dux at school in the 80s, because I'm a wop, but they should have done. Everything I did had to be my best, even sweeping leaves. It was when I was pushing a

broom into a pile of dead leaves at the back of our house at Ballarat, that a red-bellied black snake shot out over my foot. My mother and sister grabbed sticks and stood by clutching their skirts. My father whirled a spade up and with a grunt chopped the snake in half. Before I knew it, I was up on our barbecue table, pale, trembling, hardly breathing. Me, the giant of the family although only fourteen. The table sagged and broke, tilting me into the dust. They looked away. A sickness entered the yard. My mother and sister lowered their eyes and went inside. I was trapped in that moment.

That night my bed creaked as my father lowered himself onto the end of it, saying, 'Domo, all we have to fear is fear itself'.

'Roosevelt', I mattered automatically. (My sister and I had to learn seven famous quotes every Thursday night).

He patted my arm patiently, but I was still seized in that moment, trapped in my phobia, like others who have irregular heartbeat, immobility, sweating palms, constricted throat, and panic attacks among other things. People say reassuringly about snakes, 'They have their place', or 'they don't want to hurt you', or 'they aren't slimy, you know'. You cannot answer them. Images seethe in your mind's eye. They look away, offended that you won't be reassured, you're on your own. 'So what? If a snake bites you, go to hospital'.

It's not the bite. I've had injuries from insects and playing sports and never caught my breath. Once I watched my foot dangling upside down at the end of my leg and just laughed.

Snakes are evil. You can't reason with a snake, barter, win time, or please it. There is no exchange except death for one of you. And what kind of creature silently waits, coldly hidden, with X-ray vision?

I became a lawyer, shot putter and chess player. I was successful. I bought the best Italian suits. I moved to Sydney and was determined to be happy.

I felt in control except lurking in my rich and shining world was the dread that I would be confronted by a snake again whilst someone was watching. Like a test. I tried combatting this fear, but it caught me in its headlights and I was petrified. Somebody said if you let your mind dwell on something like that it will happen to you. The fact that it was highly unlikely in the teeming city shows how unreasonable my fear was.

Yuka didn't try to reassure me.

'I'm not frightened of anything', I murmured into her feathery black hair, 'except I can't stand reptiles. I don't mind if they have legs, it's the slithering, the coiling -I can't quell the panic when they move in that S-shape - not that I wouldn't rescue you!'

She listened in her quiet, way and spoke of what little we understand. *The way of an eagle in the air, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship in the midst of the sea and the way of a man with a maid.*

How did she know that? She carried quiet like a mantel. Her personality was perfect for our two-bedroom apartment: greys, whites, creams, my orderly desk, laptop, artificially sweetened air.

We didn't discuss our parents; I knew Yuka's mother lived on the largest sugar cane farm just this side of the border between New South Wales and Queensland.

I did not take Yuka home. I sensed trouble.

'What about my grandchildren? I don't want to have to make a fuss of the dog! What is happening with this girl? Why aren't you bringing her?'

For a long time, they had thought I shared with another guy.

Strangers might not have thought us lovers, but I did love her truly, and she turned to me. Her light-winged eyebrows, the colour that washed her skin, her hair, which, when wet, struggled against my fingers, her cinnamon smell, gave me a deep contentment.

One afternoon, we walked through the snake house at Taronga Park Zoo, as my idea. Familiarity breeds contempt. I trod the mottled concrete, trying not to register the smell behind the warmed glass, to concentrate on Yuka's soft white coat and the hair falling slowly from her shoulders, floating downwards, but it was as though there was no glass between me and them, soulless eyes and flickering tongues sought out private folds of my limbs to tap into the reservoirs of my blood. Distended bellies of reptiles that hung slackly from dead branches or half-deceived the world in dark holes or piles of withered leaves, filled me with revulsion. A python fixed its eye on me emotionlessly, half engorging a mouse with luxurious slowness. The victim's soft, pink, open mouth and resigned eyes were also towards me, in silent appeal. My skin turned icy and waves of shuddering cursed up my legs. Gasping, I pushed through visitors, nearly knocking over a small boy, found a patch of friendly grass and vomited painfully.

It was a bad week. My father rang and in a monotonous voice said he had to return to his birthplace. It meant I had to go with him. I hurried to Ballarat and, seeing his grey face, ordered plane tickets, my mother and sister watching from the doorway.

Yuka looked long at me before I went. She held my suitcase while I tightened the strap. A buckle broke, whipping across both our wrists in a scarlet hairline and we kissed each other better. My sorrow became the dull weight of the case at the end of my arm. I told myself the sympathetic magic between Yuka and me was enough. I had trust. But you can pick up a feather and draw a bird around it, and claim your bird has flown.

'It is time for me to die, you know that', my father said conversationally, over coffee on the plane.

'Papa, don't say that', I choked.

'That's alright', he said mildly, ' just be with me. I hope someone will be with you for your time, to look in your eyes.' Well, my father didn't die alone. He died with all his memories. I couldn't die for him and I couldn't push away what I heard. He sank or sagged to the ground that he had fought over in WWll, under a twisted olive tree. His mouth a torn shape, he whispered to the partisans he had fought with, whom he had rarely spoken of to us. Their spilt blood was the core of his life. People die softly, not raising their voices. After all the screaming in that place, he now lay silently in the dust, staring at the hills, a few browning vine leaves whirling over his hand to vanish.

Going to Cyprus with my father was always my worst journey. And yet it was my best. Afterwards, I saw the world differently come on as a whole, with my existence in it so tiny it barely mattered. My fears drained away. Afterwards, I did not want to leave that place, drinking in that part of my father's life. I was caught in time. I walked around the little village, stroking sun-bleached walls and faded curtains, sniffing handfuls of wildflowers. I searched the dark craggy faces and unsmiling eyes of the villagers. I drank with them in deep silence. Listening to larks singing, I was lost in where I came from. I did not phone Yuka, and weeks went by.

At Ballarat, I organised the commemoration for my father, in what felt like a brightly lit stage set. My mother asked quietly if my father died in peace.

'Yes', I lied, his words were of you. He said he loved you and he wanted to be with you always.'

Or did I lie? After struggling so hard working on his land, to see it threatened, then taken, always such a hard life. Beginning again. Always working for his family, loving my mother. Now, he was at peace.

It was several weeks before I got back to our unit. It was deserted, except it was full of Yuka in different ways: everything was neat and tidy, clean, except for one black hair drifting on the balcony railing and a single small feather by the bed as if she had flown away. There was no note. I realised we had never kissed with tears.

My workmates took me to a Cypriot restaurant. Someone dumped slices of tomato on my plate, slapping me jovially on the back. I stared at the fat golden seeds, the pinkish juice edging onto my plate.

I heard my father: *Domo, win or lose in life - do you want to be at the tail end?*

I couldn't eat with the cowardly lump in my stupid throat. I left. I did not know Yuka's mother's address. There were no papers. Nothing. I dredged my memory. Ah - the largest sugar cane farm just this side of the border. I borrowed a four-wheeled drive truck and took more leave. Frowning faces were the last thing I remembered from Sydney. The metal of the old vehicle shone abreast of me, as nearing the border, I turned off, meandering along until I found a farm.

It was easy. What would be the biggest sugar cane farm around here?

Pale blue eyes turned slowly to the South. I had come too far. After grunted directions, I was being thrown violently around in the driver's seat on the tomato-red earth track, eyes slitted against a blazing blue sky. I would find Yuka's mother.

There was a machine shed. Converted. I waited for someone to call off the blue heeler-dogs. Nobody. I cautiously got out of the truck and the dogs put their heads down, still growling, but wagging their tails. The door was ajar. There were some very small sandals on the doorstep. The inside of the room was dark after the blaze of sunlight. Gingerly, I walked in. The dogs lost interest and wandered off. There was an old black phone and an address book. Yuka's address could be there. I stretched out a hand. Suddenly the hairs on my neck stood up and the backs of my legs went cold. Two dark eyes were watching me intently from a

shadowy corner. I turned my head slowly. Her features were immobile, black hair coiled on top of her head, brown caftan blending into the patterned tiles.

As a lawyer, I'm good with people. I asked her to see where I'd parked the truck, to see if it was alright. Within minutes I had told her I had become good friends with her daughter, had lost her phone number and thought I'd call in as I was in the area. My insteps sweated. My voice trembled. I glanced at her mottled hands and her eyes, dark and beady, not full of light like Yuka's. Her eyes never left mine

'So, where have you come from today, my son?'

'Er…Sydney. That is, yes, Sydney.'

'So far...?' She smiled slowly and her teeth were pointed at the sides.

The wooden walls of the machine shed and exposed beams were original. It was obviously a home. The windows were ill-matched.

'This is a very nice house. Not too lonely for you?'

Yuka's mother said, 'Oh, Jim he up road - only eight kilometres ...I make tea.'

‘Arigato gozaimasu’ he said.

'Ah, you speak Japanese?' She poured green tea.

The blue heelers wandered in nosed me, then stood in front of a wall hanging.

'Don't worry snakes get up behind.' The dogs were intent. I felt as calm as if she had said a butterfly had landed on the table next to our cups.

'You get snakes here?'

She nodded, smiling broadly. 'Many. That's why dogs.'

Of course they had snakes here. This was nearly Queensland. Hypnotised by her dark eyes, withheld the knowledge I sought, I listened to her accounts of snakes hanging from the rafters above me (they were green ones), black snakes on the veranda when she cooked chicken, brown snakes behind wall hangings and the mating of two enormous pythons the day before,

rearing up and smacking each other on the stable roof. Oblivious she chatted on and I nodded calmly.

Yuka's mother fetched an envelope, postmarked New Zealand. 'Maybe she phone you. Maybe she come see you.' She seemed very amused by something.

I muttered thanks, and backed out and gulping fresh air. I'd left the keys in the truck but they were gone. I searched the truck floor, patted my pockets and retraced my steps.

'No worries, please, I get towel.' Yuka's mother patted the single bed in a side room. Tomorrow Jim will come fix. You here, no worries.'

'Could I take your car?'

'Where to? No hotel long way... no diesel here... I need'.

I stared around the bedroom. My mind raced. The door didn't fit snugly, the Venetian blinds and windows were ill-fitting, the corners of the room were dark, old furniture piled with books clothes and papers. I waited for the rising panic but it didn't come.

As I walked to the washing line, wringing out my shirt, the garden shimmered so peacefully that I wondered at myself. I had not heard a plane or one vehicle the whole time I had been there. This was Shangri la. The next day, I did a few jobs for Yuka's mother, and walked indoors to a meal, whistling, pleasantly relaxed. I tried to find out why she lived in this place but the mother just smiled. The old bitch Bella came over to me a few times.

'Can she sleep on my bed? I love dogs.'

My room backed onto a rockery and was chilly in the dark, with cold that seeps from the bottom of rocks. With the door opened, it quickly filled with steamy air. I peered under the bed like a proverbial old maid, the dog looking on in amazement. Lying down, I hung over the end of the bed by foot. It was narrow lumpy and uncomfortable but the pillow was clean. I found an old paperback and tried to read it, holding it upside down for five minutes before I realised. Bella settled heavily on my calves with the foolish grin dogs retain for people like

me. A low-wattage bulb glowed from a fly-specked pink lampshade. There was a knock. Yuka's mother.

Bella yawned and panted, her curved yellow fangs a comforting sight.

'Mado o shimete kure-masenka?' I asked, pointing to the windows.

She nodded smiling. The windows could not be closed.

I turned the envelope with Yuka's address on it over and over. Clutching it like a talisman I drifted into sleep with the light on.

I had no means of telling what time it was when there was a faint *ping*! The light went out. I stiffened. I realised my eyes were open to their fullest I heard a *plop*! Bella growled softly. My hands icy, I fumbled for my torch. An arc of light leapt around the room. From the floor, over large golden eyes regarded me solemnly. It was a small iridescent green frog, eyes shining like new coins. I chuckled with relief and bent down to it. Its toes ended in small circles. I turned the frog slightly. I gently sat on the edge of the window and it leapt into the night. There was a flight of colour.

My father was right. Fear itself.

I slept soundly for the rest of the night, sensing a drift of cinnamon over the bed. When I strolled out to take my clean shirt from the line, there was a small figure standing beside my truck, waving my keys. My Yuka, laughing.

The creased photo of me seven years ago... shadowed from the same tree, I'm waiting watching remembering. I have the warm relaxed feeling of being surrounded by friends, but will never again hear my father's voice. Or whisper into Yuka's feathery hair.

I tried to capture her but she's too quick, not close, not far away, but sharing blood. I hold my breath in the dark and will, and will, and will a perfect warm-blooded her, but she retreats, chasing the shadows of her past, not rushing to fill my yawning needs. Bridges I throw

cannot reach her reality, whatever it is. Yet she's never far away. The road is still there where she was killed by a hit-and-run driver. It's just a road. It gives me no clues. I took her small hand to cross there many times. I thought I realised what I had.

My hands tremble. I watch and wait, a purpose to fulfil.

A small, sure-footed figure detaches itself from my crowd of friends, curving down the grassy bank, chasing a red ball. My Luke. His harsh black hair bobs towards me in the sunshine. He calls demandingly, 'Dada, dad, dad!' Brightness fills the air.

