

***Holmwood***

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### . *Vol. 1: Holmwood*

*Holmwood* is the novel which constitutes the major work submitted towards my PhD in Creative Writing. It is accompanied in a second volume by an exegesis of the generative and governing notions which I deem to bear on this work. The novel is a contemporary Australian fiction set in the city of Adelaide and focusing on a period of a month or so in the entwined lives of two sisters, Evie and Paula Haggerty, women in their forties.

*Holmwood* grows out of my abiding preoccupation with the acculturation of women worldwide towards a muting and dilution of selfhood and identity, but it is a novel rather than a tract, attempting in particular a psychological verisimilitude and therefore situated largely within the minds of the central characters, who refract and provide a slant on the narrative.

Evie and Paula are bound in family bonds and by shared responsibility for Paula's children. The sisters work in early-child-care and aged-care respectively, their work scenarios providing a context and perspective for their mid-life entanglements with new partners and ongoing struggles with unresolved birth-family and young-adult relationship dilemmas. The close connections of both sisters with adolescents points up their residual attachment to a youth-culture neither has definitively left. I propose the Haggerty sisters as modest heroines of a difficult chapter in history, not alert to all the meanings of their lives, indeed actively repressing many of them, damaged by early life-experiences, but victorious, to a great degree, against the challenges of their adult lives. I hope this is an amusing and insightful novel about women of a certain age. It is squarely aimed at an identifiable market, thirty-plus women readers bored with 'chick lit'.

*Disclaimer:*

This work contains no material accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or tertiary institution, and to the best of my knowledge contains no material previously published or written by another person without due reference having been made in the text.

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Signed:

Date:

**Chapters numbered incorrectly:**

**Chapter 13 missed**

*Holmwood***CHAPTER 1**

Paula stretched back in the driver's seat, instructing each muscle from toe to scalp to relax, forcing herself to take deep breaths instead of the shallow ones she'd been surviving on all morning. It was always a toss-up on Tuesdays whether Evie would get there on time. As a rule she made it, at the last minute, but it wasn't in Paula's nature to sit calmly waiting with a cup of tea. She'd fidget, checking Rose's drink and playlunch were in the fridge, checking the mailbox, making notes in her diary, finally standing, jiggling her keys impatiently in the driveway, till Evie blew around the corner, hair flying, rolling up Paula's street like tumbleweed.

Her nursing home, decorously dubbed 'Holmwood' by its venerable founder, was at least a known quantity. Paula sighed as she turned off the engine in her parking space, right alongside the gracious, terracotta-tiled entrance. A few more deep breaths achieved the miraculous transformation she managed every morning, from Piddling Paula to Matron P. Haggerty, captain of the Good Ship Holmwood. Des, short for Desirée, met her as usual at the front door, night-sister's notes in her hand. Mrs Elton was on the critical list, but had gone on breathing through the night. Together, Des and Paula pattered along the corridor, soft rose-clay tiles underfoot, heads bent over Des's clipboard. Together they set sail on the first round of the day.

Paula lugged Mr Brennan upright against his pillows. If you wedged him there with a few extra ones, he'd stay up. He preferred to be in a sitting position; you missed too much lying down. Mrs Crafter was chirpy this morning. A daughter and granddaughters were visiting later. That was the great advantage of producing ten children - the offspring could roster themselves for visiting Mum and only be required to turn up once every second week - no one felt unduly burdened. When there were only one or two kids, they felt the strain. But with a big mob like the Crafters, there was always a different cheery face, wild

black hair, striking grey eyes, by the mother's bedside. When it came to supporting the oldies, you could see that Catholics, and every other religion that insisted on unbridled breeding, had a point.

Most of the Holmwood residents were Catholic, not that that seemed to make them any happier or sadder than heathens Paula had looked after. It meant a little bit more colour in the rooms, that was all, with the proliferation of holy cards, lurid saints in plastic frames, miraculous medals, the ornate plastic bottles of Lourdes water with the distinctive scalloped blue caps, scapulars brown, red, green and motley hanging on bedheads or hidden under nightgowns and pyjama tops, the odd electric lamp alight before a favorite image (candles being a fire risk). Lorna Gilles, whose bed they were approaching, a non-believer, was one of the best-tempered of the lot; hair still defiantly brown as when she was twenty, never seen the inside of a dye bottle. Pushing eighty, spry as a cat, wandering around the place all day spreading unostentatious cheer.

Paula and Desirée stopped. Lorna was sitting in her chair while the new chum on the nursing staff, Nurse Bridge, straightened her sheets and pillows. Lorna had her photo album on her lap.

'Classic Adelaide bungalow, yours, Lorna, wasn't it, sandstone-fronted, it looks like, with a lovely deep verandah,' remarked Des, looking over the wiry woman's shoulder.

'I walked through the door on my wedding day. Lived under the same roof for sixty-five years.' Lorna, infallibly serene, looked sad for once.

'Remind me,' prompted Paula, as Desirée put a hand on the back of Lorna's chair. 'Did you come here when your husband died?'

'No, I stayed on for six years at home after Doug went.' Lorna stared through the door opposite at a private slide show playing on the the corridor wall. 'Doug had Parkinsons.

I couldn't look after him at the end. But I stayed home on my own for quite a while afterwards. It's the garden I miss.'

The open album showed snaps of her orderly garden, taken in full, orchestrated bloom. Parallel plots bordered both sides of a neat brick path bisecting a long, narrow yard, the plants mostly ornamental, old-fashioned gerberas, pelargoniums, shasta daisies, with tailored fruit trees studded here and there. Roses. Dozens of rose bushes, holding up their arms to the unforgiving Adelaide sun.

'I miss having my hands in the dirt, dear,' said Lorna to Des. 'I used to like being good and mucky at bath-time. I feel as though I'm cheating, being clean already when I take my shower.'

Paula looked back up from the pictured garden, large but manageable by one fit, elderly woman, to Lorna, struggling in her well-mannered way to smile and make a pleasantry of her loss. She nodded, and stood for a moment more alongside Mrs Gilles, thinking.

Then Paula and Des readied the patients for Dr Rundle's rounds, Des whispering updates into Paula's ear as they progressed.

The old men were sooks, by and large. Unprofessional of her even to think so, but all the nurses privately agreed. The old girls put up with more, smiled and thanked you even when something hurt. The old boys, or a good number of them, were a lot of wusses. All those years of acting tough fell away and revealed frightened, whining lads. If women lasted past menopause, up to which point men mostly did the bullying, they found themselves shot up with a huge jolt of testosterone, so that their levels matched or outstripped the blokes'. Unusual display of fair play by God, that. In many marriages, this was when the fun and games really started, as the women puffed out their chests and started pecking hard. Paula thought of those sturdy older women standing straight and

strong, guiding lost-looking, frail husbands across supermarket car parks. It evened out in the end. All in the hormones.

At morning tea, Paula cradled a mug between her hands and stared out over the lawn to Holmwood's low, red-brick boundary wall. A powerful bike roared past, and for a second she was on the back of it, running away from home. He'd been her first boyfriend. Her mother had given her such a hard time she could never bring Gary home, even for a harmless afternoon watching footy on TV - Dot would find something to fang them about, cast aspersions on Gary's job, or prospects, or family. Making pointed remarks about how fast she'd be showing them the door if they got up to anything. Which they did, of course they did, but it was all too hard. So she and Gary had taken off, just like that, as far away as they could, to Perth. They'd come back to get married, in Dot and John's lounge room, when Paula was two months pregnant. Dot attended the wedding but refused to go to the christening.

After break, Paula was invigilating Mrs Beasley during her visit with Florence. So far she was being a lamb, sitting quietly opposite her chattering cousin. Whenever a resident was either unstable or likely to become unsanitary, Matron had to sit in on their visits. Though you wouldn't guess it this morning, Margaret Beasley could throw crockery for Australia. Paula drifted off as eighty-something Margaret and seventy-odd Florence droned on. This was a stifflingly cosy room, in overwhelming gold tones, high-backed two-seater mock-Regency sofas, tiny, fiddly coffee tables, brown-gold floral carpet, TV in one corner crowned with doilies and bronze chrysanthus in season. Paula's own mother hadn't made it to a nursing home: Dot had signed out at seventy, still with all her marbles, six kids to her credit, or anyway six kids, Dot never seemed able to see them as creditable. Feisty up to her last illness, Dot entered the netherworld a shadow of her former self.

Paula saw them seated opposite one another on Springer...



'I can't bear to be in the same room with her,' Paula wails histrionically to Jerry's voracious audience. 'Dot behaved as though I was an axe-murderer when all I'd done was get a boyfriend, and accidentally get pregnant. I was still a baby!'

'Oh, yes, butter wouldn't melt in her mouth,' spits Dot, as Paula's mental videotape rolls along its well-worn track. 'She was a beautiful child. You wouldn't credit how she changed when she got into her teens. A schemer. Cunning.'

'How cunning can you be at fifteen?' Paula cries. 'I didn't know which end was up. What was it with you, Mum? Menopausal? Jealous?'

Springer's audience mutters and rumbles.

'What about me?' cries her mother, waving her arms. 'Six kids, your father was a washout, I was teaching, he was at me the whole time - who was I flirting with at work, who did I think I was getting a job anyway, the house was filthy - never mind that we needed the money and I didn't have a choice. You kids were only ever out for what you could get.'

Paula, springing out of her imagined stage chair, puce in the face, yells back: 'You were so wrapped up in your bloody soap-opera with Dad you wouldn't have noticed if we were shooting up in our bedrooms every night ...'

'I noticed, don't you worry. Up to all sorts with Gary and you were barely out of nappies.'

The tape flickered and blurred, the images died.

Leave it alone, saddo, Paula scolded herself, tuning back in to the drone of elderly conversation in the parlour, picking up an ageing travel brochure left by a visitor to tease stranded residents. Its colours were leaching, so that Malta's golden stone buildings

looked dull and beige, the Mediterranean a drab grey rather than glinting sapphire. Two young people stood by the pale water in a port city somewhere, he in black trousers and white shirt, black vest, she in floral, gauzy skirt and badly-cut summer jacket. Paula noted the way the man stood, one leg raised, a foot planted territorially on a coil of rope, chin in cupped hand, looking as though he owned the place. The girl stood primly by, tidy little feet in prim pumps squeezed together, hands folded, waiting for her orders.

Cousin Florence leaned over the ridiculously dainty coffee table to pour Margaret another tea. Paula checked naughty Margaret, muttering away in an undertone, put down her brochure and went back to gazing out of the window. Had she herself ever been really naughty? Walking home once from school with Anthony Gogler, they'd stopped outside a house with a sprawling garden full of ancient fruit trees, entranced by a pomegranate with weird, erupting fruits. They felt daring, invulnerable. He'd dropped down on all fours, she stood on his back, leaned over the fence, grabbed a couple of the red globes, then they'd raced off with the pomegranates to the Princess Margaret Memorial Playground. Anthony tasted a red pebble or two before deciding pomegranates made mighty hand grenades. That night, Paula had lain awake, sweating. She was too terrified to confess the heinous crime to a priest. Untold till this very day, the crime sat in her soul spreading its contagion. That was it for childhood rebellion. Later, of course, there'd been her Flight into Egypt with Gary, the teenage pregnancy, yadda yadda. But they'd scuttled home to get married and settle down, tails between their legs. Was she going to have to wait for disinhibiting senility to break out again?

'Whoops! Clumsy!' Paula calmly fielded Mrs Beasley's empty tea-cup, catapulted deftly from the arm of her chair by a sly elbow. Margaret must be getting bored. Time to wind up.

'Florence. Lovely of you to stop by again. Margaret loves your visits. It is getting on for lunch-time, though ...'

Florence took the hint and raised herself stiffly from her chair. She was much less sprightly than her older relative. Spite and mischief kept you young, Paula reflected, observing the gleam in Margaret's eye. If the gods sent an anti-social malady to bedevil your declining years, at least you had an interest in life.

The afternoon passed without incident, enlivened by a three o'clock fag with Desirée in the laundry yard. At five, having handed over to the night staff, Paula stood by her car once more, tossing a final gasper behind a straggly diosma bush. She fished her keys out of her bag, let herself in, and sat for a minute, emptying her mind, staring sightlessly at the gravel drive, the elliptical couch-grass lawn, the roses against the nursing home wall. Into her field of vision strolled a girl, nine or ten perhaps, and a slightly older boy, wandering nonchalantly through Holmwood's perimeter fence, as though they owned the place. Joanna and Pedro wore the distinctive red and green uniform of Karinari Primary, whose playing fields abutted the home's northern boundary.

As Paula watched, Joanna and Pedro waltzed breezily through a side door, re-emerging moments later, one each side of Aggie, who'd evidently been waiting for them. The three were talking twenty to the dozen, though Paula was too far away to hear anything. Probably computer-talk, if Ag's growing prowess with the one in her room was any indication. Aggie had been gleaning hints from Karinari kids on how best to digitally enhance a series of family portraits she was working on, with a view to exhibiting them at the Community Arts Centre. No flies on Ag.

Early on in Paula's tenure at Holmwood, she'd noticed the occasional schoolkid scurrying across Holmwood's front yard to vault the boundary fence into Karinari's grounds, cutting minutes off the walk to school. Paula had approached Karinari's principal and extended an invitation for kids to drop over and visit the oldies whenever it suited the school. Kids began popping in the very next day. Now, there was a list of names in Paula's office, there was a gate in the boundary fence, and all but a very few of the residents of Holmwood were involved in some project or another with primary-schoolers. An

Englishwoman was instructing a group of kids in the proper way to make a maypole. Someone else was teaching flower-pressing. Then there was Aggie, using her artists's talents to help a couple of enterprising fourth-graders make fake IDs for lock-ins - cheeky bugger. Paula waved to Aggie and her comrades, strolling around the lawn, cooking up mischief, and started up the Mazda. She rolled slowly along the drive, considering the Holmwood grounds, the couch grass and prim rosebeds. Hardly hallowed turf, was it? Couldn't they put it to better use?

Paula was emerging from the supermarket with fish fingers, a frozen chicken and enough vegetables to salve her conscience, worrying she'd be late to collect Rosie, when a tap on her shoulder made her look up. A vision in a 'Fro wig, spangled vest and skin-tight pants was pressing a leaflet into her hand. *Back to the Eighties at the Pines. With DJ Jude*. Oh, yes, sure. Paula elbowed up the hatchback door, dropped leaflet and parcels onto the floor of the boot, where they lodged against a professional-looking bundle of clean sheets. Paula took her washing to work and did it in her lunch break. The machines were stainless steel monsters that used blisteringly hot water and sent your sheets back spanking clean and disinfected. Towels too. Paula also borrowed Holmwood's industrial-strength vacuum cleaner. Cooking was still not her forte. Staples at home, especially after Dot started teaching, had been chops and veg, sausages and veg, a watery mince stew the kids could chuck on the stove when they got home from school, fish and chips on Fridays. When Paula and Gary had run away together, they'd lived on pizzas and Kentucky Fried for months. Then Gary had taken to Asian cuisine, discovering a flair for it, to the point that he'd come within a whisker of opening a restaurant with an Indian friend. Paula still hated having anyone to dinner.

Sighing, Paula pulled into her driveway, noting the Barbie doll that seemed to have strayed of its own volition onto the front lawn. Just time to put the shopping away before nipping round to Evie's to collect Rose.

Except the back door, she now saw, was standing open. Paula set her shopping bags down on the path to consider her options, but her legs propelled her forward. Should she go back to the car and drive to the phone box two streets away? Her feet kept moving, and now she was inside the back door, grabbing the bread knife from the cutting board on the kitchen table, screaming at the top of her lungs.

'Get the fuck out of my house, bastard! Get out of my house! You creep!

GET OUT!!'

Paula stormed through into the lounge room, yelling obscenities, warning that she'd called the cops, they were on their way, she'd kill the bastard, he'd better leave now or else. Sure enough, there was a flurry of movement ahead, someone blundering around in her bedroom. Just as she burst through the bedroom door, a shiny black tracksuit-behind disappeared through a jemmied window. Paula, still powered by DIY legs, rushed forward, leaning out after him.

'I know what you look like, you jerk! If you ever come back here I'll rip your head off!

Yeah, keep running!

The house became very quiet.

Well, well. So this was blind fury. Paula sat on her rumpled duvet, noticing contents of her chest of drawers scattered over bed and floor. Her eyes glazed over as she stared at a clump of knickers sitting where they had fallen in front of the fireplace. On cue, her knees began shaking, her arms turned to jelly, her limp hand let the breadknife fall to the carpet. How much damage did she think she'd do with a serrated edge, anyway? She'd have to have asked the guy to sit still so she could saw him to pieces. But, hey, who would have imagined such curses spurting from Paula's mannerly mouth? Amidst her shock and late-arriving second thoughts about how it all might have turned out very differently if the intruder had decided to take her on instead of scarpering, Paula was mightily impressed

with her firebrand behaviour. Yeah, keep running. Huh. Yeah, you're cactus, mate. Hee hee. Go get 'em, killer. Paula leaned over to her bedside table and picked up the phone to call her sister. Evie would have to keep Rose a little longer, till Paula stopped shivering.

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That morning, Evie had known she'd been cutting it fine on her way to Paula's. She'd been lured into her early-opener oppie. The usual mess, crowded racks of clothes, boxes of sad posters from dismantled bedrooms, women in overalls and slippers keeping a far from discreet eye on you as you meandered about. Evie was well aware she retained a certain louche look, even at forty-something, a watchfulness that could come across as shiftiness. Add that to her five foot ten, whatever that might be in centimetres, her rangy, loping walk, springy mane that also had a touch of the vulpine to it, her searchlight hazel gaze, she somehow never managed to blend into the background. Straightening her back for the slit-eyed matrons at the till, she'd taken firm hold of a horrible dress, removed it with pantomime deliberation from the rack, held it up to the light, replaced it. When the gorgons went back to their whispering, Evie moved on towards the bric à brac at the rear of the store.

It was all the routine crock pots and irons, hair dryers and toasters, vile heavy dinner plates and mismatched china cups and saucers. From the corner of her eye, though, as she turned to leave, Evie caught sight of a spotty yellow jug, murky yellow, with white thumbprints. The squat curve, the sturdy handle, the milky glaze were all perfect, and Evie's hand closed around it, a surge of pleasure shooting up her arm as real as any that ever reached her bloodstream by other routes. The gorgons wanted four dollars, which she paid without demur. Never haggle over a little hit of happiness, you'd spoil it. But as she'd walked home along the Esplanade, sucking in the soft bay air that hardly stirred the placid shallows of Glenelg Beach, the innocent jug in her bag began working a different magic.

Joggers trotted along the damp sand of Glenelg beach as she hurried past, but Evie was teleported to another early morning, herself the first up as she often was in the Prahran share-house. The morning light in that kitchen always had a glaucous, underwater quality. Evie stood by the door in her art-silk nightie, clutching a few dirty coffee-cups from her bedroom, halted by the sight of a coagulated lump of shadow on the floor in front of the wood stove. It was Kaz, quite cold, her skin grey and waxy, her first OD. Evie could hear Kaz's little girl, Jade, moving around in her bedroom, talking to her dolls as she did in the mornings, used to the adults getting up much later than her. Apart from Jade's quiet chatter, there wasn't a sound; Evie's heart sank as a suspicion grew that she was the only other grownup home. Playing for time, she'd dragged her eyes up from the floor to the disused wood stove, tiled in celadon green, on which stood a pretty yellow jug with white spots, overflowing with irises Kaz had bought in the market the day before.

Evie breathed deeply, sent a brief hello to Kaz on the other side, checked her watch, readjusted the swaddled, treacherous bulge in her shoulder bag, jumped up and down on the spot a few times, then jogged the half- block home. Blast. She was going to be late. Tuesdays she looked after Paula's daughter, as yet only at school three days a week, till next term, when she started full-time. Paula was the only one of her many sisters Evie could tolerate in close proximity, so it was lucky she lived just around the corner. She'd been standing at the front gate, car keys in hand, waiting only long enough to wave as Evie hove into view, vaulting into the yellow Mazda and driving off to her nursing-home kingdom before Evie could make excuses.

'Hi, Rose.' Evie's niece stood at the front door in Hello Kitty pyjamas and slippers. Her aunt whisked the slight figure up over her head and looked into Rose's upside-down almond eyes.

'Okay, skinny, what are we going to do today? Want to go to the Library with me? I've got books to change.'

'You've always got books to change. You'd better watch out. You'll wear out your eyes, ' Rosie cautioned, as she was replaced on terra firma. 'I want to go on the waterslides!'

'Waterslides, then library,' sighed Evie.

'Yay!' Rosie hugged Evie's nearest leg and ran back inside to get dressed.

Paula's house was spartan, one of everything, in its proper place. Evie smiled to herself, same as always, thinking of her own flat, surfaces so crowded with finds that just now, for instance, she hadn't managed to find a mantelpiece or shelf with room for her jug, tossing it on to her bed for later placement. Evie still used her old oyster-grey quilted satin eiderdown, a relic of Melbourne's midtown fleamarket, that used to be downstairs in a basement off Collins Street. Trotting behind Rosie to her bedroom, a sunroom opening off her mother's, Evie saw Paula's bed was neatly covered with its customary immaculate white duvet, the ends pulled tight at all four corners. There was nothing else to be seen in the room, all Paula's clothes stowed in a walk-in cupboard, even reading material returned to its place in the bedside drawer. Smiling, Evie grabbed Rosie, standing expectant at her side, by both hands, and swung her up and over her mother's pristine bedlinen, so that her legs flew out like windmill blades.

On the waterslides, Rosie shrieked fit to chill the blood, but no one turned a hair. So too did all the other tots tumbling down the Magic Mountainsides on a normal summer Tuesday. Evie sat watching on the grass, scribbling from time to time in a black-bound notebook. A character who wasn't remotely herself was the heroine of her current novelette, written for her own eyes only ... playgirl Dana's limitless reserves of cash and daring had taken her to Rhodes, where a Greek lover from Melbourne had family with an apartment by the sea.



*Christos! Bring the boat over here! Dana ordered, languidly.*

*The young man's olive skin, pulled tight over taut muscles as he rowed, was perfection.*

*Under her feet, as she paddled lazily in the azure water, fish swam carelessly, and weed-festooned rocks sat clearly visible on the sea floor, far below.*

*Soon, the sun told her, Rita would be stoking up the outdoor grill ready for the squid Christos had caught, effortlessly, that morning.*

*Would Gino be back that day from Ikaros, or would there be time today for the seduction of Christos that Dana had been planning since they arrived, four weeks ago?*

'Evie! Look at me! I'm going down again! Ev-ee-ee-ee-ee!'

Looking after Rose was no hardship. Child-care was Evie's game these days - kind of a career U-turn - hard to credit she'd turned into such a sedate citizen. It was okay work, even if it was rock-bottom on the status scale. If men really thought it was an important job, they'd be doing it themselves, and paying themselves top dollar. But no, the only nod you got was the occasional come-on from the likes of sleazebag Bruce, on Wednesday afternoons after her nannying gig. Evie, you're so wonderful with the children, I don't know how you do it, why don't I show you my rally-car-badge collection now you've got them off to sleep. Come into my study...

Still, she couldn't afford to chuck in that job. Childcare fees were going through the roof, not that the carers saw much of them, and because so few parents could afford to send their kids, creches were having to lay off staff as well. Evie had more trouble finding work now than when she'd first arrived back in Adelaide. The government wanted mums at home, where they belonged. If mothers were stroppy enough to take jobs, let them call in Gran or Auntie to help out. There'd been a poster in the staff room of the first Child Care Centre Evie had worked in, back in the 70s when everyone was right-on and politicised and they still felt as though anything was possible. It showed a man in profile, hand on

huge, pregnant belly, with the caption: 'If Men could get Pregnant, Abortion would be a Sacrament.' Not any time soon.

Evie was an Auntie, never a mum.

'Rosie! Come on, missy! The Library will be open now!'

'Oh, E-e-vie!'

'Come on - I'll find Hazel's Amazing Mother to read to you.'

'O- kay. Why do you have to love books so much?'

'You love them too, you know you do. Piggyback?'

Later, Evie and Rose sat contentedly in Wendy's. Evie, scribbling again, had Christos and Dana rolling around on the hot sand while the island slept at siesta time. Except Gino, fast approaching the island on a ferry, eyes flashing fire. He might or might not catch the truants in the act, she hadn't decided yet.

Undeterred by Evie's absorption in her notebook, Rose chattered about school, where she'd been recently initiated into the powderkeg world of best friends. Tara was her best friend, but last week Tara'd spent a couple of morning recesses holding hands with Nina. Yesterday she and Tara had been best pals once more, but if Tara was checking out Nina as new best friend, maybe Rose might be left high and dry. And there wasn't anybody Rose liked half as much as Tara, no one else she could imagine linking arms with in the playground, pushing on the swing, dashing off with to hide in the excitingly nasty, wee-smelling gap behind the boys' toilets.

Evie looked up briefly, listening with half an ear to her bright-eyed magpie niece. She smiled and nodded, responding on automatic as she'd learned to do in her old Melbourne life. Bad habit. One of many. She ought to take herself in hand.

Adelaide, safe and dull. The life she led now she wouldn't have called living at all, once. No doubt about it, though, it was so very clear. The blue of the water at the end of her street, the different blue of the sky, the sharp outlines of clouds. Melbourne, looked back on, seemed full of messy colours, rich, tacky and dense, all bleeding into one another. Stabs of light, smells, bursts of delight or fear, shock waves of feeling; and between the jolts, hours and days and nights of soft, cushioning haze. In Adelaide, Evie stubbed her toe on pebbledash reality every minute of the day. Better here, though. Dreams took her back often enough to the other times. Evie ran fingertips over two indentations in the skin at the top of her left arm. None of that for Dana. She clicked her notebook shut.

'Rosie, Rosie, Runny-nosie, what say we go back home?'

Rosie licked out the bottom of her ice-cream cup and sat back with a yellow smear from nose to chin. She held out her arms in a baby pick-me-up signal, grinning.

'Oh, no you don't. You should have extra energy from all that cream and all those chemicals. Come on, we'll count all the green cars we see on the way home.'

'Red, Evie! Count the red ones!'

On Evie's back lawn, where she and Rose dreamed at lunchtime, was an old bird bath. Yesterday there'd been fluffy, white, baby-bird feathers sitting in the basin, decorating the ground around it. Now, remembering, Evie thought to look up, right into the unblinking yellow eye of a small tobacco-coloured hawk, sitting astride a tiny torso whose limp claws dangled over the edge of a branch. The hawk was watching her with its sideways glare.

Evie swept up Rose's sketch pad and pencils and Rose herself, and with a burst of chatter about sandwiches and Milo she bustled them both indoors.

While Rose slept on Evie's grey satin eiderdown, her aunt sat slouched in her squashest chair, resisting the urge to watch daytime TV. Instead she consulted her gallery of saints, cheap prints and a few quality oleographs of the kind that always hung above the blackboard at the front of their classrooms as kids. The picture-moulding in Evie's lounge-room groaned with examples of the genre, which were getting harder to find and more expensive as their kitsch value rose. Evie had been collecting them, drawn as a moth to a flame, since way back when. The resigned, whaddayagonnado face of the Virgin stared out from the mantelpiece. Her boy, Jesus, from the wall above, coyly indicated the gaping hole in his chest. At school, singing a hymn to start the day, the Angelus at twelve o'clock, the children's eyes always met Jesus's or his mum's. Who made me? God made me. Why did God make me? God made me to know him, love him and serve him and to be happy with him forever in heaven. The new classrooms opened while Evie was in Grade Two, polished wooden platforms at the front of each room, windows that opened downwards and swung out in a delightful yawning arc, new desks and acres of fresh, unmarked blackboards, but the pictures stayed the same.

Evie stretched her legs, examining toes misshapen by years of fashionable shoes, and pondered the airy comfort of Clarks brown sandals, the dignity of a yellow straw hat with a grey and blue ribbon bearing the school motto, Veritas, embroidered in front. She saw herself walking home from school with Patrick Pedlar from round the corner - a name out of a fairy tale, the wandering merchant selling ribbons and oranges. Patrick was at ease walking home with girls. Had the same sort of face as Evie's dad, long, lean and olive-skinned, dark curly hair. Brown eyes, or rather, not brown, hazel-green. White teeth.

At that time Evie's family numbered only big sisters Kathleen and Trisha and baby Evie. Their mother Dot had leisure for housewifely frills like sweet slices for recess, milk biscuits sandwiched round cocoa-copha filling. At break, Trisha or Leenie would be there

if Evie needed them, in the big-kids' playground, separated from hers by an asphalt ramp. They all ate lunch in the corrugated-iron shed with slatted forms around the sides. Once a man followed Evie and her sisters home from school. Not too close, but they all knew what he was about, and by unspoken consensus said nothing to Dot and John. Not only was it shameful, it was somehow their fault. Next day they went a different way to school.

A twinge in one of her back molars tweaked Evie back to mid-life actualities. Her teeth were giving her trouble, another legacy of youthful folly. Dot's teeth had been shot as a result of calcium depletion by half a dozen babies. Methadone would do it for you equally well, and nothing to show for it. Dot and John's generation were from the period where well-meaning relatives would pay for you to have all your teeth out for your twenty-first, so you could have a nice set of dentures and no more dentists' bills. Dad's teeth, though, were flawless - a man's teeth don't go because he fathers six children. Hard to remember her parents in the bloom of youth, not so long ago, playing golf, tennis, badminton. Plenty of Evie's friends and acquaintances, Kaz for one, never made it past first bloom. Something to be said for comfortable - or even irksome - middle age.

Getting morbid, now. Evie levered herself out of her chair and went out into the mid-afternoon heat to check her mail. Just a few catalogues. Nothing from the parish, for a change. The woman who kept slipping church leaflets into Evie's letterbox had actually called round the other day. Maureen. Wanted her to come to a coffee morning.

Evie had sent her away, shuddering inwardly. 'Not my thing, love. Sorry.'

So why does she still go to Mass on Sundays, then?

Evie leafed through the brochures and scrunched them all up again into a ball. Catalogues and crime fiction were the sum of her reading matter. Sometimes it seemed to Evie she learned an awful lot from crime novels, sometimes she despised herself for a wastrel. There'd been a time before Dad died when she'd actually got it together to go

back to study. Community Studies. Sociology. Psychology. Gender Studies. She'd been powering along, too. Then Dad had died, and that seemed to put a hole in everything. She'd taken time off, let her enrolment lapse. It's just not me, love, she told Paula, who complained. But that wasn't true. Evie didn't know why she couldn't talk herself into going back to study. She seemed locked into this bits-and-pieces life since John went. Surely she hadn't taken on the course just to impress him? He'd been the kind of Dad who'd ask what happened to the extra two marks when you showed him your test score of 98. And you'd never be entirely sure it was a joke; probably wasn't.

- Dad, how's it going? - Evie took up the running conversation in her head with her dead father, where she'd left off last time.

- Hey, Dad, remember we visited you in hospital down the Bay? Your mysterious hernia operation. We thought babies got hernias when their belly-buttons popped. Mum said yours was from lifting heavy milk cans, whatever that meant. They never let us into the ward when Mum had babies. Lovely place, Pier Hospital, remember, Dad? - it's an oldies' home now. Hey, you never showed us your scar. Hush hush, like your cricket box. Sacred mens' stuff. Remember when your Auntie Peg came to look after us when mum went into hospital to have one of the babies? Was it Sean? That stuffy old-lady smell in the toilet after she'd been in there? Made you seem very young, having your aunt looking after us, just a lad. Miss you, Dad - Evie signed off as, back in the house, the phone rang. She flung the catalogues back in the letterbox and raced to pick it up before the noise woke Rosie.

Uh oh. Maureen. 'Hello, dear. I called in the other day? Maureen van Doren. No, I know you're not interested in the coffee mornings. Only, we're starting a phone crisis-line out of the presbytery, and we thought you might like to be on our roster? With your counselling skills and all. No, I know - but you did do some of those subjects. Don't be modest. I know, dear, everybody thinks it'll be too hard, but you never know until you try. You'd be a natural, I'm sure.'

Cor blimey. Did this gal ever give up?

While Rosie slept on, and to distract herself from the unconvincing Mary Magdalene figure she could see herself cutting as a phone-counsellor, Evie pulled boxes out of the front door onto her tiny lawn, skirted by its rudimentary railing, careless of curious passers-by, unmoved by the lure of the glinting silver ribbon of water at the end of her street. Op-shop treasure was one thing, but she was suffocating in stuff that wasn't even hers. Her enclosed verandah was stacked from floor to rafters with boxes of things from her parents' house. After Dot Haggerty died, two years after John, the sisters had all come crabbily together to sift the leavings. Why had Evie agreed to store - just for a while - the olds' belongings that didn't move in the garage sale? Because she didn't have any kids whose space-requirements she could use as an excuse. And here she was, the last resting place of her parents' photos, kitchenware, tools, clothes, towels, bedlinen.

*Lachrimae rerum* - ain't it the truth, Evie thought. Was there anything sadder than shoes? John had taken his last walk in a new pair of leather running shoes. Very, very white. They'd sat accusingly behind the door in Evie's spare room for two years, and then she hid them in yet another box.

More and more often now, since her parents died, Evie found herself looking at her own goods and chattels with a dispassionate eye, as potential relics. What would a cold stranger make of the two sixties soda syphons in gold and tangerine polished aluminium that sat, still in their boxes, on her pantry cupboard? Of the multitude of old-lady shopping baskets in plastic-covered woven wicker? Would anyone recognise the flare of passion the embroidered aprons in her kitchen drawer had sparked in Evie's breast? Did she understand it herself? Who could she leave it to?

A fluting hello from the front gate, behind her back, caused Evie to whirl around, tossing back dusty tangles of too-long hair.

'Oh, hi, Maureen! You gave me a fright! ' (bloody hell, the woman was omnipresent - was she God?). 'Sorry, I must look a bit gnarly.'

Maureen, pausing as she guided her pristine two-wheeled shopping trolley, covered in to-die-for red, white and black 50s geometric-print vinyl, nodded and smiled.

'Didn't mean to startle you, Evie, dear. Didn't you realise I live just up there, on Partridge Street, near the motel? Looks like you're getting sorted out, there. We'll be seeing you on Friday night at St Leonard's, then. Toodle-oo.'

'Sure, okay, see you there!' Evie, heart sinking, waved Maureen heartily on her way. Rats, she'd never get out of it now. She'd been planning to ring up with a headache. Evie Haggerty, fallen woman, counsellor?

She had just decided that all her mother's daggy towels, a plastic picnic set and a prehistoric electric blanket , plus four perishing school raincoats had to go, when a pink-cheeked, damp-haired Rose appeared at the front door with the phone in her hand. 'It's Mum,' she yawned, passing Evie the receiver. 'She sounds like she's been running.'



## CHAPTER 2

Paula had a morning meeting with Cheryl Ainslie, the formidable owner of Holmwood and two smaller nursing homes at Murray Bridge, and she needed to be on her mettle. But her eyes felt sandpapered now as she sat opposite the blessed woman in her office. She'd spent the night squeezing through milling crowds of students in a suffocating, maroon-carpeted stairwell, attempting to get to her boss's office to defend her filing system. Bloody sardine dreams. Came from being number five of six kids.

'What you're saying, Cheryl,' Paula summoned her inner bitch, 'Is that you want us to keep only the walking dead? We were a Home, last time I checked, not a hospice.'

'Don't get yourself in a state, Matron.' Cheryl had kept faith with power-dressing; you could balance tea-trays on her shoulder pads. She patted Paula down with guff about how conscious she was of the wonderful job Paula and her staff were doing.

'But, if I hear you right, you're suggesting we should show our more able-bodied folk the door.' Paula's hackles were rising.

'There's no rush at all.' Mrs Ainslie studied her nails. 'But we do feel that if there are other places in the community where the well residents could find accommodation, that's where they should be. You know yourself what a shortage of beds there are for those elderly folk in most need...'

'We *are* the community for our residents. They wouldn't be here if they had anywhere else to go, or someone else to look after them. You're asking us to turn ourselves into a glorified terminal ward.'

Ainslie smiled her thin smile. It could all still go either way, it was all a matter of costs, Matron wasn't to worry, no one would suffer - and moved on to the next agenda item.

In the morning-room just before lunch, when sun filtered through the net curtains and made the polished cork floors glow, Holmwood seemed truly homelike. Paula sat with Aggie Metters as she crocheted more of the endless squares for throw-rugs that were sold in the Homes' affiliated charity shops.

'You sold your house to move in here, Aggie, is that right?' Paula held a strand of yellow wool tight between two hands so the older woman could snip it off.

'That paid the deposit, quite a whack, as of course you know. Then they keep a surety on top of that, and there are the weekly expenses that eat up my pension entirely. I'd only get a fraction of my money back if you turfed me out - I'd have to go on the streets.'

'Like that eighty-two year old streetgirl they just arrested in Beijing,' Paula suggested. 'Apparently they picked her up taking a fifty-year old client back to her place. The authorities are so embarrassed that she keeps going back to work every time they let her out that they're offering the local Social Services money to find her a free flat.'

'That could work', said Aggie. 'I'd refuse to stop soliciting unless they gave me a rent-free place. Look at these legs. Pretty sharp for seventy-five.' She lifted a neat calf for inspection and shook it around.

'Killer pins,' agreed Paula. 'Fabulous hair, too, Ag. I'd give my eye-teeth for hair like yours.'

Aggie's hair, a warm brown, fell, when uncoiled, in waves all the way down her back.

'Darn tootin',' she said. 'I could specialize in a Lady Godiva number for punters with a bit more cash to throw around. Frank Flanagan would still sacrifice his first-born to see that,' Aggie nodded in the direction of a fluffy-haired, baby-faced man sitting in a stream of sunlight some distance off, nodding in the morning warmth. They'd known each other since school-days.

What a trouper, Paula thought. And we treat them like empty sauce bottles. Correction - bottles get recycled, whereas we dump Aggie and the rest in these places like so many old mattresses and leave them to moulder. Maybe, Paula mused, picking Ag's crocheting up from the floor whence it had slipped during her demonstration of the hoochie-coochie, I could set Aggie up in our sleepout, instant surrogate-gran for Rose. They could share Aggie's computer!

Paula played with the idea, mentally redecorating her sleepout with a few of Dot's and John's leavings, imagining the Sanderson roses on Mum's best rosewood suite against a cream-washed wall, Mum's linen curtains drawn across the louvres, Sean's old divan bed that they hadn't had the heart to sell sitting beneath them. Could Rose and Aggie share a room? It wouldn't have been such an unusual arrangement a hundred years ago, when families kept their old folk around, and huge quantities of children as well, the youngest and oldest quartered together. Not that she wanted to replicate the battery-hen closeness she and her brothers and sisters had had to endure, squashed into a too-small house, nowhere to take yourself to if you wanted to be private, bedrooms no more than dormitories. The Haggerty kids lived out of doors, unless it was bucketing rain, and even then they would sit in the shed for preference, away from storms inside the house. And from the shed they could also see visitors arriving, which gave them the opportunity to bolt if the visitor was someone like Reg. Paula was off down memory lane again.

Jolly Reg Oliphant, Dad's business partner, little legs planted wide apart to support his beergut, beckons her from their front door, one day they'd been unwise enough to stay put watching TV in the lounge room. Dad's standing by, beaming encouragement. 'Give

us a kiss, love, it's Christmas!' Paula has to get up and let him plant a big fat sloppy kiss, the others snickering in the background. Gross old bugger. He said that about Christmas any time of the year. Paula's twelve, pudgy, still with the protruberant little belly she's always had, that the others kack themselves over when holiday snaps catch her side-on in bathers. Dad calls her his little reffo, beri-beri tummy stuck out in front, skinny arms and legs. Already she's got strong hair with a will of its own, kicking into waves on good days, freckles on a neat nose, fair skin fearlessly offered up to the sun. Paula's were the first Haggerty blue eyes - the rest of the mob, except latecomer Sean, brown-haired, hazel-eyed Paddies. Desperately insecure as she is about her pubescent face and figure, there's no mistaking the unpleasant gleam in Reggie-boy's fishy eye as he puckers up for the ritual slobber. The others make themselves scarce, and Paula joins them in the broken-down chicken coop where they huddle on the old perches.

'Why didn't you come and save me?'

'Cos he'd have wanted to smooch all of us,' that's why, says Kathleen.

'He's disgusting,' complains Evie.

'Ha, ha. You girls have to kiss Uncle Elephant. Suckers.' Sean, cross-legged on the scratched-up dirt, eyes his sisters with contempt.

'Yeah, it's not fair. Why couldn't we be boys?' Paula wipes her mouth for the dozenth time. 'Why can't Dad see Elephant's a dirty old pig?'

But Elephant is forgotten in the shouts of encouragement and sustained applause as Sean, bored with girl-stuff, scrambles up onto the henhouse roof and leaps off, arms spread wide, to land in a graceful roll, scattering dried chook poo. The widening gap between Sean's string-bean ten and a half and Paula's burgeoning twelve is painful, joined at the hip as they've always been. Scrawny little bugger, Sean, thin as a whip.

Cheeky gap-toothed smile, burgeoning finally into a six-footer, drop-dead handsome. Bad choice of phrase.

'Come in, Number Five, your time is up,' - Aggie spoke into an imaginary megaphone. Paula jolted back to Earth; Sean's face dissolved, melting into the old ones round the morning-room. There was no predicting who would hang around for longer than expected and who would pop off surprisingly early. She imagined Sean on his unsuspected last day, popping into the deli to buy himself tobacco and rollie papers. God, let her be blissfully unaware of time running out, just like him. Yet some of the oldies had the enviable knack of behaving as though they had all the time in the world left. Aggie, sitting there laughing at her, was certainly one. 'Might be time for a game of rude-word scrabble with that old goat, Frank,' she was saying, stuffing the wool away in her knitting-bag.

'I need a role-model for ageing disgracefully, Ag,' Paula told her. 'Can I adopt you?'

Paula moved on around the morning room, considering Ainslie's threats. She couldn't bear the idea that residents like Aggie would have to find alternative places. Maybe it'd never happen; maybe Holmwood would be picked up by the Commonwealth as a model facility and funded in perpetuity. Look how they'd beautified the laundry yard, only the other week, for an outlay of precisely nil. Their laundry, where Des and Paula daily slung bales of clean sheets, had until recently given onto a dispiriting expanse of asphalt, the dead grey broken only by fag-ends tossed there by nurses on their breaks. Over this patch of ground an unlikely alliance had broken out between Con Fantis and Milton, Holmwood's resident Famous Person. Milt, a reputable ceramicist of some standing, wanted it transformed into a 'piazza', no less. Paula had encouraged ex-builder Con and Milt to go for it, warning that she couldn't stump up for capital works in the current climate. The two had had their heads together for weeks, and the result was miraculous.