10. A CHANGE OF SCENE

If I were brave, I wouldn't take anything with me, she thought, but to travel light with youngsters?

'You're allowed one bag each,' she said to three mystified faces.

She'd heard Torpey, the poet, was taking groups camping.

‘What are drovers?’ she had asked her silent history class. 'Right, what are cowboys?’ ‘Miss! Miss! choose me!'

‘Don't you know your own history? Sidney Kidman had 150 cattle stations, and 160,000 square miles of grazing when he died. Started with nothing.'

A publisher had nodded his grey head at her proposal. Six weeks later she had an advance for a droving book.

They'd been in Australia a year when her husband died suddenly. Her father wanted them back in London. With her teaching position, they functioned, but it didn't feel as though it was working. As well, she had recurring thoughts she didn't know this country, she hadn't grasped its heartbeat-like living with a stranger. She remembered Torpey.

His phoned instructions were to take the train to Tarago, about 200 kilometres southwest of Sydney, meet him, drive to Braidwood, pick up the outfit. They'd follow travelling Stock Routes to Captains Flat. She told the publisher she would be interviewing drovers. She didn't know if she'd see any. She didn't care either way.

There were arguments as the boys packed. Ehrle, aged six, was red-faced when the others yanked his teddy from his bag, Lincoln, aged eight, had packed his late father's cologne, which spilt, At the pungent whiff she bit her lip til it bled, the eldest, Paul, complained she was crazy and he had exams. In the end, she shouted, ‘We're going! That's that. I'll hear no more! And Ehrle can take his bear, what's wrong with you!’

They had lace-up boots. Torpey had mentioned blankets. She took white pillowcases to pack clean clothes in. Remembering guiding days, she packed matches, torches, a groundsheet rope, towels, toilet rolls, soap and toothbrushes. It was September. They didn't need coats. What would a poet know about camping? she wondered, but it was September.

They sat on the train for twenty minutes, waiting for it to go. Climbing out, she couldn't believe her eyes. The front half had gone! Torpey would meet that half. 'Don't worry, it's a long trip,' she told the boys, 'we'll make up time'.

They didn't, arriving twenty minutes late at Tarago, a small, windswept station. As their train dwindled into the distance, a sign creaked. There was nobody in sight. No telephone. No cars. A ball of dried grass rolled down the empty road.

Paul fixed nobody her with a dark, accusing stare. 'This is one of those places where you get murdered.'

I'll walk for up to five minutes the other way, she thought, see if there's a shop with a phone

There was a shop. It was empty but there was a hum of voices coming from the Drovers Dog Hotel though. As she pushed open the heavy door, silence descended. She gulped. 'G'day Looking for Torpey train was late. Is there a phone?'

The barman froze in the middle of wiping a glass. The scene was like a still from a black and white western. Lines of sight shifted to her legs. She was wearing shorts. Nobody spoke. She repeated her question slowly. No response. She hurried back.

We'll catch the train back to Sydney, she said, as though was a ten-minute ride. Can't phone Torpey here.'

'Don't believe he even came,' muttered Paul.

She knew what he was thinking: first she brings us thirteen thousand miles, then Dad dies. As if that isn't enough, she has to catch a train to nowhere and drag us along.

They hung about the deserted platform. There was no timetable. Ehrle slept, his head warm against her shoulder. A train approached in the fading light, dreamlike, until they heard the clanking trucks. She ran and waved.

‘Mum, you can't stop a train.’ said Paul, aghast.

‘Just watch me.’

The driver's friendly face was surprised.

‘Sydney?' she shouted up.

He opened his cab and beckoned them in. Lincoln had found a cow's skull. She could see by his face he wasn't parting with it.

Finally, back in Sydney, she booked a hotel room. By morning, she had contacted Torpey (who had met the first half of the train then left), booked another ride to Tarago and arranged for Paul to stay with a friend. She, Ehrle and Lincoln boarded the train again. Each station they passed lightened her heart.

Torpey was small and agile with a rippling silvery beard that she kept glancing at as he crashed gears all the way to Braidwood.

'Who else is coming?' she ventured.

'Had cancellations. Last lot went home, didn't like my cooking. Usually have Hercules along Thought you had three youngsters…’

She explained, wondering about Hercules.

Just you two, then.' Torpey glanced back. His shirt was snowy, his trousers filthy. The boys were silent, round-eyed. Ehrle clutched his teddy like a talisman.

Lincoln pulled her sleeve. ‘Mum, do we have to do what he says?’

‘Yes, he's the camp boss,' she whispered.

When they pulled into Braidwood, they gaped at the curved roof of a bright yellow gypsy caravan, the real McCoy. A whistling Torpey unhitched, Blaze, a placid mare, from the slip rail. He backed her into the shafts of the old caravan.

They clambered up. The van moved. They giggled, clutching the sides. He handed her the reins del. 'Put your clobber inside.'

Torpey hitched Smokey, a grey, up to his buggy. A spare.

'Pitching camp this afternoon,' Torpey called, 'Shoeing Ginger later. Follow on.'

The top of the caravan door opened in halves. She perched against the bottom of the door, reigns in her slim hands. The boys hung out of the top half laughing, imitating kookaburras. Worker's cottages at the edge of Braidwood fell away. The sunlit open road stretched to the horizon.

'Do you up remember?' she asked. 'Toad - what was it? The open road, the dusty highway... The whole world before you ... a horizon that's always changing!'

Mole loved it but Ratty snorted and put his hands in his pockets,' Ehrle's grin at the familiar, showed the gap in his milk teeth.

'We'll have even more fun than in *Wind in the Willows*!!'

They left town without a backward glance.

Old mining equipment rusted at the mouths of mines in the wild, angular sandstone country. As their wheels turned off the road, her throat and stomach tightened with the uncertainty of leaving the known. The road became a gravely track, then an overgrown grassy one fringed by eucalypts with an understory of tenacious wildflowers, banksias and grevilleas. The sky was wide and blue. Honeyeaters crashed through twigs.

They pulled into a clearing. A big, rough-coated, square-bodied dog jumped from Torpey's buggy. Pepper had a wedge-shaped head, white ruff and strong jaws His brown eyes regarded them with a tolerant contempt.

She watched Torpey unhitch the horses, take them to drink at the creek. She unpacked, found firewood, started a fire. The boys dug a hole for waste; a kookaburra gliding down to watch them silently. A reassuring ring of white stones was already filled with ashes. Torpey returned with the billy full, grunting approval at her fire. He fashioned a tripod to hang the billy on. They drank from big tin mugs of sugary tea, with a hint of smoke in the taste. The boys smacked their lips, swiping at flies. The seeping warmth of sparking embers, replaced the heat of the day.

'How do you like your damper? Well done or past hope?'

'Who's Hercules, Torpey?'

'Who was Hercules, you might say.' His light green eyes were sad in his leathery face.

Someone to talk to. Nice change from the horses and Pepper. Not that I mind travelling alone.

He was abducted.

'What?' she was alarmed.

'Well, someone took him from his cage. All one and a half pounds of him. Rolls over when you say P.O.W. and talk- well. famous in bird circles. He dances and does acrobatics. He was so small out of his egg; I hand fed him every two hours.'

'Any clues?'

'Not so far. Just hope he's okay. Told the cops.'

'Well, you can't always choose who you travel with.'

Torpey knew the country like the back of his hand.

'Understanding begins somewhere, then you can share what you see,' he told her, pointing to a plunging pied currawong. 'Folk change when they come out with me for a spell. Don't know if it's the poetry, the bush or my cooking!'

'Lost anyone yet?'

'If folk get into trouble in the bush it's because of stupidity. Knew one man found dead by a tree. Boots on. Horse tied to the same tree. Horse would have led him to water.'

She felt Pepper's speculative gaze.

Pepper woke her that night, scratching himself against the van del door, *thump, thump, thump, thump!*

Hearing the patter of rain and ashes hissing, she fetched the bleached clothes off the bushes. skidding on an earthworm on the way. The ground sent messages through the soles of her feet - heavy dew, then heat. Back in her bunk, she drifted into sleep, smiling. In the morning, they would simply get up, break camp and move on. That was enough. From the first night, a deep restfulness soaked her limbs. Her body took on new rhythms, her blood flowing differently, her mind clear.

Usually, as she lay alone, her *thoughts flew like migrating birds to her previous life. That* which we fear has come upon us, she had read somewhere. *What did she fear now? What could be worse than what had happened?*

Torpey was a reassuring presence, quietly moving them through this unfamiliar country, reading calm words from other people's journeys under covering stars, squinting up at the sunny sky, picking a lemon gum leaf and rolling it between gnarled fingers for them to enjoy the scent. She watched him, wanting to belong like him.

'Engage a horse,' he said, putting his arms around Smokey's thick neck, his shoulder to the horse's shoulder.

She stroked the pale softness of gum trees with their harsh leaves. Through Torpey's eyes, there was a sense of peeling away layers, of seeing truthfully.

'Brush Ginger how Torpey does', Lincoln told Ehrle. They began copying his every move. They rumbled across flat earth empty of farmhouses, to clean horizons, with no sign of humans except fences and gates, their washing sloshing about in a bucket of soapy water slung under the cart. In wet areas, the gums grew loftily, forests thick with leaves. Where it was dry, widely spaced trees were wind-straggled, revealing fleeting shapes of kangaroos. One sunset, they saw platypus ringing a quiet creek. Torpey pointed out pilotbird and white-winged choughs. He quoted:

And thitherward the drover jogs through the lazy noon,

While hobble-chains and camp-ware are jingling a tune

The boys giggled at 'thitherward'.

'Who wrote that?' she asked.

'Henry *Lawthon'*, grinned Torpey.

A change of pace for our friend', Torpey kissed his fingertips to the sun and galloped away and back on Blaze, the mare tossing her head, snorting happily. The boys kicked their muddy legs in slippery, icy creek water, yelling and shouting, disturbing butterflies and frogs. Their skin grew darker. Their lips were blackberry stained. They glowed with life.

Perhaps the heart of a country is what you feel where you find food, shelter and water, she thought, tucking into rabbit stew. And what of her birth country, her father and uncles had fought for? Did she owe something? Should she return?'

'Always stay within Coo- ee, but get wood boys!'

'In a minute, Torpey, we're just playing What's for dinner?'

'Curried hobble strap if you don't get that wood quick smart before dark.'

'The damper, steamed mouth-wateringly. Field mushrooms sizzled with onions and slices of a big ham from the meat safe in Torpey's buggy.

'Don't let's go home', Ehrle said, cheeks bulging.

Enchanted with her new life, she walked with springy steps alongside the nodding Blaze. When Torpey took his leather apron to shoe the horses or repair tackle, she took on more tasks.'

'Worth ten men,' was Torpey's conclusion.

They met drovers and listened to them yarning around the fire about dogs and horses they had owned. One drover had a streak of white hair in his black beard, from a horse kick. Ehrle was absorbed in his throaty rumble of words. Pepper crouched ready as cattle snorted and stamped in the dusky air. Torpey volunteered, 'Dad was a drover. Originally from Wales. Hardly saw him but he always brought us back stuff-seedpods -joeys. Drank of course'.

'Wales?'

'Didn't want to come. No choice. No work. Not like some…'

Torpey, I...but I don't want to talk about me. This isn't supposed to be a backward journey.'

The last night, sprawled around the roaring logs; her blanket had three holes, perfect to hook fingers in and sit cross-legged under its tent. The boys watched Torpey closely as, with firelight in his eyes he tapped the billy with a spoon, a sure sign he would give them a poem.

The drover's friend who has seen his day,

And now was worthless and cast away

With a broken knee and a broken heart

To be flogged and starved in a hawker's cart.

'What happened?' asked Lincoln breathlessly. He had become attached to Smokey

'He bid for his old friend,' smiled Torpey.

And now he's wandering fat and sleek
On the Lucerne flats by the Homestead Creek;
I dare not ride him, for fear he'd fall,
But he does a journey to beat them all,
For though he scarcely a trot can raise,
He can take me back to the droving days

She gazed at the dark bush, the distant shoulders of hills, what made them magnificent was the way that she saw them. Her feelings. People create landscapes.
Did others along this way feel that too? The first bare feet, singing their story of belonging, lonely drovers, chewing tobacco after weevilly flour damper and rabbit stew, poor immigrants, re-reading tattered letters, burying children, battling on? She felt part of these people who somehow found time to leave poetry, wanting to share their happiness, sadness, longing and triumphs. Giant shadows spread from the spoked wheels. The boys lay deeply asleep, arms around each other. Ehrle had tiny beads of sweat on his forehead and Lincoln's eyelids fluttered in some dream as he smiled. Their chests rose and fell together.
Breathing in deeply the spicy gum scent she knew she would stay, adopt this land as her own, or be adopted. Her boys would have good lives here. She felt strong and calm, wanting the moment to go on and on.

11. A TIDE OF SOME EVENTS

The edge of the threepenny bit pressed into Ariel's hand, colder than snow. As she rounded the corner, overhung with holly and ivy, to the school bus stop, she saw their feet. Hopping, stamping, some of them had their father's old khaki socks over their shoes and socks. One whirled a jam tin with a lighted paper inside, against the leaden sky on the end of a hairy length of string and then warmed chapped hands around its blistering service.

She became aware of their over-attentive eyes.

'There she is!'

She was thrust against the holly prickles until she hit the wall and the breath was knocked from her body in a silver stream. Hands grabbed the rim of her hat and lifted high above her head so that the elastic bit into her chin. With a triumphant *thwack!* the hat hit her head. Three times they did it, and then banged her head with Snorey Morgan's, whom the nit nurse always picked on first, before the bus swung around the corner and she followed the jostling backs of ill-fitting coats inside. The light was golden, reflecting off chrome and glass, a warm haven for a while. She put the hat carefully beside her on the seat.

It was a velour hat, the kind worn by private schoolkids. For her mother, it was a symbol of the life she could never provide for their only daughter, *our precious Ariel*, as she had written on the fast-fading baby photo, a *studio photo* as her mother always remarked.

Her mother admired the sort of people who had studio photos taken, who sent their children to pay rent, who had shiny black telephones and whose husbands wore white collars. Each morning, during a silent ritual of putting on the velour hat, her mother sighed in a dreamy way, while adjusting it on Ariel's flat blonde hair. Ariel kissed her mother and wore the hat to the school bus stop, where she was attacked every morning.

She then considered her part of the bargain complete and tried her best to lose the hat. Unfortunately, it was well known among the scattered houses of Greatstone-on-Sea, where it was proof that Ariel did not belong as well as the only school in the area where she went unwilling each term day.

The hat was returned by a wide variety of people from an increasingly inventive variety of places, even one day by the dustman, who found it partially submerged under cauliflower stalks and cold ashes. Her mother cleaned it reverently.

The bus children relinquished their threepenny bits, except one who cried noisily and claimed he'd lost his. Their hands and pockets were then quite empty.

One morning, her mother had given her twelve farthings and the bus conductor had flung them to the furthest corner of the bus with a long skinny arm, insulted in his position by the tiny coins inscribed with wrens, the bus children watching avidly, large eyed.

She had told her stepfather at tea. He had considered the information while carefully scraping the crumbs of his cake within the inner circle of his plate. He had regarded her with his small grey eyes behind thick glasses, eyes behind which were many terrible real and imagined wrongs against which he had erected insecure defences.

After a while, he said triumphantly, 'legal tender. They are legal tender.'

His favourite saying was, 'it is as broad as it is long.'

At each school day's end, after the bus children had disappeared, Ariel ran freely down a windy avenue of sycamore trees, sometimes through whirling, gliding seed pods. At the end of the avenue was an orchard with apple tree branches overhanging a high wall.

She always ran and jumped to touch the branches, sometimes bare twigs, sometimes swelling buds, sometimes with lacy pink and white blossoms, sometimes with fat apples.

One night in a dream, Ariel ran and jumped for the apple tree branches. She ran and jumped and each time she floated a little so that the jump became slower and slower and then she

reached the branches and they were thick with downy leaves and delicious blossoms and crowds of red shining apples. Bees hummed amongst the riches and pollen spun in the air. She was exhilarated. She flew and hovered above the earth.

In the morning, she awoke to feel limitless possibilities stretching before her and caught her breath. She felt she had already left the Marsh. At breakfast, her stepfather glanced at her once or twice. She stood before the mirror over the sink and touched her lips dreamily. Her stepfather made a sound of alarm in his throat. Her mother stayed with him.

She crushed the velour hat into a school bag outside the gate. At the bus stop, the children stood back for her to get on the bus first. Her golden hair floated. The bus conductor winked at her.

Near the school gate was a crossroads. The sign lurched drunkenly, one arm pointing at the sky. Two young men were staring at a map under the signpost. They looked up and smiled at Ariel. She drew close.

'Which way is best to get here?' smiled one, pointing at their map. Ariel gazed at their sun-kissed bare legs, their wind-tousled fair hair, their clean, pressed shirts and shorts. One had a badge with a lizard embroidered on it. The other wore a badge with a mountain with snow. Their bulging backpacks had more badges and signs, none of which Ariel knew. She stood close to them and their map and breathed everything in.

The bus children watched open-mouthed from a slight distance as Ariel talked and laughed with the confident young men. The three turned together and walked to the next corner. Ariel and watched their disappearing backs, then she turned and swaggered back. To the watching bus children, it seemed that clouds of golden pollen sparked around her.

Ariel and her parents lived in a small bungalow that her grandfather had built. Along with other buildings it had been requisitioned in WWII for camouflage for PLUTO, a petrol sub

ocean line supplying fuel for the Normandy troops. It was returned postwar. Grandfather fretted away from his bare and charmless bungalow as he was deeply tied to it. Grandfather's father had been a smuggler. He belonged to the Owls, named after the calls they made to each other at night. When her grandfather died, she moved into the bungalow with her mother and stepfather. Ariel felt she knew every tuft of the Axminster carpet and every damp stain on the green walls and mission brown wainscotting. There was a great stretch of sandy beach where Ariel ran to, and stared at the horizon wondering how she could escape her quiet and kind existence.

Two years after leaving school, her eyes first locked with his through the glass net floats of amber, amethyst, and dirty blue, scattering magic-coloured shapes around the corner shop. Seagulls wheeled and screamed. He was inquiring about a local seamstress. Ariel shyly offered to show him to her aunt's house. He smiled at her crust of freckles and sturdy legs, the rough skirt blowing between. Her aunt had taught her sewing and she could cut and sew a garment like a professional. By the time they reached the next corner, Ariel had said she would sew for him and take him home instead. His eyes, used to distant horizons, gleamed with amusement at her eagerness and she mistook it for love, her eyes widening.

He was many voyages older, a ginger-eyed Welshman with freckles and one gold earring. His father had fled an impending coal mine explosion when his canary fluttered weakly on its cage floor. Helpless to save his three brothers, he had raised his raw eye sockets angrily to heaven, vowing never to set foot on land again, especially in England, where the coalmine owners lived. The son inherited his father's unease with the land.

As he and Ariel trudged across the frozen marsh to the beach, their toes numb, oyster catchers peeped noisily. He spoke of Australia, where the sun was hot enough to fry an egg, and a still small resolve grew in her heart and mind.

He came each day to row her out to his ship. By the week's end, she was lying in his bunk so that he had to climb over her. He kissed her in the lap, lap, lapping water. She thought she would never again feel alone.

'What kind of a girl goes to a sailor's ship with him?' sniffed her mother. 'Is he on the run or on the make?' Her stepfather was away on a sales trip. Baffled by Ariel's quiet determination, he had long ago stopped trying to influence her.

On board, a kitten, one tooth over its lower jaw, studied her and decided on collusion, thrusting its face into her leg in uninvited intimacy.

'Came on at Grimsby. Pretty grey, isn't she?'

Ariel stroked the kitten, keeping two fingers above its furry back, sensing its electricity and the kitten pushed and pushed.

He pointed out shifting sands, well-marked hazards, strong shallow water, the patterns of waves and currents. 'You can be twenty degrees off-course in no time. It's your choice. Be one hundred per cent alert or one of the wrecks dotted down there.' He jabbed at maps.

The night he gave her a moonstone, he stepped from the rowboat into coupling waves, phosphorus surging and hissing around his boots. He whisked handfuls of crackling seaweed overhead, so green pinpoints fled towards the starlight, then whirled her round and around roughing her nipples with his red beard.

Ariel was instantly anchored and deeply rooted in this man, drinking in tales from his salt-caked lips as he rocked with her and in her on the swinging water.

'Balance is the most important element in life', he told her. 'Folks think ships go through water, but they balance on it. We balance on the decks.'

In company, they stood silently together. Together, he murmured the word, or the sea murmured, ceaselessly rocking them, of places he'd seen and the ways he had found himself in them. She liked his ginger eyes which had the look of plunderers, but he did not plunder her, only entered gently as if seeking shelter.

'I just want to *look out* for you. I'm just glad your father isn't here to see it. No good will come of this, you mark my words,' her mother's voice floated above her.

He was as steady as a rock in all his adventuring. They were married on April the 1st, 'All Fools' Day,' the only couple at church, the priest quizzical. The church had a mooring ring on its wall from the sea was a mile inland. Her mother wore her usual hat. Ariel took her pillow from her bed and followed him across the rich grass, the clean sand, through the longshore drift and out to sea.

When tides ran high and they rode at anchor in some muddy thrill of a Bay, the moon pulling skeins of water around living huddles of land, she glimpsed mermaids, so full was her mind of his wonders.

'Oh, get along with you Ariel'.

She saw jagged rainbows of light as they sped through drizzling spray. He thought to call her on deck to see mackerel skies and shooting stars. He had an old engraving of a bear juggling with three knives, from his grandmother who had been in a circus.

'Can you imagine the patience?' he asked with great pride.

His charts were embellished with clouds of pouting cherub faces, barb-finned, goggle-eyed emerald flying fish. 'In those times, mappers were trained as artists. *SwwOwhyeee*, now

Hawaii, see the *Isle of Leopards* in the *New Hebrides.'* The Welsh in him made everything poetry.

On the way to Australia, he teased, 'Don't know why I brought you. Women are unlucky at sea.'

She didn't feel unlucky. Her world was complete in the snug cabin with its uncharted frontiers of love and celebration of stories and powerful secrets: just the two of them and the ship's kitten, who mirrored their moods.

'I'm having a whale of a time', she wrote to her mother but never posted the letter. The mother shook her head at her neighbour, 'No good will come of this, I'm telling you now.'

'They took some money and plenty of honey, wrapped up in a £5 note', she sang. 'What about pirates?' She prompted him.

'In the old days, pirates sent information to England to mappers. Some had charts dedicated to them.' Changing hemispheres, Ariel learned how basic principles of mapping never change: *you ask where am I on the earth's surface? How deep is the water under the boat?* He explained how they used to call out the depth as the lead hit the bottom.

She grasped his lifeline and felt contained, although he was as restless as the waves and was setting his own course.

Smilingly, she dreamed of cherub cloud faces, each face his face as a baby. Trumpets blew and her waist thickened. She drew his hand swiftly to her but saw at once that her lifeline had stopped. She was frightened. She loved him too much, and of course, the sea would claim him.

'Is the sea your mistress?' She had read that once. He laughed in his beard. She never asked about money. The sensations he drew her into were powerful enough. He liked that.

The mornings grew hotter, the fish larger. Smiling dolphins rippled around the prow. A hazy blue eucalyptus cloud enveloped the ship in scents from strange new forests on the looming land.

She stared at the ramshackle beach house near Byron Bay on the east coast. It was empty. He tucked a scarlet hibiscus flower behind her ear, laughing at her doleful, freckled face.

'This is our home. We are married for life. You do whatever you like here and I will like it.'

He nailed the engraving of the juggling bear to a wall.

The water was always too rough to land or embark in the stretch where this house was. They call it Dead Horse Beach, the locals informed her flatly, on account of the early Australian cedar getters building a wharf that collapsed. 'A bloody great dray horse lost its footing and went down in chains and harnessed to the load'. She looked unbelievingly at the bright bright blue serenity of the Bay.

On the Romney Marsh, she had surrounded herself with little mirrors to capture the weak sun rays and direct them onto her body. Here, her life was flooded with light, only darkened by the way he turned his head towards the sea.

'I cannot take you on this swing', he whispered, rubbing her belly reassuringly. The ship's kitten yawned and sat beside her, purring. He wore Ariel's dedication lightly. *'Que sera, sera'*, he sang, giving her a tattered bankbook and leaving on the top spring tide.

The pale, chaste mother-to-be stood on the front doorstep by a pomegranate tree drooping with fruit.

Far away, six months later, a rope looped around his feet and drew him from his ship, into misty green water. Knowing life and death mingle, like a river with the sea, he allowed himself to turn and turn, folding with a sigh in great, green, peaceful hills, rolling silently

down, his memories caught in fragments of the net at the sea's end, the tide sucking at his fingers.

'In the beach house, Ariel paused and turned from the long, green boarded windows, at a wrong kind of stillness. Rain-lashed ferns wriggled like turbulent seaweed. No birds sang. The house could have been moving silently underwater. In the luminous green light, the green shadows, she fancied his face at the window, one hand raised floating and fleeting, and placed her hand over her heart. The ship's cat, now grown, stared, in alarm.

At the news, she was beyond tears, her cries of despair snatched by the wind tossed away, touching neither sea nor land. She walked and walked the Bay, her eyes fixed on some twinkling light on the horizon a long time after it left. No message came in a ship's bottle. His spirit was hers to conjure at will. She whispered his statements: *early sea charts were drawn on the skin of an animal's neck. This made the shape of the map. The first maps only ran one way, too - no right or wrong way of orientation. You turned them around. His eyes danced around her.* She had had her escape.

She did not have the fare to leave that place. She sold her moonstone. She took in sewing. She died and went to hell and didn't know it and then her body took over her life, comforting her with the thought that this baby could be a replica of him. Her forehead now pebble smooth, she waited.

She laboured in the lush garden, uncovering something new each morning: tamarillos, Chinese gooseberries, kumquats, star fruit. A great tree covered with fruit and blossom was, according to the postman, a shaddock the oldest citrus tree known.