Milton had ordered his ex-girlfriend Rhonda (who often visited although, still only in her forties, she declined to play nurse to an ailing partner) to liberate a ute-load of his pots

from storage in Summertown. A 'coalition of the willing', made up of the burliest two of Con's three sons and Rhonda, had a week ago driven into the yard with a bevy of beauties, tall and spindly, pot-bellied and stubby, conical, cylindrical, four-square, chimney-shaped, every imaginable form and colour, subtly glazed and rough-cast, in the back of the ute. Milton stood by glowing modestly, protesting that these gorgeous jewels were mere rejects. Apostolos, known as Postie, and Stathy Fantis had come prepared to fill them with ornamental-orange and olive saplings they'd grown in their big Campbelltown garden, and compost-rich earth from their chook yard. Although Con, fired up on smuggled-in Cambas retsina, had at first boasted to Milton that 'the boys' would rip up the asphalt in no time, there was just too much of it to tackle with anything less than a TV home-renovation crew. Then, just when they'd decided the trees in pots would have to suffice for the makeover, Postie had rung his Dad in a fever of excitement to tell how, on his way home, he'd found Campbelltown council workers pulling up pavers behind the council chambers - apparently the locals wanted lawn again. Encouraged to follow the blokes back to the depot, Postie had convinced their supervisor to let him take the pavers off their hands - 'for friggin' nothin', Dad!' A day's exertions had seen the yard evolve into something Con insisted looked better than the plaka in his home town on Ithaka - the ultimate accolade.

They'd all christened the gleaming new space with retsina in plastic cups and dolmades courtesy of Stathy's wife. The only cloud in the sky had been a minor injury, which Paula devoutly prayed would heal itself, as Con insisted it would. He'd dropped a paver, which he'd bullied Postie into letting him carry, on his foot. Luckily Con hadn't managed to hoist the stone very high before letting go. One thing the Home certainly didn't have was workers' compensation cover for its elderly residents.

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Friday night had inexorably swung round, and Evie, still amazed at herself for not chickening out, sat in the airless presbytery lounge room, olive-green carpet underfoot, in

a gem of a 60s TV chair upholstered in green moquette, wasted amongst the muddle of ill-matched donated furniture. Maureen, cheerfully introducing herself as 'spinster of this parish', trotted round the room, thick grey bob bouncing, handing out xeroxed pages which would, she seemed to assume, convert the half-dozen unlikely assembled individuals into proper agony aunts. No, what was it they were meant to call themselves? Auditors. Like tax inspectors. Evie winced. Better than 'counsellors' - she didn't feel within shouting distance of being entitled to give anyone advice. In sensible, can-do tones, Maureen was setting out what their role was to be. Listen, listen, listen and listen some more. Any advice auditors might offer should consist only of contact details for the real, credentialled helping professionals, details they would have alongside them at all times when rostered on helpline duty. What they needed to learn in these briefing sessions were techniques for keeping people talking; talking did the trick, for most callers.

'The talking cure, eh?' Barnaby rumbled from a plum plush boudoir chair that belonged in a bordello. He was an unprepossessing bulbous, bald man shoehorned into a tight Fairisle vest, even on a night as warm as this. Prize berk, from the look of him. But it didn't matter what he looked like, did it? They'd all just be voices on the end of a line.

'That's it, Mr Heffernan. None of us is qualified to advise callers. As your notes will explain, you're simply going to be there as an ear, or a shoulder...'

Evie couldn't imagine being consoled by having a boofhead like Barnaby at the other end of her phone, but what did she know? Maureen must presumably have vetted them all, at least superficially. Rita Tierney, the priests' housekeeper, disappointingly not the least like Mrs Doyle from Father Ted, came in with Rich Tea biscuits and mugs. Tea-trolleys and giant teapots must have gone the way of soutanes and berets.

'Maureen, I feel so presumptuous,' blurted Evie, putting her mug on the carpet the better to wave her hands. 'There must be any number of parishioners you could find who'd be better suited to this rigmarole than I am.'

'I don't think so, Evie.' Maureen sat down on a kitchen chair by the fireplace and smiled a mild, vexing smile. 'And it's quite appropriate for you to feel as you do. Does you credit. Once you learn the boundaries we expect our auditors to stick to, you'll feel very comfortable, I can promise you.'

Evie subsided. By the end of the evening she found she'd agreed to be rostered for the parish helpline, Lifelink, scheduled to start operating in a fortnight's time. There would be three training sessions before then, and they would practise on each other. Great. She'd get to hear about Barnaby's non-existent love-life, no doubt. But as they all filed out of the presbytery front door and down the garden path after the meeting, Evie noticed a rather pretty woman standing alongside a green station wagon with 'family' written all over it, waving and smiling, throwing open her passenger door for the Fairisle Kid. What had Maureen been impressing on them all evening? Don't make assumptions. Who would ever have envisaged her little sister Paula bowling down the passage of her sweet little home brandishing a carving knife and yelling death-threats at lurking intruders? Everybody could surprise you.

Next morning, pleased with herself for starting the day with a beach swim, still glowing with the failsafe rush of saltwater immersion, Evie decided to get tough with the cartons remaining in the verandah. Builders at a site two doors down had left their skip invitingly ajar. Her house was possibly the oldest edifice in her area, sitting alongside a crenellated, two storey Spanish-style curiosity, the original Glenelg watch-house. A glance at the roofline of Evie's house told you that those huge chimneys were of advanced age, while giveaway port-hole openings under its tall gables also bespoke real antiquity, in South Australian terms. After yesterday's effort, there were almost as many boxes as before, only now they were conveniently labelled 'Maybe' and 'Maybe Not'. It was harder to ditch the parents' stuff than you expected. Evie sat down in the middle of the lawn and opened the nearest lid.



What offered itself to her hand was a length of sari material, pink and silver. At the touch of the fabric, Evie was back in the Prahran markets, the day she'd bought this glowing length on a whim, for her mother, caught up again in that sudden wash of homesickness, missing Dot as badly as if she were five and standing alone at the school gate for the first time. They'd been in the middle of setting up that first share-house: Evie, Seb, Jonah and Kaz. They had cash, dole money and odd-job bucks; surviving was easier then. The Prahran market wasn't as flash as Portobello Road, Seb assured them with worldly condescension, but Evie loved it. Indian silks glinting with spangles and silver-embroidered borders, hookahs and samovars, Alfred Meakin dinner sets that you realised too late were just like the ones your Nanna left but no-one claimed, mint-condition forties and fifties furniture. They'd chosen a green brocade sofa and armchair, a standard lamp in white bakelite and chrome with built-in ashtrays (everybody still smoked), an overblown-roses rug for the lounge and heavy green velvet curtains. Between them they had enough for all that. The Melbourne look was more European-bourgeois than the brazen, vampish Sydney style, where op-art ruled and rooms were full of lairy vinyl and flokati rugs. Evie's mob did up their rented houses in passé luxury, overstuffed sofas, old silver cutlery bought still resting in blue-velvet-lined canteens; they put up faded prints of Bedouins and camels, languid maidens drooping in desert oases, Victorian fairies and sun-freckled portraits of Edwardian grandfathers in oval frames.

Tossing the pink sari round her shoulders, Evie resolved to be pitiless with the next item. But what emerged now was a bundle of letters she'd never seen, addressed in her father's beautiful copperplate to Miss Dorothy Culshaw, postmarked Brisbane, April 1950. She settled down to read, setting an old alarm clock sitting in a nearby box to ring in an hour, when she was booked to meet Paula for the drink they'd arranged. Evie hadn't heard nearly enough about Paula's Wonderwoman caper.

'Spritzer, right?'

'Thanks, Evie. I'll get the next one.'

'Okay, spill. Or don't you want to? You must be shattered. Was it too deeply traumatic? Shall we never speak of it again?'

'Shut up, idiot. No, you should have been there. You'd have been amazed. Stupid fat git, whoever he was. He was almost a kebab, I'm telling you. '

'Hard to credit, but I'll take your word for it. What a champ. Hey, Paul, look what I found' - Evie waved a bundle of yellowing paper tied with blue ribbon in her sister's face. 'You'll never guess. Love letters. Correct, I said love. From John to Dot from the year dot. When he was away touring with the baseball side before they got married. The genuine article!'

'Eeyeww! Gross. Take them away. What do they say? You tell me, I can't bear to look.'

'It's all my dearest angel, we'll be as happy as sandboys and won't it be great when we're together all the time. I nearly dropped dead. When was the last time you heard him call her angel? But these are soppy as anything. He couldn't bear to be parted from her. Here, wait, here's a bit: "The boys laugh at me, because every time we have a spare hour I rush off to my room to lie on the bed and write to you." Or, wait a minute, wait, what about this: "It will be such bliss when we're in our own place, I'll never stop kissing you." Yeah, and the rest, dirty sod.'

'Oh, god, I think I'm going to be sick.'

'Don't be like that, Paul. It's kind of sweet, don't you think?'

'Are you mad? It only makes it all worse. Look how they turned out. '

'Actually, I got quite misty, reading them. Young and clueless, madly in love, vulnerable as hell. I didn't think John had a soft side.'

'She pumiced it off him fast enough. '

'Oh, for God's sake, Paul. I remember them when there were only a couple of us. You only got to see their bitter-and-twisted phase. Don't forget they could always make each other laugh, right up to the last.'

' Yeah, right, a laugh a minute. They were a disaster. She poisoned it all.'

'Is that right? He was a bully, Paul, no two ways about it. He ruined her, if that's how you want to look at it.'

'Oh, read me another one, then, go on, I know you want to.'

'Umm, wait a sec. This bit's just about how some bloke at the pub the baseball team were at was a bookie and he gave Dad a hot tip that came in at 10 to 1 and paid six bob. Promise of things to come, eh? Paul, why is that guy at the bar staring at you?'

'Oh, him? I think it's the guy from the disco last night. Um. Chris.'

'What Chris? What disco? Look at you, Paul, you've gone purple! You sly dog - what have you been up to? Wave him over, then, go on. Go on! Okay, I will.'

Evie bundled John's letters back into her bag, grinning wolfishly at the mysterious Chris, also a bit pink, who presented himself as summoned to their table, beaming like a lighthouse at Paula. Evie stuck out a hand and pumped Chris's up and down.

'Evie, stop embarrassing me! She always does this,' Paula told Chris, forcing herself to look him in the eye. 'Once, on my birthday - I was only six, but I was proud of being all grown up - this one took me up to the corner shop for an ice cream and then kept asking me in a loud voice how it felt to have turned five.'

'Don't listen to her, Chris, she can take it. She only pretends to be upset, she loved the attention, really. Well, fill me in, I'm obviously way behind the times. You met last night, I gather, which was - wait - Eighties Night, right? I saw the posters. Tell me all.'

'He had a great old tatty cap and falling-apart trousers and braces. And dreads. And a too-big t-shirt,' Paula reported.

'You picked it straight away.' Chris sighed. 'Thank God. All the disco types just thought I was some tragic derro. I was about to go home in disgust. And then she yelled across the room - "Dexy and the Midnight Runners!"'

'Well, yeah,' Paula shrugged. 'It's only because my kids watch our Young Ones vids so often they've worn them out. You know, the one where Dexy is the guest band?'

'What, 'Nasty'? Or is it 'Sick'?'

'Oooh,' said Evie, nudging him with a sharp elbow, 'you're in, buddy. Rick and Vyv and Neil are the way to her heart.'

'Shut up, nitwit.' Paula tittered, then tried to cover it up by getting up to buy drinks, jarring the table and upsetting her empty glass.

'Look at her, Chris, you've got her all in a tizz.'

More drinks came, Chris now gazing bravely into Paula's baby-blues. Evie,

third Corona in hand, steered the conversation back to Haggerty matters.

'I've been reading Paul spicy bits from Dad's old love letters to Mum, Chris. Paula and I spend a fair bit of time together, so if you two hit it off you can expect to be seeing plenty of me. There's other sisters, but we're the pick of the bunch. Paul, did I ever tell you about the time Leenie came to see me in Melbourne? Leenie's the eldest, Chris, then it's Trisha, then me, then Sheelagh, then this little cutie here. Anyway, Leenie turns up at my house, she goes out and I stay home watching telly. It's cold and wet - no surprises there. Come midnight, I'm jumping up every fifteen minutes to make coffee, sort of wondering where she was, you know?'

Rising noise levels from an altercation between the door guy and unsuitably-shod would-be drinkers threatened to drown Evie out, but she raised her voice and continued.

'Well, Big Sis comes in about one with a little guy called Dave. They've been out to dinner. No idea who he was, never seen him before, but he was a looker. Skinny as a rat, swarthy, gypsy, sexy as hell. So they're sitting in front of the late movie with me for a while, it's all getting a bit tense. Then Dave gets up and stretches and looks around and says, 'Where can we sleep?' So I shake my head, tell him no, there's no room, sorry, there's only my bed and Leenie has to share with me. Well, you can imagine, Leenie's sitting there wishing the ground would open up and swallow her, but of course she can't say anything, it's my house, and Gypsy Dave has to go home. Royally pissed off.'

'What did you do that for?' Paula hadn't heard this one. It didn't sound at all like Evie.

'You tell me.' Evie drained her glass and shook her head. 'Something weird going on there. Leenie was engaged to Dennis already, but what did I care? I mean, what was I thinking, doing a Brian Harradine, protecting my sister's morals? I just had this dead-set urge to get rid of the guy. He was pretty hot, that Dave. Small and beaky and bedroom eyes. Ha-cha-cha!'

'So, you do the policeman stunt with all your sisters?' asked Chris, eyebrows jiggling Groucho-style.

'Yeah, watch yourself!' Evie mimed slapping an imaginary baton against her outstretched palm. Whatever the wierd scene with Kathleen had been, she really wanted her littlest sister to be happy, and Evie's antennae told her that the vibes going down there in the Pines front bar were propitious.

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Later, Evie having gone back to her sorting and Chris to his shift - small world - he was a barman at The Pines - Paula tried to cool her overheated brain under a lukewarm shower. Tried not to think of her parents in the first bloom of lerv, for one. As Evie had pointed out, her olds were well and truly wilting by the time she'd come along. Paula stared sightlessly through the stinging rain from her dynamite shower-head, into the mist on the shower-screen, where a bow-tied gent materialised, murmuring a soft-spoken welcome.

*Just get comfortable. Look out at the trees, try and clear your mind. Let's both just sit for a bit. There's definitely something ... there's a very strong presence ... normally, I'd just tell you about what I feel you're feeling, but this time I'm sure there's another ... you've lost someone recently, Paula? Your father? Yes, he's in the room with us - John? He's very keen to communicate with you. He wants to say he's sorry, Paula. He's saying he was too proud to... Dear, oh dear. You lost a brother, too? John says he moped the rest of his life away after Sean died, when he should have been letting you others know how special you were. You're very special to him, Paula. He wants you to know that. When he's sorted out all those things he did badly, then he can go and meet Sean. He says he'll be moving into another place soon. Sean is waiting for him. He can see Sean across a space, a big space full of people. He's going to meet him now. He wants to say goodbye, Paula.*

How she'd lapped up the dapper clairvoyant's words, in his overheated hills house, tears streaming, he must have read it in her face, wanting to be told she was John's best girl, he'd miss her most of all. It was Dot her father needed to square things with, not her. Paula squirted shampoo onto wet curls and tuned out the Far Side. Think about Chris. Was she on to something there?

The night before, Des had let herself in, Paula hollering from her bedroom that the door was open, tossing frilly, synthetic items this way and that out of a suitcase.

'Good call, Boss.' Desirée plumped down amidst the lurid froth. 'I needed to get out. Mum put on a turn, but she just wanted to make me feel bad. Ha ha. I don't.'

'Gary took Rosie. He never minds short notice. What do you think, Des - the bubble skirt?'

'Shit. Sacred relic. No, go for the slinky white pants. Hot as.'

'Ooh, yeah. Do you believe this ruched top? Fuschia. Everything was fuschia. This is the stuff they made 50's kids' bathers from.'

'I wouldn't know, would I? Yes, the giant earrings. Plastic, correct. Pointy shoes, white, check. Will you be wanting fall-down socks with those?'

'Jeez, we look hideous. Des, or should I say Charlene, look at you! Dungarees and puff sleeves - genius!'

So off they'd sashayed, mingled with the garish crowd on the Pines dance floor, walked like Egyptians, lashed about with their rhythm sticks and stepped out the Madison with the best of them. Neither knew many lyrics, which the serious discoites belted out as they bopped, but Des got hauled up on stage by the professional Kylie-lookalike to sing along

to 'I Should be so Lucky'. It was a blast. And then, hey presto, Chris. Tubby, sweet, no taller than Paula, he 'd materialised out of nowhere and monopolised her all evening.

She saw herself again under the strobe, an image snagged on a splinter of her brain. Look at her, God how embarrassing, puffing from a specially athletic round of the dance floor, red in the face, sweating in the nylon bubble-top, eyes half-closed in concentration. And up pops a blushing wee bloke, who announces he's been steeling himself to ask for a dance for hours. He turns out to be an unabashed, sprawly dancer, which Paula loves, matching him flail for flail. He wants to know everything about her. Tongue loosened by the exercise, she tells him, over the noise - gives him her whole life story in short bursts, makes a joke of the lounge-room wedding, Mum thin-lipped in the purple trouser-suit, brother and sisters grinning broadly on the sidelines, Bert well on the way, straining against her cheap jacket. Her and Gary eloping rather than stay in shotgun range, coming back to get hitched. Paula feels a flush of embarrassment up and down her whole body as she hears herself braying. Oh, what *are* you like, you git? Did you have to talk about sex the moment you opened your mouth?

Viciously massaging conditioner through her dripping hair, Paula lets the footage play to the cringeful end.

'All ancient history now,' she tells Chris gaily, 'I'm an abandoned woman!' She bops to the right as Chris bops to the left.

'Ooh, I hope so', Chris puffs, flinging his arms around his head and wiggling his hips.

'.. And my day-job is ruling a nursing home with a rod of iron.'

'And zen ze old ladies are hit about ze head viz sticks...'

'Respect! A Python man! My Bert will love you.'



Chris grabs her hands and swings her around, scattering dancers in a wide arc. 'Does this mean we're betrothed? Do you have *huge* tracts of land?'

Paula took her arms down from her head, smiling. She spoke aloud in severe Joyce Grenfell tones as she turned off the shower taps. 'You've been depressed, my girl. What you probably need is a good seeing-to. Now, stop wallowing and go and buy your daughter's birthday present before K-Mart closes.'

The box promised a real timber seat and felt convincingly heavy. At home, the swing had hung from the strongest branch of the willow tree, but it was a damned spindly willow. Paula saw herself pushing little-tacker Sean, crowing and cackling like a baby magpie, herself eminently bountiful, bestower of all good things, infinitely older and wiser. She must have been all of four, Sean two. She'd intuited the crack a millisecond before it was audible to the human ear, run around in front of the baby, halfway through an upswing, as he sailed into mid-air. She just let him land on top of her, too small to field a fat toddler.

- I tried to be your mattress, Sean, but you weren't having any. Well, since you checked out before you met Rosie, let's make this the Uncle Sean Memorial Swing. Christ, it's good to have enough funds to buy nice stuff for your kids. Remember that awful feeling when Dad would take you aside before the big day and tell you man-to-man how the budget wouldn't stretch to going-out shoes? God, I hated having to smile like that little sod with the fox eating his innards under his tunic, when the birthday came round and you opened the brown school shoes. I wanted to live at Aunty Beth's house. They had even more kids but loads more stuff.

Paula selected a fairy costume, all pink and silver and white net and spangles, plopped it into the trolley with the swing and lined up at the checkout.

- Wouldn't you have loved to live at Betty's, Sean? What a house. Eight sides, like those twirly paper wheels we used to make with a matchstick spindle. I always used to hive off with their Paula, couldn't wait to get into those verandah storerooms. There was a prehistoric baby buggy, remember, more a galleon than a pram, and a cradle like a ship? I'd still be there if they hadn't made us go home, putting dolly to sleep, reading her *The Water Babies*. Shame Rosie couldn't have an orphanage-full of sibs and cousins, like us, eh? But, oh Jesus, nine kids... Right, that's that. I know I've had a shower, Sean, but I need a swim. I've got time to go to the Ladies Pool before Rose gets home, haven't I?

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Maureen explained that the volunteers would ultimately be tested on the brief outline of psychoanalytical theory they'd taken home with them the week before, a decent score being essential if they were to be taken on as Lifelink auditors. Tonight they were going to practise on one another, aided by scripts of actual recorded calls to a similar helpline.

'Hello?'

'Yes, hello, can I help?'

'I feel so awful, I need someone to talk to.'

'That's what I'm here for. Want to tell me your name?'

'Caroline. My mother died a month ago. I thought I'd be feeling better by now, but I'm even more depressed. I just feel as though there's no point to anything.'

'No need to be frightened of those feelings, Caroline. Many people have them at some point in their lives. It's good that you thought of us. Talking will help.'

'But every day is so dreadful. I just don't want to go on.'

'Did your mother live with you, Caroline?'

The scripts had gaps here and there, where the new counsellors were supposed to improvise. Evie found herself transmuted, surprisingly painlessly, into the voice on the other end of the line, the help that was only a phone call away. She imagined she was doing rather well, but Maureen advised her to drop the endearments with which Evie inclined to sprinkle her conversation, another legacy of her bygone life.

'Don't call them 'love', Evie, it's too intimate. They need a little distance.'

'Well, what if they don't want to give us their names? What if I recognise the voice? Surely I don't say, Hello, Barnaby, are you dressing up in your wife's clothes again - don't worry, some of our most famous world leaders did too?'

'Don't be flippant, dear,' said Maureen, as Barnaby snickered unattractively. 'You don't need a name, but if you feel more comfortable addressing a person by name, you can ask the caller whether they mind your giving them a fictitious one.'

'Do you mind if I call you Ermintrude, Evie?' giggled Barnaby.

'Right, time for a break, I think. You're all getting silly.'

Outside by the presbytery fence, Evie smoked a rare cigarette, begged from Maureen, whose one vice this appeared to be. Humidity sat over the suburb, in the wake of the first rain of summer the day before, sweeping down from the hills over the city, soothing jangled nerves and sending hordes of homeowners out into their parched yards to look for signs of recovery when evening fell. In the hills, there'd likely be some pearly vapour in the morning - or perhaps it needed to get a bit colder ... that magical soft mist you

could move through as through a thin sea, wrapped up in a few light layers so the outer one or two trapped the moisture ... an Adelaide miracle ...

That day, they were at The Farm, no distance from town, on the old return verandah with the rusting iron lace, looking down the valley across the suburbs to where the silver tape of sea met the horizon. Roman had killer home-grown grass, Evie remembered that. At some point in the afternoon, they'd gone walking around the property, playing Picnic At Hanging Rock, wandering floatily away from each other into the mist, hiding behind rocky outcrops, drifting out again and wailing softly like lost souls. They'd been traipsing round the hills in a little V-Dub, along a familiar trail, visiting friends who rented storybook cottages at Clarendon, Cherry Gardens or Kangarilla; smoking in front of indoor fires, striding around wet fields. Here comes Louise, sailing out of a wooden hut, spreading her black nurse's cape like bat-wings, strains of 'Yes' filtering down the field from Roman's open windows back up the hill. The mist parts around her as she swoops and sways, closes back on itself. Louise shimmies across to where Evie, pleasantly dazed, leans against a wet tree trunk. She grabs her hand, pulls her out into the clearing. They waft around each other, Gudrun and Ursula at their eurythmics, minus the mad cows. Turn by turn, Louise drifts nearer, catching Evie round the waist and pulling her close. They sway together in the fog, collapse into the sodden grass, Evie humming 'Foggy, Foggy Dew' and giggling. Louise strokes Evie's long hair, whispers in her ear, begins to kiss her cheek. Evie remembers how she felt... alert but not alarmed... nice to be nuzzled by a sweet-smelling, soft-skinned duplicate of herself; she nuzzles Louise back. They exchange a few shy kisses, sit with their arms around one another a long time under the dripping sky.

Evie stubbed out her ciggie, stepping back off the path to make way for an elderly woman negotiating the cracked cement pavers to the presbytery door, dismissing the pesky flashback along with wisps of last night's dream - she'd missed her own mother's funeral, because her sibs hadn't alerted her they were leaving the house in the only car. What a murky excuse for a psyche hers was. For the millionth time Evie contemplated informing

Maureen she'd changed her mind, but instead went back inside to rejoin the others. Swapping from client to phone counsellor and back, the trainees were starting to relax. Evie's easy phone manner, Maureen told her, was a credit to her. She didn't ask how Evie had perfected the art of making strangers feel at home.

*Kimberley! Your life is crumbling away to nothing! And there's nothing I can do to stop it!*

*She saw the accident, saw her sister trapped in the car! How can she possibly recover from a thing like that? I'm afraid we're going to lose her! The only people who can help Kimberley now are a sister who's dead and a father who's disappeared!*

The fat woman with the jowls and hennaed hair and the impossibly deep, fruity voice is at the bedside of her wilting granddaughter. Out of nowhere, disappeared Dad pops up beside them. He addresses Kimberley.

*I'm going to settle down, at least, not here, Kimberley. But you are coming with me.*

*She's gone, I'm sorry.*

*No, no, keep working on her!*

*Any witnesses? Excuse me, ma'am. You witnessed the accident?*

*You've got a few scratches on your arm. You want to tell me how you got those?*

Evie was pasted on the sofa in front of the soaps, drained and tired after all the role play the night before.

Cellos swell, cameras zoom in close. Kimberley, back from the dead, clutches her sister's photograph.

*Okay, Dad. I'll come with you.*

*You're going to have a stable life. We all will. You'll be able to start school again.*

Ay caramba. Rolling to one side, Evie stretched over the edge of the sofa for the battered manuscript from her backpack on the floor. She could do better than this.

Two chapterettes wrote themselves, Evie's pen flying along with a will of its own. Maria, who runs the pension where Dana is staying, has a crush on Christos. He, *naturalmente*, is a stud; delighted at the prospect of running a harem of women. But Dana has her doubts. Christos is way too pleased with himself. So, at dinner in the pension that night, as Maria passes Dana the evgolemono soup, Dana holds her hand a moment, compliments her on her perfume. Maria is a beautiful girl, and Dana likes beautiful girls at least as much as beautiful boys. She sets herself the pleasant task of seducing Maria. It might take a while, but she has time. Plenty of time. Gleefully, Evie sprang Dana upon Maria in siesta déshabille, following through with a dash of door-slamming farce as Dana and Maria try to evade the amorous Gino, coming in search of an afternoon romp.

Ah, fiction, so much less lurid than life. Energy restored, Evie packed up the notebook and unfolded herself from the couch. The hour was sufficiently advanced for her to take herself off to the Bay for a drink. The heat of the muggy day was beginning to drain out of the sky, and it seemed safe to leave the protection of her two-foot-thick stone walls.

Adelaide didn't really do locals. In Melbourne, your local was your home away from home, welcoming, uncritical; Adelaide had never got the hang of it. But old habits stuck, and Evie patronised her nearest watering-hole despite its brassy newness, plate glass and open spaces. Far from being cosily swallowed up by the Pines, you had to run the

gauntlet to the bar, caustic, calculating eyes sizing you up all the way. Evie was modestly proud of the way she could waltz in unaccompanied, sail up to the bartender, demand a beer as though she had every right in the world to be buying herself alcohol, and a man's drink at that. Today, she itched to halt halfway across the floor, stand her ground and stare down the two gormless suits staring and passing remarks they didn't bother to disguise. She took comfort in invading their space, pressing between their crooked elbows to place her order. The men each took a sideways step, studying the bottles lined on a high shelf, till Evie moved off. There were still cantons in Switzerland where women weren't allowed to vote - Australian women were ahead in some ways, weren't they?

A couple of lads were slouched around a drinking post as Evie strolled between groups of drinkers to reach her preferred possie by the window nearest the sea. She noted one, twenty-three or four, with slightly lank dark hair and a Roman nose, shortish, who threw her a look as she passed. Evie caught it and volleyed back. Still got it, girlfriend. His name turned out to be Oscar. He shrugged off his drinking buddies and came over to where she sat by the window, turning his Bolivian charm on full wattage. She'd seen it before. Travellers often had an instinct for a woman with a past, disregarding younger options in favour of battle-scarred veterans. Leading him home in the early hours, Evie congratulated herself she'd got to the point in her life where she could trust her own gut, only slipping up when she'd had too much to drink. She'd come a long way since wet-behind-the-ears days with Ronnie. But Ronnie, that bastard, slipped back into her decommissioned mind at an unpropitious juncture later, as he still had a nasty habit of doing, just when a girl had a right to expect a little uncomplicated oblivion.

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Wednesday after work, Rosie safely collected from after-school care, Paula felt the old urge. Where some single women dived for the gin, with her it was the Jif. Rosie was always up for a scrub, too. Mother and daughter stripped to knickers and vests, Paula got out rags and buckets and ran gloriously prodigal volumes of hot water. The added bonus

would be having her mind occupied, sudsing away a demeaning obsession with whether Chris would ring. Cleaning the bath alone took half an hour, an old claw-foot with enamel in disrepair. Ditto the lovely but loose old dark terracotta tiles on the bathroom floor, which needed careful attention with a soft brush and mild soap if you didn't want to prise any more away from their moorings. Paula got up on a stool and wiped a bleach-laden rag around the painted upper walls above the tiles, bringing them up a treat. She chose a straw broom for the hall and bedroom carpet, as requiring more energy than the vacuum.

The windows took time, too, especially the sleepout ones with their fragile old louvres. Paula had done no more, since the break-in, than replace the broken ones. The sleepout was Rosie's room, adjoining Paula's, built perhaps as an afterthought, with a doorless opening between them. Rosie's soft toys had occupied nearly all the space until Paula slung them into a hammock across one corner. Lately, Rosie had gone right off girly clothes: her wardrobe was all jeans and sneakers, t-shirts and sweaters, no dresses or skirts or cissy shoes. The excuse for this clean was of course Rosie's forthcoming birthday, when cousins and aunts would be visiting to pay their respects and bestow gifts.

'I'm gonna wash that jam right out of my chair,' Paula sang to her daughter. Rosie was always gratifyingly amused by her lame drivel. She handed over child-sized handfuls of things for Rose to make into piles. Rosie loved these sprees, though Paula got the guilts over turning her girl into somebody's future slave.

'Me, me!' Rose grabbed the soapy cloth and attacked the nearest kitchen chair.

Paula stood on a stool to stretch with her rag to the very back of her shelves. In the last decade of her mother's life, their old family house had got grimier and dustier. Mum owned a wheezy primeval Electrolux, didn't care enough to buy a new one. Dot had maybe four saucepans in total, ancient aluminium things, dented out of shape, pitted and pockmarked, handles coming loose, plus the odd more recent enamel pot, presents from her girls. Mum's cutlery was a nightmare, old, scarred, stained and crooked, her teacups



were sticky, her dark-green earthenware plates and bowls never looking or feeling clean, even newly washed. Once, for Mother's Day, all five sisters assembled to clean the ancestral home, floors and cupboards and bath and fridge, but the house speedily resumed its accustomed grot. Eventually, when they visited, the girls would simply wash up whatever dishes were in the sink, sweep the floor, put a load of clothes through the washing machine or bring in whatever was dry from the clothesline, and leave it at that.

As she and Rose restacked the pantry cupboard, Paula shuddered to recall the awful desolation that would wash over her the moment she stepped through the door at Bleak House, even on sunny days, preferable because you could sit outside on the nude expanse of lawn in one of the rickety webbed foldout chairs. Show me the cockroaches! Dot would demand. See any rats? Indubitably, she had a point. She taught all week, and if John wasn't going to move a muscle in the direction of the vacuum cleaner, why should she? So what was Paula's problem? Who was she trying to impress?

Rose, fresh from shower-duty with the water running full-bore, emerged like a drowned rat from the gleaming bathroom to stand in the hallway, ready for the closing stage of the ritual. In neat synch, mother and daughter entered their bedrooms, stepped out of wet underwear and into pyjamas.

'Hard workers, aren't we, Mum?'

'Too right, baby - I mean, big girl.'

'My birfday in one week!'

'Is Daddy having a party for you?'

'My other cousins are coming to his place. When will I be getting your present, Mummy?'

'Surprise! Wait and see.'

'Rosie, there's only one thing we still have to do. Help me with this suitcase. Look at this rubbish. Yikes. *Hate* that. Out it goes! And that. Look at those huge spots. What was I thinking?'

'Mum, why don't you like this?' asked Rose, twirling on tip toes in a cream damask jacket with self-pattern roses that Paula had thrown on to the floor.

'I've gone off it. You have it for dress-ups.'

'But Mummy, this is beautiful.' Rose shrugged on a denim shirt with lasso-twirling cowgirls embroidered on each breast pocket.

'Sort of cute,' Paula said, throwing a satiny swirl of fabric on to the bed and turning back to the suitcase. 'You have it, baby.'

'But *this*, Mummy!' Rosie, hampered by the too-long sleeves of the cowgirl shirt, pounced on the shiny dress as it landed. 'Don't throw this away!'

It was Paula's wedding dress, an A-line ivory number designed to be worn with a jacket, the better to mask embarrassing bumps, cut on the bias and sweeping out in a generous flare from below the bust.

'Mummy! You would look like a princess in this dress. Please, please keep it.'

Kneeling on the floor, Paula regarded Rosie, pink-cheeked in front of the cheval mirror, holding the satin bunched up under her chin so it fell to her toes.

'You have it, sweets. Time for bed.'

Rose fell asleep instantly, so Paula returned Captain Najork and his Hired Sportsmen to their shelf and took her own book out of her satchel. At work, in snatched moments, she'd been revisiting some early stuff, pooh-poohed in her student days, but calling out lately to be re-read - an old Freudian nutter called Melanie Klein, whose analysis of dreams had them wetting themselves in Child Development, every lamp-post a penis, that sort of thing.

A little boy of seven, Paula read in the light of Rosie's bedside lamp, drew 'parallel lines getting narrower and wider. It was the clearest possible vagina symbol. He then put his own little engine on it and let it go up the lines to the station. He was very relieved and happy.' Where once she'd felt confident that this was all rubbish, Paula was now unsure what she felt. Maybe Johnny did want his little engine to steam, parp-parp, right into Mother's station.

'In the second week of her mourning, Mrs A found some comfort in looking at nicely situated houses in the country, and in wishing to have such a house of her own. But this comfort was soon interrupted by bouts of despair and sorrow...The solace she found in looking at houses came from her rebuilding her inner world in her phantasy... recreating her good parents, internally and externally... In her mind she made reparation to her parents... her fear that the death of her son was a punishment inflicted on her by retaliating parents lost in strength.' Did we really go on appeasing implacable, omnipotent parents for as long as we lived? 'Some people who fail to experience mourning,' read Paula, 'severely restrict their emotional life and impoverish their whole personality.' She hadn't shed a tear for Mum. Was she trying to escape from 'the sufferings connected with the depressive position'? Oh, you bet your sweet bippy.

**CHAPTER 3**

Right on eight, the phone rang in Evie's bedroom; the first call on her first midnight-to-nine Lifelink duty. Evie kept Nanna's bone bakelite rotary-dial by her bed; it matched the oyster satin quilt. She balanced the unwieldy receiver on one shoulder. Oscar, international-man-of-mystery-style, had slipped away in the early hours. There'd been no calls during the night.

'Yeah, hi. I've got this friend,' the caller began without ceremony. He sounded young.

'Yes,' Evie said, aiming for calm, reliable, not too chummy. 'Right. Go on, I'm here.'

'Look, this friend is a bit of a worry. I was hoping you could give me some advice.'

'Do what I can, sure,' said Evie, reaching for the glass of water on the bedside table, where she'd also left a notebook with the names of real helping professionals.

'He's writing himself off all the time, drugs and booze. I'm scared one day he just won't wake up.'

'Ah,' said Evie. 'He's lucky he's got a good buddy like you to worry about him. How old is your friend?' She reached across for the notepad, ready to pass on a number for the Second Storey youthworkers.

'Nineteen', said the caller. 'Same as me. His name's Bert. What can I do?'

There was a pause while Evie registered the information. She knew a Bert - only the one. No one had saddled a kid with that moniker for forty years, but Paula's eldest, whose name was Robert, had always, inexplicably, wanted to be known as Bert.

'Well,' she said, playing for time. 'How have you handled the problem so far?'

'I don't want to put him off me,' said the caller, 'so I don't come on too strong. Mostly I just hang out with him, when I can, and help him home and keep an eye on him when he's overdone it. But I can't be there all the time, and I'm scared he'll be on his own one night, and ...'

As Evie drew out the caller's story, she heard that since moving out of Paula's place four months earlier, Bert had been hitting the grog hard. Also dropping pills, not just weekends. He'd been doing bar work until eight weeks ago, but he turned up pissed for work and they'd fired him on the spot. The caller said Bert was on the dole, hanging round his flat, drinking his dole money and doing not much else. Leanne, the girlfriend, was sticking it out, but barely, already spending nights at her mum's.

'I'm sure Bert's mum hasn't the slightest idea he's doing this to himself,' said Evie.

'No, he only goes to see her when he's straight. He'd hate her to know.'

Evie knew who this caller was, she'd often met him at Paula's place. It was Bert's school-buddy Zak - guileless, craggy face, huge feet, gorgeous honey-coloured eyes. She came to a decision. She could only hope that breaking the confidentiality and anonymity rules she'd sworn to uphold wouldn't backfire on her, but she had to come clean.

'Looks like a job for Super-Auntie!'

Into the surprised silence at the other end of the line, Evie explained to Zak that she'd rumbled him. She ought, she said, to get personally involved. She promised Zak that she'd visit her nephew and check out the situation for herself.

'Wicked,' Zak said, 'Bert thinks you're cool.' And, declaring himself stoked, he rang off.

Evie quailed. This was way too close to home. Should she tell Paula? She'd blown correct procedure right out of the water already. Should his father be told? Wouldn't Gary be the best person to tackle this? But she kept her word, immediately calling Bert on the number Zak had dictated, and, finding him home and *compos*, casually suggested she might drop by that afternoon. It being a creche day, she reflected sourly, this would mean all her waking hours would be devoted to keeping children safe from harm. She still thought of Bert as a nine year old who'd grown inordinately tall. Exhaling noisily, Evie slumped back down into her pillows.

The Anglican City Creche sat at the top of the town, a renovated cottage on a prime piece of real estate. In Australian capital cities there was always a glebe, an elevated spot where Church of England pioneers had raised the flag, like Amundsen at the Pole, for God and Country. Uncharacteristically, a hunk of the Adelaide glebe had been converted at no small expense for child care purposes, and here Evie spent three mornings a week, more if asked. Today, Evie hung her denim jacket on her peg, shook out her damp hair, shouldering cheerily past arriving parents and tots into the staff room, in time to grab an instant coffee at the urn before Director Trina read the day's list of reminders and requests. This child had a cough, that one an iffy tummy, another a burn that couldn't be got wet. Since the rain had passed over, Trina said, there was no reason not to take the Big Kids for the usual walk. Evie put her hand up for the job.

Each child took a hat from her own calico bag on her own peg, the bags differentiated by appliqued animals. 'Ducky is mine!' snapped Hannah, pushing aside Sarah who was absent-mindedly reaching for the duck-bag. 'Yours is the piggy!' Evie produced the Magic

Rope, which all the children were sworn never to let drop during their walk, lest the rope lose its magic power. The twelve Big Kids grabbed tight, and they set off. Another day at the saltmines, thought Evie happily, lifting her face to the sun, striking up a chorus of Pop Goes the Weasel as they trotted off down the lawns into the soft, green bosom of the North Parklands. The walk took forty minutes, then Evie handed the Biggies over to Stan, the sole male carer, and moved to the Toddler Room to oversee fruit time. At eleven, after the toddlers' outdoor spell, they settled down biddably enough in the quiet area, leafing through picture books or simply lying back on the big cushions, 'thinking'.

After lunch, with the Big Kids again, Evie helped add more appendages to a large robot-under-construction. Even before stranglehold on childcare funds, carers and parents alike had always willingly lugged along to child care, on the bus or balanced on top of the pram, cartons and foil cans and toilet-rolls, odd wheels and timber offcuts, plastic containers and bottles. Back with the toddlers, the high point of Evie's day came when Stacey, a reluctant toileter, proudly demanded to be enthroned for a wee. Princess Xena, she told Evie, never wets her pants.

From the city, later, in mid-afternoon, Evie took Edwardstown train, which deposited her on the western boundary of Castle Plaza shopping mall. She checked her watch, stepped across the tracks and found herself in the warren of Housing Trust homes huddled behind Target Superstore. Two-up-two-downs and bungalows were arranged around a confusing grid of interconnecting streets. Bert's was a single-storey place on the cusp of a cul-de-sac, behind a paling fence. Evie peered through gaps between the permapine pickets at mushy green-and-red carcasses of defunct VB slabs festooning the bare yard like discarded Christmas decorations. There was a porch over Bert's front door, a wide glass window in the adjoining front room. The dimensions weren't generous, but it was a solid, recently-built brick house. Some past tenant's dog, or perhaps Bert's own, had chewed up any vegetation that might have struggled through the hard-packed earth in the front yard, where nuggets of dry turds were returning to dust. When Bert opened the door, unshaven

and red-eyed, hair standing straight up from his head, Evie grinned, reassured by her nephew's familiar dorkiness.

'Hey, dude!'

Bert smiled back at his favorite aunt, ushering her in, sitting her at the formica table, its design still perceptible under the grime. He made her a reasonable cup of instant coffee, topped up with freshish milk from a fridge that appeared, when Evie snuck a glance, to contain a few vegetables and tomatoes as well as solid ranks of brown glass bottles.

'Mum told you where my new place was, I suppose,' Bert flopped down opposite, propping his chin on one hand.

'Thought I'd do my pastoral duty and combine it with my annual socks-and-undies binge at Target,' Evie prevaricated. 'How's tricks?'

'Yeah, cruisy. Park yourself over there on the couch, more comfy. We've got the dead-derro smell out of it, at last. Between jobs at the moment, you know how it is. Expecting something to turn up at any moment. Covering the rent okay with dole money.'

Evie, on the dodgy brown couch, was thinking that it took a lot of self-abuse for it to show on a healthy nineteen-year old. Bert looked fine, even hungover. He was tall, rather wide-hipped, sleepy-eyed, olive skin like his Dad's. It was difficult to associate him with the Boy on the Edge Zak had described.

'Staying well?' she asked. 'Only, you look a tad peaky. Not abusing your body in the world we live in?'

Bert followed through seamlessly as Young Ones Neil: 'Anyone for herbal tea?'



Evie laughed and pressed an imaginary intercom button. 'No tea.'

The vibes seemed good, she thought. Bert looked okay, even perky, despite the bags under the eyes. He was a big boy, he could handle himself, couldn't he?

'How's the lurve situation?'

'Great, great. Leanne's brilliant. She's here most of the time. You missed her, she's at her mum's today. You should come out with us sometime, hear a band or something. '

'I'm up for it. Need to earn a bit of the green stuff first.' Evie rubbed a Fagin thumb across fingertips - Bert was the Artful Dodger in his Year 10 *Oliver*.

'Gotta pick a pocket or two. What about this Saturday, at the Union Bar?'

'You're on, matey. Now, do you need any socks or undies while I'm on the job?'

Evie had work all week, work she couldn't afford to pass up, so she was ready for a morning off when Saturday came around. She burst out of her house into a sunny morning full of neighbourhood garage sales advertised with hand-made cardboard signs duct-taped to stobie poles. Outside a house near the old Pier Private Hospital, Hernia Central, Evie noted a table of odds and ends and stopped to investigate. More than usual precious odds along with the ends; Evie browsed happily on the kikuyu lawn. A monster hard-cover encyclopaedia, an old red Pears, nearly a foot thick, exerted a magnetic pull. Rosie would love it, it'd be an ace birthday present, brimming with old-fashioned coloured plates. Evie was enchanted with the dated, sure-of-itself information, particularly on the subject of 'Empire', with which the pages groaned.

A stocky, pony-tailed man, whom Evie dimly recognised as a second-hand dealer from a shop near the Goodwood tram station, hovered alongside her, uncomfortably close. He seemed to have a sixth sense for what interested Evie. Anything she was attracted by, Ponytail would pick up a moment before she settled on it, consider with great attention till she shifted her gaze, then replace. With the acute instincts of the true bully, he intuited that what she really wanted was the Pears, which she'd put down, undecided whether she had the strength to carry it home. As soon as it left Evie's hand, although she stood protectively poised above it, Ponytail snatched the volume up, out of her reach. He kept it wedged under one arm while he looked at other bits and pieces. Time passed, and his glee palpably increased. Finally, Evie was forced to catch his eye and ask him whether he wanted it.

'I might, and then again, I might not,' he said, unsuccessfully suppressing a curling smirk.

'Well, could you make up your mind? I'll take it if you don't.'

'Haven't decided yet,' Ponytail replied, furrowing his brow and grinning at the same time.

'I have to go. Do you want it or don't you?'

'Really can't tell. I need to think about it.'

The old girl whose yard-sale it was looked on in evident discomfort, dismayed by the man's tactics but too intimidated by his burly cockiness to intervene. Just then, he decided to play his master-stroke. He leaned across the table to the householder and handed her the book with an ingratiating smile.

'Could you keep this for me till later? No cash on me. I'll come back for it after I close my shop.'

The woman nodded unhappily, throwing an apologetic glance at Evie. Ponytail turned on his heel and swaggered off down the drive. Evie knew she wouldn't get back to the sale in time to check whether or not he'd returned, and that creep had no intention of coming back. She found herself trembling. Chalk up another one to Pigfaced Thugs Inc. Evie's good humour turned sour. She walked off with bubbles of rage popping in her blood like nitrogen in a deep-sea diver's veins. Great fucking ape. You could bet he had a doll-sized girlfriend at home he bounced off the walls like a ping-pong ball to remind himself how tough he was. One of these days... yeah, Evie, what? You'll set up a vigilante group?

Twenty years fell away and she was gingerly removing her semester paper from the tutor's fingers. Leaps and bounds, Evie, leaps and bounds, he was saying. He'd given her an A-, and her heart swelled. She was getting the hang of this; each time was easier. After so many years of non-scholastic pursuits, she'd been so terrified; taken on Eng. Lit. for starters, thinking that at least she'd never stopped reading, but the little grey cells couldn't have gotten too rusty. Yes! Evie gathered her papers and books, stuffed them into her embroidered Greek bag, slung it over her shoulder. She felt ready for anything. If she hurried, she'd catch the rest of the tut. group, who always went for coffee in the Buttery after this class. Bustling happily to the door, she swung into the corridor.

Standing there, leaning against the far wall just opposite the door, sly smile on his puss, was Ronnie. 'Thought we could have lunch together, babe?' Evie stretched a smile across her face, nodded. She felt as though she'd been punched in the stomach, it was all she could do not to double over. He'd gone to the trouble of checking the tutorials lists in the English Office. He was looking into signing up for the same course, he'd informed her. He'd been letting the old brain get soft. Sure, she'd said, good idea, the taste of ashes filling her mouth. Her chest was tight, her breathing shallow. Like now.

*Shazam!* Now Jane shoved to the front of the queue, like an importunate partner at a school dance, though Evie desperately tried to blank her mind and call up a tropical beach. There they are, Jane and Evie, walking back arm-in-arm to Jane's chi-chi inner-

city house, single-fronted old place with a sheltering verandah front and back, jacaranda in bloom on the footpath, warm golden-polished floors, white walls and ceilings, white everything. After the bottle of a delicate greenish Portuguese wine with dinner, Evie felt glowing and open. Jane said she looked fabulous. Jane looked great herself, blunt-cut platinum hair swinging at her jawline, blue, blue eyes. Jane made coffee on the neat fifties enamel stove, they took it into her bedroom to watch the late TV news.

A wonderfully peaceful sensation flowed up from Evie's toes as Jane settled her on the bed. You're sweeping me off my feet, Evie smiled, tipsy enough to be uninhibited, happily curious to see what came next. What came next was Ronnie's face at Jane's bedroom window, swimming into focus through the condensation, printed on the old glass like the Holy Dial on Veronica's towel. With his preternatural radar for any misdemeanours Evie might, even unknown to herself, be contemplating, he'd allowed them time enough to eat, get back to Jane's place and into any compromising circumstances they might be going to. In broad daylight, two decades on, Evie's heart thumped so hard she felt it jumping out of her throat. He'd made her pay for that almost-dalliance, for years and years. That schlock-horror still of Ronnie's face taking shape in the misted windowpane still unstitched her completely.

Evie found she'd walked on to the Church Hall, face no doubt set like concrete; she could slip in and see whether they had any crossbows marked down. In the back room were baskets containing only aprons, dozens, frilly short ones, pinafores with ric-rac trims, hand-embroidered cross-stitched ones, some in flirty, filmy fabric that could only conceivably have been worn to serve cocktails and canapes. Like the gloves in a neighbouring basket, icons of a disappeared women's universe. There was an old cellophane pack of stockings in amongst the gloves, very fine, silky nylon, size 9. Evie had been a skinny 9, at school, just before the invention of panty-hose. Fervently, as she regularly did amongst the lovingly cared-for, hand-made and mended apparel of departed women, Evie longed for the relief of all passion spent, backgammon games with the vicar, safe haven after a lifetime's storms. For two dollars she bought a flamingo-pink crocheted

bedjacket with a silk ribbon drawstring at the neck. Thick-necked oafs didn't exist in the bygone world of doilies and hug-me-tights. Sure, Evie grunted to herself, and I'm to be Queen of the May. She pushed the jacket to the bottom of her bag and set off at the double for the tram stop. She had a tram and a bus to catch to her Saturday arvo Mary Poppins gig.

As she sorted toys into a blue plastic cube, Evie mentally ticked off the children from the *7-Up* series who'd just recorded the *42-Up* episode screened on SBS the other night. The adults' retreating childhoods seemed ever more miraculously innocent, despite their having been already cast as tinies for their grownup roles. Sometimes that early imprinting of values seemed the most shocking thing, other times it was the way their childish bodies shimmered with energy, the unspoilt souls shining out of their eyes, innocent despite the dreadful guff they parroted about going to 'Mohlbrugh' and Trinity and poor people bringing down the tone of their school. Neil and Bruce were the saddest, while plain little Lynn was fascinatingly sharp. 'I know who her boyfriend is. We all like him, but I know which one he'd choose - her!' Lynn and her other plain friend point together to the pretty one, Sue.

The boys had grown up to be a lawyer, a jockey-turned-taxi-driver, a BBC producer, a diplomat; the Afro-Caribbean boys'-home lad was a fork-lift driver. Biology had been destiny for the girls, not that the program pointed it out - welfare single mum, librarian mum, single mum law-school receptionist, all struggling except Lynn, with help from an exemplary husband (but she had a life-threatening illness). Outcast Neil, the unpaid Hackney councillor, was the wild card. It was agony each time they flashed back to Neil, the most angelic child of them all. He wanted to be a coach driver so he could take people from the town out to the country, and people from the country to town. Or an astronaut. You saw him dancing around the school gym with other kids from his class, waving his arms, weaving up and down, skipping home in his adorable little duffle coat. Next time he appeared, at fourteen, all that was already gone. Teenage Neil had broken

front teeth that never got mended, his adolescent brow was furrowed, the weight of the world settling on his shoulders.

These two innocents at play on the rosy terracotta-tiled floor alongside Evie, their soft hair kissed by muted sunlight, dappled by landscaped shrubs outside, cascading through French doors, were heading for an Australian version of the Marlborough-Trinity scenario. Poor little sods. Poor, lucky little sods. One little boy, one baby girl.

'Come on, Joey, which cup goes in this cup?'

'The red one. No. The blue one.'

'Try it and see. See? The red one is much too big.'

'But the blue one fits!'

'Yes, but does another one fit better?'

'Yes! The jellow one.'

'That's right. And is the blue one smaller than the yellow?'

'Yes! The blue fits in the jellow!'

Another hour to go.

Jana was sitting with the soles of her feet together, the way even fat babies can. She was glued, as ever, to the antics of her older brother. She adored Joey. He could do no wrong, even when, if no one was looking, he knocked her experimentally on the skull with a wooden block, or sat on top of her, or pushed her over (mostly but not always

accidentally, en route to something else). Jana would only gurgle, grin and clutch a handful of his clothes, the better to keep him in her orbit. The three of them sat on the floor of the living room, an extension on the back of a bluestone-fronted villa, an Unley gem. A combustion heater sat in one corner, Afghan rugs dotted the tiles. Evie was at liberty to make herself very good coffee, sandwiches with whatever expensive deli goodies stocked the fridge, read the glossies from under the Danish-modern coffee table if both kids were asleep. Jana was looking a little glassy-eyed; would probably drop off if put her in her cot. Joey rarely slept during the day, now. He was just four, a bright four, needing stimulation all the time.

This should be the highest-paid work there is, Evie thought for the trillionth time, tucking her hand-appliquéd quilt around Jana's plump legs. In the few minutes she was out of the room, Joey had decided water-colours were the order of the day, dragged out the paints set, filled a mug with water, and sat himself down on the floor. Evie provided butcher paper, paint brushes and an attentive audience for the next twenty minutes. When the key turned in the back door at one o'clock, Evie knew without looking that it was Bruce who'd arrived home first. He came over and rubbed her back as she cross-legged next to his son.

'Good morning?' he asked, oozing what he thought was charm.

'Yes, great. I have to run, though.'

'What's your hurry? Here, have a wine with me before you dash off.'

'No, truly, I want to catch the next tram.'

'Wait, here's Marg home, I can run you to the stop, then.'

Christ, would she never get away from the Stones's without being manhandled by Bruce, either in the house or in the car. The too-lingering hug when she tried to get out at the tram-stop, the little squeeze of the arm that turned into a pressure on the adjoining breast. Never more than a minute's worth, but nauseating nonetheless. She fantasised the teensiest, cutest crossbow, designed for your jeans pocket, which would shoot Lilliputian bolts into errant appendages.

At the front door of Evie's flat, as she wearily approached it in mid-afternoon, a woman was waiting: tall, straight-backed, ample wavy brown hair, strong nose and an alert air. Evie's spirits shot up again, like a puck up a test-your-strength pole hammered by the likes of Ponytail. Auntie Joy, seventy-eight going on thirty-eight., still working as receptionist for her son the physiotherapist, visiting more fragile peers in hospitals and hospices, feeding whichever stray happened along, walking to early Mass in the mornings. Shooting baskets in her backyard in idle moments. She hugged Evie, explaining she'd been to see their old auntie Imelda. Most of the female line on the maternal side of the family lived to fabulous ages, excepting Dot. Settled in the front room, in the fat sage-green brocade chair that had been Nanna's, Joy balanced a cup of tea on one knee and admired the new salmon bedjacket.

'This might easily have been Mum's,' she said. 'Nanna liked to have something warm and soft over her shoulders when she was reading naughty novels in bed.'

'Lives of the saints. Why didn't Nanna ever marry again, do you think?'

'She couldn't even if she wanted to. Divorce not allowed in the Church. You know that.'

Evie smiled at an image of her formidable grandma, barricaded behind barred doors against an army of suitors. 'What about you, Joy? I bet you're beating them off with sticks.'



Her aunt raised a dark eyebrow. 'I won't say there haven't been offers. But they're all old fogeys. I'd prefer a toyboy, if I was going down that road. '

' Leave it to me,' said Evie, tapping her nose. Joy laughed.

They settled down to gossip. Joy's lads - early and unavoidably tagged the Joy Boys, though the reference was fast becoming shrouded in the mists of time - had mostly married and stayed that way. When the Haggertys and the Malones, with their matching tribes of children, had been knee-deep in teenagers in the psychedelic dawn of the 70s, Joy had briefly dropped her bundle. Uncle Bill reinvented himself, a Snag before his time, taking his boys with him, sharing cooking and cleaning duties, as proud of their bacon-and-egg pies as they were of cadet kit polished so you could see your face in it.

'I can't see him bothering to find anybody else,' Joy was saying of her Steve, recently separated. 'The others are always trying to set him up with Glenda this or Maggie the other, but he just says no, thanks.'

'There's a certain amount of drive you come programmed with, don't you think?' suggested Evie. 'Sounds like I'm selling washing machines. Not sex exactly, more a life-force thing.'

'Steve was always more interested in the Bee Gees than girls, but he was *very* interested in them. Break out the cooking sherry, my lass. What about you?'

Guard lowered by some of John Haggerty's amontillado gathering dust at the back of a kitchen cupboard, Evie was suddenly telling her aunt the story of her first time. A date with a uni student, curfew supposed to be midnight. There'd been a general swill in the British Hotel, then a blank, then she was dropped home at two in the morning, sick as a dog, no longer a virgin. Dot and John left her alone in her room for a whole day where

she lay in bed waiting to die. Neither of them spoke to her for the rest of the week. Frosty relations were then resumed.

'I've lost the missing bit, 'Evie told her aunt. 'Nothing. Blanksville.'

'That was date-rape, 'said Joy. 'If you'd had a clue, you could have had his guts for garters.'

'Nah, doubt it, Joy, not back then.'

'Don't know whether you girls had any better a time than we did,' said Joy, pulling a cigarette out of her bag and crossing her legs. 'We went out in groups. Took the pressure right off. Girls went home in a big mob together after dances. So did the boys. You knew where you were.'

'I said zilch about it to anybody,' Evie said, seeing herself - the skinny, wannabe-worldly teenager, all long legs and white stockings and pancake makeup. 'I didn't have the sort of girlfriends you could gossip about sex with, and there was no one to talk to at home. Trish and Leenie left me out, and the others were babes.'

'Poor sweetheart, ' said Joy. 'I wouldn't have been much help, would I? Being ga-ga at the time.'

'Like a fox,' said Evie. 'It made all the difference to know you were there when we were growing up. Speaking of which, you might be able to give me some tips. I'm about to hit the town with Paula's Bert.'

*To Save Them From The World...* Saturday morning, in the laundry of her maisonette Paula was gathering stacked newspapers dating back years, stored for mulch on a vegetable garden that never eventuated. The faded headline stared out from the top of a string-bound pile. Paula remembered the story: Peter Shoobridge had slit the throats of his daughters as they slept. One had woken up, fought for her life and lost. The father phoned police, cut off one hand then shot himself with the other. Paula ran an eye down the article: suicide note saying he didn't want his girls to live in the world the way it was. Yeah, like it's your decision. A sudden flood of fury rushed up Paula's throat. She itched to charge into the street roaring like a lioness, ditching petrol bombs into front bars, summoning women to evacuate their homes and gather together in places of safety, give up the insane notion of living cheek by jowl with murderous apes. Heart racing, Paula grabbed the bundle, ripped off the offending page, balled it and threw it with all her strength at the laundry wall, where it slid innocuously to the floor.

Standing there, shaking, Paula registered that the dim drumming noise she could hear from the front of the house was someone knocking. She pushed back her hair and rotated her jaw, aware that it was locked in a spasm of rage. At nine o'clock on a Sunday morning, she wasn't expecting to be disturbed. But when she flung open the door, there, standing on her front lawn, shading his eyes from the sun, looking unusually fragile for her bouncing boy, was Bert. Mother-love burning up man-hatred in a white flash, Paula's smile widened so far it wiggled her ears; she wrapped her arms around her boy and he hugged her back, standing head and shoulders above her as he'd done since he was seventeen.

'Hey, mumbo!'

'Mumbo Italiana!' Paula chirped, muffled, against Bert's chest, the dumb routine they always struck up on meeting, ever since Bert heard the silly old song on the radio one day years ago.

'How goes it, mumbellina?'

'I'm good, good, everything's good,' Paula said, letting him go. 'What a lovely surprise. You're looking a little grey - burning the candle again?'

'Yeh, you know how it is. You're only young once. I want to live, live, live! Come on in, ma, let's have a cuppa.'

'Yes, yes, let's. Sit down, take a load off. Rosie'll be back soon, she's just gone off with Tara for a swim. Seems like so long since I've seen you.' Paula pulled down the teapot, sluiced it with hot water from the tap, sat opposite her boy while the kettle popped and gurgled.

'Let me do that, Mum. You sit. ' Bert took over the ritual, opening the fridge door, locating the milk carton where it always was without having to look.

'How's Leanne?'

Bert kept his eyes on the table as he poured milk into a jug and shuffled the teacups closer together.

'Leanne and I have decided to call it quits for the time being, Mum. It wasn't working too well.'

'Oh, Bert! What went wrong?'

'Nah, it's all good, Mum. These things happen. We came to a parting of the ways.'

Paula pursed her lips into a crooked smile and raised an eyebrow, wanting to convey sympathy and affection without seeming intense, trying not to appear in any way to be

passing judgment. Hard to make your face say all that. She lifted her teacup so she could break eye-contact with her son.

'I hope you're not too sad, Bertie,' she offered, looking up again, feeling lame, deciding now wasn't the time to mention Chris.

'No, no, don't worry about it, Mum. Look, we're still mates. She's gone back to live with her mum for now, but that doesn't mean we won't get back together.'

'Good. I like Leanne. When are you going to ask me around to your house, then? I've cleaned this one to the point where you could eat off the cockroaches. You know me. I'll have a go at yours, anytime you like.'

'Actually, that's the other reason I dropped by. I'm asking you and Evie to the first dinner party chez moi. Today week. Seven thirty.'

'Love to. What shall I bring? Anything I don't have to cook. But you'll be here tomorrow for Rosie's party, won't you?'

Bert said he was planning to take in a band that evening, but promised to be on time for Rosie's Sunday do, staying to help set up a trestle table on the back lawn, along with Evie, who turned up after Joy had gone home. Rosie was being delivered back to Paula from her father's bright and early so that the Haggerty aunts and cousins could pay tribute at lunch time. When Bert pushed off, Evie remained to make fruit-juice ice-blocks and chocolate crackles.

'Paula, where are the rice bubbles?'

'Wait a sec, Evie, I have to call Gary to tell him Rosie's going to Tara's on Friday after school. I'm bound to forget tomorrow. Make us a cuppa, eh?'

Paula dialled Gary's number on autopilot, one eye on Evie rummaging in her restacked cupboards.

'Try the top one on the left. I've moved the cups. Yes, that's the ... Oh, hi, Trish! God, I really am losing it. I thought I'd rung Gary. Oh, right. Yeah? Talk about a faithful customer. Yeah. Okay, yeah. Could you put him on? And how about including us in your hectic schedule next time, eh?'

Evie was pouring water over teabags in coffee cups when Paula put down the phone, but Paula didn't notice.

'Guess what? Trish is getting her car fixed at Gary's. No mechanics worthy of the name on KI, apparently. And she's staying over for Rosie's party, so it looks like all the members of the sorority will be present. God, this tea is strong enough to strip paint. Ah, I see. Half-size cups, full-strength bags. Eeyew.'

## CHAPTER 4

Evie tried to be dispassionate about her lanky body and heavy breasts. She aimed to one day be genuinely indifferent, to consider the body simply as a vehicle for getting around in, a machine for necessary tasks. Her mantra was Ru Paul's line: 'born naked; the rest is drag'. Would it be better if everyone swanned around nude? In nudist colonies people become immune to each other's dangly bits and look at one another's expressions instead. Looks silly to paint the face when the rest of you is naked - and why bother, when the lads would rather be off fishing a river far away?

Whenever she had to get dressed up, Evie ran through her personal list of women who hadn't given a toss and yet had acres of admirers. Tonight she was thinking about Pam, her friend Barbara's mum, who'd lived on a farm outside Geelong, never consulted a mirror from one month's end to the next, had had a breast removed and didn't care who saw the long scar over the missing mammary. Pam lived in jeans and cowboy-boots, never without a bloke at her heels like a puppy. When Pam tired of a hanger-on she'd send him packing and revert to contented solitude. She'd be Joy's age now, men still doubtless panting at her door. Standing at her mirror, Evie had a vivid recollection of skinny-dipping in a waterhole on that farm, herself and Barb at the peak of youthful perfection but feeling strangely outshone by Pam in her negligent maturity. Pam sat on a huge boulder overlooking the pond, unselfconsciously displaying her fascinatingly lopsided chest, alongside her current boyfriend, some muso or poet, who lay sprawled on his stomach, gazing up at her adoringly. Where had Pam come by that confidence, so total that she never felt the need to compete or show off, so utterly innate you'd never think to be jealous of her?

Okay, in honour of Pam, no makeup tonight. Well, just a winnow with the mascara wand and a dash of gloss. Oh, crap, still look like death. Lippy over the gloss. Smidge of concealer over that vile spot. Done. And clothes - world not yet ready for the Whole Woman. Evie considered. Jeans and denim jacket would be fine. It was a Tavern Night at

Adelaide Uni union bar. The Mentals, of all people, back on another tour celebrating 25 years on the Oz rock scene. Reg Mombassa and his enigmatic brother - the upcoming generation seemed to like them as well. Bert was picking her up in the battered white Gemini at seven thirty.

As the Mentals launched into a third set, new stuff from the Garage double album, Bert seemed to be comfortably propped at a drinking-post by the windows on the river-side of the bar; Evie had been keeping discreet tabs since they arrived. She was leaning on the sticky bar, nursing her third beer. She'd been catching the eye of one of the roadies all night, at first unintentionally, then, realising he was deliberately looking her way, with more consideration. A middle-sized guy, lots of dark, springy hair, not much taller than herself, he finally strolled over and introduced himself. George, he was called. Greek, or Greek-Armenian, he revealed, Melbourne-born and now living in Adelaide, one-time travelling roadie with various outfits, now working in a bookshop, studying law part-time, making a few bucks setting up for gigs like this one when he got the chance. Cripes, thought Evie, maybe his family's got an apartment on a Greek island.

'You look more like a brickie than a student, no offence,' she told him, eyeing the strong forearms, battered-looking hands and broken fingernails.

'Nah, you're right. I've done a lot of building over the years with Harry. That's my dad. We rebuilt our place in Carlton when I was in my teens and then he got tons of work from friends who wanted to do the same sort of stuff to old places they'd bought. I moved onwards and upwards into lugging heavy amps around for a living.'

'I remember friends of mine talking about a Harry the Builder. Aeons ago, of course. Melbourne was the stomping-ground of my youth. Came back to Adelaide when my mum got sick. Still here, couldn't say exactly why. Inertia. Comfort-zone. Drives me mad, lots of the time. How did you end up here?'



'Came across with Hunters and Collectors one time on a summer tour. Fell in love and had a stab at settling down. She buggered off with someone else, but I'd kind of bonded with the place by then, started studying, had a normal sort of job. Still here.'

'Are you with someone else now?'

'Between gigs, you might say. What about you?'

'Not so much resting as out to pasture.' Evie smiled a lazy smile.

'Bull. Lots of life in the old girl yet, I'd say.' George looked into her eyes and let a grin spread across his face. Evie felt it all the way down to her toes.

During the increasingly absorbing minutes of her chat with George, she'd briefly forgotten Bert. Evie looked across the room now. He seemed to be sort-of slumped forward, still standing, but leaning on his elbows and with his forehead against the pole.

'George, would you excuse me for a minute? I'm here with my nephew, and he looks a bit under the weather. I'll just go and check.'

'I'll come - no bother,' said George, sticking close as Evie wove around drinkers between her and Bert.

'Whoo, doesn't look too clever, does he?' George smiled reassuringly, as Evie's nerves began to scream. 'Do you think we should get him some air?'

They each took an elbow, half-lifting Bert upright. They frog-marched him into the lift and down to the ground floor, where he let them drag him across the quadrangle and over to the lawns. He was as white as the dickie-front of Evie's man's dress shirt as he lolled against it, and fat beads of sweat glimmered on his forehead.

'Maybe I shouldn't have had that last drink,' he managed.

'Only beers, was it, mate' asked George, easing Bert off and down into a sitting position.

'Ah, well, I might have had the teeniest little eckie,' Bert confided. 'I'm just a bit warm, that's all. I'll be fine in a minute.'

So saying, he slithered backwards into a supine sprawl, and lay there like a dead man.

'Shit, George, what do we do?' asked Evie, her bowels turning to water, once again standing helplessly in that gloomy Prahran kitchen. She tried, gathering her strength with a huge effort, to forestall the shaking she could feel setting in, unable to prevent herself clutching George's hand.

'I'll get some water, and we'll pump that into him. Check our options then. Don't worry, he'll be okay.' George squeezed Evie's hand in his, then sprinted off.

He came back very quickly with two beer-jugs full of water. While Evie held Bert upright, George poured plastic cupsfull one after another down his throat. Bert's forehead began to feel less clammy, and his colour returned slowly to a sort of pinky-grey.

'The water's going down alright,' George said. 'But we need to keep it up. We should watch him till he comes back down to earth.'

'You needn't do this, George.' Evie's ragged breathing began to return to normal. 'You've been great, but we're spoiling your night. Why don't you go back to the bar? I can cope with Bert now.'

'No, no. I want to stay.' George took Evie's hand again. 'Our first date.'

Evie felt herself relax, warmth spreading out from the middle of her stomach, up and down her arms and legs, into the tips of her fingers.

'Ha ha,' she said. 'Welcome to the family.'

'Christ, anybody get the number of that bus?' Bert lifted himself on one arm, attempting a watery grin. He was stretched out on Evie's chaise-longue in the glassed-in verandah.

'You'll bounce back. I don't know how you would have pulled up if George and I hadn't been there, ya dumb bunny. What are we going to do with you? What would your mother say?'

George emerged from the bathroom, towelling his hair. 'She's not wrong, laddie,' he observed in avuncular tones, slightly quaint from one not more than a half-dozen years older than the patient.

'Shit, don't tell Mum,' whimpered Bert. 'I'll be good, promise. Look, you know when you've maxed out your credit card, okay? Booze or drugs, not both together.'

Evie and George raised synchronised eyebrows.

'Not good enough, bro,' said George. 'Not until they start selling government-regulated Es at the corner store. Never know where the stuff's been. I've seen a lot of tragic mistakes around the music scene, take it from me.'

'Yeah, I know, man.' Bert looked convincingly chastened and contrite. 'Just kidding. But please, not a word to mother.'

George was sitting alongside Evie, his arm around her waist .

'You've got an aunt in a million here, pally,' he said. 'If your Mum's anything like her, she'll handle it like a champ.'

'That's right, Bert. I feel bad keeping this from Paula. Why don't we call her over for a chat?'

'God, no,' muttered Bert. 'No, really, don't. She'd go spaz if she thought I was 'doing drugs' ' - Bert twiddled his fingers to mime quotation marks. 'She'd sketch out, I know she would. I don't want to do that to her. Let's keep it to ourselves, okay? It won't happen again. Pleeeeze?'

Bert smiled a wan, crooked smile that squeezed Evie's heart.

'Well, I suppose,' she said, unable to prevent herself beaming a hundred-watt glow in George's direction. 'And now I guess I make a vat of tea and a tower of toast to restore the wounded?'

'Perfectamundo' said Bert, not failing, despite his impaired faculties, to pick up on the filaments of electricity snaking all but visibly between his rescuers.

They made it around to Paula's by twelve. Trish arrived before any of the others, bubbling over with inside goss about Gary's Jenny and her neurotic attachment to her new puppy.

'Now, Trish, that's unkind,' Paula tried to tug back the side of her mouth that was stretching of its own accord into a nasty smirk. 'She *sleeps* with it? Well, I guess she's a bit long in the tooth for babies of her own. Ouch. Did I say that?'

'I I suppose Gary must find her attractive. Behind that bony exterior beats a heart of gold. Or something.' Trish was stacking the six-pack of Boag's she'd brought into Paula's fridge. 'My

old Renault's past it, as well, Gary says. Or nearly. He thinks he can source some hen's-teeth bits and bobs at some bush mechanic's at Finniss Creek. I have to pick it up next time I come over.'

'Can you borrow Ash's truck, or something?' Paula asked, as the doorbell rang to announce the next of Rosie's devotees.

'No sweat,' called Trish after her. 'Ash's Mini still goes, neolithic engine and all.'

Paula came back up the hallway with Leen and her gang in tow. Rosie dashed into the kitchen from the back yard at the same moment, squealing as her cousins held up their luridly wrapped gifts. The sisters grinned at each other over the heads of their offspring as pink and silver paper began to fly.

Sheelagh arrived last. The trestle table was groaning with party-pies and sausage rolls, Rosie queening it among her rels, graciously adding to her umpteen Barbies with a myriad dolly accoutrements a set of hot rollers from Aunty Sheel.

'Mum, Auntie Sheel gave me these to curl my hair for parties!' Rose waved the box of bright green spiky cylinders on pegs.

'Did you say thank you to Auntie Sheelagh?' Paula bared her teeth at her sister over Rosie's head.

Sheelagh snickered. 'Mummy will have to help you a little bit, Rose. Only for special parties, not every night.'

All the cousins were older than Rose, although Leenie, the eldest, had the next youngest offspring. They were helping Bert unpack Rosie's swing, offering to climb the blue-gum where it was destined to hang. Leenie's bloke, Dennis, was taking charge, fishing out the

extendable ladder Paula kept in her garden shed and propping it against the naked grey trunk. Sheelagh and Dennis held the ladder steady while Bert, still green around the gills, gamely climbed aloft to demonstrate his rope-knotting skills. Cousins congregated below to yell instructions and advise caution.

'It's not Everest, you guys. I could jump down from here easily.'

'Move that rope over further, Bertie,' called Rose. 'You're making it too squashy.'

The Uncle Sean Swing was set in motion, and the youngest cousins queued for turns, after the birthday girl had had an appropriately long go. The Haggerty sisters, mothers and spinsters, set out plastic cups and plates and fished around for matches for the candles on the cake, along the lines of countless such occasions in the backyard of their own childhood. Dot had grown less inclined to hold grand parties after one or two ambitious events for her eldest girls left her shattered. The youngest forever resented the older ones for having been allowed to ask all their classmates to those few legendary, glorious celebrations.

Sheelagh had photographs to show of her most recent overseas sojourn, six months in Rio, whence she'd recently returned with the diplomat's family she'd been nanny to for six years.

'It wasn't as glamorous as it sounds, gels,' she told the others.

'Sure, bet you wish you'd stayed home,' said Trish.

'Well, no. But there's awful poverty everywhere and it's quite dangerous. Much safer here.'

'Who wants safe?' asked Paula, tossing back the last warm beer in her plastic tumbler.

'You do, drongo,' said Evie, elbowing her in the ribs.

'Not me,' said Trisha. 'Live for the moment. Ashley sends his apologies, by the way. He had a surfing lesson he couldn't cancel.'

'That's okay,' said Paula. 'It was great you could make the trip, even at the cost of a night at Jenny's.'

'Kangaroo Island ain't Riyo-dee-janeerio, y'know.' Trisha tossed back her spiky hair with the cheeky confidence that had always made it impossible for her sisters to stay mad with her. 'I've been insisting on getting back over to the mainland every couple of weeks lately, just to stay sane.'

'Have you, Trish?' Evie asked. 'How come we haven't been seeing you?'

'I hang around in pubs on my own, pretending I'm single. You'd cramp my style.'

'Sure you do,' said Paula. 'Now - one, two, three... Happy Birthday to yo-ou...'

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Bert had gone back to Evie's after his sister's party, immediately falling asleep on her sofa again. George and Evie had picked up where they left off, not getting to sleep till much later. In the early morning, Evie woke up and took *The Adventures of Dana* out of her bedside drawer.

*That Maria, Dana whispered to Christos, she's a cold fish. They sat cosily ensconced on blue cushions in a nook cut out of the taverna's whitewashed wall.*

*Perhaps she really likes men, murmured Christos. Perhaps you like men better, also, kyria.*

*He slipped a hairy hand onto her knee.*

*Dana raised a cool eyebrow and poured more retsina into her glass.*

*That depends on the man, she told him.*

*The black-haired sailor took this as an invitation.*

*Try me. You won't be disappointed, he said.*

*You Greek men are so vain, Dana sighed.*

*But she let his hand move further up her thigh, all the same.*

Evie giggled to herself as she slipped the notebook away, while George slept on alongside her. Dana appeared to be swinging back to blokes. George had none of Christos's oleaginous wiles, but he was endearingly confident about his nuggety body, every inch of it covered with curly black hair. Almost every inch. He'd been out of his clothes and back into Evie's bed as soon as they were sure Bert's sleep was normal, his breathing regular. Oscar seemed to have disappeared back from whence he came; she hadn't given him a thought.

'If we keep seeing each other,' Evie had said as they pulled a sheet over themselves, 'you'll have to call me your old lady - it'll be no more than the truth.'

'Tell it to the marines, ma'am,' said George, and bit Evie's ear.

Bert woke up late. Evie was sitting in a kitchen chair she'd pulled up beside him; she smiled as he opened his eyes.

'I'm sad, Evie,' he said, after a moment's silent contemplation of his aunt's features.

'What is it, buddy? You can tell me.'



'I don't know. I just feel sad. '

And tears began to roll slowly from the corners of his eyes.

'Oh, honey-bun, don't cry. Here, have a hug. Don't cry, please.' Evie squeezed herself onto the sofa, jamming Bert's chest against the cushions, sliding her arm behind his shoulders.

'I feel as though things won't go right for me, Bert said, in a small voice. That I'm not going to make it. Whatever that means. I'm just - not.'

'Hey, hey! That's just the chemicals talking, sweetie. Just the wearing-off blues. You'll feel better tomorrow. I know how it goes.'

'Maybe, but I feel like this a lot, not just today. I can't imagine being in the future. I can't see myself there.'

'Don't say that, hon, that's nonsense,' Evie said, rocking him from side to side as she sat squashed up against him, fighting a rising panic. Bert sounded so sure.

'I'm being hell selfish. I know you and Mum and the others still miss Uncle Sean heaps. I don't mean I'm going to kill myself, I just feel as though I'm not going to grow older, have kids, have a life. I don't see it happening.'

'Bert, for God's sake, do you think I could see ahead when I was your age? I didn't have a clue what was going to happen. Christ knows I'm lucky to have made it, but I'm still here.'

'Yes, but you didn't doubt you'd go on going on, did you? Even when it was all crap, you just thought eventually you'd wake up and the bad bit would be finished and you'd struggle on. Right?'

This was so accurate Evie could only shrug and nod.

'Well, I don't feel like that. I feel like I'll finish, soon. '

'No, you won't, Bert. We won't let you, I promise. That's just toxic overload making you morbid. Please let me tell Paula you're having a hard time. She'd be gutted to think you weren't letting her help.' Evie squeezed Bert's shoulders and sat up, the better to plead.

'I know, Evie, but I can't. I couldn't bear to upset her.'

'I hope you change your mind soon. But don't worry, I'm here. And no way am I letting you slide out of becoming a boring old fart. I'll be making sure you cop the lot, beergut, balding, smelly feet, hairy ears. You're for it, mate. Now, you can stay there for a bit longer, then you're coming for a swim with us.'

Sun washed in over the beach, every particle of sand gleaming white and clean, pools of seawater left by the tide cold and unexpectedly deep as Evie and George splashed through them, the sky overhead that deep morning blue, punctuated with cottontail clouds. Bert was a speck in the distance, swimming to the jetty.

'This is heaven, eh? No Big Daddy but at least one angel.'

'Ugh. White man speak with forked tongue.'

'I mean it, Evie. I'm so happy, I feel about two years old.'

'Has it escaped your notice that in that case I'd be twenty-two?'

'Sorry, can't hear you. '

'I could be your mum, just.'

'Mum disappeared when I was fifteen months old. There was a card from Macedonia when I was four, then nothing. '

'That must have been tough.'

'I don't remember her at all. Dad was an all-purpose parent. For a builder, he's got a very developed feminine side. There were always gorgeous women hanging around Harry's place, but they came for the goss, not to flirt. Harry's never happier than when he's cooking, loves shopping at the Vic Markets on Friday mornings, knows all his mother's recipes. He organised his work day so he could hang around with the mums and walk me home from school most days. I couldn't have asked for better. '

'Nice.' Evie kicked a flurry of sea-water into the air. 'My Dad's generation of Irish ockers were the most emotionally stunted men in the history of the world. Catholic boys' schools run by bitter and twisted men in dresses can't have helped. '

'Harry went to Fitzroy High. There were more Greek kids there than anglos. He had a ball. '

A small seabird Evie couldn't put a name to swooped past them with a papery rustle of wings.

- Hey, Dad! Look at me - Evie yelled silently at the sky, her heart filling up suddenly with a rush of love for the movie-star handsome father of her childhood, clowning around in the water with them in those endless summers when they lived a short walk away from this same beach. She charged into the water, arms flailing, running full tilt the way she always

did as a little girl, stumbling and staggering up again, charging on until she fell full length under a wave.

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In Room 31 was Mrs Tolhurst, matron of Holmwood for thirty four years - there were photographs of her, and one portrait, in the entrance foyer: a striking woman, tall and strong, big-boned, jolly hockey-sticks, the sort of nurse you envisaged strapping shattered soldiers onto operating theatre tables, handing them rubber strops to bite on and standing by while limbs were sawn off without anaesthetic, bombs fizzing around the field hospital.

Tolhurst's son was with her this morning, sitting by the bed where she lay curled up like a fledgling bird tipped out of the nest, cushions propped around her so she wouldn't slide down. She was so tiny she almost wasn't there. She was ninety-six. One of these days the current Matron would look in and Mrs Tolhurst would have evaporated, Paula thought to herself.

Today, Paula was too preoccupied with appearing normal to say her usual prayer at Tolhurst's door that she, Matron Haggerty, might die before she got old and infirm. Heavy periods were par for the course, but this was beyond a joke. This morning, she'd had to wash her sheets and pyjamas, the folded towel she'd been lying on and the mattress protector, which the towel hadn't protected, and finally sponge the mattress where the protector too had leaked. Now she was having to dash to the toilets every hour on the hour to change double pads - no point using tampons with flooding like this, you no sooner inserted one than it washed out again.

The chaplain arrived at eleven thirty for his Wednesday rounds. Distracted as she was, Paula forgot to bristle at his unctuous tones.

'Father Keogh, come in, come in. She met him at the door. Beautiful day.'

'Ah, Paula, my digestion is playing me up again, so I'm afraid I haven't noticed,' said the priest, who insisted on wearing his flowing religious robes on these occasions, when a sober black suit would have been much more appropriate.

'My own fault, of course,' he went on. 'Although it's as much of a penance as an indulgence, when I have to eat out so very frequently.'

'It must be,' said Paula, ushering him through the foyer, under the stern gaze of Tolhurst, whom Paula could imagine heartily pooh-poohing Keogh's nonsense. The good father wrote a weekly food column for the Catholic Weekly.

'A dish of simple steamed greens should be there for the asking in any restaurant, but do you think I could get anything that wasn't swimming in butter or cream at The Flugelhorn last night? Not a solitary bite.'

'Mr Razinskas will be pleased to see you,' Paula said. 'He was in the Royal Adelaide for tests this time last week.'

'Anything serious?' asked Father Keogh, billowing behind her as she set a brisk pace along the corridor.

'Gall bladder's playing up, that's all. He probably needs a dose of bitter herbs and unleavened bread, as well.'

'Amazing how much the Bible gets right, isn't it? Did I tell you I'm planning to write a little monograph on the diet of Jesus and the apostles when I retire? It could serve as a model for us overindulged moderns, let me tell you.'

Speak for yourself, thought Paula, as she left him with his first customer. Keogh's column ran, of course, under the byline of Friar Tuck. Paula took ten minutes to patrol the new courtyard, smoking and thinking, remembering not to drop her fag-end into the new plant pots, already adorned with a few shameful butts. Cups, plates and bowls all matching. Ditto wine and water glasses. Blinding white napery courtesy of Holmwood's laundry. Cutlery all intact and not greasy. What had she been thinking, asking Chris to dinner when he rang last night? Food in its unprocessed, natural state was Paula's enemy, but she could hardly serve him pre-cooked, for all the ads showing stern grandmothers fooled by bowls of chunky vegetable soup out of a can. Women cook meals all the time, she told herself sternly. Get over it.

Rosie would be staying overnight at Tara's, still glowing from all the attention over her birthday weekend, happy as a sandboy (Why were sandboys happy? What were sandboys?) Vegetables. Roots and greens. Spinach. Beans. Can't go wrong with lightly-steamed French beans. Never try anything for the first time at a dinner-party. Carrots? Tad of water, tad of butter, smidgen of honey. You can do this. Steaks? Chicken breasts? Sausages? Veal fillets. Even Rosie could pound a few bits of veal and flap them around in egg and breadcrumbs. Be honest, Rose would do it better. Sara Lee cheesecake, some of that French icecream. A monkey could cook this meal. Why could you never find a monkey when you needed one?

In the end it all came together without a hitch. Chris arrived early, poured a verdelho he'd brought and put her at ease with bar-room gossip while she Nigella'd about, minus the abundant black hair and pouting bosom. Chris pronounced her a 'good plain cook', hastening to add that this was his mother's highest accolade. When Paula confessed that this was as high as she could fly, culinarily speaking, he laughed.

'So? I'm a whiz in the kitchen, as luck would have it.'

They moved into the lounge-room, flopped in unison onto the couch to watch a late-night SBS movie from France, sleek bourgeois at play on holiday in the country, with the mandatory ageing Lothario getting off with a barely pubescent girl, all flimsy cotton dress and downy golden legs.

'What gives with that father-daughter stuff?' Chris yawned. 'What are they supposed to talk about in the morning, her Barbie collection?'

Comfortabler and comfortabler. Chris got up just as Paula was about to, to make tea, finding the chocolate digestives by instinct, bringing in a pot on a tray rather than teabags in mugs. Paula felt as though they were fifteen years married by the time they shuffled companionably off to bed. And that was nice, too, not earth-shattering, but nice. He was unfazed by her sanguinary state, and she herself, uncharacteristically, didn't care either. Her automatic screening system - the one she'd used as a filter of potential boyfriends for so many years - seemed to have turned itself off. Paula always asked herself whether her mother would like whoever it was, just so she could make a knee-jerk opposite assessment.. Well, Dot would have approved Chris's nice manners, his attentive way of listening to what you said, tilting his head rather owlishly to one side; she would have observed that he got up to clear the table, filled the water jug, unprompted, at the appropriate moments during a meal, perfectly naturally. That he'd ironed his shirt, a soft denim one, and that his jeans were clean (not too new, and not ironed - too bad if Dot would have objected to that - fair shake of the sauce bottle, John would have said.)

Should it be more exciting than this? Paula wondered next morning, sitting in the toilet down the corridor from her office, peeling the sticker off the back of another industrial-size pad and fixing it to her sensible cottontails. I feel all warm and cosy, like it's my day off and I'm wandering about in the old chenille dressing gown and slippers. Nice, cuddly sex and a lovely, warm-bath afterglow. What more could a girl want?