'Captain Shaddock discovered it in 1696, he said. It's a variety of Pamplemousse. The fruit, a cross between a grapefruit in an orange, gushed with sun-warmed juice. She filled the house with dishes of blossom, sometimes feeling bride-like. Neighbours came and went, their voices as light as sea spray. When her time came, she dreamed blissfully of floating in seven

waves, being drawn peacefully to each summit, each wave larger than the one before, until the top peak of a giant wave was reached, the water gushed and a hard-headed, soft body rolled hot and bloody against her thighs. Her questing eyes met an oblique stare. A pale trapezium of a face, slightly uneven ears, one nicked, triangular dark eyes and black tufts of hair. A tiny tongue tip between the lips. It was nothing like her Welsh seaman. It was his grandmother's face but she was not to know. She looked around in vain for her mother's familiar face. She wrote to her, and, after a long interval, received a perfectly knitted English wool jumper, by then far too small and too hot.

Kind neighbours brought fish. An old fisherman made a driftwood rocking cradle. They remarked to one another what a good mother she was. She washed and fed the baby; she sewed his clothes but gave him no name. He was like nobody she knew. He was a mannikin. The house was usually quiet except for the ship's cats' occasional meow and the ferns brushing windows like great, green paws.

The baby lay for hours gazing with his odd walnut-coloured eyes at the old engraving of the bear juggling three knives on the wall at the side of his cot, tongue tip between his lips.

He rocked in his driftwood cradle, hung on the branch of a lemon tree, the whites of his eyes above his irises as he caught the movement of the yellow globes, his short white legs kicking enthusiastically.

The postman brought a wooden walking toy, two joined circles on wheels that babies could lean on in a walking position and push from the inside. When he was one year old, the mannikin thought he was in the walker and came running to Ariel unaided. He stopped halfway in shock, realising he was unsupported and standing alone, wonder flashing across his face. He shouted triumphantly and sat down. Ariel picked him up and stood him on her sewing table, his slender white feet on her right hand, her left hand in the small of his back.

Gazing at her intently, he lifted his right leg slowly sideways, putting his arms above his head, a paper cut out from a Victorian theatre. His body was rock steady as though a thread was drawn through it, pulling it taut, his wet red mouth a crooked star.

He did not speak until he was two years old but blew between his tongue tip and top lip. One day, Ariel was sewing and he patted her finger. She said 'Thimble' absently and he repeated it perfectly. They both looked at each other in surprise. He said it again. 'Thimble'.

Still, she did not love him but treated him with absentminded kindness. Age six, he beckoned her to sit in the shade of a lemon on a patch of the coarse buffalo grass that grows in that part of the world. Reaching up into the shade of the tree he picked three lemons. He stood with his feet at ten to two and threw them up in the air, juggling them slowly and deliberately, tongue tip between his lips, flashing glances at his mother, treasuring her reluctant smile. He put the lemons down in a neat row and bowed.

Ariel boasted about this when she went to the shops. She was walking slower her body full of odd aches and pains, a legacy from the marsh mists, strange for a young woman. She wrote to her mother and explained. She thought her mother might come for a visit since her stepfather had died and she lived alone. She had come into some money left by a relative.

'The best thing to do', her mother wrote, is for me to take the boy and do my best for him. I can let the bungalow and move to London for a bit.

Thimble felt the sting of English air on his cheeks. The stares of his boarding schoolmates turned to jealous and admiring glances when they saw him in the gymnasium. He had perfect balance. The pointed toe, the curved instep, taut calf muscles, the beautifully proportioned white torso and elegant arms were one hundred per cent alert. He swung from the highest beams with nonchalance, swarmed up ropes and leaned out into space barely holding them.

Juggling was his first love. As he learned how books yield their secrets, he read about miraculous accomplishments, like a great Simpini, the only one known to have juggled with ten balls in the air simultaneously.

'He is as sharp as a needle', wrote Ariel's mother.

When Thimble's grandmother took him to London, he learned style.

'The same effect can be achieved by a juggler with three balls and a sense of style as with seven or eight balls, although the latter requires much more concentration and practise', he explained to his doting grandmother.

She leaned on her walking stick amazed at his dexterity in tossing and catching. As he grew, he acquired an air of mystery and dedication, always wearing black. The grandmother, with her fox-head walking stick, watched his talent closely. She wrote regularly to Ariel but barely mentioned his juggling. She was now paying for horse riding lessons so that Thimble could juggle blindfold while riding bareback. They both agreed he should attend a circus training school, where the ease that he took to the high wire was remarkable. He belonged with these people. He soon appeared in shows on a unicycle with bears.

One old bear, with most of her claws and teeth drawn, had survived by craft with cruel and clever human beings. When Thimble's well-groomed black hair and pale face danced before her small, cunning eyes, she found that there were no painful prods or shocks in working with him and responded warily. In the way of circus animals, she instinctively understood the insistence of his craft. He compelled her. He taught her to juggle with three knives. She slowly became attached to him and after one year would roll over for him to tickle her patchy stomach. When he left her too long alone, she made haunting, ragged cries.

In a different hemisphere, the broken-down beach house was almost the same. The roof sagged a little more, the floor sloped towards one corner. An old, one-eyed grey cat stalked

stiffly to a warmer patch of sunlight on the polished wooden floor. The fruit trees under Ariel's brown and careful hands were magnificent. Passion fruit hung in warm purple clusters outside the green windows. Inside hung seven dazzling glass net floats. Ariel had bought a second-hand coloured television.

She was on the veranda pulling down purple passion fruits, biting them, tearing them in half and sucking the golden seeds, when she spotted through the net floats a striking young man, dressed in black, on the flickering television screen. He had slim hips, dark hair and a pale face. The camera panned around hundreds of entranced faces, mouths opened, eyes transfixed.

She dropped the fruit and steadied herself against the window.

An old bear in a spangled cap ran onto the stage and juggled three knives, her eyes never leaving her master's face. She made a ragged bear sound and shambled off-stage to applause. Ariel was absorbed as the young man bounced three balls balanced on a two-man high, black triangle, dressed in black and silver, his intent face framed in flying shapes and bouncing, parallels, rectangles, squares, rhomboids, triangles, the balls flying back to his liquid fingers and flexible wrists. Three crystal balls appeared from nowhere. Special lighting effects brought out liquid shimmering pools of intense coloured light. As he waved his hands and wove them together, the crystal balls took on a life of their own, running gleaming and winking up and down his skin as though trying to escape, ferrets of light. The more than light balls tried to leave him but could not.

He juggled the crystal and the audience, flashing glances at them, balancing his movements with their incredulity, making them gasp as rivers of light flashed between his hands and up and down his arms. The well-muscled Thimble and his Kinetic Art.

'I want to be a child always', he had smiled as the Hollywood producer, who had found him on a street corner, had asked him why he was busking. 'To get to know my audience,' he smiled.

'And why a juggler?

He smiled again but he thought, *because her chance look of love to me was when I stood, my mouth a crooked star, one-legged on the palm of her hand and laughed with pure joy at my balance as a single being, more balanced and freshly balanced at that time than I ever will be again, amongst all the rest of us trying to balance on this unsteady world*.

Ariel caught through the window, through the fisherman's net floats, by the greenish glass from the screen, a flashing searching look for her reluctant smile that he treasured, and magically came back into her life.

12. BELLES, BOTTLES AND HEARTSTRINGS

I buried the wine Aunt Gabby gave me in a deep hole before leaving the shack. When I came back after three weeks, it was gone. Just goes to show the bush has eyes, not always friendly ones. I knew what Moonflower would say, that I was thirty and a loser, so I might as well go back to the city and regard her lovely face while she said it.

Walking to Gabby's cafe, I had picked a bunch of wattle. I shoved it in a vase and told her about the wine.

'Well, I'm no drinker, no harm done. It was in a big cave on the property when we came, years ago. I've been clearing it out bit by bit.'

'I don't know much about wine, but the labels look old.'

'Well you never know...' Gabby pushed an old copy of the local paper towards me.

It said '*The Hunter Valley Vignerons Association is offering a $25,000 reward for a bottle of wine harking back to the region's beginnings. The bottle in question is Mrs Habselig's Shiraz from the Irrawan vineyard, established in the 1860s.'*

'Some hopes. That's three lifetimes away.'

I sat on the cafe veranda. A kookaburra sailed in low. Tourists squawked, flapping menus. The bird grabbed a ham sliver from my plate. Tourists twittered as though Nureyev's white-tightened legs had landed in their theatre box.

'Don't feed the bloody bird', yelled Gabby, head out of the kitchen window, tea cloth over shoulder. I gave the Kookaburra the rest. It sat, food in its beak, motionless. I glanced at the window, but Gabby had given up and the bird knew.

I gave up too, wiped my hands on my shirt and went back to the city.

I'd gone to the shack to work on my novel. The idea when I left uni was to tell one, leave one, write one down, comfort the disturbed, disturb the comfortable. One of the reasons Moonflower and I rowed was that I gave up.

Words are spellbinding. Back at my computer, I looked up '*Habseligkeit'.* It was voted 'most beautiful German word' by some panel of judges. It means 'the blessedness of small possessions' - I suppose like a two-headed penny or a leg of mutton in a swag.
Moonflower, Gabby's daughter, is a high achiever. She says things like yesterday was the first day of the rest of your life and you mucked it up!
I was deeply and darkly possessed by her the first time I saw her.
'Moonflower! My name's Alyssa!'
She and Gabby stared at me with the same velvet eyes, pale skin and hair.
I persisted with Moonflower, which became Moo, leading to another row. We rowed often, but making up was sweet.
Back in the city, they waited for me in the corner of my room, leaning against the wall, throwing bizarre shadows: my stilts. Highlights, my business, where I cleaned chandeliers and inserted bulbs, paid bills and gave me a different perspective on life. My stilts were my crow's nest, suspended between heaven and earth.
I strapped them on and went round to the lawyers where Moonflower worked. I doffed an imaginary hat, glimpsing her startled eyes through the second-floor window as I leaned against it like a deranged stork. She has a lovely face. She waved the back of her wrist at me, turning to her keyboard. I mimed agony, but she put his shoulders up. The other girls were laughing.

When my life started, from a legal point of view, my mother signed me over to a foster mother. She had run out of enthusiasm, and I was brought up by 'the lady over the road' as she called Mrs Tom.

Mrs Tom and her husband were my real parents. Their running chatter warmed my whole body: *I'll wash the dishes* (*what a fuss*), *I'll clean the dunny* (*time enough!*). Mr Tom mopped the floor (*whatever for?),* scraped pots (*leave 'em soaking*). When he raised his eyes, she said, *'Who cuddle up to you on cold nights if I don't Mr Tom?'*

I learned everything they hid from me very well but felt no bitterness. They were my lost mother and the Archangel Gabriel rolled into one.

However, I suppose I felt the earth a dangerous place, and the sky, where I was told my mother was, being out of reach, it seemed sensible to hover between the two.

Flying was out of the question - I'd tried from the shed roof in my Batman outfit, emerging scratched and spluttering from the privet hedge. Elevation, suspension, were the trick. I threw myself on my bed, landing stomach first, exulting in my airborne feet. I walked on my hands. I swung from the hoist. The first time I crossed my room without touching the floor I grinned for an hour.

Early on, I knocked two holes in two tomato soup tins, tied in bits of string and wobbled about holding the ends. The string wore through and I fell across stones. Mrs Tom's expression changed from kindly concern at my yelling to alarm at the smears of red soup.

The next stilt attempt, with blocks of wood, resulted in another crash and bruising.

'Get off those!' yelled Mr Tom.

'That boy's got something in the top story, said Mrs Tom proudly. The postman, who was watching, asked if I was joining a circus.

You wouldn't believe it, but an uncle worked the elephants in a circus. He knew where I was, from my mother, and turned up occasionally, muttering with Mr Tom, staring up at the sky,

and then disappearing. We had the same dark red hair. Once, when I was eleven, I followed him. He half turned, waving me away, without speaking, but I stuck in there, boarding his bus, dodging traffic behind him. He reached the circus, with me trailing wordlessly behind. Afterwards, it was understood we'd go together, which we did a few times. He was strange. I saw him push lionesses out of the way in their narrow cage while sweeping it. They grumbled but stared away.

The circus folk were as warm to me as my uncle was odd.

He's only a ‘Chav’, they approved of uncle. (I know, being a writer that Chavo is a child, or son, in Romany - dash probably from the French word ‘*cheaus’*, an old French hunting term for fox cub).

My uncle muttered something and they looked at me with interest. Next one of the Hands tied me into stilts.

'Borrow thes', he chuckled. 'Best around four feet saves trouble with road signs. Also, you can reach down to shake hands with children.'

'Wow! Awesome!'

'Highest I've seen was at Cody's circus in England - ten feet. The Hand tied the stilts tightly, the top belts level with the tops of my calf muscles, with my knees bent. 'Lower it slips, higher it hurts'.

A small crowd gathered. Someone slung a rope between two trees. They hoisted me up.

'Rope under your arm, the Hand said, 'don't look down'. He told me that the trick is when you lift your foot you move it forward. When it comes down you put your weight on it.

Dizzy with new sensations, I could do it, so I kept doing it, hardly touching the rope. The crowd didn't speak. I tried balancing without moving.

'Won't work', called the Hand, 'keep stepping'.