She pulled up the underpants and wriggled back into the trousers of one of her workaday suits. No man had ever had to sit through a job-interview with a large part of his mind on whether he was going to bleed through his white skirt, displaying a huge red stain to the panel as he left the room. Paula had been in full flow on the morning of her interview for this job. She hadn't leaked, as it turned out, but it hadn't done anything for her composure. Women ought to get extra points in interview situations - and a multitude of others - if bleeding heavily at the time. Surprise, surprise - the subject never seemed to come up.

As she hurried down the corridor, Paula began to smile. She already had a boyfriend, waiting for her this very moment. Jonesy, as in Jonesy the butcher in Dad's Army. Arthur Jones did look a bit like Jonesy, wizened and spry. But he hadn't been twinkly like his namesake, not a bit of it. When he arrived, he'd been depressed and cranky and a pain in the bum. Jonesy was ninety not-out and these days he was the life and soul of the party at Holmwood. His second coming, as he chose to call it, was due to his second marriage. To Paula.

'You're a corker, Sister Haggerty,' he used to say at the beginning, when she stopped by his room. 'Does an old feller good just to look at you.'

'You're not doing too badly for eighty-odd yourself, Mr Jones.'

'Will you be looking in again tomorrow?'

Arthur Jones had been a beekeeper. If he chose, he could talk your ear off about blue gum and leatherwood, orange blossom, red clover, honey that had been processed to buggery and wasn't worthy of the name, Adelaide Hills versus Plains and Vales honey, a thousand types of bees and how to treat them. He began to try to keep Paula at his bedside with tales of his fearless swarm-battling exploits.



Jonesy had a crush on her. The whole thing was entirely harmless. Soon, he'd begin to glow like an electric element when she came into the room.

Paula would find a bit more time to chat each morning, her beau metamorphosing into an excited, garrulous schoolboy. For weeks he paid her shy compliments, and then one day he began to gabble about how they were going to get married and live in his cottage in Summertown (long ago rented out by his sons to yuppies who commuted to town every day, modernised past the point where he'd even recognise it). Arthur knew it was all pie in the sky. Where was the harm?

'Only if we get a really huge bed, Jonesy,' Paula remonstrated. 'You toss around something cruel in your sleep.'

'Only the best for you, sweetheart.' Arthur grabbed Paula's hand. 'You can choose whatever you want for the bedroom, dearie. Go to Moore's - good classy stuff at Moore's.'

Moore's, with its gracious, sweeping marble staircase and broad, beautiful cupola, had long since been transformed into the new Supreme Court building.

By that point Paula had taken to stepping in sometimes to relieve one of her nurses when Jonesy's shower-time came around. That was as good as it got for Jonesy. All it took was her applying a soapy sponge to his skinny spine for him to come over all pointy, in his phrase, and buffing his bottom would as often cause an eruption - Arthur would be as proud as a lion. Paula, who had long ceased to be fazed by this phenomenon, first encountered during perhaps her second administration of a bed-bath to a male patient, would laugh and tell him he was a dirty old man and squirt away the evidence with the shower-nozzle, while Arthur would snicker and be hugely pleased with himself. She'd towel him dry and help him into his day clothes - soft old cord trousers and one of a selection of much-washed, soft flannel shirts.

Though frail, Arthur was by no means helpless, and could get about the Holmwood corridors with only occasional recourse to the guide rails. When their wedding-day arrived, he and Matron had been thrilled with the beautiful spring day at Second Valley, the tiny stone church and circle of close friends, and on the Kangaroo Island honeymoon they'd camped at American River and seen platypuses; swum with the seals at Seal Rock, frolicked in their tent at night after campfire meals.

They'd been happily settled in the Summertown cottage for some years. Jonesy would ask Paula to check the hives in such and such a paddock as she left his room, and she'd remember to report back with news of some little crisis when she saw him again later in the day. Theirs was a blissfully contented life. Jonesy, unfailingly chivalrous, told her she got more beautiful every day. The other occupants of the room, far from being jealous, loved the game, treating them both as a live soap-opera, hanging on every exchange.

This morning, Arthur was sitting up in bed, looking a shade weary.

'Hello, my dearest,' said Paula. 'Feeling well today?'

'Ah, well, my sweet, you know that giant feather doona you insisted on does make me feel a tad smothered... and I think perhaps your delicious bacon and eggs might have been a little rich for the old tum this morning. '

'Oh, that's no good. What have you got planned for today? Anything on the property that I should deal with?'

'Well -' Jonesy summoned his sweetest smile - 'We do need to check on the nectarine trees; I hear there's been an outbreak of fruit fly in the hills area.'

'I'll do that, my love. And what will you be up to?'

'I think I might take a walk around the boundary fence; survey our domain.' Jonesy's smile twisted. 'Ouch. Maybe I was a bit too much of a tiger with you last night, dearest. A few twinges this morning.'

'There's no holding you back, is there, you devil?' Paula gave him a squeeze as he sat, a little wan, against his pillows, making a mental note to tell the doctor to come and check out the pains.

Rain, rain, rain, then more rain and a great deal of wind. Day after day of grey skies. Melbourne's winters could be very trying. In other respects, as well, this was a grey time for Evie. She sat in the front room of the house she now shared with Ronnie, her previous co-tenants having all moved on in a rush since he began sharing Evie's room and life. Such a gradual shedding of props, each of which she thought she could do without, until they'd all gone. Ronnie had been so clever about maintaining his Mr Nice Guy façade that it was a huge shock when he bared his fangs at last.

Then again, her instincts might have rung the correct alarm bells if everything hadn't been blurred by the new chemicals in her bloodstream. Ronnie had made it his mission, in the first weeks he'd known her, to persuade Evie that it couldn't hurt to try just a little ... if other people didn't know how to handle it, that didn't mean it wasn't the most incredible high, he'd be there to look after her, he could always vouch for the quality of the stuff he had, why not just once? And Evie forgot all the lessons she'd recited to herself over her time in this city, stepped off the path of righteousness into a blissful stream that carried her into a storybook freedom from care. Once, twice.

Gradual, again, the progress from choice to need. Evie still felt confident that the choice was hers, but a niggling doubt was making itself felt. Her bones told her that she should put as much distance between herself and this Ronnie as she could manage. But she sat

on in her living room, for more and more of every day, as a new set of people began to use the house, people she would instinctively have crossed the street to avoid a few months back.

Tonight, Ronnie had gone out. He went out much more often now, and he'd taken to letting her know he expected her to be home when he got back. Her friends were hardly phoning her any more, picking up on Evie's hesitancy during calls Ronnie was listening in on from two feet away. They thought she was cooling off on them; they gradually stopped calling so often, and most had stopped altogether. You don't need that cow for a friend, he'd say, she's shallow, or she's stupid, she's two-faced, she's a slag. If blokes she knew phoned, Ronnie would stand by the phone glaring at her until she ended the stilted exchange. That loser, he'd say, that tosser, that creep, he's up himself, he thinks he's some sort of intellectual, he only wants to get into your pants.

By now, Evie had no-one to call, no-one to spend an evening with, except Ronnie and his friends. Ronnie's friends were mostly guys; they didn't bother to make a show of being interested in her. They came for what Ronnie could provide. She couldn't decide how far up the food chain Ronnie was - the same dozen guys came round on a regular basis, they sat around in the living room for a while, maybe listened to a bit of music, drank a coffee or two for form's sake, left after the shortest decent interval. Nobody shot up inside the house, and up to this point Evie hadn't herself. Ronnie didn't use at all. Just smoked the occasional joint. Very occasional, and only a toke or two then. She'd been too naïve to make anything of that, at the beginning.

Cold as it was outside, Evie suddenly resolved to go out - exercise her right to freedom of movement. Free country, wasn't it? Boots, fluffy black-and-white wool-mohair coat straight out of the sixties via Prahran Market, a scarf, gloves and a Doctor Zhivago fur hat. Evie decided on a favourite pub, the Union Club, in Fitzroy. She slung a leather bag of generous dimensions over one shoulder and set off, walking as fast as she could to work up some warmth inside the coat. There was still rain, misty, cold on your face but

not the drenching variety. Two trams came gratifyingly rapidly, and then there was a trot along Smith Street and down Charles. In not much over thirty minutes, Evie was pushing open swing doors into a tiny porch, and then through a second set into the front bar. She forged straight ahead into the warmth of the lounge, where there were still spaces on the sofas and a glorious fire blazed.

Feeling clean and invigorated by the chill air and the exercise, Evie nudged through the crowd at the bar and bought herself a schooner of stout. She ordered fish and chips, and retreated to the snug sofa-corner she'd marked with scarf and hat. She didn't see any friends in the crowd, but the atmosphere was genial and homely, and she read a discarded *Weekend Age* as she ate. A band was playing around the corner in another part of the pub, folky rock that blended with the chatter and completed the sense of being ensconced with like-minded, sociable, happy humans. A perfect evening.

Until Evie stood up to leave the way she'd come, through the front bar. As she shrugged on her coat, she scanned the drinkers leaning together on bar-stools in earnest discussion, exchanging banter with the barmaids, staring into their drinks or watching the telly high up on one wall. At one end of the long, curving bar were a couple who hadn't been there earlier: a stunning girl Evie had never seen before and Ronnie, their heads, conspiratorially, almost touching, intimacy advertised by every detail of their posture. Expecting at each moment a sudden, deathly stillness to fall on the pub's noisy patrons, revealing her standing frozen with her hat in one hand, Evie backed away into the corridor to the toilets and through the back exit into the beer garden. Numb, not with cold this time, she stood at the nearest tram stop and boarded the first tram to arrive, which took her to the city and added twenty minutes to the trip home. She hardly noticed. It was the beginning of the bad days.

'Evie! I said, can Tara come too?' Rosie was tugging Evie's hand, impatient at having to ask twice for an answer.

'Yeah, yeah, of course.' Evie refocused on Tara and Rosie, dancing on the footpath.

'Sorry, love - away with the fairies. Did her mum say it was okay? '

'Yes. If we're back by six,' she said.

Evie looked up and down the street outside the school gates. Sure enough, a woman sat a little way away in a white Datsun, smiling and waving energetically.

'That's your mum, Tara? Okay, then.'

She waved back at the woman, yelling: 'Six o'clock, at Rosie's!'

Rosie held on to Evie's hand, Tara held Rosie's other one.

'The farmer in the *dell*, the farmer in the *dell*, hi ho the *derry-oh*, the farmer in the *dell*.'

They walked the familiar dogleg streets to Evie's, holding hands, swinging one another's arms as high as they'd go on the beat.

'The farmer takes a wife, the farmer takes a wife, hi ho the *derry-oh*, the farmer takes a wife. What comes next?'

'The wife takes a child, silly,' said Rose, beginning the next verse. 'Then the mouse takes the cheese, and the cheese stands alone, remember, dummy? Come on, run faster.'

Rose and Tara hopped impatiently at the front door while Evie fetched her towel and one for Tara. 'Come on, der-brain, race you.'

The beach was blues and silvers, dotted with studs of fluorescent colour - the long-sleeved lycra rashies, becoming the norm since ozone-hole awareness. Tara and Rosie dragged off their green-and-white gingham uniforms, under which they'd worn their old-

style bathers all day in anticipation of this moment. Linking hands, they barrelled, yelping, down the sand and into the water. Evie stretched out on her towel and closed her eyes.

'Roman' was the decorator's watchword for the revamp of the Blue Moon. The effect had come off rather well. Green and white tiled floor and walls, a shallow tiled pool in the middle of the atrium floor, a small fountain playing inside the entrance, just in front of the reception desk. All the girls wore togas, kind-of authentic-looking, if abbreviated. They'd been given working names like Livia, Flavia, Julia, Augusta. Santo, the owner, was proud of his Italian heritage.

Evie was working at the Moon three nights a week and one afternoon shift. She'd enrolled in the methadone program, finding the daily dose would tide you over for most of the day, but nearly everybody also indulged in a daily taste as well. Urine testing was supposed to be routine, but rare in practice, the clinic being drastically understaffed. You needed to be pretty definitively out of it to do the work.

Tonight, as she and Lesbia sat smoking in the atrium, waiting for the next clients, Santo, impeccable in dark suit and shirt and pink leather tie, strolled in with a heavily-built, bearded bloke in tow.

'Hey, girls! This is Muric. He's a friend of mine. I'm sure you'll look after him.'

Evie quailed, though she kept the smile plastered on. The Turkish guys had a bad rep, notorious for staying foul-tempered however hard the girls tried.

'Lucretia, would you like to entertain Muric this evening?'

Evie ground out her cigarette, and got up with a practised show of willingness.

'Sure, Santo,' she said, strolling over and taking Muric by the arm.

Her chirpy questions about how his day had gone didn't prompt any response from the client, who maintained stony silence. Evie invited him to sit on the bed, filled a basin with warm water and knelt in front of him to perform the usual ablutions.

When Muric knocked her sideways with a cuff to her head, she opened her mouth to scream, but he was very quick on his feet for such a burly guy. He grabbed Evie by the throat and squeezed. Not a sound escaped. Seconds ticked by, Evie thrashing from side to side in the eerie silence, Muric maintaining his grip. She had time to make many resolutions covering the rest of her life, if there was any more to come. Inside the terror, she felt a weird clarity, as though curtains had been thrown back to drench a room in sunlight. She thought that if she did come out the other side of this, she would understand all there was to know about her own behaviour, that her life would make complete sense.

Evie woke up, still on the floor, in the pool of cold water that had spilled from the basin. Lurid bruises were already forming all over her body. Muric had had his way with her, that felt certain, using her for boxing practice either before or after. She was still alive, though. What had she realised so clearly just before passing out? All she could remember was the sensation of grasping a fast-receding truth, blindingly clearly.

Santo phoned Ronnie to collect Evie early. There was always a heavy on the premises at The Moon whom the girls could call if things got dodgy, but sometimes, like tonight, things went amiss -

'Sorry, darling,' Santo shrugged. 'We have to get alarms installed in the rooms, I know. I'm on to it. I'll send some flowers round to your place, cheer you up, eh?'

'Evie! Wake up! Let me jump off your shoulders, Evie!'



'Okay, okay. I'm awake. Here I come. Careful, careful, I'm old, remember. Ow. Rose, you've got your toes caught in my hair.'

'Pull us both along! Evie, Evie, I'll dive under your legs.'

The green water worked a baptismal magic, like always, shunting the unwanted archival footage back to the vaults of Evie's brain. There was no way of preventing it popping up, but there were things you could do to exorcise it.

'How's that brother of yours, Rosie-posy?' Evie asked, as she towelled the skinned-rabbit six-year-old form standing with arms raised on the sand, Tara capering around them.

'Tara, they're my undies. The green ones are yours. Bertie's good. He came to see us the other day. He's got a job in a furniture place.'

'Great, great. Have you met his girlfriend yet?'

'Errh, there's sand in my singlet. No, Leanne's not his girlfriend any more. She's gone back home to live with her mother. She thinks Bert drinks too much, Mum said. '

'And does he?'

'I don't know. He had two bottles of beer at our place when he came over on Sunday. Hey, did you know there's a girl in our grade with a glass eye? She's had three others, but they didn't fit properly. She's called Molly. Come on, I want to climb on the rocks before we go home.'

## CHAPTER 5

George kept the boys coralled in front of the TV while Evie walked Rosie and Tara round to Paula's. When Evie got back, the two of them let the lads loose, to drape themselves over her front verandah. In various poses of abandonment, they were Bert, Zak, and a few buddies, stubbies in hand, strains of Grandmaster Flash, from George's sizable music collection, floating out to engulf them through the open double doors of the front room.

'Can't beat 'em, join 'em, eh?' Evie asked George, who was sprawled across her people-eating couch.

'Yeah, best plan. They're a good bunch of kids. This way we get to keep an eye on them without seeming to.'

'Right, Methuselah. They must be all of five years younger than you, on average.'

'It's the living I've done, the miles on the clock, all the trucking ... wait - I feel a song coming on.'

'What - 'I'm a Train'? Want to watch The Bill with the sound off?'

'Good plan, Guv. Come and sit with me, it's lonely over here. '

Two of the lads wandered out onto the front lawn, returning after a bit, quite a bit more animated than before they left.

'Can't be everywhere at once, ' shrugged George.

'So are we doing any good?' Evie sat up to watch Bert and Zak disappear into the kitchen.

'Look, they think it's wicked for there to be a safe house, somewhere comfortable. Long as you don't mind picking up the bottles and throwing the occasional blanket over an overnighiter.'

'Done a lot of that in my time.'

'I guess you'll get around to telling me about it, one of these days.'

'Well, yes. Not tonight, though, Giorgio.'

'That's okay. I'll tell you some of my roadie stories to while away the time.'

'What, the girls in every port? You needn't bother.'

'Shall I start with my Mrs Robinson? I was just sixteen, and I used to hang out at my best friend, Julian's place. His mother was this gorgeous Jewish babe, with hair down to here and incredible chestnut-coloured eyes. She always seemed to manage to be in her silk dressing-gown, just out of the bath or shower, when I came over. So this one afternoon, I'd taken the day off school, and I'd swung by Julian's house because I thought he was slacking off too, but he wasn't there. Well, Ramona answered the door in this filmy, flimsy, shortie-nightie ...'

'Sure this isn't a Benny Hill episode? Were you wearing a white cap and carrying gold-tops?'

'Wicked wench. How dare you deflate my steamy seduction-scene! Just for that ...'

'Hey, you guys, cut that out. There are children present.' Bert, sidling in, plumped himself down between them. 'Move over, squash up.'

'Are you okay, Bert?' asked Evie, all at once anxious.

'Chill, dude. I'm fine. I've just been awake too many hours.'

'Sure?'

'I've learned my lesson, auntie dearest, really I have,' Bert simpered, squeezing his eyes tight and pursing his lips in a Shirley Temple pucker.

'All right, all right. Sling us a beer, O Great One.'

'Here, have two. Save me getting up later.'

'How's your mate, Zak? I like him, he seems like a nice kid.'

'He is. Except that his bum's so big it blocks out the sun. Sorry, Zak, I cannot tell a lie,' said Bert, as Zak poked his head through from the kitchen to see where he'd got to.

'Don't know how you can say that, buddy, when you are the super-fatass of all time.'

'At least I don't stink like a dead water-buffalo.'

'Ah, you noticed my new scent. That's exactly what it's called, actually. Dead Water Buffalo for Men, by Calvin Klein.'

'Ah, such wit, such steely intellectual rigour - I see why you two stick together,' said Evie, recrossing her legs over George's lap.

'Yes, it's exhausting. But we owe it to the universe to lift cosmic awareness. We never let our discussions fall below the level of genius, isn't that right, Zakko?'

'What are you studying, Zak? ' asked George, massaging Evie's ankles, as Zak steered his enormous Vans, the size of paddle-boats, towards the empty armchair.

'Viticulture, would you believe? I want to make world-class wines, save lots of moolah and retire to a hacienda in Spain, first stocking its enormous cellar with my best vintages. '

'Wow. Is that so? Where do you go to study wine?'

'Roseworthy. Division of Waite Agricultural College, part of Adelaide Uni. All the best students for the last ten years have been women. I want to be the first boy to make good. I'm doing pretty well, so far. Got a holiday job with one of the big McLaren Vale outfits this break. Beats grape picking.'

'Brilliant. So why do you hang out with this bum here? ' George elbowed Bert in the ribs.

'He's my tester. I hire him to taste every bottle of wine I make. We're a team.'

Bert giggled, and tipped the last of his beer down his throat.

'I'll get us another barrel from the fridge, eh? If that's alright with you, Kellermeister?'

'Ja, ja, mein herr. Two barrels, bitte.'

Paula smiled to herself as she sat at her teak desk in the Holmwood front office. She was channelling Dot again.

Look, Dot, I don't give a bugger what you think, okay, but he is nice, isn't he?

Exceedingly nice, her imaginary mother responded. He suits you, Paula. You suit each other. He's more comfortable with himself than your other lads have been.

Farts and scratches his crotch, you mean? He likes his mum, that's a good sign.

He's daffy about you, dear, said pretend Dot. You've turned out very well, after that wayward period. He couldn't do better.

Thanks, Mum. And I wasn't wayward. It was you who were off the planet in the seventies.

If I was, I had every excuse. You lot were running amok, I was working full-time, your father was...

Go easy, Mum. It was a shitty time, I know that. You were too hard on me, all the same.

I'm sorry, dear. You were such a beautiful baby, so happy and sunny. I loved you, really...

That's the great thing about your parents being dead, thought Paula. You can rewind the crap footage and tape over it with stuff you like better.

Desirée, no sign of her dungarees, crisp in ironed poplin, popped her head around the door.

'It's Minge,' she said.

'Mignon? What now?'

'Screaming total filth at all the old ladies. They're petrified. I can't calm her down.'

Paula pulled herself out of her chair and hurried after Des (quizzed about her name, Des revealed her mum had been reading a Barbara Cartland screamer about a French governess in the latter stages of pregnancy).

Mignon was in rare form as she rained obscenities on her comrades in the day-room, where they had been peacefully engaged in one of the pursuits with which Desirée had gradually replaced daytime-TV. Today it was making flash-cards to be sent to African nuns running a school for poor children in Soweto. Each had been given a number of words to be transcribed with care onto cardboard rectangles, for the sisters to use in English lessons. Work had stalled as the group goggled at Mignon, whose vocabulary of abuse was astounding. Normally small and frail-looking, she could summon up amazing energy when the mood was on her. She stood in a commanding position in the middle of the room, flailing her arms about, zimmer-frame standing by unheeded.

'You pack of slimy lowlifes,' she yelled, her thin voice taking on an eerie American-cop-show harshness. 'You shit-eating dirtbags, you're all full of crap; you motherfucking losers, you ought to be ...'

Eminem, eat your heart out, thought Paula, entertained, but the distress of the other occupants of the day room was too acute to ignore. Experience had shown that a ball from left field would often distract Mignon, even in full flow, so Paula had a stab at bowling a googly.

'Hey, Mignon,' she called loudly, walking straight up to her and taking her arm. 'What's the best kind of cake for a trifle?'

Mignon paused in mid-curse and considered.

'Sponge. Stale sponge.' Still stroppy. 'Don't you know anything?'

'And should you put fruit in a trifle?'

'No. Just sherry on the sponge, jelly on that and cream on top. Is there some for tea?'

'I wouldn't be at all surprised,' said Paula heartily. 'Now, what were your words for today?'

'Mother' and 'motor', replied Mignon pleasantly, slowly bending back into her accustomed stoop, and moving sideways to take hold of the zimmer. 'I left them by my chair when I went to the toilet. There they are. Would you pick them up for me, dear? I'm not as nimble as I used to be.'

Paula bent down to pick up Mignon's cards, catching Desirée's eye and sending her a wink. Not too many dull moments in this job, whatever people might imagine. If they ran the Home the way so many were run, primarily for the convenience of the staff, life would be much more tediously predictable. Holmwood's policy was not to use restraining measures such as tying patients into bed. There had been cases where residents who became consistently physically aggressive had been sent to secure wards in public hospitals, or to Glenside, the latest name for the suburb where the old mental hospital still operated, soon synonymous in local parlance with 'loony bin', just as the old one, Parkside, had been. Wanderers, though, Holmwood could for the most part handle: men and women who wanted to walk around the home from dawn to dusk, on errands they would describe if you stopped to ask them. They were bringing in the cows, or going to meet their little sister at the school bus stop to walk her home, or to buy eggs from the chook farm up the road, or to pick up the tractor from a neighbour's workshop. Paula's



staff were under instructions to consider this kind of chat part of their workload, not to be resisted in order to get on with practical chores.

It was difficult, though, not to grow immune to the talkers. Heather Armitage regularly sat alongside Mignon for communal tasks, talking non-stop in the gentlest and pleasantest of voices. Paula tuned in to the broadcast as she settled Mignon back in her chair.

'The puppy had beautiful fur,' Heather was saying. 'Daddy came to give her her bread and milk I can see his head bobbing up in the water she's asked me to get her a cushion coming in the gate my bed was by the window Michael...'

If you let it drift over you; it was quite soothing. The others had long ago come to treat Heather's perpetual disconnected narrative like a sort of eternal radio play. She couldn't answer a straight question with a straight answer, but if you did ask a question she'd behave as though it made sense to her, and be pleased to clarify, to her satisfaction, the point you'd raised.

'Where were you born, Heather?' Paula asked her now.

Heather nodded, smiled, resumed: 'There's crabs at Port Broughton when it rains Mother and Auntie Clare in the when my son comes to see me why does this ten minutes sometimes...'

Heather's son could say whether they were from Port Broughton, if he ever visited, that is. Heather was lucky: one of the ones who wasn't bothered by her confusion; it didn't feel like confusion to her. Like Jennifer, who'd come to the office at lunch time yesterday to display her yogurt, confiding that it had been freshly picked from the tree that same morning. Paula consigned that one to memory to pass on to Evie: eerily like what one of Evie's littlies had told her about where jelly came from.

Paula's feet hardly touched the ground for the rest of the day; it was five thirty and she was undressing alongside her blessed pool before she knew it. She wasn't to be let off the hook yet, however, being unwillingly forced to resume matron mode in order to keep one eye on a tall, fragile old woman who was sharing the water, a woman who'd never turned up to swim before. She said her name was Ruth, as she negotiated the steps in excruciating slow-motion. Her doctor, apparently, had advised that Ruth should take up swimming again, a habit she'd dropped years ago because of her dicky heart.

Great, thought Paula, proceeding with restrained, slow breaststroke as Ruth submerged herself to chest-height. What sort of dim doctor advises a ninety-year-old with a heart condition to swim in an unsupervised pool? Only today, of course, it was supervised, wasn't it, by none other than muggins. Bugger.

Halfway through a backstroke lap, while Paula's eyes were on the ceiling windows and the untroubled blue sky beyond, she heard a sharp sound of distress. Paula was upright in a flash, moving over to where Ruth, her face parchment, was clutching the side of the pool.

'I don't feel very well, dear,' she moaned.

You're more than unwell, thought Paula, making reassuring noises as she helped her to the steps, where Ruth sat down heavily, her head dropping backwards. Paula threw out one hand to cushion the head against the top step, stretching her other arm over the woman to keep her from falling back into the water, listening in disbelief to the rattling in the old lady's bri-nylon-clad chest, watching her poor eyes turn up and mouth go slack.

Nice work, Doc, whoever you are, Paula fumed, when frantic resuscitation efforts produced no response. Awkwardly, back muscles screaming, she pulled a dead-weight Ruth clear of the pool and hauled a towel over her, scrabbling in her bag for mobile phone. The cops arrived first, the ambulance ten minutes later. Ruth's purse furnished her

surname and address. In forty minutes or so, a sozzled son arrived, evidently hauled out of a boozier somewhere, and later a grandson who took control. They let Paula go home forty minutes later still, wondering if she'd ever want to swim in her wonderful pool, her own private Lourdes, ever again.

Since George had become part of the scenery, Evie had taken to trying to cook occasionally. Several of the sisters were good cooks, but she and Paula weren't contenders. Evie was happy to eat toast and baked beans a lot of the time, or the brilliant lentil soup an erstwhile housemate had perfected, one pot feeding her for weeks. In honour of George's Greek heritage, however, she'd bought fresh sardines at the Market and was cooking a dish she'd found in a newspaper article. The Market, all by itself, was worth living in Adelaide for: there'd been several displays of glistening sardines to choose from, and the exquisite silver beauties had been embarrassingly cheap. She'd even cleaned them herself, in the sink under running water. Evie wasn't squeamish about things like that. Now the sardines were waiting on a tin dish painted with chrysanthemums also bought in the Markets, at one of the Asian supermarkets. The fish lay there obediently as she chopped rosemary and beat two eggs on a dinner plate.

George was cleaning the front room, which could have looked worse, considering the number of blow-ins who'd swelled the party the night before. He was matter-of-fact and efficient about cleaning, unlike many of the males of Evie's previous acquaintance, who, trapped in similar situations, either feigned total ignorance of the mysteries of the vacuum cleaner or ill-naturedly whisked the machine around the carpet for two minutes, missing large patches, infallibly leaving the machine parked in the middle of the floor afterwards. And always expected to be thanked ecstatically for deigning to help.

George had put on Evie's old Steely Dan tape, and was whistling as he dragged chairs out from against the wall to vacuum behind, emptied ashtrays into a black plastic garbage

bag strategically placed outside the double doors, stacked sticky glasses into a cardboard box on the doorstep, and wiped away the rings they'd left behind on the mantelpiece with a damp rag tucked into his apron. The apron was one Evie never used, bought because she loved the cross-stitch swans on the red and white check pockets; it was tied cheerily around his waist, protecting his solitary pair of beloved Levis.

'The oil should be very hot, but not smoking, okay?' he called back to Evie.

'Yes, okay, it's not my first time in the kitchen, muchacho,' she called back.

'Pretty nearly, though, eh?' shouted George over the vacuum cleaner.

Evie grinned to herself. 'Up yours, hairy man,' she called.

The sardines, dipped in egg and flour, she dropped into hot oil in which crushed garlic and rosemary leaves already bubbled. They turned a sumptuous golden brown in almost no time, and she fished them out on to kitchen paper on another chrysanthemum plate. Redder tomatoes than she'd seen in her local greengrocer's for many a month, also from the market, sat halved in a glass bowl on the kitchen table, and she'd bought radicchio and cos lettuce as being close to authentic Greek greens.

'Come and get it, George!' The last sardine landed on the serving dish.

George burst through the kitchen door, whipping off his apron, dropping into one of Evie's green fifties chrome-and-vinyl kitchen chairs.

'Stop looking so disgustingly healthy,' Evie told him, as she put the fish in the middle of the table and sliced some hunks of wood-oven bread. 'You're making me feel a hundred again.'

'Not you. You don't realise how blooming you're looking. I would venture to suggest it's all the intimacy we've been sharing.'

'Could be. You do seem to be good for me.'

'Back atcher, babe,' smiled George. 'Why do you think I'm sticking around? The sex, and your cooking.'

'Ha ha. Actually, these sardines aren't bad, are they?'

'Sensational. One day we'll eat them cooked on a campfire on a beach on Hydra or Lesbos or Kythera.'

'I'll hold you to that.'

Rosie was coming to spend the evening, so Paula would be meeting George. Evie found herself a little nervous, something that had never happened when Paula stumbled upon one of her overnights - dossers - Paula's sardonic term.

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Paula surprised herself with a pang of nostalgia for her early days with Gary as she fossicked in her reduced wardrobe. It was early days with Chris, sure, but Paula was disappointed to find there was a sense of déjà vu. First time around, every little thing about the other person was engrossing. But, like the surprise balls Joy's Boys used to call the rissoles they were regularly offered during their stint at boarding school, balls don't keep on being surprising. Poor Chris, condemned by an accident of history not to be number one. Although the excitement wore off, with your first, there was enduring, disbelieving gratitude that you'd each paid one another the compliment of devoting that much attention, that never-to-be-repeated wide-eyed concentration on the other person's

particulars. Not that Paula didn't find Chris interesting. It was just that now she was aware of consciously setting her mind to the game again, when she'd got out of the way of it. Imagining she'd missed having someone else to attend to, it seemed, now she'd got someone, she was feeling perversely nostalgic for only having herself - and Rosie, of course - to bother about. Dragging one of two remaining white scoop-neck t-shirts over her head, Paula pulled on the sole pair of jeans in her cupboard: the pair that fitted properly. She sat on the bed to brush her hair, and stared into the middle distance.

She saw baby Bert sitting splay-legged on the red moquette couch they'd pushed against the wall in their first rented flat. She'd dressed him in the bunny suit Gary's mum had given him, and he sat there beaming at them, showing off his two new front teeth, the hood with its bunny ears pulled up over his head, looking too ridiculously rabbitly for words. Gary and Paula, sitting on the floor wrapping Christmas presents for Gary's brothers and sisters, had got hysterical with giggles, and Bert, of course, joined in the hilarity. They'd left the gift-wrapping and plopped him into his stroller, still laughing, to tour the neighbourhood and show off their gorgeous baby. Paula felt a physical pang as this vision evaporated, conscious of a hollow gap below her stomach, an actual emptiness, like hunger. Those stupid verses from MacArthur Park about rained-on cakes and never-to-be-rediscovered recipes floated bathetically across her brain; a pang in her throat alerted her to the fact that she was about to cry. Paula, a black-belt in self-control, gulped the tears back down.

Rosie was in the bath, facewasher draped over protuberant tummy.

'Mum, when will I start to get boobies?'

'Not till you're twelve or so, honey-bun. I was such a scrawny kid, I didn't get any till I was fourteen.'

'Did you have a boyfriend then?'

'Not then, but I met your Dad not long after. I was fifteen and he was eighteen.'

'When you had Bert, how old were you?'

'Eighteen. Too young.'

'But wasn't it fun having a baby to play with?'

'Sure, honey, of course it was. But I was still a kid myself. Babies take a lot of looking after.'

'I wish we had a baby. I could help look after her.'

'You're still my baby, Rosie-posy. Look, I can still blow on your tummy.'

'Mu-u-um! Stop! That tickles!'

'Come here, baby. Time to get you into your jarmies to go to Evie's.'

'Why hasn't Evie got any kids, mum?'

'Just as well for you she hasn't. You're her baby too.'

'I am, aren't I? '

'Yes, you are. Now put your woolly dressing gown on. It's cold outside.'

Rosie and Paula were met at Evie's door by a washed, brushed and clean-shirted George.

'Wow, this place looks fabulous,' said Paula, retrieving her hand from an enthusiastic handshake.

'Yes, it's all thanks to my butler,' said Evie, coming up behind him. 'I'll send him round to you on his next day off, shall I?'

'Please do. Hey, George -' Paula sidled past him into the hall - 'you're from Melbourne?'

'Correct. But I've been here a few years now, and Adelaide's looking particularly appealing at the moment.' George raised a leery eyebrow at Evie.

'Like that, is it? Good-oh.'

'And when do we get to meet the lovely Chris?' asked George.

'Oh, soon. I ought to get going. You're sure you don't mind having Rosie?'

But George had lowered himself on to all fours and Rosie was already climbing up his back for a ride on his shoulders.

'Well, if you're sure. Thanks, guys.'

'Sure,' said Evie. 'We were boring each other silly anyway. Knock 'em dead, Paul! Come on, George, what do you say we get Hungry Hippos out?'

'Serious? You've actually got Hungry Hippos? '

Evie and George sat on the lounge-room carpet, catapulting tiny balls into gaping, brightly-coloured plastic hippo maws with a warm, clean Rosie for an hour, and then



Rosie decided it was time for bed. She was all floppy, she told them, so she'd better get some sleep. Evie reminded her that she never wanted to go to bed, but Rosie said no, she wanted to. She was growing up, she informed her aunt, and big girls knew when it was bedtime, and never made a fuss about going. She didn't need tucking in, either, she said. And off she went.

'She's trying to make an impression,' Evie told George. 'She must like you.'

'I like her,' said George. 'How does she normally behave with your boyfriends?'

'They're not usually around long enough for her to meet them,' Evie replied truthfully.

'I'm flattered,' said George. 'Also curious. I thought it was men who were supposed to be scared of commitment.'

'I've managed like this for a long time,' said Evie. 'I was planning to go on in the same way for ever, or at least as long as men kept showing an interest.'

'Cue lecherous remark from me,' said George. 'But seriously, Evie, why do you shake them off before you can get attached? And why am I still here?'

Evie considered. They were fair questions, questions she'd been asking herself.

'You're here because you're here,' she told him. 'With you, the panic button doesn't light up. As soon as it comes on, I activate the ejector-seat. Better unwed than dead.' Evie laughed. 'Believe me, on the shelf and in one piece is an achievement. I think of myself like one of my oppie jugs or cups. We deserve a quiet old age.'

George smiled a quizzical smile, though the frown didn't quite disappear from between his eyebrows. Evie could see that he wanted to ask more, but was waiting for a prompt.

'I'll tell you the sad tales one day,' she said. 'If you're good.'

'I'll be very good, you'll see.'

Evie sent him home then, and he went gracefully.

She climbed into her bed beside the sleeping Rose, picked up her exercise book and a pen.

*Aristos crossed the room towards Dana, purposeful as a panther.*

*Sweat glistened on his forehead in the candlelight, and his white shirt gaped open over dark tendrils of hair. Dana sat up in the tousled bed, miming shock, a timorous half-smile playing over her features. Her bed was set into a niche in the wall, a three-quarter bed rather than a double. The white coverlet was thrown enticingly back to display her golden arms in the lawn nightdress; her hair, she knew, would be an enchanting disarray of curls. She couldn't have planned this better; Aristos thought it was all his own idea.*

Evie giggled. Dana had lost any trace of maidenly modesty since Evie had met George. She was up to all sorts of tricks, and Evie had plenty more planned. The story was coming on in leaps and bounds. Therapy could never be this much fun. Before she put down her pen, she'd steered Dana through a steamy encounter with Aristos, and caused her to secrete him under the bed when another suitor came calling unannounced. Aristos had to endure the slings and arrows, or bumps and prods of his paramour's frolic with another, and then humbly agree, when the second suitor left, that he would be content merely to share her favours - indeed, he would be ecstatic.

The next morning was one of those dauntingly beautiful late summer-early autumn Adelaide marvels. Evie took Rosie for a walk and paddle on the still-cool beach, followed by ice-cream at Wendy's. Back in her own backyard, they took crayons and sketchbooks outside and sat under the big tree.

'What are you going to draw, Evie?'

'I'm no good at this, but I'm going to have a go at a pond and some trees. How about you?'

'I'm going to draw Daddy.'

Rosie's sketch took shape fast: a wedge-shaped head with goatee beard, handlebar ears and almond-shaped eyes, the irises a chocolate brown.

'There. Does that look like him?'

'I'd recognise that face anywhere. You forgot his eyebrows, though.'

'My Dad misses me when I'm at Mummy's,' Rosie told her aunt, pencilling in the eyebrows as two straight lines. 'He wants me to come and live at his house all the time.'

'Would you like to?'

'Not all the time. But I miss Daddy too. '

Voices floated over the fence from the noisy neighbours' side.

'Mum, can I go up the shop?'

'You can get in here now and clean up your room. Now, Alex, you hear me?'

The woman had a voice like a corncrake, if a corncrake sounded like a gate being dragged open on rusty hinges.

'It's hard for mums and dads to share their kids when they don't live together. That's just the way it is, Rosie.'

'And now Mummy's got a new boyfriend. Will they have babies?'

'Anything's possible, hon, but I think your mum's probably happy with just you and Bert.'

Rose was drawing a sausage-shaped body with thinner sausages for arms and legs. 'This is Mummy,' she said. 'I'm going to make her really beautiful. I'm doing her a necklace of jewels, see?' And she studded the top of the sausage, below its round head, with bubbles of red, green, gold and blue.

'Lovely, Rose. What do you think of my pond?'

'A bit dirty-looking,' said Rose.

'Well, it's summer. There's not much water in it.'

'Hey, here's Mummy! Mum, come and look at my drawing of you!'

Chris and Paula emerged from the path alongside Evie's flat, self-consciously keeping their distance from one another, which said more clearly than if they'd had their arms entwined that they'd recently been a lot closer. Evie smiled and waited to be introduced.

Chris squatted alongside the artists and inspected the drawings. 'Anyone I know?' he asked Rose.

'That's my Dad,' she said. 'And this is Mummy.'

'Can I draw one of you, Rose?'

Selecting a couple of vaguely flesh-tinted crayons and a brown one, Chris turned to a new page in the book, dashing off a clever cartoon Rose with tighter, springier curls and bigger, googlier eyes, unmistakably her.

'Hey, that *is* me! Can I keep it?'

'Charmer,' said Paula. 'Got any other tricks up your sleeve?'

'I can get up from a squatting position without using my hands. Look - ta da!'

'God, he's amazing. Evie, any chance of a tea? We'll leave Chris to do his Rolf Harris turn for Rosie.'

'He seems like a honey, Paul,' Evie told her sister as she fished out three differently-quirky china cups and non-matching saucers. 'Can you see the teapot in that cupboard?'

'There are four, drongo. Which shall we use?'

'The fat yellow one. Yep. So, is he nice?'

'So far, so good', said Paula. 'I keep hearing Mum checking off points for and against. How pathetic is that?'

'Ah, well. Just because they're dead doesn't mean they shut up.'

'Apart from Mum's reservations, to do with how much money he earns, we both seem to think he's too good to be true.'

'Sex?' asked Evie

'No, thanks, I've just put one out,' said Paula.

'Don't play dumb with me, girlie.'

'Oh, you know. It's nice. Listen to me - nice! But he is, like a hot water bottle. Suits me fine. Nice is good.'

'Well, great, Paul. Can we really have both lucked out at the same time?'

The sisters carried one of Evie's old-lady painted tin teatrays - white with pink and red climbing roses - out to the garden.

'Rose, I forgot to show you! I found an old china kids' teaset the other day, just like one your mum and I used to have. It's under my bed. Go and bring it out, and you can have tea and milk in your own pot and jug.'

Chris continued effortlessly charming, sitting with the women a while longer, drinking tea from dolly cups, capping off a flawless performance by announcing he had to go and visit his mum. He'd left his car at Paula's, and trotted happily off around the corner to fetch it.

'I like Chris,' Rose decided.

'I'm not about to send him packing just yet,' Paula said.

'Mummy's got a boyfriend, Mummy's got a boyfriend!'

'Nyah, nyah na nah nah! Ro-sie ha-sn't!'

'I don't want a boyfriend!' Rose was affronted.

Rosie got to choose how they'd spend the afternoon. She elected to watch 'Clueless' on Evie's video for the twentieth time.

'Let's fast forward to her girlfriend driving onto the freeway,' Paula recommended hopefully.

'No, no, I want to see when they find the bong in the jumble sale box.'

'That girl's brother has some explaining to do,' muttered her mother.

'Wah, there's the automatic clothes chooser. Wish I had one, Mum.'

'I have told you that Amy Humperdinck or whatever her name is based Clueless on 'Emma', haven't I?' Evie turned to her sister.

'Only three hundred times.'

'So it's even funnier when you think of Joel as Mr Knightley.'

'I was away the day we did 'Emma'.'

'The year, you mean.' Evie grinned and turned back to the screen.

'Give it a rest.' Okay, so Paula had left school at fifteen. Big deal. Anyway, Dot, she mentally telegraphed her mother-in-the-clouds, look where the checkout chick's got now. D'oh. Doing it again, moron.

'I'm going to go back to school just to do English one of these days,' Paula said aloud.

'I'll come with you.'

'You! Evie, you got an A for Year Eleven English.'

'Right. And then I chucked it in, remember?'

'But you did go back, in Melbourne, didn't you?'

'A brief attempt,' Evie said shortly.

Amazing how many gaps there were in her knowledge of Evie's life, Paula thought, settling back into her bean bag. For two women who were supposed to be close, sisters and friends, they had a surprising number of secrets from one another. Didn't Evie trust her, was that it? Or was it stuff she never told anyone? Paula knew Evie had had a period, corresponding to the years she'd spent in Perth with Gary, of life on the wild side. Evie had gone so far as to hint she'd been a Woman of the Night, but never provided any details. At this point in their lives, so normal, so everyday, so apparently indistinguishable from other women their age, it was hard to believe either of them had a 'past'. Well, if Evie did, there were also things Paula could tell her sister that would make her sit up. Paula suspected Evie imagined little sister's life had been Dullsville up to now. She'd be surprised.

'Evie,' she said tentatively, 'How would you feel if I organised a family barbie? We could show off the new blokes. Say, for my birthday?'

'Your fortieth! Well, suitable occasion, certainly. Up to you, Paul. You know I don't click with all the gels, not to mention their hubbies. But I can cope. And you deserve a big bash. Sure. Why not?'



The pizza from Mamma Carmela's arrived. Bert had worked there for a while two years ago, and they'd all kept faith with the pizzeria. The special was mammoth and messy.

As they ate, they compared notes on the *soirée* at Bert's, held according to schedule the previous weekend, where Bert played the capable young bachelor to perfection. The sisters had smiled fondly over the head of the beamish boy, bustling about the table, who turned his hand to a very good *coq au vin* from the secondhand Margaret Fulton Cookbook, presented by Evie on the occasion of his leaving home. Paula had been delighted to note the effort Bert had put into staging the evening, clearing the dog turds from the yard, inexpertly but earnestly mopping floors, plumping cushions, assembling matching crockery. Evie thought it was brave of Bert to make the attempt at all, considering Paula's standards in her own home. Paula, though, was merely touched, charmed that her boy was evolving into a species of house-trained adult male. Evie noted Leanne's absence, evident in the bare bathroom windowsill, still stocked on her previous visit with pretty toiletry bottles. When Bert made a casual reference to Evie's dropping by, she trotted out the Target-undies story; Paula laughed and stated a preference for Woolies'. Evie, though, had suffered spasms of guilt over their continuing deception of Paula concerning Bert's nasty turn on the night George came into their lives.

After Paula and Rose went home, Evie washed some clothes by hand. She felt strangely insubstantial; as though she could disappear in a puff of smoke and no one would even notice she'd gone. Her mother never sent Evie messages from the other side; she rather envied Paula that. Being in your forties, not tethered to the world by children, could be unsettling, much as she insisted otherwise to anyone who asked. While Evie had never fancied herself as a mother, her hormones still sent populate-or-perish messages; they were repeatedly stamped Return to Sender, but all the same ... this was one of those moments when a brood of children might make a girl feel more solid. She shook herself. It's the Irish talking, so it is, she told herself. Sunday evening's a good time to sort out your tablecloths and doilies, Mother Macree, in case the bishop drops by for a nightcap. At least

she could leave Rosie a fabulous trousseau, if she turned out to be interested in such things.

## CHAPTER 6

Some days Paula woke up feeling as though she'd shed several layers of protective cladding during the night. Today was one of those days. The sun was shining brilliantly into her open front door as she laid the table for breakfast, the sky was an unbelievable blue, the morning was blessedly quiet, nothing evil threatened - by now Paula had stopped imagining flashes of shiny black tracky-dak in the corner of an eye. It was just that the world felt primordial; all her own impulses seemed oddly preordained, in a biological, evolutionary sort of way. On days like this, Paula felt suddenly part of a vertiginously huge whole plan, the one which made big-picture sense of all her small impulses, the urges that pushed her through the day. Urges that pushed everybody through every day, which were plain enough, of course, in extreme situations. God knew there were enough of those around the world on any morning, and Paula gave thanks for her safe haven, experiencing a pang of visceral pain for the people in the refugee camps, sheltering from bombs, hiding from marauding warriors of rival tribes in so many places, 'civilised' as well as 'backward' places, where the imperative was perfectly clear: survive, get over this, live until tomorrow, keep your children alive till tomorrow.

Well, this was one of the mornings when Paula felt more like a female hominid than a person. If she moved to make Rosie's breakfast, it seemed as though her arms and hands, setting out rice bubbles and bowl and glass of orange juice, became longer, fingers and palms long and wide, fingertips spatulate, the backs of her palms covered in long, dark hair. If she swept the floor, rearranged bedclothes, put rubbish in a plastic bag in the wheelie bin just inside the front gate, packed Rosie's school lunch, she saw and felt herself gathering armfuls of fresh branches to make a new treetop nest, peeling back fibrous outer leaves of nourishing fruits for her baby, checking the nest for droppings, nasty insects, foreign bodies.

In a way these occasional 'peels', as Paula thought of them, were comforting, because they shattered the overlay of rationality, of distinctive humanness as opposed to primateness or animality, that normally shrouded one's sense of one's life and activities. On peeled

mornings like this, Paula felt exhilarated to be part of a continuum, part of something bigger than herself, something that made sense. On the other hand, peeled days were disconcerting; one's notions of what one was about were suddenly revealed as inflated and indeed laughable. What was there to do in the world besides gather food, or work to provide oneself with the means to gather food, procreate, find or provide shelter, protect one's young? What else did any creature do?

As she cruised abstractedly to work, Paula smiled to think what a clever chimp she was, to be driving a car like this. And to be a chimp in charge of a retirement-colony of elderly chimps, wow! Give the girl a banana. Give her a bunch of bananas!

Humming the 69th Bridge Street Song, remembering the days when she'd thought Simon and Garfunkel were profound, she pulled almost without her customary twinge of disbelief into the Matron's designated parking spot.

They've all gone to look for America, all gone to look for Ame-e-rica, she sang quite loudly as she walked into the hall and noted the absence of dust, smelled the scent of actual roses rather than that much-touted institutional cabbage and disinfectant smell.

It was quiet, but some mornings were quiet, with no emergencies, everything humming along as it should. Paula settled at her desk, dealt with some paperwork and went so far as to slide a CD into the tinny little player on the windowsill. Madonna's new one, Rosie's CD actually, but Paula had become fond of it. At low volume, it wasn't distracting. Once upon a time, Paula had entertained fleeting fantasies, if not of rock-stardom, at least of singing, accompanying herself on guitar, in pubs. She had a sweet voice, and had mastered enough guitar technique to pass muster.

Evie had just loaned her *42 Up*, recording it for her specially; watching, the night before, Paula had felt a strong affinity with Sue, the pretty one, with her two kids and lowly job as receptionist in a Law School office. Sue decided not to go to grammar school, attending the

local comprehensive instead, insisting still that she hadn't missed out. Her parents, she said, had been marvellous. All the East End girls said that, while the Hooray Henries and Henriettas had endured miserable, love-starved lives at boarding school, booted out of the nest at painfully tender ages, drilled and regimented and allowed home for brief holidays a couple of times a year. When Paula watched Sue singing her heart out at karaoke night at the pub, it was all she could do not to weep aloud. She had cried a bit, but quietly, so as not to disturb Rose.

Shuffling through her in-tray, Paula hummed another forty-something song, Madonna's for Guy Ritchie, father of Rocco. This guy was meant for me, and I was meant for him. Was Chris her intended from forever? Ringing romantic phrases didn't seem to apply, but did it matter? He was besotted with her, and Paula herself was certainly in like.

Shaking her head, Paula got up to go and check on her current husband, and so discovered the cause of the hush around Holmwood.

'Paula! We didn't realise you'd arrived.' Desirée, breathless, caught her by the arm in the corridor outside Arthur's room.

'How's my boy?' Paula attempted to continue her interrupted passage.

'That's the thing, Paul, there's very sad news.'

Paula halted in the doorway, practised eyes taking in the scene round Arthur's bed. Then she was running across the floor, little sobs catching in her throat.

'Sorry, Matron,' said little Nurse Bridge, sitting alongside the bed on the visitor's chair. 'He slipped away between checks somewhere around four this morning. There wasn't any warning. We haven't moved him or anything.'

Paula picked up the fragile hand lying immobile on the sheet and pressed it against her cheek. Tears were streaming down her face, and Arthur's poor fingers were wet when she pressed them between her two warm hands.

'My poor old lad,' she whispered. 'My best boy.' And then she was sitting on the bed alongside the thin body that took up so little space, crying in earnest with her head on the old man's chest.

'Let it out, love, let it out.' Des patted her back. 'You saved that man. He died happy because of you.'

'What about me?' He made me happy too. My dear old Arthur.'

Des stood by, stroking her shoulder. Paula cried as she hadn't cried when her mother died, she cried the way she cried when her father went. But she dusted herself down after ten minutes, kissed Arthur on the forehead and went about her day, the sadness settling like cold porridge in her gut. The usual procedures were set in motion, and she was her brisk workaday self again. She suffered a pang every time she passed the door of Arthur's room, surprised to be so moved. And a memory of her mother popped out of nowhere: Paula thirteen, gawky and unconfident, discovering blood in her undies in the toilet at home one Saturday afternoon. Dad at the races, Mum guarding the nest. Displaying her uncanny sixth sense, Dot knocked on the toilet door behind which Paula was delaying her exit, trying to fold toilet paper into a wad to stuff into her pants.

'Are you okay in there, dear?'

'Yes,' Paula had said, not quite covering up a quaver in her voice.

'Let me in, Paula. Come on, now.'

So she'd opened the door for Dot, who'd taken in the situation instantly, given her an encouraging hug and fished out the Modess packet from its hiding place alongside the water heater, which lived behind the toilet door. Dot had borrowed a sanitary belt (not such a bad invention, Paula remembered, now that they'd disappeared in favour of stick-on pads and everything depended on the elastic in your underpants holding up) from one of the older girls' cupboards and shown her how to attach the pad to the teeth of the clasp. Then she'd made her a hot-water bottle and told Paula to have a rest, made her a cup of tea and read to her from, of all things, *Wind in the Willows*, which Paula's class was studying for English that year. It was the cosiest afternoon, just the two of them in the normally crowded house, and Paula remembered how capable and unfussed her mother could be. The Kenneth Grahame fan, the tea-and-hottie provider, elusive as she was, was her mother as much as the unappeasable adversary of Paula's later adolescence. Stupidly, Paula was crying again as she locked the door to her office and shrugged on her jacket. Too late to make up now.

When she got home, Paula called Evie and asked to borrow the old box of photographs from Mum's house so she could make copies.

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Evie was at morning Mass. She wasn't sure why. She'd simply woken up that morning, got decisively out of bed and dressed, walked out the front door and round to the church in time for the 8 o'clock.

The priest was the youngish one she judged to be a bit wet; the turnout of six was all female, and it was all over in twenty-five minutes. Evie didn't feel any holier. She'd had the urge to go; she'd gone. The act was probably in the same league as her frequent walks around the neighbourhood. Wanting to touch all familiar bases, remind herself of all the places where she was known, all the places she belonged, however tenuously. To keep herself from disappearing.

Last night she'd dreamed that Rosie and Paula both had newborn infants. Must have been Rosie rabbiting on about a new brother or sister set her off. Paula's, in the dream, was so tiny it was almost invisible; Rosie's was a bouncing, glowing babe, a picture of health. Paula and Rosie were both in a hurry to deliver their infants, because they were off to Italy and thence to Paris. Then the scene changed to children playing near a brazier in an enclosed market, where a large crowd was gathered. There was a bomb in the brazier, which duly blew up, but not much damage was done. People who had scurried away came back, only to encounter a further detonation, this time spraying around some awful infection. Later, two small children, alone, talked together about running away from home. A woman bystander took them into a café and gave them hot chocolate.

Babies, babies. Face the future with a child on a stick - her favorite Leunig cartoon. Evie sat on in her pew, staring at the giant Murillo nativity reproduced around the Romanesque dome of Our Lady of Victories, the painting that dominated her Sunday Mass experiences throughout her early years. Beefy shepherds and fleshy Madonna cloaked in deepest blue leaning forwards around the manger, whence issues radiance as from a cunningly-placed spotlight, beaming babe being unwound from swaddling clothes like a chubby jujube from its wrapper, and a not-too-hoary Joseph standing by. Mary looked womanly and real, the mood was tender and amazed, right for any birth, not just the Big One.

The other women from morning Mass had vanished. Evie felt a pang of nostalgia for a world she dimly remembered, when all your friends and all your parents' friends were from the same parish as you, went to the same church, attended the same few schools. Gone for good, all that, the unquestioned clan loyalties, the easy confidence in a camaraderie born of shared faith and culture. It seemed like centuries ago that they and their parents, their friends and their parents and thousands of others had turned out bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for devotional processions at the Monastery and the Seminary, ranks of true believers parading around the grounds of those huge church properties, belting out hymns and declaiming the mysteries of the rosary. That simple-minded show of solidarity belonged in



another era. Well, it was last century, Evie reminded herself. Sometimes she missed it, the time when everything had an explanation, everything made sense, you were part of a gigantic gang.

Maureen, who'd naturally been one of the Excellent Women at mass, was waiting for her outside the church door, to ask how the phone-counselling shifts were going and remind her she was on again that same night. Evie felt weirdly detached from the conversation, observing as from a cloud her own impersonation of a decent spinster. To counter the strange sensation, she went to her room immediately she got home, reached under the bed and pulled out Dana's trashy doings. Sitting on top of her satin eiderdown, she rested her back against stacked pillows. Time to get transgressional...

*From the bed, Dana watched Aristos' furry shoulders swing through her door, his form becoming indistinct as he edged into the shadowy corridor. She sighed, stretched, pointing her toes taut. She was imagining how it would be to spend time in the exclusive company of women, surrounded entirely by female flesh and scents. Maria had spoken intriguingly of a convent on a nearby hilltop, similar in all outward aspects to the monasteries of the monks, such as famous Mt Athos, whose brethren shunned females so notoriously. As she pulled her sheet up to her chin and prepared for sleep, Dana resolved to find out more.*

*In the morning, she took Maria aside and quizzed her.*

*Ah, Kyria, it is heaven to be with the sisters, Maria breathed, a gleam that was not at all spiritual in her dark eyes. Every week I take to them bread I have baked and they are so thankful...*

*So it was that Dana accompanied her friend up the hillside on the appointed afternoon, gasping with amazement as a heavy, mullioned door in a high rendered wall was pulled open to receive them by a gossamer-veiled beauty, who*

*took their offerings and led them into an atrium where more sisters waited in a shallow pool, less encumbered by clothing than the porter ...*

When the phone rang at eleven, it was a surprise to find it was Paula, a little shaky-sounding, asking for the olds' photos; Paula had not so long ago expressed herself glad to see the back of every last hairclip of Dot's. Must be getting soft. Hormones. Chris. Nesting. Evie merely agreed she'd drop the photos round next day, being Tuesday and Rosie day. She didn't tell Paula she planned to occupy her own evening as Dear Dorothy Ditz. Somehow Evie hadn't got around to mentioning the helpline to her sister. If anyone ought to be doing it, it should be Matron Paula, mother to her people. But it was Evie in the chair, though for how much longer, if she kept breaking rules as with Zak and Bert, she couldn't tell.

By eleven at night, after a whole, luxurious day with Dana on the Greek Isles, there'd only been two calls. First was some bloke whose wife had left him. He admitted that he also had a girlfriend of several years' standing, but he didn't see that as having any bearing on the situation. He and his wife were married in the eyes of the Lord and God's law said they should stay that way. Bloody born-to-rule Catholic blokes, Evie thought. What are you calling me for if you know you've got God on your side? Ring the cops and make them find her and drag her back, seeing she's your property that's had the cheek to bugger off. Matey seemed to want to let off steam, blowing it out like a kettle for half an hour. Ten minutes after he'd hung up there was a call from another married bloke who wanted to know if he was going to go to Hell for frequenting 'comfort-women'. Again, Evie had to fight down the urge to vomit or scream. Best ask the priest that, she told him; You'll probably get off with a warning, Evie thought but didn't say. This is a Church that specialises in doublethink. Like don't blame homosexuals for their urges, only for acting on them.

My, my, one's rich and varied life experience is paying off tonight, Evie reflected, replacing Nanna's bakelite handpiece in its cradle. Only, if everyone's going to want me to be the Voice of the Modern Church, I'll need a refresher course.

Picking up the phone before it could ring again, although this was strictly forbidden on nights you were answering help calls (directed from a central switch to your number), Evie rang George.

'What in the name of God am I doing?' she asked him when he picked up, having just (he said) finished a long email to Harry. 'Me telling people how to run their lives? Puh-leeze. They're sad old tossers anyway. The whole thing's a crock. I'm going to quit.'

'Whoa, whoa,' said George. 'You know the drill. So what if they just want to justify themselves? You're a step along the way to their eventually taking a good hard look at their lives. Or maybe not. But hey - if it's you getting an earful it isn't their wives or girlfriends. Isn't that a genuine public service?'

'Fuck providing services,' Evie muttered. 'Alright, I'll stick with it for tonight, anyway.'

'Your reward will be great in heaven. When shall we two meet again?'

'Shall we say, high noon in Dunsinane tomorrow? No, make that The Pines front bar after work. They're clear-felling Dunsinane.'

Evie had made herself a cup of tea, put aside books that needed to go back to the library and was about to take the phone off the hook and go to bed when it rang again. A priest, for fucksake. He was feeling suicidal because he felt his faith was failing, and yet he couldn't bring himself to do the right thing and leave his ministry. He couldn't imagine life outside after all these years; but what else was there he could do?

Who do you refer professionals to for counselling? wondered Evie. 'Well, Father,' she said, 'of course your pastoral skills could be employed in other roles. Your experience would be very valuable in all kinds of fields.'

'I've read to them from the rule-book when they had serious ethical problems, instead of trying to discover the best interests of the individuals involved. I can run a funeral service, perform baptisms and weddings, and bleat on about faith, hope and charity at First Communion. I don't think I've grown in wisdom at all.'

'Surely not.' Evie was warning to her theme. 'It's the priests who don't have doubts who do the harm.'

Father O'Nonymous seemed a little comforted when he rang off. Evie felt pleased with herself. How about that, she thought. On the other side of the confessional grille for a change. Now why didn't I take the chance to give him three thousand Hail Marys for the Sin of Doubt while I had him there?

She sat on in the armchair by the phone for a while after that, instead of getting into bed, staring at the wall. Nanna used to take them to Confession on Saturday afternoons if they happened to be at her place. When they got older, Evie at least would have carnal sins, of the lewd-imaginings variety, looming like mountains amidst her other offences, waiting to be confessed. 'Impure thoughts'. Inevitably, the time came when she had to confess some on one of those Saturday afternoons in Nanna's sun-drenched parish church, whispering her shame through the grille, with Father McIntyre handing down several decades of the Rosary for penance. Kneeling there reciting Hail Mary at machine-gun speed, when Nanna had manifestly long finished her piddling three Our Fathers or whatever she got for falling asleep before reaching the end of her nightly devotions, was ghastly. Evie pretended to be extremely pious, looking up dreamily at the end of the Sorrowful Mysteries as if she'd just awakened from a vision. Betcha Nanna wasn't fooled, not old Hawkeye.

The yellow veyella dress with the brown sprigged flowers and white collar which floated into her mind belonged to a more innocent era, when Mum and Dad still went to Confession with them and they dressed up in Sunday best for the event. For some reason Saturday

afternoons were the designated repentance times, so when Dad became a regular racegoer, family confessions stopped. Evie remembered the virtuous feeling of kneeling down on the polished, glowing mahogany wooden block under the grille, spreading the skirt of her best dress out around her, making sure not to scuff the patent leather of her black court shoes, preparing to launder her soul. She was still a good little girl, who only sometimes said naughty words or answered her mother back. When they'd all unloaded their crimes, great and small, they'd kneel in a row in one pew, facing the altar of the Glenelg church, and light from Heaven would fall on their shriven heads from the high windows above. When they drove back home in the white Holden Special, they'd all be trying to be nice to each other, keeping their souls unstained for as long as possible. It never lasted much longer than the car trip; someone would jam a finger in the car door and swear, or trip over a sibling's foot and bark angrily at the offender. But for half an hour or so they all felt new-minted and clean, and a happy, loving family life seemed within their grasp.

Nanna never wavered in her faith. Neither did her parents, as far as Evie knew, although they became less punctilious in their observances than they had been when the children were little. They never missed Sunday mass, though they would often go on Saturday evenings when that became permissible, and they kept up with the extras like Good Friday services and Palm Sunday processions and Midnight Mass at Easter. When the laity were encouraged to join in the liturgy on Sundays, Dot and John read the lesson at the parish church.

The rot set in with Evie and her sisters and brothers. Although they'd all been to Catholic schools, primary and secondary, exposed to the best efforts of the nuns and brothers, each in turn had dropped away as soon as they left school. Or as soon as they left home, so as to avoid all-out war with their parents. Who in any case began to slacken in their determination to get them out of bed for Sunday morning Mass as one after another of them begged off week after week - late night, not feeling well, having doubts about the whole thing. Leenie had baptised her babies, Trish hadn't. It must have seemed to their parents as though the world was going mad.

Evie rotated her head from side to side, pulling herself stiffly out of her chair. Before bed, she ought to find those photos Paula wanted. When she dragged them out from the narrow space that had once been her father's sock-drawer in his french-polished wardrobe, now pushed against Evie's bedroom wall, she sat on her bed for an hour more looking at the impossibly young, shining faces in the wedding album, her mother's bouncy curls in the tiny box-Brownie snaps from their first home, the fat little butterball Evie had been herself, sitting grinning on that indestructible couch grass by the rainwater tank, the rows of strawberries her father grew by the back gate. Did all families, with the years, acquire accretions of unhappiness and unretracted hard words, like disfiguring barnacles? Or great, enormous carbuncles, in their case? Were some families exempt?

Several cups of tea later, as she put the lid back on the last shoebox of photos, wired rather than tired now, Evie decided to compose an invitation to Paula's birthday party, to send to all her siblings. She knew she'd been ungracious when Paula suggested it. It was the thought of having the whole crew in one place, where she'd feel obliged to give an account of herself. But Paula was her littlest sister, and when her turn for events like fortieth birthdays came around, everyone else had always been there first. Evie decided that this would be a birthday to remember, and she, Evie, would make it happen.

When Evie arrived early at Paula's for Rosie Tuesday, bearing a shoebox of photos in one hand and an outsize handmade card in the other, Paula hadn't yet had a chance to ring around the family to set up the modest birthday drinks she'd had in mind. Evie thrust the card into her hand. 'HEY, PAULA' (said the giant letters) 'WE WANT TO MARRY YOU', and then the fine print inside - 'ha, ha, sucked in. But we do want to say Happy Fortieth', and at the bottom, Leenie's Plympton address and phone number and a date two weeks away. Trust Evie to dig up the corpse of that dumb Paul Anka song Dad used to tease her with. Still, Paula glowed as she took the invitation into the lounge room to sit it on the mantelpiece. The whole Haggerty bunch together. It almost never happened any more - wouldn't kill them to turn out for the baby's fortieth, would it? If they could only have Sean

back, just for the day. There was still that sensation, as though her heart was being squeezed between giant hands, when she thought of her little brother, dead now ten years. He was the baby, not herself. Paula was second youngest, once secure in the knowledge that there was one more between herself and the end of the line, who she could cuddle and teach. Someone who would look to her for guidance, and also as a partner in naughtiness.

Evie sat Rose on the floor and spread out some of the old photos on the coffee table, playing 'guess who this is', quizzing Paula at the same time on developments with Chris.

'He said his Mum brought them up on her own,' Paula told her, draining a lukewarm teacup. 'She sent his Dad packing because he was having it off with her sister. They live in Queensland now.'

'Must have been hard,' said Evie, imagining it. 'Pretty difficult to put that one behind you, eh? Though Christ knows, it's a common-as-muck story. Shouldn't you be buzzing off to work, sis?'

Only now did Paula become aware why she was slow off the mark today: there was an ache behind her eyes, her throat was suspiciously scratchy and her arms and legs hurt. Damn and blast, she'd picked up a bug. Probably the shock of Arthur dying had disabled her immune system long enough for something nasty to dig in. Getting up, with effort, from the kitchen table, Paula stood by the sink, eyelids half-closed against the bright morning sun, patting a hand along the windowsill for the Panadol packet. Suddenly her muscles felt like lead.

'You're coming down with something, aren't you?' Evie realised. 'I'll ring Holmwood. You go to bed and Rosie and I will come and read you to sleep.'

They tucked her in and slid a hot-water bottle under her feet. Rosie sat down alongside her mother's pillow with a stack of 'Spot' books, and proceeded to read them all aloud from start to finish. It was wonderfully soporific. Paula drifted off into a feverish haze, a *séance* that all her family attended.

Kathleen was looming over her, telling her she'd had too much to drink.

Mind your own beeswax, Sis, Paula came back wittily, tipping the last of her stubby down her throat.

Look, I know we've had our moments, said Kathleen, lips tight, but I only want what's best for you. For us all.

Yeah, yeah. Check out your own backyard before you clean mine up, Paula blustered, knowing Kathleen was right about the alcohol, at least.

Her sister's face tightened even more.

Great, she said. Our little chat *has* done me good. And she stalked off.

Paula shivered with shame under the bedclothes, as though that barbecue at Mum and Dad's had been yesterday. Kathleen's husband Dennis was a world-class dill, who'd lost money in more ventures than any of them could remember. But he was an okay bloke. Why she had made such a pathetic attempt to hurt Kathleen was clear enough. It was simply that Paula, like most of her sibs, it had to be said, hated to be told what to do. Anything in the least like advice gave her hives. At the time of the barbecue, for Dad's sixtieth, Kathleen and Dennis had been in the throes of selling their desirable eastern-suburbs villa in order to move into a sprawling, timber-frame house in unfashionable Plympton, thanks to Dennis's most recent stuff-up. He'd gone into a timber-blinds business with a mate, that time, and it had gone belly-up. Poor Kathleen. She'd stuck with the star-crossed Dennis, who didn't



have a mean bone in his body, even if, like Epaminondas in their Wide Range Reader, he didn't have the sense he was born with. These days Kathleen worked as a secretary for a legal firm, having quickly become indispensable to her sole-practitioner boss. Dennis was holding down a job as a postie, of all things, and they seemed happy.

Sorry, Leenie, Paula telegraphed her oldest sister, tossing on to her side in the clammy sheets. I'll make it up to you. Promise.

With Trisha, nearer in age, Paula had always maintained a scratchy intimacy. Trisha was much tetchier than Kathleen, much more inclined to run off at the mouth, but Paula, for no obvious reason, was more inclined to tolerate Trish's blunt buttings-in.

Bloody useless git, Paula's overheated brain retrieved her sister's verdict on being informed that Paula and Gary's marriage was in its final throes. You, I mean, not him. For God's sake, when it's over it's over. Put this marriage out of its misery, why don't you?

Trisha herself had done just that to her own eighteen-year marriage to Brenton not long after. Trish had fallen hard for a successful maker of surfboards, with curly black hair and blue eyes. They had got married, Trisha's oldest boy going to Kangaroo Island with her, the eldest daughter staying in town with her dad. Paula had been to visit, and deduced that new hubby was not the easygoing surf-rat he projected but a textbook ruler of his castle, who kept a tight rein on Trish and always got his own way with a mixture of sulks and bluster. Paula ached for her sister, but knew from experience that Trisha was even more allergic to advice than she herself was. The one time she'd tried to suggest that Trish should insist on one day a week for herself, her sister turned on her like a cornered cat.

We're partners, Ashley and me, Trish had snapped. He misses me when I'm away.

But he's in the factory all day, Trish. What does it matter to him what you do with the day? You could easily be back by the time he gets home at night.

He likes to know I'm here if he wants to pop home for lunch. And why not?

Paula had backed off, but she knew the look in Trisha's eyes, at once defiant and defeated. She'd seen it in Casualty often enough, in the faces of women who were having treatment for injuries ascribed to household accidents, always plausibly, by the concerned boyfriends and husbands who accompanied them. Trisha was as stubborn as all the Haggertys put together, and that was saying something. Admit nothing, least of all to yourself, was Trish's rule, but Paula could see the way the wind was blowing.

Paula turned onto her back, tossed off her doona and floated through the ceiling and into another house in another year.

She stood in a lounge-room with lozenge-paned windows, where a woman with long, straight hair and crazed green eyes was flailing like a thresher, whipping ornaments off shelves, pulling crockery from the sideboard, sending a lamp sailing through a window, maniacally strong despite her tiny stature. 'Little Pattie' to her friends, Pattie had been Brenton's first wife, and no way was she handing over to the interloper, Trisha, without raising a protest. Trisha and Paula had been backed against one wall as the dervish twirled and screamed. Into Paula's mild delirium, Pattie's exquisite little countenance loomed, teeth bared, pupils huge.

Outside the mayhem, spinning free, orbited sister Sheelagh, born independent, happily unmarried, wandering first the country and then the globe with her portable paralegal and nannying skills. She sent cheery postcards when she was away, but had drifted, over the years, beyond her sisters' realm. Currently, she was back in Adelaide and working for the Public Trustee's Office. A great gal, Sheely, but maybe that one had been found under a cabbage leaf - couldn't be a filly from the Haggerty stables, eh?

Now Gary slid into the room, displacing the sisters.

I would have stuck it out, you know, he remarked, without rancour. But you weren't having any. And I made you laugh, you can't deny it.

Paula's mouth twisted into a half-grin as she lay, eyes flickering.

You lunatic, she told Gary, or dreamed she did. What was it with you, teaching the kids rubbish names for everything? Bert still asks for torpies in the shoeshop, just to see the look on their faces. Torpedoes, I ask you!

Well, then, if I made you laugh, what made you run away?

Don't know, to tell the truth. Cabin fever? Marrying into another big family?

Gary evaporated, and Bert sat down where his father had been a moment before. He smiled and picked up Paula's damp hand.

Wassup, mumbo? Not the best?

Why don't you come and see me more, Bertie? I miss you, you know that.

Yeah, ma, but a guy's gotta do what a guy's gotta. Ah got spurs that jingle, jangle, jingle.

When I strike gold, I'll come home and set you up jess like y'all deserve, you'll see.

Men! Bertie, you don't have to prove anything to me.

But Bert, too, was gone, and Paula slept.

Wednesday was nanny day, but first there were bills to pay, a rigmarole involving Evie's walking up and down Jetty Road from bank to Post Office to the Gas Company office to query an extra charge on her bill, which the Gas Company predictably verified, back to the bank again. Then home to collect clothes for the laundromat, first dragging a grubby shirt back out of the hamper to wear later for what turned out to be her final job with the Stones. When Bruce accidentally-on-purpose brushed her right breast with his knuckles as he turned in his seat to make his farewells at the tram stop, whither he had insisted on driving her, Evie snapped.

'Neanderthal!' she spat, slamming the door. 'What millennium do you think this is? Do you think the squire still gets to poke the scullery-maid? Bugger that for a game of soldiers, loser. Get another nanny. Your kids deserve better than you!'

All the way home on the tram, she stared at the lights in the houses flashing past, trying to keep her brain empty. So she didn't know where she'd find the money for the next round of bills. So what? There was a cold, white-light intensity inside her. Evie was pleased to feel the flame burning. You made excuses for a certain number of hopeless men in your life, and then no more. Simple as that.

But that night, God sent minatory dreams.

Evie was twenty-something, at a fair with her sisters, and she'd made an assignation with some unknown man. Evie and her sisters separated; the man duly showed up; they carried a picnic basket between them to a dam, not too far along the waterway, sat down to eat, spreading a blanket on the grass. The man was lovely, gentle and rather inarticulate, a Thomas Hardy hero. The whole dream was *Mayor of Casterbridge*, Evie thought, after she'd woken up with her heart pounding. Ronnie, needless to say, had been lurking in the bushes, pouncing on them as they lay with their arms round each other. He kicked the Angel Clare boy, over and over, as he crouched there trying to shield Evie. She sprang up, screaming, pummelling Ronnie, who held her at arms' length while continuing to boot her

boyfriend. Ronnie tossed the other man to one side, grabbed Evie by the hair and pulled her to where his horrible old midnight-blue Chrysler Royal was parked, behind the willows that had seemed so sheltering and friendly when they'd arrived. Evie woke up as Ronnie shoved her head roughly down, jarring her neck, to force her through the open passenger door.

Her head was twisted into the pillow at a painful angle, face down.

The fathers are angry, Evie thought, sitting up and taking deep breaths. Daddies from God down. They set us going like fat gold watches, you got that right, Sylvia. Keep us ticking, inscribe in copperplate and pass on to the next custodian. The fathers were scary, no point denying it. Evie marvelled at the depths of fear in her own psyche. Her dreams only processed it at an infinitesimal rate; her conscious efforts to subdue it were mocked by the ferocious revenge her dreams took. Or could it be she was due to wake up some day soon to find that fear had been burned away, run out of town, finally crushed and vanquished? If only you were allowed to talk about this stuff in the cool light of day. How many women did battle at night just like Evie, waking in fright, tamping down panic. The fear was real. The threat was real. You just weren't supposed to mention it.

Her fingers had moved to her upper arm, caressing the hollows of flesh there. Evie shook her head. Another time, when you're stronger. In about a million years. She hauled herself out of bed, to make yet more tea, summoning a father-challenging song she kept stored for times like these - an old, chilling tune from a folky band like Fairport, one that displayed the enemy's underbelly, the fear and loathing that made them do the things they did - a she-monster's song with the refrain, 'More meat! More meat!' Can't beat 'em, eat 'em, eh? Today, Evie resolutely dressed in camouflage jeans and jacket and Blundstones, striding off to the tram and riding it to the city, where she bought not bullets but balloons and plastic cups for a party she'd offered Bert at her place. She and George (she was slipping into thinking of herself as one of a couple; must watch that) were persisting with their plan to hold festivities at Evie's wherever possible. Bert was keen, although Evie told him he and

Zak would have to fork out for whatever went down peoples' throats. Meaning food and drink, she stipulated, nothing else.

The sun was out, the sky was blue, God was probably not in his Heaven but the world felt benign. Evie strolled across the mouth of a carpark on North Terrace, passing a man in his sixties wearing shorts and a backpack, who calmly told her to go fuck herself and continued on his way, looking straight ahead. 'You shits,' he said, loudly, but there was no-one near.

Am I imagining it, Evie wondered, or are there actually more of them on the street?

George was waiting for her at a pub right on the edge of the square mile of the city.

'What do you say to a walk in the Gardens?' he asked as soon as she walked into the bar, setting down her unwieldy plastic bag of party paraphernalia. 'Here, I bought you a schooner - get that down you and we'll take a constitutional.' He picked up the bag and waited while she swigged.

Under the giant Moreton Bays, the light was green and gold. Leathery dead leaves as big as soup bowls littered the lawns. Evie forgot the madman and took George's hand, laughing at herself, like a sixteen-year-old with her first boyfriend.

George smiled his dazzlingly white smile at her.

'Aarggh, you're blinding me, ' Evie said, bumping him sideways.

'You are under my power; you will do everything I say. You will tell me the story of your life.'

'You wish. Look, matey, you'll go right off me, I can promise you.'

'Evie, can you get it through your head that I like you - whatever made you the way you are won't change my mind. I'll just have more to worship.'

George put his palms together and bowed his head over them in obeisance.

'Still respect me in the morning, eh?'

'I promise you, Evie.'

So Evie sat on a grassy knoll with George, measuring out small doses of story from the horror years when she lived from hit to hit, looking sideways from time to time, expecting every moment to catch a flash of disgust passing over his face.

'That must have been hell,' he said, pulling his arm tighter around her shoulder.

'It's a bit of a blur. And it wasn't all ghastly, I suppose. But I don't see any of the people I thought were my bosom buddies for life any more. Some of them died, but I know lots of them are still around. The worst thing is the way the friendships you make when you're in that scene turn out to be so hollow. At the time they seem like the deepest, most genuine connections. And everyone outside the magic circle seems so drab and colourless, you despise them. You're the chosen ones, you've got the secret. Going back to the outside world is something you can't begin to imagine.'

George nodded. Well, he hadn't been packed in tissue paper these last years, had he?

'I remember a friend of my sister's coming to see me soon after I moved to Melbourne,' Evie went on. 'She was going to become a nun. She was only eighteen, a little bit younger than me. I was really pleased to see her; really pleased she took the trouble to look me up on her last visit to Melbourne before joining the Order. And the first thing I did was offer her a joint. I wonder what planet I was living on. Making a last-ditch effort to divert her from the straight

and narrow. So desperate to be cool. I was making it up as I went along. So were most of the others, I suppose, but Melbourne seemed so chic and cosmopolitan. I assumed everybody else was way more cool than me. She took it, though.'

Evie stretched out on the grass and looked up into the lowest branches of a huge European conifer.

'We always seemed to be inside, in Melbourne, ' she said. 'Adelaide was the place for outdoors, back-to-nature. We smoked so much so as not to feel the cold.'

'Grow your own?' George raised himself on one arm and picked a pine needle out of Evie's hair.

'Every now and again someone grew a dope plant behind a runaway thistle or fennel. Never much else in our gardens. No, somebody always knew somebody who had a little property. Trips to the country were always to visit a little farm to buy a little weed. '

'All sounds pretty tame,' said George.

'Yeah, well, could have been worse. And then, abracadabra, it was. Why does there always have to be a Part Two?'

'Complete with a Big Bad Wolf?'

Evie found her voice had temporarily deserted her. 'Huh,' she managed, a noise between a cough and a squeak.

George was stretched out alongside her, his cheek resting on one hand. He reached out the other to stroke Evie's face.



'Cough it up,' he said. 'You can tell me.'

'You know,' Evie said, turning away, fixing on two ducks swaying off towards the creek in the distance, 'You know, at the turn of the twentieth century, ladies had afternoon tea parties where they injected each other with morphine. A hundred years ago, I would have had laudanum and cocaine in the kitchen cupboard. I would have made home remedies for my children's coughs and colds using my own stock of opiates.'

'Queen Victoria used cannabis for headaches,' George offered.

'We have such a short collective memory.' Evie took a deep breath or two. 'When I was in my twenties, I thought that was the best time in the history of the world to be alive. The best time to be young. But if I'd been in my twenties in 1900, I could have had a nice little habit going and still lived within my means, and no-one would have turned a hair.'

'Very funny, Evie. And if you'd been in your twenties a few hundred years before that, you would have already had five kids and been ready for the scrap heap. Where does that get us?'

'Knock, knock. Who's there? Laura Norder. Jails full of addicts and social security defrauders. Brave new world. What have we really learned?'

'You're smokescreening, you don't fool me. Okay, I'll play. What have you learned?'

'Not much. Beware of strangers?'

George laughed. 'And of Greeks,' he said, stretching his fingers out into talons and digging them into her shoulders.

Evie squealed. 'Especially Greeks.'

## CHAPTER 7

Holmwood was without its Matron for two whole days. The second day, Wednesday, Evie's nanny day, Chris came to play nurse, ran her baths, cooked convalescent meals, a soothing presence.

'Are you sure you've never worked in a nursing home or a hospital?' Paula asked weakly, handing back the tray with its litter of crusts and eggshells.

'No, never. Bar work does have some elements in common with nursing care, though, I will admit.'

'Yes, we sometimes have to call in the bouncers to throw out old ladies from the sitting room when they get too stropky. Really. We do.'

'I mean just being the face on the other side of the bar, in the quiet times,' said Chris. 'I'm good at that, just being there, exchanging meaningless pleasantries, watching people being themselves.'

'Ever thought of being a psychiatrist? There's more money in it.'

'I did think about a Psychology course. In fact, I started one. I may go back to it one day. If I do, I'll do my thesis on the front bar as consulting-room of the masses.'

'The bartender as modern sage. Jackie Gleeson. Howdy, Mr Dennehy. Ooh, my head hurts.'

'I don't think I'm ambitious enough,' Chris said, smoothing Paula's forehead. 'But I am curious about people. I know pubs are an artificial social scene - more so than most, because there's this frantic pretence that everybody's a good bloke, a few beers and we're

all best mates. Still, people do have this urge to congregate at the watering hole, and it's a fascinating place to be.'

'You're a fly on the well.' Paula's demented laugh turned into a groan.

'And I get to watch a lot of daytime soaps. Anything you want to know about Days of Our Beautiful Hospitals, I'm your man.'

'How old are you, Chris?' Paula asked now. 'You seem as though you've been around a long time. But you can't be older than me - maybe this is your seventh time around and you're about ready for Nirvana.'

'Nah, give me Oasis any day. Ha ha. I haven't come back this time as a comedian, that's for sure. I'm thirty-seven.'

'Right, a chicken. I'm turning forty in three weeks.'

'A witch! A witch! Burn her!'

'It's a fair cop,' Paula giggled, 'So dunk me in the pond. What do you want to spend your time with wicked old ladies for, young feller-me-lad?'

'I'm waiting for the spell to break - poof! You turn back into a spunky sixteen-year-old. You dill. Look in the mirror - you're a hornbag!'

'You watch your tongue, young man, or you'll get a taste of my walking stick. In fact, you're probably a hallucination. But while you're here, could you get me a glass of barley water?'

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The supermarket checkout queue stretched out to the crack of doom. Evie was at the back, cradling a basket of cut-price nuts and crisps and crackers and olives. George had come across with some funds for a few eats for the party tonight, Bert and Zak turning out their pockets and making sad-clown faces when it came time to buy refreshments. Normally, she was good at waiting, but today her feet itched with the tedium of standing still, inching forward, standing still, watching soap powder, toilet paper, biscuits, spaghetti, cat food, light globes, bottles and tubes and boxes without end being waved over the magic red light on the counter. As a rule, Evie drifted off effortlessly into reverie of one sort or another, but today it wasn't happening; each time the checkout boy lifted some item or other and called out in a whining drone to a colleague for a price check, Evie longed to rugby-tackle him to the ground and batter him with her change-purse.

She wrenched her attention away from the proceedings at the till to steal covert glances instead at the other prisoners in the line. One of the women, a couple of places ahead, looked oddly familiar. She wore a button-through pale grey blouse and grey-blue cardigan, with a pleated dark-blue skirt, knee-length. Her hair, more of a steel-grey, sat neatly in waves, and there was nothing to distinguish her from several similarly neat, middle-aged women waiting their turn in the same queue. Memory, unprompted, supplied a wimple and veil, and begorrah! - there was Sister Mary Damien. Evie had to fight the urge to fling her basket aside and run. With an effort, she stayed where she was. Damien was looking benignly ahead, standing beautifully erect and straight, as she always had. Not an iota different from the days of white habits and black veils; she seemed not to have aged at all. Evie knew in her bones that if Damien were to turn around and look into her eyes, she would intuit in an instant that Evie had scurried out from under the sheltering cloak of Our Lady as soon as the nuns' backs were turned.

But Damien continued to look, with a beatific half smile, at some private vision beyond the supermarket doors, and Evie began to relax. A hymn started up in her head. The one with that killer phrase, 'sweet mother, sweet maid'. Sorry, girls, God could only do it once. I should go and visit the nuns some day; tell them it's their fault I never entered the wife-and-

mother race. Their fault for being eccentric, so much more individual than our mums, who all blended into each other. I guess they wanted us to be virtuous matrons, in a vague sort of way, but they never got around to talking about the nitty-gritty of families and running households. They were more interested in ideas, history, languages, poetry. They were unwomanly passions, sisters. We were on to you.

Back home with the provisions, Evie found that a corner of her lounge room had been set up for the DJ, with a trestle table, stored against just such an occasion in the shed, pressed into service as a pedestal for three turntables, supplied by Argus, DJ for the night. Bert supplied a mirror-ball that he'd rigged it up smack in the middle of the ceiling. Evie cleared the mantelpiece of bottles, vases and pictures, substituting bowls of nibbles. She'd taken down the oval portrait-photo of somebody's grand-dad, still lives and landscapes, all the saints, storing them under her bed. Furniture was pushed back against walls or dragged out into the front garden.

Bert was sorting through his plastic milk-crates of vinyl records, insisting he didn't want any duds left out for DJ Argus, though Zak assured him that Argus would only use his own stuff.