I was hooked, but suddenly glimpsing my uncle's face, I stepped backwards, crossing the stilts crashing to the ground.

'Remember, Chav', my uncle pulled mud and grass out of my hair, 'if you're going to fall, go forwards'. It was the first time he had spoken to me directly.

While I sat swinging my legs under Mrs Tom's table, tearing at her bread with small, pointed teeth, she washed her coins, chink, chink, chink, chink. Flavoursome blue smoke from a cigar burning in an ashtray made her feel rich. She talked about everything under the sun. I tried to fathom whether she had an ancient mind with new things in, or a new mind with ancient things in. Anyway, she had a mind like a Swiss penknife. I would never have gotten to uni without her. In my second year, I had a call that Mrs Tom had been run over and killed. I hurried back in disbelief, although they both had white hair when they took me on. Mr Tom and I stood before a bunch of flowers tied to a telegraph pole, foil snapping in the light, all that was left of so much richness and love.

I visited Aunt Gabby, her niece.

Cleared her things out. Told Tommy he was welcome, then... I had to get back to the cafe, Gabby dabbed her eyes with a tea towel.

As I was leaving, I spotted Mrs Tom's cracked, black shoes, stuffed full of violets, spilling out happily.

Mr Tom was alone in the empty house. He had had an operation for cataracts (*A cow of a time!*) and could see straight ahead but not to drive - a pity, because he had a clean record for forty years. He had broken his leg earlier (*could have been worse, could have been the cow*) that was Mrs Tom - and rheumatism had set in.

I visited pretty often, but his heart wasn't in the place he only lasted three months. The doctor told me it was put down as a heart attack. 'Stress, cardiomyopathy - the result of a prolonged

rise in stress hormones, adrenaline and other' toxic chemicals, which temporarily stun the heart. Known as a broken heart.

They should have put that down on the report.

Moonflower and I helped Gabby clear out the house and after we'd given Mr Tom a good send-off, we went back to the cafe for a few days. Moonflower and I had a glorious time in the big cave.

I needed Moonflower now. I didn't want to a row. I wanted us to have what Mr and Mrs Tom had together. There were no wrinkles on their hearts.

When I had gone up to the cave, with promises of returning with a wonderful short story, Moonflower had waved happily until she was as small as the porcelain milkmaid that used to be on Mrs Tom's kitchen shelf. And here I was, returning empty-handed - with my wine stolen.

I was offered two weeks outside a city store, Red Nose Clown on stilts handing out balloons. It was good money. I got straight into it. The second day, as I shifted my weight from one stilt to the other, a clown in slow motion, one of the upturned faces in the crowd was Moonflower's.

'Why didn't you tell me you were back?' she seemed upset.

'Uh, well ... '

'No spare me. Come round tonight. I need to see you urgently.'

A few of the crowd seemed as interested in this shouted exchange as I was. Moonflower faced me in the kitchen, her eyes taking on that baffling secretive expression women can have, and she smiled.

'What?'

She held up outstretched fingers I looked at her closely. She was humming. 'You will have to raise that bar now', she smiled. Then her eyes darkened at my expression.

'You got promoted?' I asked innocently.

Sigh. 'We're going to have a child'.

'How come? We only got to Redfern, never right through to Central'.

Well, my feet hardly touched the ground. The door slammed and I was in the garden, my jacket swinging from the lower branch of a tree. I hammered on the door. She told me she never wanted to see me again. I staggered into the street column muttering Miss Piss'nVinegar, but the sun struck my hubcaps with a sizzling silver light. A child! I thought I'd go up to Gabby's and get my story in first.

I finished the clown job, collected the money and headed north. Gabby's cafe was busy, so I wandered down to the big cave. It was drawing me.

This is where it must have happened. The remains of our stifled fire were still there. Mountain climbers had suspended a large steel-framed hammock from the cave roof. It was known as the cradle. The rope was twenty feet long, so when you climbed in and swung, the arc was long and low back into the dim cave and out into the light, over the bush. That night, we'd climbed in a cradle, sides furling over us, leaflike. We'd picked blackberries before and I'd licked the purple stains around Moonflower's mouth. 'You were made for me to eat', I'd whispered.

We'd swung contentedly from cave dark into bush dusk, fire sparks spitting below and as we slowed and as the soft movement of air we made dropped, there was, without breathing out, the promise of a child.

I wrote Moonflower's name on the sand on the cave floor. You and me. Us, I murmured to it.

Gabby nodded at my news, not stopping her work. I suppose Moonflower had phoned her. I vaguely heard 'wakeup call' and 'money on the table every week' and 'lucky'. I asked if I could sleep in the cave overnight, saying rather lamely I was planning another novel.

Back in the city, at our local cake shop, the cake was remarkable, catching my eye immediately. It was a cheesecake the size of was small tumbler with this glistening strawberry on top, the fascination lying in its wrapping, a furled bag, with a tie, made of dark chocolate curling around the scarlet strawberry.

'I'll just take the one'.

'Someone special?'

'It's for... a girl'.

'Have you done something wicked, or has she done something marvellous?'

Well, both really. I told the shopgirl about Moonflower and how she really understood me and how marvellous she was and then I began, 'but what I really like about her', until the girl and the waiting queue lost interest and got restless.

I presented Moonflower with the cake, dropping down beside her and laying my head on her belly. I made solemn promises. She had the guarded look of someone listening to a foreign language.

She let me move in with her. The next few months were a dreamlike existence of working, money. I took every job offered. Moonflower kept working so I cooked and cleaned and shopped for us both as well. Gabby said she pay me cash for painting the cafe. I went up for three days, sleeping in the cave, making a fire as we had done before, watching the moon climbing out of the horizon.

The third night, making a hollow for my hips and head in the sand, I felt a piece of wood and tugged at it. It didn't budge and I dug around it with my pen knife. It was the corner of a narrow crate, splintery with age. There were three bottles inside, dark red. I turned one around. Sand had preserved it quite well. I read... *Habseligkeit*.

Well, I don't know much about wine, neither does Gabby, but we found an auctioneer and there was a lot of fuss eventuating in a lot of money, and Gabby's cafe drew coach loads of customers, but nothing the kookaburra couldn't handle.

Then, one May Day, I saw the pink perfect soles of our daughter's feet, and that was it. It was as though Moonflower and I had wandered off the road, into an amazing landscape, different every step of the way. Our daughter, Hope, is down in the yard tying tomato tins to her feet with bits of string as I look down from my desk now.

I got the editor's job I do now. I've had two novels published in America. A critic said,' I'm uplifting in an age of cynicism.'

13. THE PROPERTIES OF THINGS

The huge iron bath in enfolding trees and mossy banks was filled with stream water on which floated two thick planks. Handfuls of white wildflowers rotated on the water. Heated by glowing logs underneath, it was lit by candles placed in nooks and crannies flickering all around.

There was silence except for chuckles from Nangle and me as we lowered our limbs onto the planks and into the scented water. Nangle avoided getting his long waves of blonde hair wet. He insisted hair is self-cleaning. He was a da Vinci Angel. His mouth looked very red to me. We seemed a long way from our boarding house. We could have rolled down the moss, under the mussel shell sky, thrilling in the icy stream, plunging back into the bath, with its fire, kissing, twisting, biting, goading each other to the brink of madness, where enough was never enough until one muttered to the other, *you should be in a cage*... but we didn't. There was an innocence. The best thing about New Zealand is there are no cold-eyed snakes watching... if you want to roll about naked outside, you can. In fact, we splashed and laughed, crushing the petals, like children, then shyly groped for the big white towels which revealed a bottle of Cloudy Bay white - a cool bottle left by our hostess. Nangle kissed me and it was like me kissing my arm, but we had a deep sense of satisfaction as though we had been well fed. Back in the boarding house lounge, a pair of binoculars lay on an unopened book of bird identification. The book was covered with fine dust but the binocular lens gleamed. Lifting them at the same angle, I saw they were trained on the bath we had just left.

So that was that, and I returned to my temporary job of home visiting in Katoomba in the Blue Mountains. Each job was a question of doors. Approaching a closed door, you sought a

way to make it open - a bell, knocker, sometimes your knuckles. What lay behind that door was unknown. Usually, people were glad to see me, sometimes they were not.

I settled on visiting Claude every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. He had a broken arm. There was never much to do. He seemed to drink a lot of tea. There were always several used cups on the draining board. He indicated the rooms in his cottage where I was allowed - bedroom, kitchen, bathroom and laundry. There were two other doors he waved the spread fingers of his left hand at, looking away. Romeo, his dachshund, padded about with a lofty expression, front feet turned outwards. Unblinkingly, he regarded me as I brushed Claude's black hair, listening to him talking in a voice as quiet as a paintbrush stroke on rough canvas. I bathed Claude every visit, steadying him by his muscular arm as he lowered himself in with the silent snarl old men have, although he was only forty or so. *Occupant: one person*, my paperwork informed me.

One morning, I put the washing machine on and it started thumping on the wooden floor. Claude snored softly on, chin in the air as though waiting to be shaved. I turned the handle of one of the forbidden rooms and peered in. It was a studio - the blinds were down but I could make out rows of delicately illuminated manuscripts on benches and tables, some obviously in the drying periods following the application of fresh layers of colour or gold leaf. The levels of pattern and pen-flourishing in vivid inks, the glowing ornamentation, decorative letters, borders, frames and vignettes made me gasp. Worlds of Moorish ecstasy, legs of letters were platypus, cockatoos, wallabies or plant people, twirling vines disappearing and reappearing, mocking at my lack of ability to capture them. Faces peeped slyly from corners. The themes and symbols were all Australian: the skill, mediaeval.

I had been fascinated by illuminated manuscripts since an aunt gave me a copy of The Breviary of Saint Martin of Aragon for a birthday present. When studying mediaeval herbal healing, I came across Bartolomaeus Angelicus, (Bartholomew the Englishman), in a 15th-

century French series called ‘The Properties of Things’. What had attracted me to Nangle was that his face was the same as Bartholomew's - pale, a pointed chin with long blonde wavy hair and innocent eyes. Our gaze had met in a bookshop - my stomach tightened at the scene. I remembered how we intertwined fingers walking back across the moss. I wanted him to see me, but how could that happen, after that bath that could have led to so much but didn't.

I thought I heard a sound and humbly left the room. Can claw draw with his left hand, I pondered.

'Is that you, Anna?' he called peevishly, 'I need my bath'.

Romeo waddled out regarding me as though I was a very poor candidate for a position. The dog scratched and padded around the place and pushed his dish across the kitchen floor, but otherwise, it was so quiet you could hear the wind soughing in the firs.

Claude stretched out in the warm water, his quiet sigh filling the room.

'Have you lived in Katoomba all your life, Claude?'

He nodded, grey eyes resigned to my nursing, supporting his plastered arm above the cooling greying water.

'What do you do?'

'Design'.

I stopped soaping his toes and sat back on my heels, staring at him. His eyebrows were raised, his mouth puckered, his eyes sly, defying me to ask more questions.

The cottage next to Claude's became available for rent, which was good because my bicycle needed fixing and my next client was nearby. It was also cheap because there was no heating and it was partly furnished which people don't like. The estate agent was visibly surprised when I said I take it for six months. The words *conveniently central* hung in the damp air between us but it wasn't central at all. There were three cottages, of which mine was the end one, on a dirt track dwindling into the bush. I dragged a lumpy old mattress out to the gate

and dumped it in the wintry air. To my astonishment, a woman appeared immediately and asked if she could have it. She said it was better than the one she had.

I saw Nangle a few times in Katoomba on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I caught my breath at the sight of him. Twice he waved calmly and I felt my skin tingling. Once, I felt he was studying me. It was two weeks since we had gone to New Zealand on impulse, not knowing anything about each other, playing at being mysterious. I had decided he wasn't attracted to me. After all, I was thirty-something. He seemed younger. When I wasn't at Claude's or shopping briefly, I slept. Partly because it was cold and damp and dark early, I curled up in woolly socks under my dinner and folded my hands and slept and slept and slept. I wasn't tired. I sought the endlessness of sleep and after a long dreamless spell, had the satisfaction of winning. Sleep was positive, sleep was peace. I felt the more I could sleep in my life, the better but I was never late for Claude. One Friday, Claude sat as still as an angel on a church window while I brushed his hair and shaved him. I glanced at the last door I had not opened. Claude talked and talked, his voice painting a picture I had no comprehension of. And Nangle had seen me at the shops and smiled the day before.

I began telling Claude about it, keeping my voice as low as his.

He immediately burst out, 'You haven't been listening to a word I've been saying have you!'

'Claude, you are an artist aren't you - won't you show me what you draw?'

'I draw on life', he grunted. By late evening, Claude was tucked up in a clean bed, half an empty bottle of port beside him, the light from his television flickering across his face. Romeo had condescended to lie on his feet. I cleaned up in the kitchen and went back to check on him. He was deeply asleep. Romeo was now at that door, nose to the slight gap at the bottom. I turned the handle. The whole room was flooded with early moonlight, which flowed through the window over the floor, covering the bed. There was a slight movement

and a pale hand moved on the coverlet. I made out an elderly lady, propped up, silvery hair rippling across her shoulders. Whether she was awake or not, I couldn't tell. I silently withdrew. Romeo stared at me with his dark speculative eyes and down-turned mouth.

The evenings began to get lighter. Snowdrops sprang up, dangling gracefully along my cottage path, brushing my ankles. I stopped sleeping so much and read some old novels left in the cottage. I needed a fire. I had money for it but perversely felt I shouldn't have one. I had to learn to live without passion. I had to learn to accept being cold.

Broken arms don't take forever to mend. I knew the health authorities would be ending my daycare of Claude. My curiosity made me take the bull by the horns. 'Claude, you always struck me as a very interesting person'.

He glanced at me sharply. Strange how you can wash somebody's bare limbs and yet feel their mystery - a kind of intimate alienation between us.

'Shall I tell you how I came to be here?' I cajoled.

Claude pursed his lips. 'We're out of port'.

'Don't you have to be careful with alcohol? Keep your hand steady?' I stared into his grey eyes.

'Being snoopy', he accused in his gravelly voice. 'Knew it'.

'Claude, come on, I buy port for you and that's not part of my job'.

There was a noise like a stick falling on a flower on the floorboards. Romeo looked up sharply.

'Why don't you want anyone to know that you're looking after your mother here?'

'Mother! She’s, my wife!’

Back at my cottage, sweeping the path, my mind raced furiously over the sight of that aged lady, in that moonlit room. I knew from university about Hutchinson-Gilford Progeria

syndrome, which causes the body to age at a rate ten times faster than normal. It's so rare that only one in eight million children have it. But he wouldn't have married her when she was a child. He was strong, a relatively young muscular man and she was old, old, old. Why? I went and regarded myself naked in the spotted mirror in the bathroom: a small lump on my shin from falling off a horse, long fingers, flat stomach unmarked by childbirth, small white breasts with large round brownish nipples. A mass of tangled red hair - 'fresh fire coals', Nangle had quoted, almost touching my eyebrows with his long fingers. How did I look? My green eyes stared back at me unhelpfully. I twisted my hair up in a knot and suddenly, in the soft light felt quite beautiful. I threw a robe on and cut some snowdrops. There was a dress I liked -yes, there it was, an old rose-coloured one with a frill around the skirt. I went shopping with my hair up, my skirt swinging around my bare legs and feet.

Nangle seemed to appear instantly and we walked off to have coffee together 'It's just about spring', he smiled,' and you look all about spring'.

'Are you still working in the bookshop?'

'I've never worked in a bookshop. Sometimes help out - my cousin owns it.'

I felt a twinge of annoyance. I had avoided going there and I had finished all the books left in the cottage long ago.

It was my last day working at Claude's place. Opening the front door, I immediately felt something in the air. Romeo strutted importantly to the second studio door, which was half opened. The lady with the pale hand was pressing gold leaf onto a letter M with a tiny tool. Her rippling white hair was coiled like a Florentine bun. In the clean sunlight, she was almost transparent, her frail body shadowy under a flowery dress. She turned and stared at me with large silvery eyes. It was like being looked at by a wild creature.

Claude whispered confidentially, 'I've bathed and shaved - I must be better! you might as well have the rest of the day off - there is one thing - we need a piece of wood to elevate these. He

gestured to a row of richly delightful drawings. He gave me the address of a carpenter on the outskirts of Katoomba.

The carpenter's shop was up a ladder, so I had different levels of view as I climbed up. The first sense was the sweet rich savour of sawdust - cedar and spotted gum. Peering through the clean blonde-coloured shavings, I saw Nangle's pointed face and we laughed out loud. He was planning a piece of silky oak with his long fingers. I watched him with a half-smile, my eyes large, heart pounding, revelling in the scent of him and his surroundings.

A bellbird called as we walked into the eucalypt forest. Near the fragrant rotten growth of the valley floor, insects hummed and whirred. The mist was lingering and the tops of the trees had melted. The mist floated in veils. Small furry blue and yellow fungi glowed sweetly from tangled roots. Nangle put down the piece of wood for Claude. 'I thought you didn't...', I began awkwardly before I trembled under that red mouth.

'You look so tired and lost. There is a right time for everything...'

Birds cracked seeds like pistol shots and fragments plummeted through the great branches, peppering our lifted arms.

'Breathe on me...'

My breath was silvery vapour in the air.

'You are real then...'

I remember a drop of moisture sliding down a satin twig. It hung trembling, slowly falling through the air to bounce on a red leaf. I didn't even think about snakes.

Later, Claude came over as I was locking up the cottage. He flexed his arm, thanking me. I was noncommittal but still dying of curiosity. Romeo poked his head through the snowdrops and we looked down at him while he wagged his ridiculous tail.

'I have something to ask - please don't mention...', he glanced towards his cottage - please, please don't say anything to anybody. I met her in Prague you have no idea what she... I send

her work back there. She's terrified of them knowing where she is but she is still the best in her field. I've never even glanced at anyone else but my Ceska. I don't care how old she is or what has happened to her - I know it was communist police - terrible, terrible things. She has never had papers - I love her or die - but we've been together now so long it's become 'I love her and die...'

I've read about the monotony of bliss but I know it now it's a ridiculous notion. I phoned my boss and promised I'd be back on duty in three weeks. I had to take that six-month break and luckily he was understanding. On call for two years nonstop - well I would have told anyone they'd be mad to do it but I didn't and I had woken up one morning shaking, unable to stop.

It was when the Japanese businessman sliced off two toes with his rotary blade mower on a wet grassy slope and I was nearby and stopped the haemorrhage. I saved him, nursed him, then helped him regain his balance. Afterwards, the whole family filed into my surgery to thank me, bobbing, and bowing, looking so doleful, then smiling. If they had been matter of fact I would have continued listening, writing scripts, encouraging - but they kept thanking me, over and over and I didn't know whether to smile or bob my head and somehow it all stopped making sense.

I wasn't strong enough to go on a cruise or face other people. It was good in Katoomba. Nangle? Yes, we're together. What did Claude say? - love one another or die or *love one another and die*. In a dangerous world, the smallest variation in the properties of things can mean the difference between life and death.

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14. CONTROL Z

Dear Cousin,

We have rain and I have lit the paraffin lamp, although it's still afternoon, as it is so dark in here. The dogs have hardly moved for hours. The rain thunders and drums on the tin roof and there are three leaks. I don't worry about the leaks. They soon dry up. Usually, everything is as dry as a dead dingo's donger, as the vet says. You will probably be surprised to get a letter from me after all this time. I could not believe that you were still at the same address after all these years, and I've been turning it over in my mind. I do have a phone but I can't ring out, only receive calls. That way it's free. Especially since I couldn't ring you on an overseas call.

But I do think about you. I have fond memories of your mother. After the bombing raids, she kept me with her for a long time. You were so young then; you probably don't remember. As we lived on the same road, you had spent a lot of time at our house before the bombings. Your mother got me a free passage to Australia. She hugged me and said I needed to get away. I travelled with 20 orphans from Barnardo’s, going out to Sydney for a better life. They were supposed to be orphans, but several talked about their mothers, which was very sad. I kept in touch with all of them for a long time. They were all OK. I was supposed to go back to Norfolk a week after I reached Australia. That's why I didn't take Pip's photo. Your mother loved Pip too. His photo was safe with her. Then one thing led to another. I met your uncle on the boat and we drifted around, getting farther and farther away from the cities.

I have an old tower pc that someone gave me but I really don't understand how to fix it. Maybe water got into it. It worked for a while. I would love to be able to find things out and

write things down. My writing is so crabbed now with my crooked fingers. A woman told me that if you lose a page, you can hit Control Z and you get it all back again. If life was like that, I could bring back the boys, Stephen and Jim, Alf and Joe and Curly. All of them back and laughing loudly at some joke. Dancing. Especially Pip. It was the time I felt most alive, being in the crowd and laughing with them. Especially Pip.

The iron smell of the rain is good, and the sizzle on the ground. I wonder about the worms. They will be deep under the ground in the dark and they will hear the rain drumming above them.

When I used to do paper rounds on my bike, down our road, at first light, after rain there'd be worms run over, lying stranded in pink ribbons on the road and drowning in gutters and puddles. I used to slip a soft leaf under them or a long piece of grass, wriggle it gently and flip them onto the earth. There were times when I was in a hurry and tried not to see them, but I had to look because my bicycle wheel would run over them. If I spotted one, I'd have to turn back - and then there would be more to rescue. I'd be late for my paper round, with no excuse to offer. Once I rescued so many, I put them in a bucket with some water. They got quite sexy and frothed up. Then I put them on the richest earth I could find.

I always wondered why they ventured onto the bitumen. Charles Darwin said in a book he wrote on worms: 'It has often been said that if the ground is beaten or otherwise made to tremble, worms believe that they are pursued by a mole and leave their burrows.' Maybe the worms think the pounding of the rain is a mole coming. Maybe they can't breathe in waterlogged earth, as they breathe through their skin.

Where my place is at Somewhere Else, at the back of Broken Hill, population 445, it's dry, dry, dry. And red. Sometimes the sky's red too. Hard for you to imagine over in the greenness of King's Lynn. I must be the farthest away from Pip's photo that I could be.
I had to move here, on the outskirts of town, the only place with a bit of acreage for my animals that I could afford. I don't waste anything. My hot water bottle had a hole in it and I use it as a kneeler when I'm planting out. It took me a week to think of that. I had a tin bucket with a rusty hole and guess what, upside down it forced the rhubarb! I found a five-dollar note on the road last year, miles from anywhere. I gave it to the vet.

I was so surprised to get a reply from you. I read it so many times, then folded it up, then unfolded it and read it again. It was at the Post Office in town for a couple of weeks before people told me it was there. They were all talking about the stamp. I don't get into town much. I have a dress and wear shoes instead of boots, which I need for the snakes here. I wash carefully. My long hair is grey now, not blonde, but still has a nice wave. I tie my hair back. I used to wear a hat, but I pinned it to my dress once, when my arms were too sore to reach up to the hook, then forgot it. I wore the dress to town with the hat pinned on the back. A lady tapped me on the shoulder and whispered to me. She helped me unpin it and put it on.

The animals keep me busy from first light: I have one rescued kitten, (my last), found outside the Post Office in a box, so named Postie. She is an only cat, half wild, with no mate so thankfully there will be no kittens. She thinks she is a dog and copies them, to their annoyance. There are 5 rescued dogs, all healthy, and 25 rescued sheep and lambs. I have an old ram, I call Archie, with Archibald Ormsby-Gore (John Betjeman's teddy bear), in mind. John Betjeman was clutching his teddy when he died. That's so British, isn't it? I keep Archie penned up as I already have too many lambs to care for and I won't allow them to be

slaughtered. The things humans eat: whale, horse, dog, grated puffin! They all have souls. SOBs means souls on board - you can't argue with it. The vet is looking to place Archie somewhere else. He says he's too much for me. He is always looking for a blue. Ewe gene, one of the oldest sheep comes to the back door and bellows for something to eat. If I go out, the back door is left open for the dogs and some sheep and lambs get into the house and chew things and poo. Lily is now toothless. She used to be really clean, not now. Her friend, Gran stole an opened tin of beetroot last week, from the kitchen bench, which she shared with Lily. They drank the vinegar and strolled about with bright red lips. The dogs circled guiltily when I came home, so I knew the sheep had been inside. One sheep I named Carmen, after the opera character, but it didn't stick. She just didn't have the personality.

I have a blind black old ewe. None of the dogs ever chase her - she can't see them and they know. She wanders about bumping into things. I let her lie next to my desk and my bed. Yesterday, Lily had a bellyache. Her ears flopped sideways and she didn't steal Ewe gene's food. She drooled. She must have eaten something poisonous. I shouted at her to stick to the grass, but the wind fanned out the red dust in mockery and she just stared at me through the cloud.

People just drop animals off. Sometimes they don't even knock. I find tyre tracks doing a turn outside and go and count the animals. They know they have a place with me and blend in. No hot water for two months. I'd love a hot shower. Can't afford repairs. The dam has a sticky bottom with a few inches of muddy water in it.

On a good day, over 100 magpies call in for breakfast. Honeyeaters, crimson and eastern rosellas, galahs, cockatoos, corellas, tufted pigeons and a goshawk swirl around me, in the

middle like a plump St Francis with long, wavy hair and boots on against bitey ants. Two Willy Wagtails are learning to fly from my finger to their nest.

I struggle with bleak, black depression. All the time I slide back to the brave boys who left, not only killed but not given a proper burial. When I got the computer working, I found a German list of burial sites, but it was all in German. I hoped the Allies would do what the people in Holland did for the war dead - they made a big effort. The Germans were the enemy but now with so many dead, they are not anymore. Just someone's son, brother, husband chum...my boys, the laughing, joking fresh-faced boys who joined the RAF, I knew so many. One of them, Pip - well I still catch my breath when I think of him but I was always too shy to do anything but catch his eye and be quietly with him. I'd love to be a writer and rewrite their end...mashed to bits in the air and not remembered.