'I've got some ultra-cool records here, matey. He'll be honoured to play them.'

'One look at your dorky puss and he'll know you couldn't possibly own anything cool.'

'You're just jealous, zit-face.'

'That's why I brought along some truly shmickin' records from my collection to donate to the cause.'

'We'll see. Put them over there. And I hope you're not planning to wear that tragic Phantom tee shirt.'

'We'll see which one of us is the chick-magnet.'

Evie looked on indulgently and smiled. Boys. What a great invention.

George was setting up a Hills Hoist marquee on the back lawn, tossing a tarpaulin over the hoist and clipping the edges together with bulldog clips. Fairy lights around the rim would complete the picture. There was a genuine old trough-style Coke cooler, one of Evie's treasures, full of ice and waiting to be stacked with visitors' contributions alongside the shed.

Where Evie would have fussed about outdoor chairs, George had done a deal with his local Greek greengrocer for a brace of wooden fruit -crates, which looked rather chic arranged around the edges of the lawn, about half accessorized with cushions, the rest bare. Ashtrays, of which Evie had dozens, collected for their quirkiness quotient, were everywhere. They were ready.

After seven, kids began to trickle in through the front door, and by nine were arriving in swarms, both through the front of the house and from the lane, via the back gate. Argus was setting up for his first set, and Bert and Zak were everywhere at once, lit up like Christmas trees, with only a little help, Evie was fairly sure, from beer.

At midnight, pizza was circulating around a group of six in the kitchen, including George and Evie, Zak and Bert and a couple of nice-looking girls. The girls were talking about how pleased they were to be nearly out of their teens.

'I was tired and emotional for four whole years,' said the blonde one. 'I hated it, but I really hated anyone being sympathetic. I hated being noticed at all. I didn't trust my judgment enough to be confident that I was hanging out with the right people, saying cool things, laughing when I ought to laugh, all that stuff. I think I'm over it, more or less.'

'For sure,' said the darker blonde. 'The schoolyard was a bearpit. One swipe from the coolest girl and you were mincemeat. You stuck to your best friend like superglue. Even if you didn't like her very much. Donna and I were okay; we're still together. But some girls who didn't have anything in common stuck it out because it was too scary not having someone on your side.'

'Huh,' said Bert. 'Zak and I became blood brothers in Grade Four, and look at us - four grandchildren and counting.'

'It's better for boys,' said Donna, selecting a Heineken from the cooler she and her friend had set down on the floor between their chairs. 'Boys kid around more, it's okay for them to let off steam, roll around on the ground like puppies, be physical with each other, and they hang around in bigger groups. More bad stuff gets defused between boys; between girls it hangs around and festers.'

Rhiannon, Donna's friend, cuffed her gently on the back of the head. 'We've worked it out now, though, she said. We're allowed to beat each other up for half an hour in the morning and half an hour before we go to bed.'

'Are you two, like, 'together'?' Evie asked.

'Yeah. Not that we could let anyone at school know. It was getting to be sort of okay for boys to be on the gay side, at middle-class schools like ours, although they still weren't supposed to be outrageous. But the girl thing was still taboo.'

'I lost touch with most of the girls at my school - a girls' school - but I don't think I could even guess which of them might have been gay. It's hard to tell with girls, said Evie. Everything's so intense, and it's easy to cover up by just giggling about boys along with the others.'

Donna patted her friend's hair. 'We used to sneak off and pash in the orchard over the school fence; there was an Ag. High next to us; lots of trees and bushes.'

Zak had liberated more beers from the fridge and handed them around.

'Boys are very loyal,' he said. 'Loads of guys we know are still best buddies with their best friends from primary school. Must be to do with the fact we just don't change from about age nine on.'

'Segregation of the sexes is probably the way to go,' said Rhiannon. 'Women and men in separate compounds, fraternising on appointed days. Not sure what you do about children, though.'

'Nuclear families are all nuclear bombs waiting to blow,' put in George. 'If we all really believed women were worth as much as men, society would change in ways we can't even imagine.'

Right on, brother!' Donna grinned. 'For a start you'd have as many men as women cleaning toilets and serving food on ads. My ma still spits chips every time they run 'Good on Yer, Mum!' She wants to see Good on yer, Dad! ads where pop's wiping up chunder or cleaning the toilet.'

'I want to be right up close and personal with my babies,' said Zak. 'I love the little mongrels.'

'You and Bert would make good dads,' said Donna.

'Well, if we can't pull girlfriends, we might adopt a Romanian baby,' said Zak. 'And would you look at us, sitting around with a couple of dykes? Come on, Bert, let's hypnotise some chickens.'



'Right, Houdini, show me how it's done.'

'Hey! We'll have a barnyard tailing us before you can say Rhode Island Red.'

Evie and George sat on with the girls while Bert and Zak wandered off into the fairy-lit backyard.

Hours later, Indian trance-music floated through the house, and only a small band were left. Bert, in one corner of the lounge room, had bailed up a girl who'd come along clad in contending tartans. George was playing Scrabble with Zak, whose mesmeric powers had let him down. Evie was dancing by herself, eyes closed, beguiled back into bygone lounge rooms where ragas droned endlessly from chunky turntables and massive speakers.

Eventually, all the stragglers had gone, and the sky over the sea was a lighter wash of grey each time they looked up, clearing away Evie's dad's foldout chairs and empty bottles from the pocket-handkerchief front lawn. Bert's face was childishly happy, and he gabbled exhaustedly about the new girl, the great music, the best auntie anybody ever had.

Following a plastic-cup trail around the side of the house, Evie straightened up with one hand in the small of her back, tossing the last offending vessel into a black garbage bag. Which was when she saw a foot lying apparently disembodied alongside a box. On inspection, it proved attached to a sprawled body, a body clad in cargo pants and a black Phantom tee-shirt. Evie thought for one careless moment that Zak had decided to take forty winks on the lawn, but a second's further study showed an unusual disarray in the limbs, and a grey cast to the features on the side of Zak's face turned up to the sky. Zak was Kaz backwards, Evie thought stupidly, her back lawn transmogrifying into that early-morning kitchen floor. A half-second more and Evie was screaming at the top of her lungs for George, who materialised instantly, with a terrified Bert in tow.

'Zak! Zak!' Bert dropped to his knees and threw his friend over onto his back with a heave of the boy's shoulders.' What have you done, mate? What is it? What is it?'

Zak's throat declared a thready pulse, as Bert pulled a cushion off a fruit box to put under his head, looking about wildly for help.

'George is calling an ambulance,' said Evie, shakily. 'What's he taken, Bert? You have to tell us.'

'I don't know! I don't know! I didn't have anything!'

'Well, who did, for fuck's sake? And what?'

Bert patted Zak's cheeks helplessly. 'There was some E going around, but I told the guys to can it. Zak's never taken anything in his life.'

Ambulance workers came running through the open back gate, firing questions.

'We think it's an Ecstasy OD,' said Evie, 'but nobody's sure.'

And in no time, a few minutes that stretched out in slo-mo as Evie, George and Bert, in tears, watched, Zak was whisked onto a stretcher and stowed like a side of beef in the back of the ambulance, and they were piling into a car to follow the siren to the Emergency Department.

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Three suits lay across the bed, all good quality, all boring.

Paula felt thin, after the days in bed, and sick all over again at the sight of the clothes she owned.

She awarded herself a further morning off, and drove out to Seconds Mile, east of town. Witchery was the best of the shops, so Paula sailed into a park down its dingy side lane.

The store wasn't crowded, on a working day, and Paula felt guided by the unseen hand of the goddess as she floated around the racks, still a little pleasantly light-headed. There was a display of vastly-reduced winter stock, including a cherry-red and white flecked sixties-style coat with a scarf collar, houndstooth-tweed flares in mustard and green, and a cropped jacket in cream tweed flecked with brown and pink with a matching three-quarter-length straight skirt. Almost without a second thought, apart from checking the sizes, Paula slid them across the counter, with a swirly yellow, brown and white gauzy blouse for some special occasion and a severe white cotton shirt. Silently sending up a promise to build her a small backyard temple if the wardrobe goddess would ensure that they looked good on, she eschewed the humiliating change-room ritual altogether and swanned, laden, back to the car. Packages stowed, she dodged Glen Osmond Road traffic and landed, slightly faint, at a café table in the bakery someone had thoughtfully planted across the road from the sales strip.

Tea in a stainless-steel pot, ditto hot water and milk, scones, jam and cream. What had life to show more fair? Revived, and updated on what Jennifer and Brad were up to, thanks to the *Who Weekly* left conveniently to hand, Paula had an urge to buy something new for Bert. The men's equivalent of Witchery was non-existent, but in the Diesel seconds store she found a charcoal denim jacket she was pretty sure Bert would like, and bagged it. Pulling into her reserved park at Holmwood half an hour later, Paula embodied the New Woman.

It was Father Keogh's afternoon, the good cleric already well into his rounds. Paula, head down in paperwork, was roused at three thirty when he poked his glossy features around the door of her office and begged for tea.

'Sure, Father, it's time I took a break.'

Paula made Irish Breakfast tea with the kettle that lived on her windowsill, and served it with MacDonalds Shortbread.

'Two kinds of Celtic this afternoon, Father,' she said, handing him his cup and saucer.

'Ah, yes. Myself, I'm still deep in the mysteries of the Hebrew diet. I've convinced our cook at the Priory to do one authentic Israelite meal a week, with my help, of course.'

'Won't that get a little repetitive?' asked Paula.

'Well, yes, but we can always ring small changes. One of the problems I'm having is blandness. You know that when Jesus called his disciples the salt of the earth, he was referring to the value of salt as a commodity? The poor didn't use salt much.'

'Healthy, I guess.'

'Mmm. Olives, grapes, grain. Sheep. Figs. Unleavened bread.'

'Pretty much like what you'd find at a basic Greek restaurant?'

'Yes. Wine is fine, of course; Jesus wasn't one for dietary strictures. Paul said that no food is unclean in itself, but that was a bit later. And pork and shellfish wouldn't have appeared in the markets too often, even if they were allowed. One imagines they were more likely than other foods to be contaminated. The restrictions had hygienic origins, as you know.'

'But you'd have to stick to rough, plain wine, wouldn't you, to be authentic?'

'Ah, well, I take the line that a wine that's been handmade rather than industrially mass-produced is what we want. And while that certainly includes home-made vino generously donated by our Italian parishioners, I don't see that it excludes the best French wines that come our way; the French are very careful about hand-selecting grapes, not allowing conveyor-belt processing with stems and twigs and mouse droppings going into the compressors, you know.'

'Hm. Not quite the spirit of the thing, is it?'

'As I say, Jesus was no stickler for rules. I don't recall a prohibition against a third piece of shortbread.'

At home that evening, Paula hung the new clothes in her depopulated wardrobe, fed, bathed and read to Rose, had a bath herself and sent Chris, who turned up on the doorstep worried that she'd overdone it on her first day back in circulation, home to see to his own accumulated chores.

It was nine o'clock when she sat back in the deepest armchair and closed her eyes for a minute. Then it was twenty past nine and someone was knocking at the door.

Paula opened it, blearily, wondering if perhaps Bert was popping in for cocoa, to find a haggard Evie there, looking ready to drop.

'What's the matter? Bert's okay, isn't he?' asked Paula, wondering as she spoke the words what possessed her to ask that, and why Evie should know.

'Yes, he's okay. It's Zak.'

'What? *What?* Come in and sit down.'

So Evie explained, haltingly, about Zak coming to ask for help with his friend, who turned out to be Bert, and how she'd taken Bert under her wing a bit, and the night at the Union Bar, and the parties at her place. And what appeared to have happened to Zak, despite their vigilance.

'But how is Zak? Will he be alright?'

'He's still out to it, but they've stabilised his temperature. They reckon it looks like an ekkie overdose.'

'Ekkie? What, you're still a cool guy, is that it? You of all people should know how appallingly dangerous those drugs are! There's no margin for error - people die, Evie! Zak could have died. It could have been Bert! Why didn't you tell me about Bert!'

'Because I thought it was his call, Paul. I wanted to tell you. I asked him to tell you. He said you'd be too upset, and he didn't want to distress you. And he'd sworn off anything but booze. He is going easier on the booze, as well.'

Evie leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes.

'I just wanted to be an adult within reach, you know? If he wouldn't go to you I thought I could be the next best thing. And we probably did save Zak's life.'

'Oh, right. Playing God with my son. I had a right to know, Evie. You should have told me.'

'Look. Paul. He's grown up now. It was good that he was happy for me and George to be included in some of his partying. And yes, my history probably makes me seem like a grownup who won't be too judgmental about their chemistry experiments. But the important

thing is that I don't do it any more. I don't have to preach to him. I just have to be someone who's come through it and lived to tell the tale.'

'Great. So you're saying they look at you and think it's okay to mess around with drugs a bit, here's Bert's cool auntie, a little bit of junk when she was our age didn't do her any harm, let's go for it!'

'What do you think I am, Paul? Of course I told him how dangerous the game is. But I could see he'd had a big enough fright to stay right away. That's why he was so distraught when he realised what Zak had done. He's been there, and he was terrified for Zak.'

'I should have known about this, Evie. You were conspiring with my son to keep me in the dark.'

'No, I wasn't. I begged him to talk to you. He would have, eventually. And you would have freaked out. You're a nurse. You would have read him the riot act.'

'Oh, right. And you're so cool, you knew the right way to handle it. Well, look what's happened. How will you feel if Zak's brain-damaged or in a coma for years?'

'Stop it, Paul. I didn't think it was the best thing to do, necessarily. It was all I could think of that wouldn't alienate Bert and might help.'

'Don't you think I might have had some ideas about what was good for my own son? You make me sound as bad as Mum.'

'Look, I'm exhausted. I think I'll go home. I'm sorry you feel like this.'

'Too fucking right I do. Bert's my son, not yours. I should have been told.'

'Okay, well now you know. I'm going home. Goodnight.'

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Shallow sleep carried Evie over the next five or six hours, as though she was coasting across choppy shore water on a Li-lo. She woke up drained and headachey, dark panda circles under her eyes. The duty sister on Zak's ward said he was progressing, and that his mother was with him. Bert was still there, too. He'd refused to go home.

George had driven Evie to Paula's after they left the hospital, waiting outside in the car while she spoke to her sister. Then they'd gone on to his house in Parkside, a sprawling, ramshackle old villa where he had one of three bedrooms, the others occupied by a thirty-something saxophone player, a girl who was learning how to be a trapeze artist, and a plain, common-or-garden med. student from Armidale.

It felt strange to be staying overnight with a boyfriend in a share-house again. Evie felt old and out-of-place, though George assured her she was being silly. She slept until three the next afternoon, and woke to see afternoon light filtering through heavy old velvet curtains. George slept on.

Disoriented, she sidled quietly off her edge of the bed, shrugging on a blue-and-white-striped kimono hanging behind the great four-panelled door, so typical of these lovely villas. Evie had time to think it was amazing that a house like this should still be let out rather than snapped up by a yuppie family, with three glossy kids and a dog, all called Hamish, who'd have spent tens of thousands on making it a Homes and Gardens special, before a gulping sob welled up from somewhere deep inside. Clapping a hand over her mouth, she subsided into a forties autumn-leaves brocade armchair.

Tears cascading down her face, she cried silently, smothering hiccups. Paula's right, I'm a phoney. What can I tell the kids? What have I got to show for forty-five years?



Zak's white face swam accusingly up out of the gloom in George's bedroom.

And then Evie was sitting once more in a similarly dim room, nodding off in the company of four or five friends, whose names she'd forgotten. So many days went by like that, they were so sure they had the secret. Once you've become a junkie you'll never want to be anything else - Michael Dransfield, smug bastard. What had she done with her life?

She saw herself in Mish's lounge room, pretty Mish with the long blonde hair and little-girl face, who'd done her the huge favour of running off with Ronnie. Mish's then boyfriend was Vik, a small-time pusher who was doing well enough to buy her Italian dinner sets, gold-plated cookware and heavy gold chainlink bangles and necklaces. Vik came in with whisky-sours for them all in crystal tumblers so heavy you needed both hands to lift them.

In a flash the setting changed to an outpatients clinic, herself and Mish, Mish pregnant and strung-out, still heartbreakingly baby-faced, swearing that this was it, the baby came first, she was going to get clean and stay clean. She was waiting stoically for a gruesome liver biopsy that would involve the physician charging her with a wide-bore needle, ramming it into her back for a sample.

Mish's lounge room, again: full of burly policemen, dragging them into separate rooms for questioning. Mish was more emphatically pregnant, paler and thinner in the face, her blue eyes still sparky. Evie had been sticking to her methadone program quite faithfully for a month or so, but she was tarred with the same brush, treated like scum the way Mish and Vik were. Ronnie, with his gift for knowing when to be absent, wasn't there.

Mish and her little girl, Francesca, swam into focus, Mish sitting up in her hospital bed, good as gold, the baby with her dark shock of hair feeding angelically. Francesca lived with her grandmother these days - she'd have to be nine. Mish and Ronnie might be still together, Evie had made a point of not knowing. Francesca had been a great little girl, coping with

cops at the door, house searches, visits from the standover-men sent by the dealers, Mum permanently dozing on the lounge, until Mish threw over Vik for Ronnie and left Fran with Vik. Vik made a valiant effort to go straight, getting caught out finally by some very pure shit - a one-off, sadly, intended as a recreational hit after several months on the wagon. So Francesca went to her granny, Mish's mum, and went on surviving. You could read 'survivor' way back then in her determined three-year-old features, as she set her jaw and tucked a blanket awkwardly round her mother who'd nodded off on the couch.

Evie cried helplessly for everyone she'd known who hadn't made it, and wondered for the thousandth time why she was still here. Was any of it down to her strong character, as she liked sometimes to flatter herself, or all of it just a matter of dumb luck?

Hey, Sean, why is it you and not me up there? What use am I? Look at the cockup I've made of being an auntie, let alone a mother. I'm a fucking waste of space.

Don't get melodramatic, came Sean's dry voice inside her head. You know you agonised over Bert, and you figured this way was likeliest to work. Nobody's got second sight, so don't sweat it, right?

I'm such a wimp. Look at me, butter wouldn't melt, phone-counselling sad gits when what I really ought to be doing, with my history, is phone sex. At least that's a straightforward, honest transaction.

Oh, don't wallow, Evie. Just get on with it, eh?

Thanks, matey. Straight from the hip, as ever. I'll go and have a wash, shall I?

Pots and saucepans clanged alarmingly against the back of the cupboard where Paula was flinging them.

'Leave me out of the loop, will they! Bastards! I'm his mother! Could have been Bert in hospital, or worse, and I'd have known bugger-all (crash) - my little boy (clang). What, am I that useless?'

Rosie watched from the corner of the kitchen.

'Go outside and play with the rabbit, Rose.' Paula's tone was uncompromising.

Rosie went, bothered.

'Snowy, why is my mum so crabby?' She picked the rabbit up, a heavy white lump who was getting too big for her to lift. He didn't resist, for once.

'Why doesn't Bertie come to see us again, Snowy? I miss him.'

The rabbit said nothing.

'I want Evie,' said Rose, burrowing into his fur.

Paula, watching from the back door, growled furiously and flung back inside. She picked up the phone to ring her eldest sister and tell her the birthday party was off, then put it down again. Bugger it, at least the rest of them could make a fuss of her and tell her how great she was for once in their lives. Instead, she filled the mop-bucket with scalding water and added bleach, detergent and disinfectant, plunged the mop into the suds and began to pummel the kitchen floor. Then she barged across the hall into the bathroom to apply the same treatment there, knocking the phone off the phone table with an angry yank of the bucket.

Marginally moderating her elbow-power, tapping the handset to one side with a toe, Paula found herself remembering Bert's earnest sixteen-year-old face as he sat at the phone for hours, long into the night, talking to his best friend, Zak. And they say teenage girls spend forever on the phone, she would tell Des proudly the next day. Bert and Zak were deep into a meaning-of-the-universe phase, and would debate endlessly such posers as how it could be proven that Zak, say, might not actually be God. Zak, son of a policeman and a maths teacher, serious and silly at once, had never been known to admit defeat in an argument, but Bert made a worthy opponent. They could go on gainsaying the other's positions, inventively and plausibly, till the early hours. Paula and Rose would go about their evening's business, taking note every now and then of the time, comparing notes on how much longer than the one before the current Bert-Zak session looked like lasting, giving up and going to bed long before the receiver was replaced.

Zak. She hadn't even stopped to think about Zak.

Glancing hurriedly in the bathroom mirror, grabbing her handbag from the kitchen bench, calling to Rosie as she went, Paula snatched the carkeys from their hook by the door, pulled a comb quickly through her daughter's hair, locked the house and accelerated away. Deliberately allowing herself no time to rethink her impulse, she wittered on to Rosie about how Zak had eaten something poisonous and had to be taken to hospital, and wouldn't it be nice to visit him?

The Information Desk sent them to what Paula registered was a general ward, and then they were asking the Ward Sister which was Zak's bed, and then there they were, looking down on the utterly familiar features, exchanging cautious smiles with Zak's mum and dad, who sat on either side of their son.

'Is he... has he..?'

'He woke up briefly a little while ago,' said Shirley. 'He seemed to know who we were, but he's been out to it again since then.'

'That's good. Isn't it?'

'Yes, the doctor says he'd expect him to wake up and stay awake soon. It's too early to say whether there's been any damage ...'

'Right,' Paula nodded, inclining her head towards Rosie, who was listening avidly. 'I'm so sorry this has happened. You must be worried sick.'

'We've been lucky,' said Brett. 'I've been called to plenty of incidents like this where the kid hasn't made it this far.'

'God, it's a nightmare. It's like one long Snakes and Ladders game, the teen years. Just when you think they've negotiated all the climbs, a scary new snake darts out from behind a rock.'

'Did Zak get bitten by a snake, Mummy?' asked Rosie. 'Will he die?'

Shirley blanched slightly, but stepped in calmly enough to answer that Zak had swallowed something nasty that had made him very sick, but that they hoped he'd get all better.

Rosie nodded, reached over and patted Zak's hand where it lay on the white bedcover.

'You'll get better, Zakky,' she counselled. 'And when you come home you can come over and see my rabbit. He's called Snowy, and he lets you pat him as much as you like.'

The next few days were busy at Holmwood, with two long-term residents giving up the fight, one quietly and the other not, and endless arrangements to be made with families and

funeral directors, plus contacting the next few individuals on the waiting list, or their families, with the information that new rooms would soon be available. They couldn't afford to be sentimental about matters like that; it was too vital to keep the cashflow running.

There was already a new man in Arthur's old room; Paula still suffered pangs when she inadvertently stepped over the threshold, as she sometimes did, with a piece of flirtatious banter ready for her old hubby. She badly missed the fantasy of their shared farmlet, she found. She and Arthur had spent so many hours filling in all the details of the cottage, its furnishings and garden, the fruit trees and animals in their small acreage, the creek and its tadpoles... it was almost as though she'd had a real house in the country repossessed.

It had been a refreshing experience, having a pretend marriage with an old guy, who'd been through a life and was quite sure, when lucid, what mattered and what didn't. Who was not about to jeopardize his final relationship. Arthur had always been courteous, always cognisant of anything Paula did for him in fact or in fantasy - he listened when she talked to him. He was endlessly interested, down to very small details, in Rosie's and Bert's doings. Paula's kids had become 'their' kids, somewhere along the line. Not only that, which was perhaps to be expected, but Arthur would discuss the relative merits of household appliances and tools, cooking and cleaning preparations. Whatever Arthur might have thought about the separation of wifely and husbandly realms when he actually was a husband, all that was past. Effortlessly, in imagination, he cooked elaborate meals for the family while Paula was at work, subjected their little cottage to dire spring cleans every fortnight or so, did the washing every other day, and joyfully hung it out to dry, collecting it from the clothes line in the evenings and folding and putting it away.

Arthur would complain copiously about wet weather, not because the rain might be unseasonal for crops (though he would talk about that too) but because he'd had to drape their wet laundry around the bathroom where it refused to dry. He entered instinctively and completely into a fantasy partnership where no aspect of the work that had to be done was marked off as either partner's territory - certainly not the emotional kind. It wasn't a game to

impress Paula, it was his lifetime's verdict about what was precious between couples - a fastidious, downplayed, open-all-hours service. Sappy as it sounded, it wasn't. Missing her virtual husband left a persistent ache that coagulated with the ache of her dad's and brother's deaths, sitting just under Paula's breastbone.

Meanwhile, Milton was being a pain. One-time top dog in a famous, long-lived seventies commune of artists and writers, Milt felt that he ought to be cock of the walk in his new group-living situation. He'd got used to homage. Lately he'd taken to singling out other residents and quizzing them on their knowledge of the Australian art scene. Several respondents scored surprisingly well, but others, naturally, had no idea. Paula had had to intervene on several occasions to rescue a victim whose ignorance Milton would be deriding in scathing tones. This morning he'd fixed on one of the Greek residents, a friend of Con Fantis's, who could have given a decent account of himself if the topic had been the sculpture of classical Athens, but who knew not a sausage about James Gleeson. Paula and Des were totally out of patience with Milton, but hadn't managed to devise a way to muzzle him.

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Evie was at home, searching for a rubber band to stretch around a newly-opened packet of muesli. She didn't have a kitchen drawer where such things lived. She did, though, have a letters-basket, where rubber bands sometimes found their way, after being pulled off circulars or calendars. Yes, there was one - a nice, fat, red one.

George was collecting her in half an hour, for a visit to Zak. Zak had been awake and communicating for a day now, and was only staying in hospital for another day's observation before being sent home. He was saying that some blow-ins he'd never met before, who'd arrived at the tail-end of the party, had talked him into trying some 'very mild' E. That Bert had known nothing about it or them.

In search of distractions, Evie sat in front of the teev, trying not to think about the standoff with Paula, which was upsetting her more than she liked to acknowledge. A nature program seemed the only thing worth watching: a winsome, lanky woman naturalist roaming the globe in search of primates, in a show called 'Cousins'. Chimps were grooming one another, babies clinging to mother's fur, youngsters rolling around on the leafy forest floor. Tuning in to the voice-over, Evie heard the tone turn from indulgent to cautionary, as the camera followed a group of four young male 'boundary riders' to the border of 'no man's land'. Shortly, a hapless small chimp from another troop appeared in a tree at the other side of the clearing (or was he poked and prodded there by the crew?)

The border patrol advanced on the little intruder with grim intent, surrounding him in a pincer movement. Evie had to close her eyes for the next bit, as they began raining blows and biting viciously. When she opened them again, the commentator was remarking that although the 'soldiers' had not killed the stranger, it was so badly wounded that it might not survive. The merciless camera followed the victim's unsteady, bloody stumble, forearm sliced open to the bone, into a nearby creek, then returned to the rest of the troop, whose gambols now seemed full of menace.

When George arrived shortly after, Evie was sitting in front of a blank screen, an untouched bowl of muesli on her lap. She searched his worried features for a long moment.

'What? Have I turned into a werewolf?'

But Evie just muttered under her breath about men's knuckles still dragging on the ground, and went to fetch her jacket.

In the hospital shop, Evie chose a Marvel comic and a yellow Pokemon figurine as cheerful gifts.



Zak was pleased to see them, sitting up alone in his bed, his parents having left him for the day to see to things on the home front. He liked his toy and comic, and grinned a watery, lopsided grin up at his visitors.

'Sorry to spoil the party,' he said.

'Yeah, thanks a lot. How are you, old son?' asked George, plonking himself down on the narrow bed, grabbing Zak's ankle through the bedspread and giving it an affectionate twist.

'Okay, I think,' said Zak. 'I don't know what got into me. After all my fuss about Bert and his bad habits. I just thought, oh, what the hell, millions of kids my age can't be wrong, and I did it.'

'As you do,' said Evie. 'We can't talk. I can't, anyway. But it was very scary, let me tell you, seeing you squashed on the back lawn like you'd just been decked by a giant fly-swat. My heart stopped for about a minute and a half.'

'Sorry,' Zak said again. 'Now it just seems so stupid I can't believe I did it. Never underestimate your own capacity for idiotic behaviour, I suppose.'

'Amen to that,' said George. 'Did you know hundreds of Australians are admitted to hospital every Christmas morning with burns they got trying on new jumpers without taking the cigarettes out of their mouths?'

'Yeah,' said Evie. 'And a couple of dozen die from testing nine-volt batteries with their tongues.'

'Not to mention the ones who ...'

'Yeah, I know,' said Zak. 'I feel okay now, except that I get these sudden jolts of anxiety, panic, I suppose. Not like me at all. Crap, in fact.' Zak tried to smile.

'Chemicals working their way out of your system,' George told him. 'Not very nice, and they won't disappear overnight, either, matey. Your punishment, Fred Nile would say.'

'Shit. Shit, shit, shit. As if it's not bad enough, these dickhead doctors keep popping by and sermonising. I've had about five morons in tweed ties telling me I've probably mushed my brain for good, ticking me off for upsetting my parents, telling me I'm lucky they didn't report me to the cops, yadda yadda. They look at me as if I'm some disgusting blob of pus in a petrie-dish. One of them said he didn't think public hospitals should admit drug cases because it was a waste of public money and druggies should live with the consequences of their actions.'

A tear slid from one eye and made its way unchecked down Zak's pale cheek.

'I feel like a total dumbass as it is, not to mention sketched out in case I've fucked up my neurons forever. They don't need to preach to me.'

'Creeps,' said Evie, moving up to scrunch the boy into a tight hug. 'Don't worry, Zak, it'll all go away eventually, truly, it will. Promise. Bert came good, didn't he?'

'You'll see, Zak,' said George. 'You just need to be able to talk yourself through the bad moments. They'll get further apart, and then they'll stop. Deep breaths, and a few mantras to repeat over and over. Die, doctors, die. Kids rule. I'll show you, bastards. Stuff like that.'

Zak didn't look very comforted, but he let them chatter on and regale him with poor jests, mustering enough spirit to groan at less than pithy punchlines.

'Where's Bert?' he finally asked, in a small voice. 'I want Bert.'

'He was home sleeping when we left,' said Evie, 'but we'll go and collect him for you, shall we?'

'Yes, please.'

**CHAPTER 8**

As Paula gradually took in the grey sky outside the window, the room swam into focus. It must be six in the morning, or thereabouts. The dream maintained its hold on her mind for some minutes more, clearly enough for her to see again the Hong Kong gift shop she'd been in with Desirée, frantically searching for presents for Rosie. Des pranced into view around the corner of an aisle full of exotic merchandise, wearing billowing white harem pants that were just what Paula needed for herself. On enquiry, they proved to be the last pair in the shop. And when Des bought her niece a funny wooden puppet that climbed two parallel sticks, that turned out to be the last toy of its kind in stock as well.

Paula was wondering, panicked, whether Rosie would like a pretty paper lampshade, when the dream scenario changed to a windup celebration she was attending with work colleagues. Remembering that she owned a small cottage in the grounds of the large house where they'd assembled, she wandered off to find it. Hidden in a thicket, Paula found that sand had banked up against its gaily-painted walls. She had to push hard to open the door, and as it swung inwards, two winged mice like outsize cockroaches scuttled past her feet into the woods. Paula was suddenly seized with a sense of the pointlessness of the whole business of maintaining social contact with anyone at all. Instead of dressing up for the evening, she sat on a bench in the enclosed verandah of her cottage, letting the golden light of sunset stream in through the windows, bathing her face and chest, leaching all striving and desire.

When real-life Des informed her, as she deposited her bag and a few loose folders on her desk, that Milton had devised a questionnaire he proposed to circulate to the residents on the subject of Surrealism in Australian Painting, Paula, brimming with a sense that today was a day to slice through thickets with a trusty sword that went snicker-snack, laughed out loud.

'It's just dawned on me what we have to do,' she told Desirée, as they stood together by Paula's window with the first coffees of the day.

'We sic him on to Friar Tuck. Keogh fancies himself as a patron of the arts. You know how he's always banging on about the commission he gave this one to paint a mural, and the start he gave someone or other in religious sculpture. It's Keogh's day today -he's never met Milton since, no surprises there, Milt's an atheist. Let's introduce them. Say we want to give all the residents a chance to shine, and we thought Keogh could help extend the questionnaire to cover Australian religious artists. They'll be at it till Doomsday.'

'Could work, Boss,' said Des, downing another caffeine hit. 'That man brings me out in hives. They both do. Milton must have driven his wife mad.'

'Wives. Then he had a succession of younger women acolytes. Aggie knows all about him; she went to art school here in the forties when he was just making a name. She's a dark horse, our Ag. Ag says Milt came on to her at art school, but she knocked him back. Told him he was too earthy for her, to soften the blow. He got a shock to find her here. Not that I had any idea Ag was an artist until I dug around a bit. Too modest to call attention to it. But I made her show me her albums - she's wonderful.'

'Ag's thriving on Milt's bloody Mastermind games, that's for sure,' said Des. 'She keeps stepping in with the answers and saving her friends from embarrassment. Here's the good Father now. Shall I usher him in?'

•

George rang Evie, who was still at his house, from the bookshop, catching her closeted again with her imaginary friend, Dana, improving the shining hour before creche duties.

'Bloody stroppy born-to-rule silvertails.' George was back on his hobby-horse. 'Scions of the gentry - they treat me like shit. Anglo down to their RM Williams elasticised boots. I want to

spit in their faces. You know the look, swinging-clean blonde hair, turned-up collars and pearl earrings. I know there's still a Greek mob here, and an Italian one, they stick together, I see them in the cafeteria. But the wogs are losing ground again, babe. I thought Harry and his cohorts had won that revolution. One girl was just in here asking me for Chaucer's Tales for her English 1 course, and she looked down her nose and spelt 'Chaucer' for me before I had a chance to move.'

'Yeah,' Evie commiserated, with one hand shoving library books she'd borrowed to read to creche toddlers into her grey shoulder-bag. 'The bad old days are here again. On the other hand, it might have been the first time missie had encountered our old mate Geoffrey. She's probably just emerged from a Swiss finishing school where all she learnt was which bit of Georgian silver goes with which.'

'Doubt it. You could tell she was thinking - nasty greasy little dago, how dare he presume to work in our university. I sit on the lawns reading crime novels at lunch time and imagine the rich kids on the receiving end - it helps a bit.'

'You need to perfect a few Greek curses. Mutter them under your breath as you hand over the books. That's what they expect, after all.'

'That or ogling their tits. Little do they know my heart belongs to an Irish wench.'

'I remember Mum talking about the days when job-application forms all had spaces for 'Religion'. If you put 'Catholic' you'd never hear from the company again. Like putting 'Communist' on your US passport application. Gotta dash, Yorgy. Off to indoctrinate some tinies with tales of misbehaving grannies.'

'Want to come over my place again tonight and stick pins in John Howard dolls?'

Before she set aside the exploits of Dana, Evie made a few rapid notes for a new character on her Greek island, sketching her according to George's venomous portrait. Her name was Arabella, she was the daughter of a wealthy Victorian landowner, her golden mane was held back in an Alice band and she had too many teeth for her long, equine jaw. Arabella was to arrive imminently in Maria's pension, a contender for Maria's or Christos' favours, or both. Evie shoved the notebook away again. Just time to check the mirror in George's bedroom in case she'd omitted anything essential to decency.

Her white men's dress shirt was straining a little across the bosom. Evie remembered Nanna's ample frontage, sent up a prayer to be spared that fate. Being generously endowed in the mammary department had been a plus in her Melbourne job, but she'd never planned on feather pillows. Nanna would sigh, as Evie and her sisters helped her hang washing on the prop-up line in her neat back yard, that it was a great day for women when dresses began being made in non-iron fabrics. Wash 'n wear for Nanna from that glorious day on. Evie shuddered and swore to herself that no Ostia garment would ever touch her body. She rebuttoned her shirt and sucked in her chest.

When the communists took over in Laos, about the time Evie began working at Blue Moon, word got around that they swept up the Vientiane bar girls and prostitutes like so much fluff and relocated them to an island in the middle of the Mekong, setting them to learn domestic arts. Had they been re-educated, reintegrated? Were they happy wives and mothers? Did they gladly wear the Lao equivalent of Ostia, drab and shapeless? For the millionth time, Evie felt ridiculously, inordinately fortunate. Born a little to the north, at the same moment in history, odds were she wouldn't have had the luxury to take the prodigal risks she had; she might well have been a smashed skull in a mass grave. How to atone for surviving, so undeservedly, so frivolously?

In bed the previous night, Evie had made George tell her about Harry and his comrades and the peaceful urban campaign, which Harry at least still waged, to win a few hearts and minds from consumerism. Always happy to be the butt of jokes and ridicule, people being

the more easily disarmed when laughing, Harry went forth to shop armed with string bags when string bags were still old-lady gear, before being elevated to latter-day chic. He'd charm checkout operators into putting through loose, unbagged potatoes and apples. Harry and friends rebuilt and remodelled their inner-city houses together, recycling iron roofing and iron lace, bagging walls, erecting mezzanines, knocking out skylights in Victorian roofs, installing rainwater tanks, making their own sandals out of used car-tyres in extreme cases, decades before the plague of home-renovation programs.

George had fished some photos out of his backpack, and Evie felt sure she recognised the wide, guileless features, the wiry black beard, the irrepressible chest hair curling over the open shirt buttons. Probably not from the Moon (or maybe so; who could say what urban guerillas required to help them unshoulder their burdens at the end of a hard day's correct living?) More likely she'd occasionally stood behind him in the queue at the local Safeways, looking askance at his string bag. In any case, this was a face you had to smile back at, a mouth that had just closed on a belly-laugh.

This morning, Evie felt full of barely-checked energy. She'd dragged George out of bed and talked him into a walk around his leafy Parkside neighbourhood before he left for work. They stoked up on eggs on toasted pita bread, with a suggestion of garlic and paprika. George kissed her goodbye like any wage-slave farewellling wifey at the door. Stake a claim, make a bid, she was thinking now as she stood at the bus stop. Don't let the treasure be lost. You're a loony, she told herself, but her heart was singing as she boarded her coach to tinyland.

•

The other sisters had all been in touch about Paula's impending fortieth. Kathleen had offered the capacious garden in her house in unglamorous Plympton, an area with lots of large, untidy dwellings that would one day come into their own. Whipped into line by Evie, all the girls had committed to being there. Now, Paula found herself driving to Leenie's, Rosie chattering in the passenger-seat, wondering why they hadn't offered Evie a lift. Paula



hadn't given her sister, who continued Rosie-minding on Tuesdays and Fridays after school, the time of day since the Zak episode. All the Haggertys gave Eeyore a run for his money in the stubbornness stakes, but Paula was a past master.

Kathleen came to the gate to meet her as Paula pulled into the gravel driveway beyond the timber-slab fence and parked behind a phalanx of family cars. Evie, in an unexpectedly becoming seventies hostess-dress that flowed down from a halter-neck in orange and brown swirls, stood uncertainly behind her eldest sister in the front doorway of the house, George, like the Cheshire cat, visible as a whiter-than-white grin behind her shoulder in the hallway.

'Hello, littlest angel,' cried Kathleen, sweeping Paula into a bear-hug, whereupon Paula embarrassingly and unexpectedly burst into squally tears. Seeing her chance, Evie advanced on the two of them and awkwardly added her embrace to theirs. Tears all round.

'Must be the pollen,' sniffed Paula, extracting herself.

'Yeah, me too. Come inside, kiddo, they're all here,' sniffed Kathleen, straightening up and smoothing her crumpled linen shirt. 'Trust you to slobber all over me; that was your party-trick when you were a baby. I carried you into church on Sundays with a trail of vomit down the back of my best dress more times than I can remember.'

Evie, hanging on tight to Kathleen's other arm and causing yet more damage to the soigné pressed linen, smiled tentatively at her youngest sister. Paula, resentment swamped in a rush of gratitude for family ties, smiled back.

Rosie was dragging at Paula's other hand, squealing. 'Come in, Mummy, come in, Auntie Trish and Auntie Sheila are here and guess who ...'

But Paula could see quite clearly for herself, as her eyes adjusted to the gloom of the shaded living-room. They'd asked Gary. Paula, preoccupied with Evie's treachery and anxiety about Zak and Bert, hadn't in the end got round to inviting Chris. When she did think of calling him, the day before, it somehow didn't seem like the right time to usher him into the bosom of the family.

'Hi, bub.' Gary cheesy-grinned over the lip of a beer-glass. She strolled across the carpet with casual aplomb to give Gary a hug, same as everybody else.

It appeared Gary had been appointed Master of the Records.

'Listen to this, Paul,' he crowed, dropping the needle on his first choice, as Dennis handed champagne and orange juice around the cast of thousands, including all nieces and nephews who were within a stretched arm's-length of legal drinking age.

Gary was opening proceedings with one of the first albums he and Paula had bought together. All the adults joined in on top note; all the children, with the exception of Bert, who sat wearing a watery grin on the couch, stared at their parents as if they'd lost what marbles they ever laid claim to.

'Come on, you losers, sing along!' roared Uncle Gaz. By the second chorus, the kids had the hang of it, too.

'Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam! Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam! Lovely Spam! Wonderful Spam!'

Paula felt an unnamed burden roll off her shoulders, shouting nonsense with the rest, feeling as if she was twenty for the first time rather than the second. There was all the time in the world, anything could happen, she was pretty, she was a live wire, everything was going to be great. And if it wasn't, who gave a toss.

Evie plumped herself down next to Bert, handed him a champagne.

'Wotcher, cock!'

'Watch your own, rude woman.'

'Old English greeting, my lad. How's tricks?'

Bert looked tired. 'Eh, can't complain,' he said, however, in a passable Yorkshire accent.

'Trooble at t'mill sims t' be wahnding oop.'

'Zakko?'

'Well, sort of, but he's not the full tank again yet.'

Zak had gone home to his parents, who were continuing to pay rent on his share-house room so he could move back there when he was ready. Evie and George, visiting, had also judged the stuffing still knocked out of him. Bert saw Zak every day, sat with him and played chess or watched old videos - Doctor Who or The Goodies - safe, circumscribed activities. Evie saw Bert was churned up by the change in his friend, and struggling with guilt.

'It was one of my eck-head friends, it must have been. Zak says not, but I know he's just trying to make me feel better. Gallant to the last. The noble Aragon.'

'Nothing you can do about it now. He's taking longer to get over it than you - but he'll battle through, beat the bad guys. Aragon wins in the end, doesn't he?'

'I want to make him better, Evie.'

'Give it time. Zak was trying to be your guardian angel, you know.'

'Yeah, I know, he told me. Him and you both. Did you really think I was that far gone? Evie, will he get better? He's not going to be wrecked for ever?'

Bert looked so stricken that Evie found a lump in her throat.

'It's a sad thing, Bertie. You just have to hang in there, see him through. It might take a while.'

Bert raised a crooked eyebrow and tried to smile.

Evie felt powerless and miserable. 'You have to talk to your mum about all this, chum,' she said.

Bert looked away.

Gary had replaced the Pythons with the Stones; George sashayed up to the couch and grabbed Evie's hand, pulling her to her feet. As she was dragged into the midst of the scrum beginning to fill the lounge room floor, she looked back over her shoulder. Bert winked. Evie watched his cousin Jess try to get him up; Bert put a hand to the small of his back, saying his arthur-itis was bad, but he'd think about it when he'd taken his pills.