Well, I remember them. I wonder if you've had time to look through your mother's things for that photo of Pip. She had all the photos in a brown suitcase tied up with one of your father's belts. She wouldn't have thrown them out, I'm sure. Probably in the attic. The photo is hand coloured. He signed it in the corner, sideways. Pip is looking up and laughing, fair hair tousled, eyes so blue like the sky he disappeared into. The day he had the photo taken, he asked me to go with him. He wore his battle jacket with the sheepskin lapels, although it was a mild day. He was so proud of it and walked with a swagger. I had a new pink dress and he kept saying, 'The dress, eh? We do like the dress!' and I blushed the same colour. We stopped off at a pub and sat on the grass under a tree full of apple blossoms, buzzing with bees. He laid my head in his lap and I shivered with happiness looking up under his chin at the blue sky. I wanted that moment to go on forever. Each time he flew out I died a little and then there was the day he came back with a chipped elbow and great jagged cuts across his lovely

face. He had a week off. We looked at each other and I said, 'You're going back, aren't you', and the space between our faces said goodbye.

Would you have a photo of yourself as you are now? I would really love to see how you have grown. You had fair hair and your mother used to pull it back tightly in two big white bows. You said it made your headache. I don't suppose you remember when I took you for walks to the Tuesday Market Place. Margaret Read, whom they called a witch, was burnt there in 1590. It is said that as the flames licked the poor old woman's toes, her heart burst from her body and struck the wall, leaving a heart shape. There's a carving. I held you up to touch the heart. Just a poor old woman.

I have six more sheep to hand shear at present and am bucketing water around the place. By the time I've done that, I'm sunburnt and quite weak. I've decided to shear the sheep continuously, so hopefully they won't get daggy. It will be cooler for them, too. I have to average two a week. Nobody comes except the vet and a young chap from the council wanting rates. I sheared one Merino Christmas Eve, one Christmas Day, one New Year's Eve and one New Year's Day. Even my elbows ache. Who was that comedian who said his teeth itched? Tommy something. He always made me laugh.

The house is cooler than outside at night but I can't leave the doors and windows open because of the mozzies. They get in anyway. The dogs snap and snap at them. Postie goes under the sheets and sometimes bites my toes or digs her claws into my leg and purrs. What can you do?

The good thing about sheep poo is that it holds the water it's caught and holds, so it doesn't run across the red dust. I've put it under the trees, where my animals go when their souls leave their bodies. The pear trees bear very well. I cut up the green ones for the sheep before the rosellas get stuck in. The apricot gets heavy with fruit, but last time the birds got them all except ten. It breaks my heart when a tree dies. I think of your mother's dewy garden with hollyhocks and wallflowers and sweet peas and the small birds chattering. I have geraniums here, redder than the red ground. How I would love some white flowers.

Gran has become very frail. She eats but walks very slowly like a ninety-year-old human. She still has all her teeth but she is exuding frailty. Poor Gran has to avoid the boisterous young 'uns. Sometimes I clear a path so she can totter through.

Some days her nose runs and I grab her and blow her nose for her like you do toddlers. Ewe gene is very bolshy. She is strong and cunning and gives as good as she gets.

I am now completely vegetarian and just buy mince and bones for the dogs and birds. My brain and body are unravelling fast. I suppose I'll be buried by loony Christians. I heard of a couple of unpleasant incidents and I'm careful not to put my address and state of health out. Nobody in town would know because I always dress. I have some 4711 eau de cologne.
Do you know any males who were in the RAF in WW2? I would love to talk with them. That's probably a silly question, it was such a long time ago.

Wherever I've piled sheep poo, the worms have arrived. Poor little creatures have done it hard in the dry. I found a friendly farmer who let me get under his shearing shed and rescue some. I put chaff bags and old bits of carpet around for them. It's wonderful how they find the shelter. If I find a sick magpie, I kill it but I actually feel very guilty about killing anything.

All of our boys were Ozzie’s except for three. The eldest was 29, the youngest was 19. Six of the seven dead probably bailed out too late from a plane on fire and about to crash. Alf may have had a damaged parachute and gone down in the early hours over Holland. Or they got caught in fog and could not see the ground. Pip just disappeared.

I'm so hot. I will have two or three days of salad before everything rots. (No fridge) I've opened a tin of beetroot which means Gran and Lily will be very interested.

15. BLINDSIGHT

The sea breaking seemed the same as the sea still but the salty air stung my nostrils. I labelled rock specimens, made my bunk, replaced lids and tops carefully folded cartons, washed and swept sand out of the door. Groceries were left every Tuesday. I did not read newspapers, even the local ones. I emailed my results to my colleagues. I never locked the door. Night after night I lay awake, seeking a solution, trying to find peace.

My family and friends did not know where I was and even if they did, I was well out of reach. I had shipped my 4WD to Denial Bay, South Australia and flown down. The Shack, attached to the geology station, was 800 kilometres of red dirt from Adelaide and on the beach. It was curiously silent there. I was glad. It couldn't be far enough away from Sydney and facing people. Sparse trees leaned into the indifferent earth. The notion of responsibility for trees is not felt here because there are hardly any. The great stretch of the horizon, and the massive softly changing skyscape, cleared my brain. I could go for seconds without a sequence of thoughts, without the numbing pressure of what I had done.

I wondered about staring at the sky for a living, recording something or other for a job. The endless sky made me feel small and my troubles smaller. I could look one way to see the grass blowing, the other to watch waves rolling. The wind blew endlessly. I found in summer, prevailing winds moved from the southeast to south by southwest in the afternoon. In winter, the prevailing wind was north-westerly in the morning and northwest to south-westerly in the afternoon. The weather conditions occupied much of my long days. Each day, I walked from The Shack along the beach and back five times. I wondered about the average 128,000 kilometres in an average lifetime, more than three times around the earth, that people walk.

A young Postie started dropping by every Wednesday. At first, I went in and shut my door. Then post was exchanged wordlessly, just a nod and sunburned hands reaching towards each other. Then there were a few words. Then the Postie shared the view and a beer, seeming to prefer being outside, sprawling on the sandbanks, licking off beer froth, even when the sky filled with water and light rain swept in. I talked about my work. Seismology is my rock. What happens to me dwindles in the scale of time.

'When my times up, I'll be in a box with a tagged toe, just another specimen: Grenville. A. seismologist. Comforting thought. And a place in the great scheme of things. Basically, I work for mineral resource interests, but I'm studying earthquakes.'

'Oz is a place to study 'quakes?'

'Twenty in the last hundred years: seven rupturing the crust. One, magnitude 7.2 in 1906 off the West Australian Central West Coast, was felt over one-third of the continent. Another, Adelaide 1954 caused $100 million worth of damage. No deaths. After the Meckering WA earthquake in '68, we got the first Australian Earthquake Code. Since then, Newcastle has had a rumble of course.'

Postie stirred the sand with one bare foot.

I explained how I was working on a jigsaw puzzle of the planet, putting together a rock picture showing how the earth has cracked apart and how the stretch marks fit together.

'Mostly computer work, but specimens are vital. My work is not secret but it is sensitive.'

The Postie only worked about three days. We drove to Carnot, a rock rearing from the sea like a gigantic tortoise, heading outward towards Antarctica. Even on a beautiful day, when the weather gets up, 100-foot waves can break over it. A group of geology students was

swept off its back once. One bought it. Some photographer was pulled in. They're still looking for him. The rock is like some great monster, claiming victims. We stood quietly on its edge, watching the great swell of the ocean beyond.

'They say it's 2,460 million years old.'

Where base metals were settled in their final emplacement is of vital interest to mineral explorers. I map the earth from when the giant supercontinent, Columbia was assembled. When it was destroyed, more than one billion years ago, cratonic fragments broke into three supercontinents: Rodinia, Gondwana, Pangaea.

The Postie was good company, asking the right questions, offering companionable silence.

I said, ' You don't say much, where do you live?'

Grey eyes turned to me. 'Turn left at the old fruit fly station this side of Ceduna. Just me and my old man. It takes my time - he's blind. Not that anyone would know. When mom went, they put papers in front of him to sign. It's called blindsight. He can handle it as long as everything in the house stays put.'

'You don't get someone in?'

'Buckleys. Fierce old bugger. Wouldn't want a stranger in the place.'

'Hardly a bed of roses!'

I felt a glance that said *look in the mirror*. I suddenly saw how the Postie saw me - *sorry for me?* with nothing personal in The Shack - just work stuff and living. Not even a cat or dog to brighten the day.

One morning, I saw a great shining fish leap out of the ocean. As the Postie came up from the beach, I asked, 'What are the local fish? I've been living out of tins.'

Like reciting a psalm, the Postie gabbled, 'Whale, sea lions, dolphins. Good eating is salmon, King George Whiting, snapper, blue morwong, squid, marvellous southern rock lobster, king crab, some abalone, deepwater flathead, bright redfish, orange roughly, mulloway, kingfish, southern bluefin, tuna, blue swimmers, butterfish - that enough?'

We laughed. I'd read the warm current from Leeuwin means plenty of fish.

Postie brought fresh kingfish and we barbecued it wrapped in foil, melting butter spitting on the coals, mouth-watering smells. We sat staring at the great ocean together. I muttered something about appearing odd, a hermit, a workaholic. I felt steady grey eyes on me.

The hot moist fish in my mouth, I tried to explain why I was so crippled with people, staring at the sea, not at the Postie. When I was about seven, I was exploring an old, ruined house with a broken-down conservatory with my brother. We came across half a dozen boys about twice our age, laughing in an unpleasant way - *guilty? defiant?* - they had long sticks. There was a little bird's nest above them and the boys were poking through the fragile shape, pushing out these tiny baby birds which fell to the ground and fluttered about. The parents fluttered in distress about the nest unable to stop them. The babies didn't have feathers and their eyes were still swollen shut bumps, their large feet trying to balance. Cameron stared up at me in consternation.

'Stop them bro', he said.

'I was rooted to the ground. The bigger boys looked at us sneeringly then threw away their sticks and ran off. I felt sick to my soul. The image has never left me - such wanton cruelty. We never spoke of it afterwards but I'll never forget it and how helpless I felt.'

'It gets worse.'

After a few beers, I rambled on about taking Cameron up in a surveillance plane. He kept on at me to go. My lovely laughing brother, so full of life, who worshipped me as his older brother. I had followed all the correct procedures and said to him solemnly that a pilot must remain extremely alert, calm and prepared at all times. How I failed him. You must check each tank as part of the flight check. Water is at the bottom. Also, the colour. Each has its own colour. I didn't check if there was water in the fuel and the engine literally stopped in midair. I tried to land her but there were rocks. The back of my seat was pressing so hard into my neck that I couldn't turn my head to look at Cameron but I was saying his name through gritted teeth. I staggered away from the crash landing with only a broken collarbone.'

The Postie said nothing. I waited to hear, *it was an accident. Could happen to anybody, you didn't wish for it, the brother wouldn't want you grieving*, but there was just a sweet silence only filled with breaking waves and the Postie's warm hand on my wrist.

I hadn't spoken about either of these incidents for three years. It was mostly unbearable and I couldn't change it, so I avoided it and anybody connected with it. I had some really restless nights afterwards then, collecting specimens through the soaking rains of June and July, relished any discomfort. I gradually controlled the dark place.

One sunny morning, the Postie described reading a book about Tibetan Buddhism. A woman had come to a monk seeking help. She had loved her father very deeply and when he died she cried every day and couldn't stop. The monk listened, and then said, 'But why are you crying because somewhere, your father is laughing in golden sunshine.' At the Postie's words, a heavy load gradually lifted from my shoulders. There was a different way of thinking and my feelings loosened and changed like the clouds.

I was grateful to the Postie and wanted to help. We put an advert in the *Adelaide Advertiser* for a companion, to care for a blind person. There were 33 replies. We read them together and chose one, which was to the point, in nice steady handwriting. Then I didn't see the Postie for a bit. As I was collecting samples in mine shafts, I'd asked for mail to be kept. I drove into Ceduna to collect it and ask for delivery to be reinstated. I missed the Wednesday meetings and mooched around for a few days, constantly glancing along the beach to the horizon.

Three Wednesdays later, I looked up to see the Postie, running over the rocks, on strong young muscled legs, making whooping curves in wet sand, galloping through silver foam, fish jumping. I glimpsed a letter being waved. It turned out that the woman we had picked for the companion was tall and thin with a long, reddish neck and bulging eyes. The Postie mimicked how she picked at her food and we both snorted with laughter.

'However,' the Postie said, 'she's alright. Dad's really taken with her. This sheila makes him trays of food. Wheels him into the sunshine, knows exactly when he's had enough. He lets her shave him. She's apples. And there's more.' Postie waved the letter again. 'She's got a place by the sea near Adelaide. They will shack up there, so she can be near her daughter, - I'll stay in the house! All here, in black and white!'

We drove into Ceduna for a pub lunch of snapper to celebrate. We got tipsy, reread the letter a few times, laughing over nothing. The Postie said a mock grace: *Heavenly Father bless us all and keep us all alive, there's ten of us for dinner, and not enough for five*

There was talk of breeding butterflies and throwing the mail job in as soon as possible. My heart lurched.

'No more barbecues?' The wimpy note in my voice made me squirm.

'A mate of mine will have some southern rock lobster for next Wednesday.'
I looked at the size being indicated and heard the words lemon juice, bay leaf, lemon sauce and felt weak at the knees. Later, I drove back into Ceduna for a couple of semi-dry whites from the Barossa Valley, stacking them in my small gas fridge, so they'd be nicely frosted.