In the back yard, which went on for miles, Paula was standing under a too-tall pear tree, listening to Leenie on the subject of Jess, who was seventeen, with long brown hair, green eyes and spectacularly long, thick eyelashes.

'This is the third stray she's put up in the granny flat. And that's just this year. He seems nice, but how can you tell?'

'Are they ... you know?'

'No, no, no. She met him through the lads who've moved in next door to her best friend. Now he's fallen out with the lads, and Jess has taken his side. She moved him in while we were away on holidays. I only signed on for my three kids, not a holding-bay of assorted waifs and refugees.'

'Yeah, it's like that. But you'll miss it when it stops.'

'Ha! You kidding?'

'True. I'd give anything to have Bert's clodhopping mates tramping through my place again, spilling coffee on the rug, burning cigarette holes in the lino, missing the toilet when they go for a pee in the middle of the night.'

'Get off,' said Kathleen. 'I can't wait for blessed peace in my own home. Not to mention food bills smaller than a developing nation's GDP.'

'You'll miss that, too. Even I could cook a huge fried rice or a mammoth spaghetti bog for a horde of boys; I liked to watch it all disappear. They sometimes remembered to say thank you, too. And now it hardly seems worth the trouble to cook for myself and Rosie. She eats like a sparrow, not like her brother.'

'Yes, but don't you feel you've got your life back? I don't seem to ever get a moment to think.'

'Time to think is overrated,' said Paula. 'I want all that chaos back again.'

Sheelagh, out of uniform for her sister's birthday, came up behind them. She was wearing an old army shirt and pants, red curls untethered. She fished a fresh Coopers ale from the

cement laundry tub, currently full of ice and bottles, that Kathleen and Dennis used to prop up a shaky section of their fence.

'Cheers, sis. Forty big ones, eh? Don't expect any sympathy from me. I have to say you're looking in the pink at fivepence ha'penny.'

'Huh?'

'Some old radio play Dot and John used to recite. Every time I ever changed your nappy I'd go into that routine they did - Big and Stinker minding the baby? - *There's a boy, there's a girl, there it is!*'

Trisha came up, clutching an imaginary microphone - 'Father, why are you sharpening that knife?' 'Whist!' 'But why are you sharpening ...?' 'Whist!' 'But you don't play whist with a knife!' 'Whist - shut up!'

'The Fruity Melodrama', Kathleen nodded. 'Makes you feel ancient having that hoary crud in your head.'

'Walking archives. If someone wanted to buy it all, I'd happily sell it as a job lot.'

'So how's your new squeeze?' asked Trish, nodding towards Evie, strolling out of the house and across the patchy couch grass to join them. 'She let the cat out of the bag.'

Paula was annoyed to feel a flush creeping up her neck.

'Chris,' she said. 'He's nice. What say we stoke up the barbie, eh?'

Kathleen and Trish shook their heads at one another behind Paula's retreating back, as Rosie shot between them and veered wildly around her mother, followed a heartbeat later

by Chrissie and Angela, Kathleen's other two girls. They careered across the lawn and pounded down the fence-line to the sprawling fig-tree at the bottom of the garden. One after the other, they disappeared up the rope ladder to the broad platform Dennis had built a few metres up, yelling at the top of their lungs.

'What the hell?' asked Evie, spun around in their wake.

'Who cares. They're happy,' said Trish.

'God, I don't know whether I've got the stamina to go the distance with those two,' said Kathleen.

'Well, you would insist on having them late in the day,' shrugged Trish.

'When we could finally afford them.'

'She's just rattling your cage,' said Evie. 'Trish, put a sock in it.'

'Gawd,' said Paula. 'You think you've got problems. Look at me. I've done it all once and now it's all to do again. By the time Rosie leaves the nest it'll be time to admit myself to my own old-folks' home.'

'Ah, rubbish. They'll have rung down the curtain on all of us and you'll still have gas in the tank.'

'Speak for yourself, Sheelagh. I'm going for the ton, if you're not.'

'Christ, Trish, what a horrible prospect. I'll take a flying leap off Glenelg Jetty into the sea when I hit eighty, I reckon. Only decent thing to do.'

'You say that now, Evie, but wait till you get there,' said Paula. 'Not too many of my eighty-year-olds are planning on exposing themselves on snowy hillsides any time soon.'

'I wouldn't expose myself at eighty either,' spluttered Trish into her beer.

'You'll be wanting to hang on to the bitter end, wait and see.'

'Why would you?' Sheelagh protested. 'Mum was desperate to be out of here, wasn't she?'

'We won't be like Dot. We'll be in better shape and more cheerful when we get to her age.'

'Can't count on it. She was chirpy enough until she got to sixty-five or thereabouts.'

'Oh, for God's sake. Can we stop this now? This is a birthday party, not a wake.'

'Damn right. And I'm the youngest, so bollocks to you bunch of old hags!'

'Think we won't bash you up now we're all grown up, don't you? That's where you're wrong, shrimp.'

In a flash, Trish had stuffed a double handful of crushed ice down Paula's front while Kathleen held her sister's arms from behind. Evie tipped her handful inside the waistband of Paula's pants and Sheelagh followed suit. The piercing shrieks of the baby of the family brought the menfolk running, too late to aid Paula but handy for the offenders to hide behind as the birthday girl, struggling free, armed herself to retaliate.

The kids all materialised by magic around their elders, screaming with glee. Another Haggerty party off to a promising start.



Bert wandered out into the yard, bumping on the back step into his father, rushing back inside to turn up the stereo to full volume, and Evie, close behind, heading to the loo.

'Okay, Sonny-Jim?'

'Yep. Fine, Dad.'

'Bert, your mum's being iced. Here, I saved you a handful.' Evie pushed a cold lump into his hand and pushed him into the fray.

At the end of the afternoon, the mob gravitated back into Kathleen and Dennis's living room, with its dark-stained timber floor and saggy, comfortable couches, kids sprawled on the flokati rugs Leen and Den had brought back from an early, hopeful trip to Hydra that had never been repeated.

Worn out, full of steak and sausage, Trish's rice salad and Kathleen's potato, washed down by a cheeky Argentinian red contributed by Sheelagh, they watched an ABC doco about Macquarie Island, its animal and human inhabitants, spectacular high seas and occasional sky-shows of Aurora Australis lights, at which the kids sucked in their breath and the parents sighed.

On the island, two women researchers were emerging from a cottage above one of the windswept beaches. Male colleagues were sedating seal mothers whose pups were weaned, attaching monitors to their flanks. The male and female seals apparently fed at different spots in the Antarctic, females stacking on huge amounts of body fat for the month spent on the beach feeding- supermilk that caused pups to add four kilos a day. Other residents of the island were royal penguins, twenty thousand in breeding season. The girl researchers were the penguin team, tagging birds for Antarctic satellites to track.

'That could be you one day, Rose,' said Evie lazily.

'No, me,' said Jess. 'I'd love a job like that. I don't want to grind my life away in a dirty city. Oh, gross, look at that poor pup; those horrible males have rolled on top of it.'

'Why are they fighting, mummy?' asked Rose.

'You tell me, honey. They've both got hundreds of girlfriends if they want them.'

'Remember how we used to watch Disneyland on Sunday nights?' asked Trish. 'I don't think the nature-episodes were this explicit.'

'Rosella tomato soup and toasted cheese sandwiches. Heaven!' sighed Leen.

Dennis, Gary and Bert got up as if on wires and offered to make tea and toast for the company.

'You guys are quite evolved, for sea lions,' said Trisha.

'Arf,' barked Gary, clapping his flippers.

'Some nice sardines for you later if you don't burn the toast.'

'Let's all stay here. I don't want to go home!' cried Rose.

Kathleen smiled benignly, indistinct in the darkened room, in the flicker of silver light from the television.

'I wish we could,' said Paula. 'It's so homey here, Leen. Why don't we all move in, build cabins in the back yard - there's oodles of room. It'd be so sensible. Why do we all have to strive so hard to prove we can make our own way in the world, living in our own separate

igloos? When we spent all those long childhood years bonding with each other. Mum and Dad are gone, nothing left to prove...'

'Speak for yourself. And do you really want to go back to fighting with your siblings over the washing-up? *And* Sheelagh would be off into the wild blue again just as we got settled.'

'Oh, Trish, don't be stupid. I can't think of anything nicer than having all our undies tangled up together in the wash again.'

'It'd be fine and dandy for about two minutes,' said Kathleen. 'Have you forgotten how we used to sulk for days over one of us borrowing the other's blouse or skirt and giving it back late, or stained or shrunk or something? It's not so hard staying civil for an afternoon now and again. How would we be with each other day in, day out?'

'Christ, they do it in other cultures happily enough,' Evie protested. 'They think that's what life's all about. I think we could be very happy, with a little bit of in-service training.'

'Right on cue, here's the boys with tiffin. I suppose if we got them properly trained, it could be pleasant enough. I'd never cook again, for one thing. I'll do the cleaning instead.'

'Don't worry, Paul, we wouldn't let you near the kitchen. But I'd be happy for you to vacuum my floors and clean my bathroom.'

'You can talk, Eve. What are you going to feed us all, then? Toasted ham and cheese sandwiches every night? '

'Why not? Actually, George has taught me some mean Greek recipes. The quantities are always for twenty or so, as well. Now there's a culture where they expect to stay in family groups. '

'Used to,' said George, handing mugs of tea around. 'Not so much any more. But still more than you mad anglo buggers, frantically proving how independent you are till the day you die all alone in a nursing home. '

'No joke,' said Paula. 'I say we approach Marion Council for planning permission for those cabins tomorrow.'

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Evie and George got back to her house, sitting up talking till two with the TV on, sound down. Evie, relieved that Paula was speaking to her again, chattered on about the nieces and nephews, how Kathleen's hair was much greyer but it suited her, how relaxed she and Dennis seemed, how Jess would be perfect for Bert if it wasn't for all that inconvenient cousin stuff... George kept his arm around her, mmm-ing and no-ing, stroking her hair.

'You're a nice lot, you Haggertys,' he said. 'Mental, but nice. Evie -' George sat up - 'I have to go away for a bit.'

Evie's body stiffened under his arm.

'Oh. Fine. Okay,' she said, brightly, eyes locked on the TV screen, where the perma-cheer of Entertainment Tonight bubbled silently along.

'No, I don't want to, it's not that, you know it isn't. Harry's sick. It takes a lot to make him admit there's anything wrong. So I'm worried it might be serious. Might be bowel cancer, in fact.'

At once Evie sat up, pushing herself back against the arm of the sofa.

'Go and find out, then. Gawd. Don't worry about me, for chrissake. He'll need you.'

'I think he does. He has to go and have tests, and he'll hate that like poison. He's a bloody awful patient. He always said we should shoot him if he gets cancer. Typical Leo, Harry is. Fine as long as he can be Mister Strong and Bountiful, complete mess if he gets sick and has to ask for help. He knows it, too. But it doesn't make him any better at it.'

'Go tomorrow, George. Can you get time away from the bookshop?'

'Yeah, they're okay about it. I was just worried about telling you, in case you thought I was running away. I know you. You'll always pull the plug rather than be the one who gets left. I'm not running away, Evie. This is the last thing I wanted to happen. I'll be back as soon as I know he's okay.'

Evie grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him gently backwards and forwards.

'George. I know I'm pathetic, but you seem to like me. I won't go to pieces, and I won't write you off. If you're as good for Harry as you are for me, he'll be doing the Zorba dance around the ward in his hospital gown in no time. Give us a hug, but.'

George did, a long one. Evie's shoulder was damp when he sat up again.

'It's special, isn't it, Evie? Us?'

Evie nodded, dumbly. 'And we don't have to rely on carrier pigeons any more, remember. We have telephones now,' she managed.

But the weeks ahead stretched out like wasteland. George had taken like a successful skin graft. If he pulled away, she was going to bleed. Evie hadn't felt like this in a long while, and wasn't sure she didn't prefer her old self, thickly insulated like underwater cable. It used to

take nothing short of a depth charge to shake her. How could she have shed her protective cladding so completely, so quickly? And could she grow another?

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There was a wonderful aroma seeping along the corridors of Holmwood, causing Paula to lift her head from her typing.

Desirée put her head around the office door.

'What is that fabulous smell, Des?'

'That's Mrs Gallina's eggplant torte. Don't you remember, we agreed to start rostering anyone who wanted to cook on kitchen duty?'

'Oh, right, so we did. Eggplant torte, huh? Beats shepherds pie, I bet.'

'Come and check her out. She's Nigella and Jamie and the fat ladies all rolled into one.'

Paula stood up and stretched. 'Lead the way.'

In the long, narrow kitchen at the back of the main building, Mrs. Gallina stood beaming beatifically amidst an array of large bowls and pots, roasting pans and saucepans.

'Miz Haggerty, look what I make. Jean get all the things for me on Friday, and I make some tomato sauce yesterday afternoon. All ready this morning.'

Three large round baking tins were sitting on the draining board alongside the stove. They had evidently just disgorged their contents, which sat on plates on the cooktop. Three glistening, steaming, eggplant-laminated cakes.

'Hold me back,' said Paula. 'They look astonishing. Mrs. Gallina, what are they?'

'Oh, they very easy, dear,' glowed the mother-of-nine, who'd shed fifteen years in a morning. 'Pasta filling, tomato wine sauce, lots of garlic, lots of cheese. You fry the eggplant and put in the tin first, then the filling, some eggs, you bake, ecco!'

'This must have taken you hours, though! Aren't you tired?'

'No, dear, no tired. I make salad now.'

Jean grinned at Paula from behind Mrs Gallina's back.

'Don't stop her now, Boss,' she said. 'She's on a roll. All I've had to do all morning is find pans for her and wash up. It's great.'

Des was examining a series of bottles and jars laid out on the bench under the window.

'What are these for?'

'My boys bring me so many tomatoes,' said Mrs Gallina, her eyes shining. 'I make plenty of sauce. Jean help me put in bottles.'

And, indeed, the kitchen's biggest stock pot was bubbling on the back burner, giving off a tantalising, herby vapour.

'Sure,' said Jean. 'It's killer stuff. Mrs Gallina says she'll use the sauce for homemade pizzas for us next week, and polenta and ragu after that. Couldn't we take her on permanently?'

'We're twisting the regulations into shreds having residents in here at all,' said Paula.

'Oh, Miz Haggerty, please, we want to cook. If we get burn or cut, we no make trouble for you.'

Paula smiled. 'It's okay, Mrs G. I'll worry about the legalities. You just enjoy yourself.'

'Yes, and Mrs Vogelsang cook on Wednesday. And Mrs Lorenzin next Monday.'

'I have to order all sorts of weird things, you wouldn't believe. What the hell is speck, for instance?' asked Jean.

'Is like prosciutto, like bacon, speck,' volunteered Mrs Gallina.

'See what I mean? But I'm not complaining. Mrs Lorenzin was in here, happy as Larry, half the morning, butting in and making suggestions. I haven't seen the ladies so full of beans since I don't know when.'

'Mrs Lorenzin, she from Friuli, they do different,' frowned Mrs Gallina. 'I tell her I do torte Roman way.'

'You told her alright,' confirmed Jean. 'Didn't put her off one bit. You can come in and bother her next week.'

'She cooking risotto, with aspergus.'

'Asparagus. Fresh, if you don't mind,' said Jean, who seemed as frisky as a kitten. 'And provolone cheese. And fresh peas. Just so long as you're going to shell them, I told her.'

Mrs Gallina was motioning Jean to lift the tomato sauce off the stove.



'For God's sake, be careful with the hot liquid, won't you?' begged Paula. 'I can't look. I hope Mrs G knows some home remedies for scalds if you drop it; I won't be calling the doctor, that's for sure.'

Des took Paula's arm and led her along to the staff room.

'Have a coffee, darl,' she said. 'Not to worry. This is the best idea we've had in ages.'

'I have to worry, that's my job. But it is, yes. Mrs G's ecstatic. And so is Jean, even more amazing.'

'It's only common sense. They've been feeding families all their lives, getting praised for it, admired. Suddenly they're supposed to be happy to be fed three times a day like babies, no-one needs them, no one's telling them how fantastic they are.'

'Sure, I know what the reasoning was. It was my idea, remember?' Paula sat down on a cane chair and began to do some ankle exercises, putting her cup on the floor.

'Cut a rug or two last night, eh?' asked Des, noticing Paula's wince.

'Yep. Forty big ones. Family party. I'm the baby, would you believe? Cooking's not going to be what my family remembers me for, I can tell you. They won't be swapping stories about my knockout pavlovas when I go.'

'What'll they remember you for, then?' Des teased.

'Cor lumme, I dunno. Maybe I'll make a late run in politics, draft a groundbreaking piece of legislation allowing old people to do dangerous things in nursing homes if they sign waivers to say the home's not responsible. Think about it. We could have the old guys building

pergolas, fixing the roof, rewiring the building. Happily electrocuting themselves, falling to their deaths, dropping loads of bricks on each other...'

'The sky's the limit, Haggerty. Let's get the cooking thing ticking over nicely, then we'll think of something dangerous for the blokes. Not that they can't cook if they want to.'

'Have any of the guys signed up?'

'Not yet. Early days, though. I suppose if we let them build a barbecue they'd want to blacken things on it. Shall we make that the next project? Give 'em a cast-iron excuse to get out of attending Milton's afternoon lecturettes on his own work, eh?'

Paula smiled a conspiratorial smile and picked up her coffee. 'Tophole idea, Jeeves,' she said.

A more pressing problem was Margaret Beasley, who was getting worse. They'd taken to giving her plastic cups, something Paula had held out against when told it was the way to go with old people. All the residents, unless very infirm, had china crockery for all their meals. Not Margaret, any more. All the same, hot tea flung across the room, from whatever kind of vessel, was dangerous. They let her tea cool to a safe temperature. But any liquid flung with force into one's face was unpleasant, and liquid flung while still in any kind of cup unpleasant and capable of causing injury. Des reported that Nurse Bridge was muttering about the woman needing to be sectioned, or restrained.

Paula made a note to call the gerontologist Holmwood used, without having much confidence that he'd be able to pronounce on Margaret with any finality. Margaret was notoriously erratic, could go for weeks without an episode of violent behaviour. Sadly, that almost made things worse. The nurses couldn't relax enough with her to treat her normally in the lulls between outbursts. Margaret would be miserable, Paula knew, in 'secure accommodation', but she had to think of the safety of her staff, who put up with enough

risks as it was. She made another note to phone Florence, Margaret Beasley's one relative, and ask her to drop by for a chat. Unfortunately, as the patience and nerves of the nurses wore thin, and with other residents at risk as well, the outcome was almost certain, merely the timing remaining to be decided.

On Paula's desk, regarding her as she worked, was a Callaghan card: it showed a classic Dry Gulch badlands scene, two black-bandanna'd cowboys on horseback contemplating an empty wheelchair with drag-marks leading away from it into the distance. Let's get after him, says one cowboy to the other. He can't have got far on foot.

Inside was the query 'Where have you got to, cowpoke?' Chris.

Paula resolved to make an effort. Look at her - she'd slipped back into her old routine, letting days go by, keeping Chris as a sort of optional extra. He was being entirely accommodating, allowing her to set the pace. In the past two weeks, he'd rung her a few times, she'd called him once. She hardly thought about him when he wasn't there. Poor guy, he was so nice. Before she could change her mind or allow another distraction in, she picked up the phone on her desk and called him at the pub. They agreed to go to a movie the next night Rosie was at Gary's. While she was at it, Paula photocopied the front of the wheelchair card, scribbled *You Can Do It!* underneath the black-and-white image, and stuffed it into an envelope which she addressed to Zak and slipped into her out-tray.

Milton's cod-Olivier tones floated down from the day room and through Paula's open door.

'Agnes, where can you have picked up that impression? A genius?'

Agnes's calmer reply didn't carry, so Paula got up to eavesdrop.

Agnes was standing with her back to the window, so that sunlight bounced off her amazing hair. She had Milton where she wanted him, Paula realised right away; Ag could look after herself.

'Ah, but of course, ' she was saying. 'I know she's lesser-known than the male painters, but her reputation is growing by the day. I'm sure you went to the Art Gallery retrospective last year? No? What a shame. The early work especially is astounding. That painting of the dark car coming up the road through mist, between trees, is better than any of that rubbishy Heidelberg stuff. She used to paint in a back shed her father graciously let her catch pneumonia in, or else *en plein air*. Matron, you're a Clarice Beckett fan, aren't you?'

Paula, who hadn't been inside an art gallery for years, nodded vigorously.

Milton opened his mouth and closed it again. Agnes patted her hair.

At home, Paula sat with Rosie in front of the *Aladdin* video, one they'd watched so often it was animated wallpaper. Paula was letting down the hem of Rosie's summer uniform, wondering how many times she'd need to perform this service before Rosie left school. There'd be lettings-down, until she started high school, and then there'd be takings-up of new, slightly large uniforms, or letting-down of skirts that had unfashionable hem-lengths. Whatever, no way was this anywhere near the last time. She tried to keep the stitches small, to catch only a fraction of fabric in each stitch so that it wouldn't show on the right side of the dress, but inevitably she lost concentration and threads of wrong-coloured cotton poked through to the front.

Hook-noses featured prominently on the screen, when Paula looked up at intervals, at least among the men, the evil ones being the beakiest. The cartoon princess was doe-eyed and sinuous, in an all-purpose oriental way, though Princess Jasmine had a mind of her own, sort of, also throwing fits of pique in classic princess style. The minor characters Paula

usually found funny, the father a charmingly pudgy, diminutive potentate, the young couple sweet and diverting. Tonight, it seemed a shade tired.

'Where's Princess Jasmine's mum?' asked Rose.

'Good point. She doesn't seem to have one. Or has she died?'

'Would Princess Jasmine's mother be the main wife?'

'I suppose.'

'But wouldn't all the wives have children? Why is there only Jasmine?'

'Got me again. Can't all have died.'

'Mummy, could you make me a costume like Princess Jasmine's?'

'What do you think, kiddo? Look, I've just stabbed my leg with the needle again; I can't sew for toffee.'

'Could Aunty Trish do it? She can sew.'

'Maybe, if she wasn't too busy. '

'Goody.'

**CHAPTER 9**

In a fit of feverish activity, Evie had cold-called a new creche, looking for more occasional work to fill her days. And pay some bills, a heap of which had fallen due around the same time. She'd volunteered to roster herself on Lifelink one extra night per week. She'd been to the library and stocked up with so many novels she could hardly drag them all home. But reading wasn't distraction enough; her mind would wander to George, or the lack of him, too easily. She needed to be doing - Evie now had either a morning or afternoon, at least, of every weekday accounted for, more if you counted travel to and from.

So, Wednesday morning, not a normal creche day, soon after George had headed off by bus for Melbourne, saw her squashed into a narrow window-seat alongside a woman mountain with arms like bolsters. It was a variant of the old torture that involved a huge weight being placed on your chest so you couldn't breathe. Suddenly violently claustrophobic, Evie stood up and squeezed out into the aisle, pretending to need the next stop. She clung to a pole for the rest of the trip.

When the bus deposited her in North Adelaide, Evie still had half an hour in hand. She sat under a tree halfway up the gentle hill, extracting the Dana notebook, burning a hole in her bag as usual. She'd left Dana stranded inside a hilltop convent in the Greek countryside. A quick check revealed that Maria and Dana had been tenderly bathed by the novices of the Order, according to the ordinances of the Rule (handed down by the sainted Eugenia, little known outside their remote locality). The novice mistress stood by, nodding her approval of the ministrations performed by her charges, next instructing the newly professed sisters - comely young women just a little older than the dewy novices - to lead their guests to the massage room.

*Should not holy sisters spend more time in prayer? Dana asked Maria, who translated the query for the maiden at that moment anointing her breasts with lavender-scented almond-oil.*

*Blushing, Sister Areti lowered her eyes as she whispered a reply.*

*They interpret these attentions to their women guests as corporal works of mercy, Maria reported to her friend, whose own anointing with oil had been gently completed, and who sat rosily naked on her narrow bed. Also, this is a way of showing reverence to the Blessed Virgin, in whose image all women are made. Women's bodies are to be worshipped and adored.*

*Dana sighed, and allowed herself to be robed in white cotton and led through an open archway into the nuns' enclosed garden, where both the Postulant Mistress and Novice Mistress were overseeing the infusing with fresh rosemary of the spring-water destined to be used for washing the hair of their guests.*

Yes, women are for worshipping - Evie thumbed her nose at the reprovng Anglican Cathedral spires, and walked the rest of the distance to the childcare centre attached to the Catholic hospital, Calvary, where she'd been born herself. Dropping her mother's name had oiled the wheels nicely. Her mum's long teaching career had resulted in a wide spread of ex-students, especially in Catholic workplaces. Sure enough, Antonietta, the manager of Calvary's daycare centre, was one of Dot's ex-pupils, remembering her as 'the best'. Evie's mother had bloomed like the desert rose in the school setting, saving testiness and sarcasm for home. To be fair, full-time work and six kids would try the patience of a saint, while Dad always behaved as though Mum had been home with nothing to do all day, expecting undiminished all the perks he saw as due to the head of the household. In any case, Evie chimed in enthusiastically with her new boss's eulogy. - 'Yeah, she was one of a kind. We miss her.'

'If you're as good as she was with kids, you'll be a natural here.' Antonietta welcomed her at the door. 'You're just in time to take the toddlers to the loo.'

Evie peered into the bathroom, saw the familiar row of miniature toilets protruding from the wall like fixtures in the Seven Dwarfs' house, looked back at a line of expectant two-year-old faces and smiled. 'Right, you lot,' she said. 'Pants down.'

Supervising outside play, collecting casualties who'd fallen off swings or cubbies, reading stories, making sure playlunch and lunch proper went into all the little mouths, more toilet time, babies' nappies, an influx of older children who came after school and queered the mix, wiping noses and washing faces, changing wet clothes after water play, sweeping sand tracked in from the sandpit out of the play area, nipping fights in the bud, reading more stories. By four Evie was wrung out like a wet dishcloth. She hadn't had a moment to pine.

From the corner of her eye, as she trudged down the hill, she wearily noted the couples lying under Moreton Bay figs, plane trees, oaks and chestnuts, all the introduced European trees planted by the early city fathers. The afternoon was warm and the air balmy. There was no coffee-shop nearby, and Evie doubted whether she'd have had the energy to make her way there even if there was. All she wanted was to get home, slide into a hot bath and pull the water over her head.

There were only a handful of people waiting at her stop. It wasn't rush hour yet, in this town where the rush lasted not much more than the prescribed sixty minutes, not like Melbourne or Sydney. A person was loitering just at the edge of her field of vision, under a tree, rather than at the shelter. Evie registered that the loiterer just made the bus, jumping on as they pulled away, sliding into the very front seat, the one built right up behind the driver's seat, with no leg room, his back to the rest of the bus. Evie closed her eyes.

The bath was bliss, and Evie took her time over making herself some soup and toast. She sat down in the lounge room, trying not to imagine George walking in the door, arming



herself with the new Ian Rankin novel. Edinburgh would be a nice place to visit, if she and George ever travelled. Whoops. If she ever travelled. How was it possible she'd adopted such dangerous habits of thought? Anyway, yes, Edinburgh. One of her schoolfriends had gone there to study linguistics back somewhere in the dawn of time. Maybe she could look her up.

When Evie woke, it was midnight, she was cold, and she'd knocked the remains of her cup of tea over onto the carpet. She flicked at it half-heartedly with a smelly Wettex, stood up stiffly and tottered the few steps to the bedroom. In the seconds before she fell asleep, she noticed that the bedroom curtains weren't quite drawn, and light from the street lamp was seeping in. She didn't have the strength of will to get up again.

The hours before dawn were full of portents and alarms. Evie ran along treacherous cliff-top paths, through tangled trees, always fleeing a nameless pursuer who was only a few paces behind. She woke with her jaws clamped together in a painful grimace, fists clenched and neck rigid. A hot shower eased some of the tension, and a blast of idiotically cheerful breakfast radio almost erased a lingering hunted feeling. Then there were a brace of catalogues in the letterbox, the kind to browse through rather than chuck straight in the rubbish. Some were rubbish, of course, and Evie walked around the side of the house, sorting as she went, to ditch the dross. With one eye on reduced Target corduroy jackets, she automatically sidestepped a depression in the ground, and proceeded to the bin. As she stood with the green lid raised, her brain registered what the indentation was. A footprint. Outside her bedroom window.

On the bus to work, in the back seat this time, Evie closed her eyes. A beach, maybe St Kilda beach, maybe a Mornington Peninsula one. She's under the water, sitting on sand at the bottom, looking back up through green-gold glass to the coruscating surface. Hands on her shoulders restrain her from standing up. Involuntarily, she gulps in several litres of worn-out bus air. She's flapping her arms in despair, convinced she's going to die, when the hands release their hold. She can hear Ronnie laughing as she scrambles to stand up. Had

you worried, didn't I? he chortles, as she coughs and splutters and strains to fill her lungs with all the air they'll hold. Oh, dearie me, yes. He puts his arm around her shoulder. Sorry. Overdid it a bit. Here, you can do it to me. I won't mind. But Evie knows she's not strong enough to hold him down against his will, so she just looks at him and staggers back to their towels. His idea of a joke. You weren't supposed to hold it against him. Just his way.

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In the act of knocking on his mother's door, Bert hesitated. Paula, watering plants unseen alongside the fence, screened by the old crepe myrtle in the middle of the lawn, watched him with a constricted feeling in her chest. But he lifted his hand again, and pounded lustily the way he always used to.

Paula dropped the hose and bounded across the lawn behind him.

'We're not interested. We're Catholics,' she said to Bert's back, catching him in a hug as he wheeled around.

'You were hiding in the bushes perving on old Mr Zwar again, weren't you?' he accused.

'Fair cop,' said Paula, trotting back to the fence to turn off the hose. 'Those pre-war Y-fronts are a sight to behold. What brings you to the old alma mater?'

'Alma mater. Dear mother, right? I'm here to see my old alma mater.'

'Want a beer?' asked Paula, who'd been keeping the fridge better stocked since Chris.

They sat on the back lawn, couch grass that never wilted or died, tough under bare legs, till Bert went into the laundry and dragged out the plastic-webbed metal frame chairs that had belonged to his grandmother and grandfather since he could remember.

'These always make me think of Grandpa. I feel as though I should get togged up in Fletcher Jones shorts and a daggy blue towelling fishing hat before I sit in them.'

'Me too. So weird not to have Dad or Mum around. '

'Puts you next in the firing line, doesn't it, mumsie?'

'Us, me and the sisters. You feel pretty exposed, let me tell you. Anyway, enough morbidity. How are you, my beamish one?'

Bert stretched his legs out in front of him and dropped his chin on his chest, looking for a second the image of his grandpa. 'Still a bit bummed out about Zak, Mum. Can't quite shake off the spooked feeling.'

Paula reached out a hand and patted her son's arm.

'I feel stupid letting it get to me, especially since it wasn't me it happened to. I did have one close shave but I pulled up okay.'

Paula pulled her hand away sharply and sat up.

'Don't stress, Mum. I was okay. Evie happened to be there and she knew what to do.'

'Oh, Evie did, did she?'

'Yeah. Don't say it like that. I was lucky she was there. Anyway, the point is it was Zak who nearly checked out, not me. But I'm nearly as freaked out about it as him. When he needs me to be solid and cheerful.'

'You can understand what he's going through, when other people don't. That's what matters.'

'Do you think? I feel such a wuss. We just sit there and play chess, not saying a word. So not like Zak and me.'

'That's better for him than having to hold his end up when friends who don't know how fragile he is come round and expect him to be his old self, as I'm sure they do. You're probably just what he needs. He'll come good any day now.'

'Think so? It feels as if we've moved into a new, horrible, grown-up, serious phase and that's the end of our young guys mucking around time. No more fun. *Finito*.'

'Nah, your hormones will zap you out of that soon enough.'

'Kkk-*ching!*' Bert gyrated lewdly in Grandpa John's old chair, swinging his pelvis sharply to one side, in robotic response to an imaginary buxom blonde walking by - a joke from *Wayne's World*, another family favorite.

'That'll do it. You'll see. Speaking of which, have you been keeping in touch with Leanne? '

Bert hadn't, he said, because she preferred it that way. Better to make a clean cut. Though he wanted them to stay friends.

'That old story. You're not missing her too much, are you?'

Bert was, and he wasn't - too preoccupied with Zak. Didn't seem to want to do anything but sit and listen to music when he was home.

'Bert, why didn't you come to me when you were having a bad time?' Paula asked the only question she really wanted an answer to.

'Because you're my mum. You'd have felt it was your fault.'

'I wouldn't, Bert. Truly. I know you're your own person, not just my creation. I don't feel responsible.' Paula heard her mother's voice, demanding the universe tell her where she went wrong with her brood.

'You say that, Mum, but it's not quite true, is it?'

'I think it is. I feel things that happen to you as if they're happening to me, but that doesn't mean the same thing.'

'Well, that's bad enough. I don't want you to feel this. And I didn't want you to feel spun out and wasted, either.'

'Wouldn't be the first time. You lot didn't invent illegal substances. I swore off them the time I flipped out when I had the last puff from a hookah someone was passing around. I went troppo for days, and it was really, really nasty. Flashbacks for years.'

'Shit. Mum.' Bert had sat up straight to look at her. 'Bummer.'

'Well. I would have told you if you'd asked. But the point is, it wasn't centuries ago. I'm hardly going to be shocked and appalled at your shenanigans. Although of course I'm going to worry.'

'I suppose I just ... well, I knew Evie had a past, but somehow ...'

'All us Haggertys have pasts, you'd be surprised. Quite apart from all that, I am a nurse, as it happens.'

'Trust me, I'm a medic. Poor old Zak trusts anyone but after that shitty hospital.'

'It's the system, not the doctors. Some of the time.'

'You old hippie, you. What else do you have to confess, eh?'

'You'll have to wait for the memoirs like everybody else. More alcohol?'

'The Haggerty drug of choice.'

'Bert, you come from a long line of alcohol-abusers. Grandpa didn't cash in his chips at sixty-eight for no reason. And Uncle Sean wasn't lifted to heaven in a fiery chariot either. You're just going to have to be a boring middle-roader when it comes to substances. Like me.'

'Yes, mumsie. Another beer?'

'Just the one, then.'

A beer each later, Bert and Paula had decided to repaint Rosie's room as a surprise for her when she got back from her current weekend with Gary. There was a colour called Egyptian Gold in the Dulux range at the hardware store. Between them, they dragged Rosie's bed out of the sleepout, and her child-size wardrobe, and the salvaged trunk with her toys in it. The rug was rolled up, the curtains came down, and several old sheets were spread over the floorboards. They dragged in Bert's old ghetto-blaster, still sitting in Paula's wardrobe, and plugged it in, positioning it near the door, Daddy Cool and Captain Matchbox tapes stacked alongside. In the end, they repainted her bed as well, a vivid purple-blue.

'What was this colour called?' Paula wondered. 'We've dribbled paint over the label.'

'Grape Milkshake? Portuguese Man o' War? '

'When was the last time we did anything together?' asked Paula, holding her paintbrush under the tap at the back door.

'What about your new man?' Bert asked. 'Haven't you got a new life?'

'I don't know, truly, Bert. He's lovely, but I don't think about him when he's not here. And he's so perfect. It's not real.'

'Perfect's got to be good, no?'

Paula shrugged, and left it at that.

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Lunchtime at the Calvary Hospital creche; Evie decided to get out of the building for her break. She made her way down the hill to St Peter's Cathedral, and up along King William Street a little way to Anglicare, a prince among op shops, and one she didn't often get to. There were acres of clothes, some designer castoffs - a better class of donors, your Cathedral parishioners. Not like the plebs over her side of the tracks. Evie spent a pleasantly mindless half-hour looking through bed-linen, all re-packaged in plastic wrap and labelled. She found a feather duvet that looked freshly drycleaned and quite new.

'There's a half-price sale tomorrow, dear,' the woman at the counter told her. 'I can't hold it for you, but get in early, chances are it'll still be here.'

'I'll be here at ten. Thanks very much.' We micks can be mannerly too.

Evie retraced her steps along the edge of the Parkland lawns. It was almost two o'clock. When the Calvary littlies woke up from their after-lunch sleep, they had stories for a while, to give them time to shake off their grogginess. They sat on cushions around her on the floor, faces still slack from sleep, dreamy-eyed and soft all over.

From the middle of the ring, the warm breath of twelve two-to-three-year-olds gusting lightly around her, she read them *The Tawny, Scrawny Lion* - still clear in her own memory as one Dot and John read to the three eldest girls, in the days before there were too many kids and too little time. As Evie read, the pages were overlaid by a snapshot of herself with Sean on her lap, sitting on the polished red concrete of the front verandah. He was an angelic baby, all golden curls and limpid eyes, with an abundance of little mothers to choose from, fighting over who was to feed him, bath him, sing to him, pick him up from his cot after a sleep. He was always engrossed by this Little Golden Book, falling apart by then, about the lion who was dissuaded from eating his rabbit prey when the rabbits filled him up with delicious carrot soup instead. Evie read aloud to the end, where the now-plump lion walks home in the moonlight rubbing his distended belly, and the ring of dreamy children were content. As the littlies pushed themselves to their feet and toddled over to their individual cupboards under the long bench by the door, to put their shoes on for outside, Evie fought down a distraught premonition that one, or some, of these children, would not see out their twenties, would instead, like Sean, be ushered untimely from the world in a dark box. She forced herself to attend to the moment, the mystery of vanished socks, the intricacies of shoelaces, the dilemma of which foot was right. You only ever had the time at hand, not the next bit or the bit after. If Sean's life meant anything, it surely meant that. He'd have had no patience with her Cassandra turn. But if they could have him back, just for a week, a day...

Ashleigh stuck his booted foot in her face. 'Is this the right shoe, Evie?'

'No, sweetheart, good try. Here, give it to me.'



The Pines and its stock of imported beers called to her across the city. Evie was planning on heading there without let or hindrance as soon as she got home. Another shoelace, another nappy and she'd have had to be carted off to a padded cell. The bus ride had been bearable, since Evie knocked off before rush hour. Two courtly old gents, one sitting alongside her and one in the seat in front, were deep in conversation about shipping. It appeared they lived in the same block of units, but hadn't spoken before now.

- Ah, there'll always be some games going on. Those were the days, said the dapper little man at Evie's side, comically natty in pressed white shirt, sleeveless camel wool vest, honey-gold dull velvet pants.

- Everyone had some job to go to. They might not do it well, the council workers might lean on their shovels, but everyone had a slot to fit into. Now it's all computerised ...

The other man, Eastern European of some description, nodded eagerly, ready with a response about the old country, but Evie stopped listening.

She drifted off, staring out of the window at Anzac Highway flashing past, the Keswick Barracks, those hearty signs urging you to join, best decision you'd ever make, all the things you could learn, no mention of killing people. She always liked the Barracks, so neat and manicured, there was something quaint about them; they reminded her of her cousins' days in school cadets. The corporals and sergeants, the parade-ground nonsense were endlessly lampooned, but they liked it, those boys, the dressing up and the marching around, the fitness training, the camaraderie. The ones who'd been old enough had avoided the Vietnam draft, though. That would have been a horse of a different colour ...

The old men both stood up to get off at the same stop. The migrant, whom they would have called a New Australian in Evie's school days, which was quite sweet, when you thought

about it, was burly and round, perhaps an ex-dock worker. The other man, small and trim, with neat, brushed-back white hair and upright posture, walked with the distinct flat-footed, turned-out-toes gait of the old soldier, still with a slight swing to the arms.

Maybe she could give away the child-care game altogether, Evie thought now as she walked briskly through the dusk. She could join the CMF, get fit, get a job in Security or something. Have to give up drinking, of course.

Evie knew she was doing okay for forty-five, walking and catching buses and trams everywhere, never having had a car. She wasn't enormously interested in food, and if she spent the evening at the pub would often make do with a toasted sandwich for dinner. Lots of calories in beer. She wouldn't board the wagon tonight. Just dump her bag and walk to the pub for a few quick ones before an early night.

She used her silver key in the keyhole by the door handle, her brass one in the lock at hip-height. Evie leaned her weight against the door to push it wide, shoving her bag, dropped on the step, inside with one foot. It was almost dark in the lounge-room, she must have left the curtains drawn. Evie flicked on the light.

'Hi, babe. Long time no see,' said Ronnie, from the depths of her sofa.

Evie felt her heart shrink, her throat tighten and dry out in an instant. At once she realised her sixth sense had been telling her Ronnie was back in town for days, weeks.

'How did you get in?' she challenged, after a moment, though that wasn't what she needed to know. Why was he here, and what was he after?

'I've been in the neighbourhood for a bit, babe. I've checked out the lie of the land. How are you, Evie? You're looking good.'

Evie stood rigid, hands on hips. 'None of your business. I don't want you coming into my house uninvited. We haven't got anything to say to each other.'

'No way to be with an old friend, babe. We've got a lot of catching up to do.'

'Why are you here, Ronnie?'

'Told you, thought it was time for us to catch up. Can't write off all that history.'

'I have,' said Evie. 'I don't want to see you or talk to you. Just go, Ronnie.'

'Okay. Don't get your knickers in a twist. But I'm going to be around for a while. Got a bit of time to kill. I think we should reconnect, you know?'

Evie said nothing as he sauntered out of the room and through the still-open front door with that same old little-big-man swagger.

She felt cold, arms and legs all of a sudden like wet sandbags. Avoiding the sofa, she sat down heavily on the arm of a chair. Then jumped up again to run across and slam the door. Why bother locking it? He could find a way back in if he wanted to. All her bubbiness of a minute ago had evaporated. The pub might as well have been in China. If she went out again she'd have to risk having Ronnie pop out from behind a hedge and insist on walking her to wherever she was headed. She knew his tricks. But her bloodstream was fizzing with agitation and she couldn't bear to stay in the room where he'd just been. Evie forced her breathing to deepen, instructed herself to go ahead with her plans, not to let any of the old reactions set in, even if her involuntary shock and distress must have been only too gratifyingly evident to the little creep. So she picked up her bag from the floor, gulped some more mouthfuls of air, walked shakily back through the front door, pulling it to behind her and double-locking as always. No one interrupted her unsteady at-the-double trot to the pub.

But Ronnie continued to poison her air while she sat at a window, nursing a Heineken for longer than usual. Chris called across from behind the bar, something friendly and warm, to which she could barely return a half-smile, a nod, a little wave. After all this time, the man could still destroy her apparent equilibrium, just like that, a stone dropped into a puddle.

Well, what do you expect? Evie tipped the last of her beer into a glass. He turns up like a ghost. Goes for maximum shock value, being the fuckwit he is, loves the drama, wants to see he can still make an impact, gets off on seeing people squirm. No surprises there. Once you get over the shock, he'll just seem like the worm he is. But what does he want? Hasn't he got anybody left to make miserable ... has she left him, then ...?

The beer in her hand was warm. The sun had dropped beneath the horizon and the water across which Evie stared unseeingly was a deepening oyster-grey. As she got up to go, she shook herself and pulled her shoulders out of their slump. Shoulders back, chest out, stomach in - that's it, soldier. Now - quick march!

At home, she vacuumed the lounge room, using the strongest suction and the bare nozzle all over the sofa Ronnie had been sitting on. Returning to the kitchen, Evie rummaged under the sink for an ancient can of air-freshener, sprayed the cushions with that. She lit a scented candle and sat it in the middle of her sixties Parker teak coffee table.