At the back of The Shack, we sprawled, melted butter on our chins, eyes lazy with the wine in the sun-warmed air. It was utterly peaceful. Then, without warning, my 4WD, parked on the edge of the sand, reared up and crashed down, dipping sideways and the coffee pot danced on its ring *ching! ching! ching!!* We gasped and grabbed each other. It was shattering. We scrambled inside.
'Most earthquakes are very shallow, less than 1.5 kilometres focal depths,' I shouted to the Postie, braced against the wall.

I knew from studying epicentral patterns that one of the major zones is the Eyre Peninsula. There have been 40 earthquakes of magnitude four or greater since 1963, the largest being of magnitude six in the Musgrave Ranges. The shuddering rolled on and on with sounds like teeth grating, heralding the great groaning tectonic movements underneath the apparent stillness of Mother Earth. Then the whole world really shook. Coffee spluttered and hissed and a bottle of turps fell and leaked everywhere.

As quickly as it had climaxed, it stopped. It was amazing. I hurried to my computer, which of course was dead. The setting sun beamed benignly through the broken blind. The Postie was sprawled on my bunk, eyes shut tight curved cheek glowing gold, golden dust motes dancing. I knelt down and traced the warmth hesitantly with a finger.
'Were you scared?'

The Postie pushed me away and stood up slowly changing my horizontal world to the vertical.

I burrowed my face into the warmth of the Postie's legs and felt fingers playing with my ears, then pulling up my shirt. We melted together.
'What do you want to be when you grow up?' whispered the Postie close to my chest, laying in her delicious ear against my stiffened nipple.
'Don't care as long as it's with you,' I threaded her long hazel hair, which smelt nutty, in my fingers. Ceduna is from Chedoona meaning 'resting place' in Aboriginal, the Postie said, opening her arms with a smile.

It is five years since the earth moved for us. Today, I am wakeful with questions in that blue air stillness that only comes with early mornings in Spring. They are all good questions. The coolabah tree leans over our small pond, which gently shimmers in the early heat haze. The Postie's double-fronted cottage, which I had imagined fibro, has blue stone rubble walls, brick quoins and raised gables with a slate roof. There is a rambling garden for our son, Cameron, who is always laughing, and our daughter, Mimi, who trails after him wailing 'Wait for Mimi', and dogs to play in. Mimi is named after my mother, who has visited three times. Postie's butterfly breeding cages down one side of the property, shelter us from the winds.

Our friends love the way we've lined the walls with books and kept the old open fire going. My wife hung my awards from the mineral industry around the chimney breast. A photo of me and my younger brother, him standing on a box with his arm around my shoulders is in the best place. He was a great kid.

We walked along to The Shack the other morning with the children and dogs. A man with a red beard was sitting on the beach, with a tray of specimens and a laptop.

'Good day,' I called.

He got up when he saw us, went inside and closed the door.

16. MONOPOLY

I never want anything to change - phone numbers, members of parliament old style measuring, road names, emails, the change of seasons is enough for me and they're getting blurry. That's why I left Sydney to live in a small town in Tasmania. I left before my sister Mavis left for the Gold Coast with her husband and young son.

In my town, there's a courthouse, a church, a police station and a baker, everything predictable. Not even a Chinese restaurant. Instead of celebrating diversity, we all work together to keep everything as predictable as possible. It's well kept and civic and you have time to admire the apple blossom, to feel the slow change of green things in the earth. It's what we like.

'Here you don't feel the government's trying to make you into what you are not,' a taxi driver said complacently once. He was from Scotland.

I was so at peace in Tasmania, that every day I wasn't there was a wasted day.

Neither Mavis nor I worried about mother back in Sydney much. She had come from a family of nine and still revelled at waking up in her own bedroom. The clean squares of the ceiling and walls were a reassuring frame to her existence.

At least I didn't worry until I had the phone call from Pinner, an old family friend. He managed to sound as distant as he really was. He never became quite used to the phone and held it with some suspicion far away from his mouth and sounded his 't's' very distinctly.

'You sound worried, Pinner.'

'All I know is she's not herself.'

I walked through a sun shower from North Sydney down to McMahons Point. I had travelled to my first job in the city from there. The ferry was still running. The place looked the same except for sale and auction notices everywhere.

Back before the last war, dad had bought two villas, one to live in, one to rent out.

'Now you don't have to worry old girl,' he had said to my mother, only two months before the hospital ship he was on was blown up.

A brass cartridge case full of artificial flowers caught the light when I opened the front door. It reminded me so much of dad. I liked it there. Mum always refused to live with Mavis or me. She lived in one house and rented the other. 'I've got Pinner,' she'd say.

Pinner was an old family friend. His sons had sold out on him when he was in hospital having his legs done. He'd come home to find he hadn't one. Been certified, so mum said. Part of the time he stayed in a big pub in Wellington for free, eating the country-style breakfast with relish, collecting glasses and doing odd jobs. When he thought they might be getting sick of him, he came down to mum's and fixed things.

Mum had lived all her life in McMahons Point. Her friends were elderly widows like herself. They dyed their hair the same lilac, wore the same shoes with built-up insteps and outdid each other with whiter-than-white bowling dresses. I took tea, sipped beer in the heat, sat in at council meetings, played Housey at the local church, and took concessional trips - always the same ones: the tulips at Bowral, a steam train to Lithgow, the spring gardens in the Blue Mountains, the Melbourne Cup, the Ferry race on the Harbour. Mum had boundless energy, initiative and childlike exuberance.

'You know me, typical Aries, the zodiac's original dynamo. Especially when Pinner's down. We are both ruled by Mars, a planet of drive and actions.'

Mum had never married again. *He was a good man. Enough said*. She pursed her lips

Once, when she had had a few McWilliams sweet sherries, I heard her friend ask her if she'd ever marry again and she'd said, 'Do I look like an idiot?'

'Did you like being married, mum?'

'I did then, but I wouldn't now.'

My feet led me to the local butcher's shop. I'd planned to buy three steaks for us. The dusty windows were empty. A shiny sold notice hung over the door. We always shopped there. The whole street did. Dog bones and cat bits were supplied free without comment. Fresh parsley was thrown in as the meat was wrapped in newspaper. It seemed strange not to see Bluey's red face over the counter, his eyes darting left right, left right.

This prestigious property... the notice read ...*original, historic, sandstone*.

'Nothing historic about my meat,' Bluey would have chortled, 'fresh as a daisy, every last skerrick.'

At the flower shop, a woman was showing a customer a bunch of daisies.

'No $50 is nothing. This is a quality flower.'

Pinner came to the door in his greasy hat, vest and braces, pushing his hands deep in the pockets of his baggy trousers with an embarrassed air because I had come so far at his request.

'Great day! Would it be dead for quids.'

'You look well, Pinner.

'Well, one of them pub breakfasts would set you up for a week,' patting his large stomach, 'and your mother used to see me right.'

'Used to?'

We sat in the kitchen and enjoyed a cold beer together.

'What's the problem?'

'Don't know. Don't understand what's going on anymore.'

It was not the time to probe. I would wait till she returned and see for myself.

'Why Pinner?' I'd asked him plenty of times before, but I liked to get him talking.

'Cause my brother was Needles. We all had nicknames in those days. When he died, no one could remember his real name. We had to send off for papers. There weren't any. How is the dollar in Tasmania?'

Pinner was trying to be polite, so I knew he was worried. There was a screech of brakes, hurried footsteps.

'Doll! Be waiting long?' mother embraced me.

She flicked open a gold-embossed leather notebook.' I had you down for 5:00. I was held up at the Lands Department.'

She dumped a pile of gaudy real estate pamphlets on the table and kicked off her high-heeled shoes. The heels were silver metal. I gaped. Mother hadn't worked outside the home for years. There had been a stint of about six months as a cook at a girl's high school, but the rent from next door had usually been sufficient for the simple needs of the three of us.

Pinner said in what he hoped was a businesslike manner.' I've been showing her around.'

Mother nodded absently, unloosening at her tie and checking her answer phone. She clicked a gold pen and looked at me seriously. I don't want to hurry you, but there is a tremendous demand for homes in this area. Thinking this was some sort of game and painfully aware of my own budget, which was calculated to the last dollar, I said smilingly, 'I can offer you $250,000.'

Mother smiled back condescendingly. 'There wouldn't be anything in this area for less than one point five. Oh no, no, no, that wouldn't do at all!'

I looked at Pinner, who shrugged.

'Everyone wants to live here, eight point one rise this quarter.' He was secure in his statement and I was aware that he did not know what it meant.

'Very convenient, very, taxes, trains, buses at your door, secure asset increase, one of the most sought-after locations, a village atmosphere close to city amenities.'

I drank my glass. This is my home we are discussing, although I had moved out. It seemed a good time to change the subject.

'I called in at Bluey's for steaks. I didn't know he'd gone.'

'Last Wednesday. 1.8 million.' Mother was as proud as though she had been the agent. The buyer reckons he'll get $3,000 a week for flats during the Mardi gras.'

'It's good to see you looking so vital, mum.'

'I'm upwardly mobile,' my mother said proudly, rolling down her elastic stockings and grunting.

'Everyone's into it. Even the untouchables in India. They can't get anyone to clean their toilets anymore except Christians who have gone to learn humility for six weeks.'

'Aries don't like to be told what to do.'

She patted her slightly blue coiffure, the diamantes in the corners of her glasses glinting like extra eyes.

'I was such a long time at the Lands Department. A DMR resumption of one of my properties. Don't they know time is money!'

'How many properties have you got, mother?'

She shrugged. 'It depends on the pace and perception of the real estate market. I might be realigning my focus. Water. That's the thing. Water is the new gold, mark my words. Anything to do with water.'

'When did all this happen?'

Out to the corner of my eye, I could see Pinner, hands uplifted in supplication eyes to the ceiling.

'Started work at the real estate office opposite to help out. Negative geared the house next door. It went on from there. I've got the eye. My last one is in the Hunter Valley. Demand for wine overseas increasing due to climate change. And Newcastle is the gross centre. Strong rental demand.'

'It's taken off like a bride's nightie and so has she,' Pinner said.

Mother gave him a look. He muttered something about having a hedge to finish and slunk off into the sunshine.

Mother said she wanted to shower and took off her tailored, lined jacket. The shoulder pads were huge.

'Power dressing,' she said reverently, patting the pads. She asked me to take any messages.

Putting her heavy colour corporate-style earrings on the table she rubbed bruised earlobes.

Seeing my mother with a tense expression was a new experience for me.

I went to admire Pinner's hedge cutting.

'What's got into mum?'

'She stopped playing Monopoly for fun and started playing it for real. You can see how it is. She goes up that Sydney Tower, peers down through binoculars, quite sure that there is a forgotten little square somewhere. Her aim is to build a block of flats, with her only living in one of them. I said I only want one roof over my head not 20.'

'What's for tea?'

'Ask me tomorrow.'

I walked down the end and bought some fish and chips.

Pinner pointed his shears across the road.

Have a look at old Mrs Mundy's house across the road. Went last month for 1.3 million and they can't even live in it yet. By the way, the fish and chips place is now a duty free.

I left mother singing, *'I'm just an old-fashioned girl*,' in the shower. The phone was ringing madly but I ignored it. I sauntered over to the Jacaranda tree, in the corner of Mrs Mundy's. We had a tree house there. We used to lower an old shopping basket on a rope and hold the dog up, so he wouldn't give us away sitting at the bottom of the tree whining and looking up. My mother never did find out where that shopping basket went.

Mrs Mundy made lemonade and Anzac biscuits for us and all the kids in the street. She was never too busy for crying children. Come and tell me all about it, she would wheeze in her kindly way, lifting the tear-stained one onto her lap.

Wayne the Pain had seen her crawling about under the hedge once after the deadly nightshade and called her a witch. The kids had held him down and put a blue tongue lizard up his shirt. She was our Mrs Mundy. I remember the lovely house going down to the water's edge, the cool rooms lit by the stained glass. The haven had gone. In its place, a grey facade with peeling paint, the windows boarded up, the roof sagging. Brilliant red light streamed through a broken board and fell across a bundle of rags near the steps.

I hastened back and questioned Pinner. He went on clipping the hedge and remarked laconically that she had been persuaded to put her home in her daughter's name to save death duties and her daughter had promptly kicked her out and sold it.

'There she goes now.' He didn't stop clipping the hedge. A woman swept by in a Porsche, fake diamonds glittering on her dog's collar.

I remember when she caught her knickers on the frangipani tree and was sent to her room and I smuggled some Pavlova up on the garden ladder and was halfway through the window when I fell off the ladder. She got in trouble for that too, but I stuck up for her.

We three sat around the kitchen table and gloomily watched mom paint her nails brilliant red.

'If you and your sister can't make a reasonable offer for this house, I suggest I sell both houses and...'

'Mum, you know you wouldn't like living with us. I'm happy in Tassie and my sister doesn't want to move.'

'I know dear, but I have to have this wonderful Balmain property, absolute waterfront with six bedrooms and three ensuites...'

'Mum!'

My mother looked at me as if I was wanting.

'It's a deceased estate. I've got inside connections. I took the bank manager down there and he said I can't lose.'

'Lose what mum?'

One thing is certain, life with an Arian is never dull!

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