Begone, arant thee, die-diddly-aye, gremlin! muttered Evie, standing in the kitchen with toasted cheese sandwich and mug of tea. She pulled all her curtains tight shut, locked all the windows and got into bed, flicking on the bedside radio for the late-night Nocturne program on Radio National. Eventually she slid into sleep on the gentle waves of an endless Cuban salsa from Sierra Maestra.

Chris had come to claim his promised day, standing on the doorstep behind a bunch of freesias that Paula could smell from ten paces away. The glorious scent overpowered her uncertainties and acted on the muscles of her face to produce a warm smile.

'Hey, you,' she said. 'How did you know they're my favorite flower? '

'I trust my instincts,' said Chris, pointedly, the sun gleaming on his shining dome. 'I've missed you, Paula.'

Paula felt warmth seeping around where her heart lived. Why was she giving this nice man the runaround? She stepped out of the door and linked her arm through Chris's. They'd agreed to go to the Zoo, of all places. She couldn't remember when she'd been there last without a kid in tow.

In no time she was scraping the remnants of monkey-poo from her handbag, where the flung dung had thankfully landed, and looking around for somewhere to wash her hands.

'Shall we move on to the giraffes?' Chris was trying not to laugh.

'At least they don't throw their poo at you. They need to install showers along the walkways.'

'Don't you like the zoo, then?' Chris sounded disappointed.

'No, no, don't get the wrong idea. I love it. I like to come here to watch the people. Especially kids, spotty youths and their girlfriends. It always kills me how they come to the zoo in droves. They must get turned on by the shameless antics in the chimp enclosure. You can just imagine the boys trying it on... we're animals too, what do you say? Primate behaviour this side of the bars is way more bizarre.'

'So cynical,' smiled Chris, putting his arm around her waist.

'See, typical zooging behaviour. You'll be wanting to snog under the wisteria walk now.'

'So, how does Evie seem to you lately?' asked Paula a bit later, smoothing her hair.

'I thought you two weren't on speakers.'

'Me-e-eh - ' Paula made an indeterminate sound - 'no, we smoothed it over. But I haven't heard from her since George went back to Melbourne and Rosie's been at Gary's for the hols. She's been working flat out, I gather.'

'Well, I saw her in The Pines bar last night, actually. She waved, but she wasn't her usual gabby self. Sat on one beer at a table by the window, and hardly said a word to anybody. Looked a bit pale and wan. Nervy.'

'She probably misses him more than she lets on. Evie's so independent, it must hurt to admit it. I should call in on her, make sure she's okay.'

'Won't that ruffle her feathers, if Evie thinks you reckon she's not coping?'

'Sure, but I can probably figure out some excuse. I'll take Bert along, to show there's no hard feelings. Can't say fairer than that, can I?'

Wiping a bench clear of bird droppings with his handkerchief, Chris motioned Paula to sit.

'Crap everywhere around here, since they let some of the big birds free-range. Would I be pushing it to offer to cook you dinner at my place? It's a completely poo-free-zone.'

'Yes, that'd be lovely,' said Paula. 'Let's have something neither flesh nor fowl. Fruits of the earth. Your potato pizza, say. I want to check out the bison and the owls, though, before we go. Did you know owls can turn their heads through 360 degrees?'

'Unlike bison. Standing still and looking straight ahead over there.'

'They kill me. I can never get over those big boofy heads with the dainty little hooves.'

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'So long since I've heard from you, dear, I thought I'd just give you a call and see how you were.'

Joy sounded so normal and sensible and motherly, Evie was tempted to spit it all out about Ronnie's being back in town, but decided against. Joy'd get upset and insist on ringing the cops or posting one of her boys on guard at Evie's front door. Not a bad idea, actually. But Evie was feeling better, with some sleep under her belt; she could feel the dampened fire in her belly sputtering back to life. So she settled back on the couch and told Joy stories about the creche kids, mostly about Toby, a serious little lad who'd taken her fancy lately.

'He's nearly school-age,' she said. 'The school he's going to gave them all some tests, and his mum told me how he did. Apparently they asked the kids who they were in their imagination - Toby said he was actually a girl and spoke in a very high voice. When the teacher asked what he was good at, he said hunting and picking plums in the orchard.'

'Jim was like that,' said Joy. 'A little old man from birth. He always had a a worried frown - wandering about the house pondering the ways of the world. Once I took his mittens off and he asked why I didn't take his hands off too.'

Joy's third, Jim was closest in age to Evie. She remembered what a little thinker he'd been as a small boy. Very endearing. There was a photo among Dot's collection that showed Jim in cord pants and fluffy jumper, fingers tucked into the bib of the trousers like a miniature Santa, leaning back on his heels and chortling, a mad grin stretched right across that sober little dial.

'Toby is Jim all over again; probably why I like him so much. Jim's got out of teaching, hasn't he?'

'I think he was good at it,' said his mother. 'But he's into computers now, isn't everybody? Did I tell you I've started a computer course at WEA?'

'God, Joy, you put me to shame! And I suppose you're taking to it like a duck to water?'

'Well, it's not difficult, when you've been a typist and receptionist since before the Flood. What about you, Evie - thought any more about going back to study? That's a good Haggerty brain you've got there.'

'Maybe,' said Evie, remembering Ronnie, the picture of innocence, looking up from his English essay at their kitchen table, pretending to be sorry she'd chucked her course in. And then dropping out himself the next day. Old fury surged up her throat.

Joy was going on about how much Evie would enjoy the stimulation of a uni course. Unbelievable: the picture of energy, never too busy or tired to devote her astute attention to how one or another of her extended brood might be made happier. When she'd said goodbye and hung up the phone, Evie found a little pile of green cotton on her lap, fluff she'd picked off the arm of the phone chair as they talked - a nervous habit she thought she'd got the better of.



She knew perfectly well George would want to hear about this development, would be wounded if she kept it to herself, but Evie needed to feel she'd made some progress since Ronnie had taken himself out of her life all those years back. She had to think hard about how to proceed. Ronnie was a weasel, mean and cunning and a dirty fighter. George, who'd picked up sufficient crumbs about Evie's past to have sworn to wring Ronnie's neck should they ever be in the same room, would want to play Caped Crusader. For that very reason, though she knew George would be hurt, Evie determined to win this round on her own.

A rusty-red cord jacket from the forties, front panels flowing copiously from shoulder yokes, with large, low-slung front pockets on either side and big shiraz-coloured glass buttons had been extracted from the back of her wardrobe to add visual emphasis to her strength of purpose. Evie slung an old tooled-leather shoulder-bag, part of her mother's honeymoon ensemble, over her arm for good luck. A tingling in the back of her spine as she walked to the bus-stop through the morning bustle suggested that at least one of her fellow travellers was keeping a sharp eye on her. But that was no more than she expected: it was a feeling she'd had for the last week, and now she knew why. Forewarned was forearmed. At least you could hope.

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Still suffused with a pleasant afterglow, Paula delivered a wifely peck on Chris's cheek as, unwifely, she left him to the dishes still in the sink from last night's roast chicken and veg. Gary was dropping Rosie to school from his place; she wanted to get to work early to see to the paperwork so she'd have time to hover around the kitchen and observe the day's cooking adventure with two new residents, a Scot and a Pole, trying out their best recipes. And she badly wanted to see Bert. Since Zak's near-thing, she needed to verify her boy's continuing existence every couple of days. Paula was full of timorous qualms, feeling every nerve in her body twang with dread whenever the phone rang after nine of a night-time, avoiding watching TV news or reading the paper. The world was too perilous a place to support every life that flickered on it, yet the only way to bear the thought that your kids

were stuck on this planet was to try to believe that oncoming perils would swerve around them all through their lives. At all events, Bert seemed to be accepting with good grace his mother's popping up so regularly, an insanely cheerful marionette, at his door.

This morning, as Paula pulled up in the street alongside Bert's place, she found her son outside in the front yard, a black plastic garbage bag with holes cut out for head and arms, standing in the middle of the dirt-patch they called a lawn, attempting to shave his own head with electric clippers. Around him on the ground were the leavings, and the yappy dog Leanne had left behind was scuttling in and out between Bert's ankles, barking its yippy little bark.

'Hi, Mum,' said Bert, who was bent double the better to get at the back of his head, catching sight of her feet when they appeared in his line of vision. 'Could you have a go at my neckline back there?'

'Okay. How drastic do you want it?'

'Number One. But not straight across like a ruled line. Follow the growth pattern. You know how it should look.'

Paula took the clippers and practised on a bit of hair growing right at the bottom of Bert's hairline. Gaining confidence, she cleared a patch under one of the whorls of hair at the base of her son's skull, the ones that had made growing his hair long so difficult. Then she sheared the same patch on the other side, and cleaned up the nape.

'Done. What would you have done if I hadn't happened along to finish off that bit? '

'Nippy does it for me most times, don't you, boy?' Bert ran one hand over his own stubble and the other over the dog's. 'Thanks, mum. Got time for a coffee?'

'I've got ten minutes. Make mine tea.'

Bert was in the mood for schooldays reminiscences as he spooned out International Roast for himself and found a teabag for Paula; he'd been thinking about kids with strange names while cropping his hair. There was Boggie (short for Bogdan) Stancovich, who never had a hope of a normal childhood; there was Ashkan, ditto, and there was a girl called Ruta who also had her formative years blighted by her parents' choice of label.

'What about Zak?' asked Paula. 'A zack used to be a sixpence, way back in prehistory.'

It seemed Zak had always been just Zakko or Zak; his name already sounded like a nickname; he was lucky. Bert himself had been left alone, except that he and Zak as a pair used to get Bert and Ernie. That was fine, they liked that, Bert going so far as to start a bottle-top collection in honour of the Sesame Street nerdmeister.

'Zak's pretty good, Mum. Good relative to how he was. I think he'll be okay. I see him most days. What was really doing my head in was that my friends must have been responsible. Then I started to think - pull your finger out. This's not about you. I'm going to get him out of his hole, Mum. I've got lots of ideas.'

Paula had to swallow down a rush of love, seeing Bert standing there with an evangelical glow lighting up his face, head shorn like an earnest young novice's, the battered green-and-white formica table his pulpit, waving a tinny, tarnished teaspoon. She stood up and gave him a hug, hiding her face in his shoulder for a second.

'You're the man for the job,' she told him. Before she left, Paula promised to visit Zak at home.

For the thousandth time, as she walked briskly into Holmwood's front hall, Paula wondered where she herself would wind up. From the vantage point of mid-field, the idea of having one's options reduced to only one, a room in a nursing home, was unthinkable; yet you had to work all the time to keep them open, or they fell away without you noticing, so that when the time came to live within four walls day in, day out, you adjusted. Or was the trick to deliberately scatter possessions and attachments as you went along your way, so that by the end you were a blissed-out St Francis, chattering to the birds and living on handouts, no regrets, no encumbrances, happy with each new moment?

In the present, there was some unaccustomed friskiness going on up ahead in the corridor. Mrs Baldassi was earnestly proselytising, pumping the arm of Mr Fantis, who was gesticulating broadly with the unencumbered arm.

'Eggplant, Mr Fantis, aubergine, we could grow so easily in this garden. Earth just like home, like Bari, or like Greece, your town in Greece, I forget name.'

'Sure, Rosa,' he was saying, 'but if we only grow a few vegetables, we should grow just tomatoes, some zucchini, some capsicum. Eggplants take too long.'

'Oh, but nothing is so good as eggplant from your own garden, you know? And they look so beautiful, they make garden look so lovely.'

'We've got loads of room,' said Paula, weighing in. 'How many people want to be involved in the vegetable garden?'

'Plenty, plenty,' said Rosa. 'The women and the men. And our children will bring us seeds and little plants. Cost nothing.'

'Well, we have to get a plan going. You'll need to ask the kids for tools as well. Maybe a working bee one weekend so your children can do the heavy digging and turning to get the

plot ready? I don't imagine too many of you will be up for breaking the clods and hauling those stiff lumps of clay around?'

'You'll be surprised,' said Con Fantis. 'They've put us out to pasture, but plenty of us are still strong.' He lifted his right arm, which Rosa had freed, and flexed impressive biceps.

'Right on, Con,' said Paula. 'What do you say we get the gardeners together at morning tea and start drawing up a chart to work from? And I love aubergines; I think they'll be worth the wait.'

Insurance problems and the spectre of accidents were already furrowing Paula's brow as she moved on down the hall to her office, where Des was waiting with the morning's mail. But she was damned if she was going to let the cooking and gardening plans drop. There was all that lawn out there, like a big useless outdoor carpet, and that huge, well-stocked kitchen. Why should the capable residents, who had never been idle in their lives, have to twiddle their thumbs and watch daytime TV? Plus, don't forget, they'd need to keep their skills up if Mrs Shoulderpads chucked them back out on the street. Paula needed to talk this through with the nurses, all the nurses on all the shifts, and the kitchen staff and groundskeepers. If Holmwood was to become Holmwork, they had to present a united front.

Along with the bills and requests for information, Des dropped a magazine on her desk. She'd found it in one of the old bedside lockers, stacked in the disused former laundry - a 1967 Womens' Weekly, with Madame Sukarno on the cover - the aptly-named Dewi, emeralds dripping from her sweet little ears, looking back coyly over her bare shoulder at the camera. Paula flipped brittle pages: an article on jealousy ... a husband jealous of the attention new baby gets from his wife, a wife of the husband getting all their little daughter's attention, here dubbed 'existential jealousy'. An unrecognisable Weekly, full of dense print, impossible to scan for main ideas. A naughty ad for Bond's jocks, mustachio'd, medallioned bloke sprawled in an uncomfortable chair in 'Lo-Rise' briefs, consulting a leather-bound, embossed volume - some fighter-pilot's memoirs? Opposite, an image of five little boys and

girls in a darkened room, mesmerised before the console TV, in Ladybird sleepwear, 'warm, strong ... from the famous English children's wear maker'. Five kids was normal. It might have been Paula's mob, same moment in history, same pyjama-suits, washed and brushed and watching the final authorised program before bed - that toddler standing at the back with his hands on his head could be Sean, in a sleepsuit with toy houses on it.

How had their mother done it -all of it - found the money for all those little pyjama suits, all their clothes, kept them all clean, kept the house from falling apart when they were like so many mice chewing their way through fittings and furniture and floor coverings, constant demoralising wear and tear, spills and dropped playthings, a mob filling up all her space so she must never have had a square inch, let alone a room to call her own. Nothing ever stayed nice, nothing looked new for longer than a week. Although the older ones helped, it must have been so tiring, so dispiriting.

'Gor, those parents had their work cut out,' said Des, looking over Paula's shoulder. 'Where are they, anyway? What do you reckon? Snuck out the back and headed for the hills?'

'Betcha my mum wanted to,' said Paula. 'Yours had five, didn't she?'

'Yeah, on her own. Dad pissed off; I never knew him. Mum did shift work at the local hospital.' Des straightened up and stared into the distance. 'She didn't talk about him. The older girls said they used to fight all the time. He disappeared off the face of the earth.'

'How is she now? Are any still at home?'

'Me, of course. And Lorraine is, she's thirty and very overweight. She's a nurse as well - three of us are. Lorrie collects stray animals; there's always a kitten or pup or goanna or something underfoot. Mum still complains she's surrounded with children, but I reckon she won't know what to do with herself if Lorraine and I go. Don't think Lorrie will, but I might not hack it much longer.'

'Good God, Des, look! - here's Glenda Jackson in Sydney for a play! She was my hero! Did you know she's a local MP for Camden in London, now?'

'Glenda who?'

'Never mind. Here, hand me those invoices.'

**CHAPTER 10**

There were paintings up around the Calvary Creche walls, new since Evie's last shift. Toby's had a teetering, tall, narrow house such as four-year-olds like to paint, in reds and black. Yesterday's carer had transcribed his inscription: 'This is a crazy house. If you go outside you go on an adventure, and if you tell lies your tongue can get ulcers and drop off.' Casting an eye around the ad-hoc gallery, Evie felt cheered. Kids were the best. Such a great mix of knowing and innocent; not totally innocent, in the sense that people who'd forgotten what it was like to be one imagined, not at all, but a brilliant blend. She had the big kids this afternoon; at storytime she got them to do the work, tell her the real stories behind nursery rhymes. Why did Jack and Jill fall down the hill? What else was there in Mother Hubbard's cupboard?

Jodie thought Jack and Jill knew there was a McDonalds' up that hill; after they'd got the water they were off for McMuffins. Tom added that they both fell because, leaning over the well to fill their bucket, they were slapped sideways by a seal hiding inside. Maya said the cow jumping over the moon was leapfrogging, the moon another cow with a shiny rubbish-bin lid on its head. Lachlan suggested that poor people used to sing 'Ride a cockroach', upgraded to 'cock-horse' in times of plenty. Smiling approval, Evie recalled a playground, two girls holding joined hands aloft, a procession weaving beneath. She remembered how your heart sped up as the last line of the song came nearer, the dancers skipping faster, until finally someone was trapped by descending locked arms - 'the last man's head right OFF'. She herself always vied for the chopper role and usually got it - she'd been popular. She sometimes missed having girlfriends, but her sisters stood in for them - sort of. Evie registered a fierce kinship with her four-year-olds, on the cusp of the years of intrigue and alliances, as yet still defiantly, obstreperously themselves, enclosed but not defined by family, considering the world from inside the bubble of I.



'Evie, Evie, why did the old lady have too many children?'

'I know,' said Katie, 'they weren't her children, it was a creche!'

'Yeah, very good, Katie. The Shoe was a child-care centre, and the mad old lady was me. She beat them all soundly, did you hear that? Here I come! Time for your afternoon rest.'

'Awwh, Eevee!'

Feet propped up on a kids' stool, coffee in a Kermit mug in one hand, Evie waved the other around as she entertained the troops at afternoon tea with stories about her sister, Paula, as a kid.

'She was so cute; only three and a half when she started at our school. Mum got a job teaching there and the nuns generously said bring the youngest along and start her early. Knee-high to a grasshopper, teeny doll's uniform, hat falling over her eyes, holding my hand while I walked her across to the kindergarten. By the end of the day she'd be exhausted, but we had to walk half a mile to the bus stop. Trisha and I'd walk at a normal pace, but Paula would run on ahead with her last drop of energy, and flop at a bus-stop further along to wait for us to catch up. She'd be fast asleep when we got there; we'd have to wake her up.'

'Poor thing,' said Marta, also one of a large band. 'Did she have a nice teacher?'

'Sadly, no. Sister Assumpta was old-school Irish, special subject tales of extreme martyrdoms. Paula had a real sweetie called Clementine or something the year after, but the damage was done.'

Marta squeezed more hot water from the kettle and added a spoonful of coffee, dropped back into the protesting armchair and stretched her back.

'We had the Joeys - swishing black habits and mudflaps on their veils so they couldn't see round corners, till they changed to dead boring brown uniforms, dishwater colour, that made me think of worms.'

'Our lot looked kind of elegant, all white with a few touches of black. Full marks to Saint Dominic for that. You knew he was the Spanish Inquisition numero uno?'

'Mary McKillop was our Noble Leader.' Marta sighed. 'We got the story over and over, how she won her battle against the bad bishop. At least our hero was a stropky chick... So did Paula cope, Evie?'

'The littlest angel, they called her. Fair curls, big blue eyes, happy disposition. She survived Assumpta because she was such a dreamer. We'd collect her in the afternoons from the kindergarten, and she'd have this faraway look, as though she'd been astral-travelling all day. I hope she had.'

Marta lifted herself out of the chair. 'Wish we had a hoist for lifting kids. One of them did a limp-fall on me the other day while I was holding her hand. Katie. She didn't want to go to the toilet, so she just died - dropped in her tracks. Nearly yanked my arm out of its socket. Put my back right out. Ow.' She flapped her hands to dispel smoke. 'Back to the mines.'

Afternoon sun was shafting across the parkland lawns at a low, oblique angle that said autumn was coming. The day was warm and balmy; Adelaide could turn it on in April and May. Evie was unsurprised to be joined from where he was lounging against a Moreton Bay fig across the road by Ronnie; she was ready for him.

'You can come with me to the Cathedral pub and tell me what this is about. You've got half an hour.'

Ronnie fell into step; she noted he was more rodent-like than ever, cheeks thinner and deeply grooved, nose beakier, teeth yellower. Also as smart as a wharf-full of rats, she ought to remember that.

Around them, cars whizzed down the hill from North Adelaide, flying past the sand-coloured exterior of the Cathedral Hotel. Men were leaving their wives, girlfriends taking off with boyfriends' best mates, kids running away from home, politicians bickering in Parliament House just a little way down the road. Suits were dashing back and forth to law courts and offices, Social Security personnel expertly fobbing off their importunate clientele and shoppers parting with small and large amounts of cash. They all might have been in another galaxy. Evie sat in a thickening miasma of incredulity, watching the unchanged back view of Ronnie, standing at the sticky dark-wood bar.

Ronnie returned from the bar with two VBs.

'You remembered,' Evie remarked.

'Of course. Evie,' Ronnie sat down and leaned earnestly forward. 'Evie, I'm sorry about the other day. Just showing off. Shouldn't have done it. I'm trying to change my spots, then I get these urges, and I ... Anyway, sorry.'

Evie relaxed a fraction. Ronnie's eyes looked different today, the grey irises clearer, the whites brighter. And ...

'You've lost the ponytail.'

'Yeah. Sad, wasn't it? Evie, could we start again. Scratch the other day? I haven't come here expressly to hassle you. Do you remember Dylan?'

'Your cousin's kid?' Evie put her glass down. Dylan used to visit them in Melbourne, catching the overnight bus from Adelaide by himself from the time he was eleven. Ronnie had been good with Dylan; always cleared the weekend for him, took him to Luna Park or to see Phar Lap's heart, on the paddle-boats, to the Zoo. He'd been close to Derek, Dylan's dad, when they were teenagers and their parents lived near each other in Melbourne, before Derek and Kaylene moved east. The way Ronnie was with Dylan was one of the things Evie liked about him in the early days.

'He's okay, isn't he? He'd be, what, twenty-one?'

Ronnie's face clouded.

'He didn't quite get there. Motorbike accident. Dylan and his mate had ridden up to Port Augusta in the uni break, seeing a bit of the country on the cheap, staying in caravan parks, you know, having a ball. Then Derek gets the phone call in the early morning, the day Dylan's expected home. Truck cleaned up both of the boys on the freeway, just before the tollgate. They've done the whole trip without a scratch, and they're both out like candles, right on their doorstep. I came across for the funeral, stayed with Dezza for a few days, and I'm hanging around a bit longer to try and get my head around it. Couldn't take it in, you know? Dylan still used to message me all the time, since he got his mobile.'

It was a long speech for Ronnie. Evie was aghast.

'God, Ronnie, that's awful.' Without thinking, she leaned across the table and patted his hand. Ronnie clutched her hand in his.

'Life's too short, Evie. I couldn't leave without seeing you, trying to mend some bridges.'

Evie withdrew her hand and looked levelly at this older Ronnie. He seemed genuinely shattered. Evie breathed in, breathed out again, breathed in.

'I'm not interested in picking up our pieces. But I am really sorry about Dylan.'

'Look. Evie. I'm going to be in town for a bit. Sorry if I gave you a fright; you know I've got a warped sense of humour. I've lost touch with people I knew here - I'd really like to catch up.'

'You wouldn't be hanging around to sew up some deal or other, would you? Not like you not to make the most of an occasion.'

'I'm out of all that. Got enough cash to please myself for a bit. '

'So where's Mish?'

'Strung out in a squat somewhere in Perth, probably.'

That was more like the old Ronnie.

'She's still alive, then?'

'Most likely. I left her to it when the habit got on top of her. She's found a new bloke. She'll be jake.'

Ronnie twisted in his chair and gazed over his shoulder at the TV screen above the bar, but Evie doubted he was interested in Wheel of Fortune.

'Ronnie, I'm going home now. We're never going to be drinking pals.'

'Evie. Don't be like that.' He swung back around to face her. 'Actually, I've got some photos of Mish, not so long ago. You can see for yourself she's okay. Why not come to the caravan

and have a cuppa. I do still see her. She sent you a few bits and pieces. She had a gold chain of yours she wanted you to have back. I've got it there. You could pick it up.'

Evie's hand went to her neck. Finely worked, tiny links, rose gold, light as a feather, you almost didn't know you had it on. Every now and then she'd still feel for it at her throat and be surprised it wasn't there. She'd found it in a shop in Angaston, in the Barossa, one time she and Louise went for a drive when they were eighteen or nineteen. Antique places out there used to be to die for. A dusty glass tray on the counter might have a pair of pearl earrings, long leather evening gloves rolled up and secured with a rubber band, a fine twenties chain-metal evening purse ... Evie had found all of these; and that day, with Louise, she found the chain. She'd never taken it off after that, until she gave it to Mish, on an impulse, a superstitious urge to give it to her as protection, an amulet. Did Ronnie really have it?

'Why not just give it to me after work, meet me there again?'

'Be neighbourly, Evie. I've got a nice little van. What say I give you a meal, have a proper visit. I'd really appreciate reminiscing about Dylan with somebody else who knew him and liked him. What about tomorrow? Or the day after?'

Evie wavered, and Ronnie smiled, quite pleasantly.

'Right, that's sorted. I'll meet you after work day after tomorrow; we'll get the bus to West Beach. It leaves from just over on Pennington Terrace. Drink up, babe.'

Home had never felt so womb-like; obeying an imperious urge to sweep, fold, dust, clear, bin, sort, empty, stack, hide, plump, range and align, Evie used up all her nervous energy in an hour. She'd hardly fallen full-length on the couch and kicked off her shoes than the phone rang. Jesus, Mary, Joseph - Lifelink night! Bolting up again, she raced to the kitchen to grab a packet of Jatz to stave off starvation before snatching up the receiver.

'My ex is stalking me,' pronounced a tentative female voice of indeterminate age.

Evie itched to reply, wildly inappropriately, with Lucille Ball chutzpah - 'Hey, toots, you think *you* got problems!' - but instead murmured encouragement. The woman, Fay, detailed a long list of incursions into her privacy. The ex was tireless, shameless, self-righteous when confronted, seemingly without any aim in life aside from rendering Fay's a misery as long as she persisted in her solitary state.

'How did he behave when you were together?' Evie knew what the answer would be.

'The same, you know. He always seemed to have time to keep tabs on me. Except he didn't bother so much when he thought I was too meek and mild to break out. Which I was for a long time.'

'What decided you to strike out on your own?'

'Nothing you could put your finger on. I came home from work one night and just started packing my stuff. He's a salesman; I knew he had a client to see that evening. I was gone by the time he got home.'

'How did he find you?'

'Asked my stupid mother, didn't he? I'd told her where I'd be, and she was too weak to hold out when he turned up on her doorstep and challenged her. It's how bullies always win, isn't it? They get off on it. Browbeating little old ladies or women half their size, or kids. Anyway, Mum blurted out the address to get rid of him. Dad used to use the same tactics. She's a pushover. I should have known.'

'I get the picture,' said Evie. 'who did. 'What do the police say?'

'They say to ring if he threatens me physically. But he's too clever to do that. He stands at my kitchen window and glares at me, he waits outside my work, catches the same bus home, walks a few paces behind me back to the flat, rings me from the phone booth round the corner and hangs up when I answer. All that stuff.'

Evie badly wanted to promise she'd send a team of vigilantes around to loosen a few of his teeth. Instead she suggested that Fay get a friend or relative to move in for a few months in the hope of shaming him, or at least getting corroboration of the harassment. If he kept it up, maybe with a friend around he'd be easier for Fay to ignore. This was a strategy Fay had thought of for herself; she didn't have the money to move again, but there was a girl at work who would soon be moving out of her flat because the landlord wanted it back for his kids. Fay estimated the workmate was tough enough to tolerate the ex's antics, especially if she offered her a room for half what it was worth.

Evie passed on a few phone numbers from her list of the good guys. When Fay rang off, the time had contrived to move on to quarter to eleven. Was every woman in the world being hounded and harassed by a man who believed he was entitled to a bitch who answered to him, a cowed dog?

Surveying her own few rooms with the relief she always felt at being in her own space, Evie acknowledged it was only George who'd ever dented her conviction that she could never spend enough time by herself. After the slow asphyxiation of her years with Ronnie, every minute overseen and accounted for, the slow leakage of her sense of herself as likeable, funny, capable, interesting... there'd been no end to the satisfaction of not having to forever look over her shoulder. George, George. Why couldn't he come home?

Okay, it was clear enough why. Harry was scheduled for an op to remove a decent stretch of his gut in a few days' time; George was by his father's side, where he ought to be. He rang every night or early in the morning, warm and loving - Evie didn't have the heart to



burden him with old ordure. Her gut burned with a mixture of irritation and unwonted sympathy for the Weasel, along with a determination to deal with Ronnie all by herself. But she missed George like a lopped limb. It was scary.

She fell asleep briefly in her armchair, dreaming she was a princess of Romanov aspect, only with interestingly tiny poached-egg breasts, in big trouble over her bloke, who wasn't Daddy's choice. Princess Evie and the Pauper began their adventures with a nasty whipping, tied up to posts in the palace courtyard. When they escaped, attempting to pass unnoticed amidst her subjects, two dressmakers, the stationmaster and some old school friends all threatened to penetrate her disguise. They were about to take it from the top, beefy minions preparing the whipping-post again, when Evie managed to snap herself awake and stumble to her room, cursing all stoats and weasels to hell.

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A wad of toilet paper scrunched up in her hand, Paula was wiping around the bathroom basin, her way of sprucing between proper cleans, which she did every day without thinking. Having read Des's '67 *Weekly* cover to cover, she was recalling a piece by a berk who fancied himself a time-and-motion expert, helpfully sitting on his bum watching his wife at her housework, even inviting himself to her friends' homes to watch their techniques. He'd produced a booklet his wife professed to be delighted with, instructing wives everywhere how to smarten up their act. Wifey now kept a scrubber in the shower to clean a small section of the tiles daily. Hubby cheerily admitted he never lifted a finger. Did he have a job, or just sit around and pontificate? Paula, thrusting behind a tap, hoped the wife had eventually gone deliriously berserk and chopped him into efficient little pieces with a super-sharp knife sharpened to his specifications.

Rose was sitting unclothed on the closed toilet lid telling her mother about warts and the things other kids at school did to make them go away, notably picking at them with compass

points. Paula was beginning to feel queasy, nursing training notwithstanding. So she bustled her daughter into the waiting bath, congratulating her on being wart-free.

'But what's this here, Mum?'

'A freckle.'

'It's a mole.'

'It's a freckle.'

'See how this toe next to my big toe is bigger than the big one? That's because Dad's toes are like that.'

'Too bad you didn't get my dainty little feet.'

'Dad's looking for a new house up in the hills.'

'Won the lottery, has he?'

'No, his new girlfriend's going to help him buy something.'

Paula felt a stab of unworthy emotion, covering it by lathering Rosie's feet.

'Yep. Up near Uraidla, they think,' Rosie continued. 'I could have a puppy, maybe, Dad said.'

The steel monsters were doing their thing. Doona covers and pillowcases. Amazing how good it felt to haul them out of the dryers at the end of a lunch hour.

Des came in and sat on a folding chair, watching.

'What a way to spend your lunch break, Paul. Did anyone ever tell you you were a tad compulsive?'

'Compulsive, *moi*?' asked Paula, lighting a fag.

'No smoking in the laundry, boss.'

'Yeah, I know. I'll go and stand by the door. What's your décor like at home, Des?'

'It's Mum's from thirty years ago. Screaming matches between the curtains and the chair covers, oranges and blues and browns, swirls and paisleys, bouclé rugs, woven wall hangings, your total seventies disaster.'

'Coming back in even as we speak.' Paula blew a toxic cloud through the screen door, where it danced gracefully across the lip of a tall forty-thieves terracotta pot.

'If I ever get my own place, it'll be blond beech finishes and limed wood floors and white everything else.'

'Ha. See, you're as bad as me. Obsessive.'

'Nursing, it gets to you.'

'So, are you anywhere near being able to get your own place, Des?'

'Maybe not so far off now. Mum doesn't want me to go, but I need to get out of there. I've got my eye on a unit in Ascot Park.'

'New?'

'Yeah. Don't want to inherit anybody else's troubles. This'd be one half of a duplex, garages in the middle separating the houses. Looks quite cute. I went on a walk-through last weekend. Didn't tell Mum, but. Gonna be hard when I have to. Shit, I'm twenty-nine, for chrissake.'

Paula smiled at Des, amused by her young lieutenant's anguish. 'Your mum is lucky to have you, Deputy. I left home when I was hardly out of nappies. Lived in rented squalor for years, then Gary and I got a Trust house, a new one, not too far from Ascot Park, actually. Solid enough, brick, although the internal walls were like rice-paper.'

'What about your new bloke - won't he want you to get a place together?'

'Ah, that's a long way off,' said Paula, absently tossing her fag-end out of the screen door onto the new paving, where it hissed in the drizzle and expired. She realised uneasily that Chris had dropped off her radar screen again already. 'Come on, Desilu, lets get moving.'

'Dezzie-who?'

'Lucy and Ricky? Loooo-sie? O-o-h, RI -ckee!...?'

'Doing anything exciting tonight, boss?' Des stood up, shrugging off the culture gap.

'Bert and I are taking Rose to see Evie. We haven't caught up in a while.'

'I like Evie. Tell her to pick up her reading-to-the-oldies afternoons again. They all think she's ace.'

'I will, Des, but she might be too busy. Here, catch.'

Paula heaved a bundle of folded sheets in a sky-blue plastic bag in Des's direction, picking another up herself. Holmwood sheets were washed at a professional laundry and delivered twice a week. 'Look at us, Des, the penguin-walk,' Paula watched their two pairs of nursely white shoes striding flat and splayed ahead of them as they headed briskly for the linen-cupboard.

'Mignon's been over the top today,' Des slid a bundle into its berth. 'But this time she's been coming out with madly dated insults. We're all cads and blackguards and rotters and oafs and bounders. Total PG Wodehouse in the morning room. Hilarious.'

'So you don't know Desi and Lucy, but you do know Jeeves and Bertie?' Paula enquired, as she stood on tiptoe to reach a high shelf.

'I can read, can't I? Mum's got the whole Wodehouse collection. And the Brighton Library has a BBC video. I've borrowed it so often the tape's bugged. I like the old stuff,' said Des, shunting the last bolt of linen into place. 'I look for old Penguin paperbacks in secondhand bookshops. The British gels are good. Rosamund Lehmann, Elizabeth Taylor, Elizabeth Bowen.'

'You are full of surprises, Des. I don't know any of them.'

'I'll lend you some,' said Des. 'They'll probably suit you.'

'Meaning I'm ancient?' Paula grinned, as Des automatically smoothed her uniform back into place.

'Not that. Domestic interiors. Drawing rooms. Private lives. Feminine concerns,' Des was continuing. 'The small-canvas stuff; hothouse emotions - best way to relax I know.'

'No pole-dancing at strip-clubs? Oh, go on, then; send some Rosamunds my way. Now, shall we sort out these receipts? '

Des blew out her cheeks and shook her head.

'What a lot of hoo-ha, eh, boss? Give me people any day. You do the receipts. I'll check Aunt Agatha. That's a Wodehouse reference. You're too young to understand.'

I love that girl, thought Paula, taking up her pen to write a letter she'd put off for a day but couldn't leave any longer. She tried to send a note to bereaved relatives when residents died. In this instance the resident had been quite young, only sixty-seven, afflicted with a dementia that caused a rapid decline. They'd been able to keep her at the Home until the end, and it had been distressing to see the family entirely unable to hide their dismay and agitation as the woman's cheerful, robust personality so quickly became lost to them. Her husband, slightly younger than she, was aghast at the change in his wife and at a loss as to how to deal with it. As who wouldn't be, thought Paula. What was there to say about Celia's death that wasn't anodyne, asinine, or plain untruth?

In the end she composed a page of vignettes, small incidents from Celia's early days with them, when her sunny good nature was mostly intact and she used to busy herself concocting small pleasures for the others. If there were daffodils in the garden, Celia would put a few on all the bedside cabinets around her shared room. Or she'd wander down to the laundry and help fold small things, move magazines around from room to room when the owners had finished with them. It wasn't long before she'd wandered too far into another reality to keep on spreading quiet good cheer, but Paula composed a genuine tribute from her memories of Celia's first few weeks. The letter took time. Paula liked to fix the residents

who died in her mind by this means. She kept copies of the letters so she could remind herself in a more personal manner than by consulting files of the individuals who'd spent their last days at Holmwood.

Rose had an extended after-school-care evening and Paula was looking forward to a swim before collecting her. At the pool, as she shoved her car door shut behind her with one buttock and hoisted her bag of gear onto her shoulder, impatient to be in the water, she was momentarily unnerved by a long, low wailing sound, somewhere between a canine howl and a cry of distress. Paula looked over the road and saw that young Helen was standing at her front gate, an old, low-slung, woven-wire one, and that she was the source of the noise. Jesus. If it wasn't dying swans in the pool it was wounded animals across the road. Couldn't she have a simple swim in peace?

Helen would be about nine or ten by now, stocky, cropped fair hair and a pleasant, vacant little face. You never knew when she'd be at her gate, staring blank-eyed at the passers-by. The girl was mostly dressed in track-suit style pyjamas, whatever the temperature. The first time she'd heard that chilling noise, from inside the pool enclosure, Paula had imagined a child in torment, maybe shut in a room or left alone in a nearby house. Clare, whose pool it was, had taken no notice, continuing to swim.

'She's not necessarily unhappy. She makes that noise, that's all. Sometimes she claps her hands and laughs. A congenital disorder; she won't ever grow up.' Clare was equally matter-of-fact about her own disorder, which twisted her muscles a little tighter each month.

'Isn't it dangerous? Shouldn't she be kept inside?'

'Helen gets distraught if she's not allowed to be outside watching the world go by, so her mother lets her stand there. I probably would too. She goes to a special school most mornings, but there are lots more hours in the day.'

'What if someone abducts her?'

'I guess her Mum isn't far away. She can't stand at the gate with Helen all day. She does her best, I reckon.'

Paula turned to face the child, who was staring straight at her with that strange, piercing gaze.

'Hi, Helen,' Paula said.

Helen bayed.

Paula hurried across the road and let herself into the pool. She felt unsettled and tetchy. For God's sake, did they have to let Helen park herself virtually in the middle of the street, come rain or shine, upsetting passers-by like that? The sight and sound of Helen always put Paula on the spot; she tried and failed to accept her as a natural phenomenon, like a cat with no tail. She got out of her clothes in a rush and scurried down the steps into the water, feeling unclean, hoping to be washed free of bad thoughts.

Surrounded by pieces of paper, Rosie was huddled in a corner of the big room with the bay window, in the house on the school grounds where after-school care was offered. The carers were making a very early start on Christmas decorations, and Rosie and two cronies were cutting out angels. Rosie's had long hair curling in perky matching arcs on their shoulders, long white robes with wide sleeves and vestigial wings poking up out of their shoulders. She'd also painted some pine cones silver, and wrapped several matchboxes in gold paper, tied up trickily with gold thread, loops of string attached so they could be hung on the Christmas tree. Next time they'd be making papier mâché balls to wrap and tie likewise. Molly and Angie and Rosie, seeing two mothers and a dad come through the door,



began packing their artefacts in baskets made of stapled squares of paper, with green tape handles.

Paula watched them, in busy groups around the room, fifteen whole, hale children in their right minds, playing the way children were supposed to, interacting easily with one another in innumerable complex ways. So many thousand things that could have gone wrong from *in utero* to now, none of which Paula could see evidence of, looking around at the glowing, healthy kids, some bleary-eyed, no more than you'd expect after a long day. They'd go home, eat good food, sleep and get up tomorrow, ready to take on the world again. Perhaps some of them were already incubating terrible illnesses, but you couldn't think that way. Better for dreadful things to be bolts from the blue, better to blunder along as though your own and your childrens' health, sanity, connectedness would simply be added unto bountifully, day by day, forever. You couldn't prepare yourself for disaster; humans hadn't evolved that far. Stoicism was only a blanket drawn across pain, doubtless the customary cloak for poor Pool-Helen's mum. Paula trotted across to her daughter, who scooped a few last trinkets into her basket and stood up for her hug. Paula picked her up and sat her on her hip.

'Whooff, you're getting hefty,' she told her daughter. 'What's with those little bitty angel-wings?'

'They're only six years old, like me, those angels. Their wings haven't grown properly yet'

'Fish and chips for tea?'

'Mum, mum, me and Tara made a cubby at school today. Terence Vanderzwan wanted to play in it but we wouldn't let him. And ...'

'Whoa, whoa, hang on, let me buckle you in. Okay, now ... what did Terence do?'

'He made a gang with Joseph and Paolo and they tried to knock the cubby down. But the teacher came and made them stop.'

'Just as well. What would you have done if the teacher hadn't come?'

'Tara and me were going to let the boys play with us. It was a good cubby. We didn't want it broken down.'

'Best plan. Or you could have got more girls to come and keep the boys out.'

'We couldn't go away from the cubby, because the boys would have knocked it over.'

' 'Twas ever thus. Shall we pick up Bert after tea and go and see Evie?'

'Yeah! Yeah!'

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Stand under the hot water till it runs out, wash that man right out ... even extra time spent choosing clothes and polishing her shoes failed to arm Evie completely against the day. She felt as though a small cloud remained poised over her head as she walked to the bus, like Pooh's swarm of bees. Well, she could detour, just quickly, to her sacred site, St. Augusta's round the corner. Excellent Women were already at their posts in the church hall, orderly racks of clothes screaming 'gentlewoman' down to the last tweed or worsted fibre. Evie felt her heart lift, passing through the church porch, eyes adjusting to the gloom, olfactory equipment to the odour of sanctity, or at least mothballs and incense and Yardley's Lavender talcum powder.

'Hello, dear. Can we help you?'

They were two sisters: Evie recognised them from other visits, both tall and thin and bearded, always in hand-knitted woollies and always good-humoured.

'How are you both this morning? Don't get up. I'll look through the books.'

Hiding among cancelled hardback library books was a sixties' recipe collection for 'Young Moderns' by Sister Mary Casimir LMC of Calvary Hospital, which opened to a page with directions for making 'Tum-a-ditty'. Next to it was 'The Intelligent Parents' Manual', the authors two undoubted paragons, Florence Powdermaker and Louise Grimes - a blue Penguin, 1953, the cover showing line-drawings of sensibly becardiganed mothers and a pipe-smoking father. It fell open to hints on teaching acceptable social behaviour: 'Children find it difficult to learn the rules governing good manners', Evie read, leaning against the bookshelf, her bag at her feet. 'They find them arbitrary and without reason. Why should one interrupt one's play to say 'good morning'? Why is it necessary always to say 'please' and 'thank you'? Why may one eat a slice of buttered toast with one's fingers but only touch a slice of cold chicken with a fork? Why should one not speak of the lavatory or undress in front of visitors?'

You tell me, thought Evie, reading on, alone among the shelves. Powdermaker and Grimes recommended reasoning with one's tots. 'Do you like to be shouted at, or do you prefer to be asked pleasantly to come to lunch?'... 'Do you like to have people talk to you when you come into a room? Well, then, let us greet Aunt Mary and tell her we are glad to see her.' 'How're they hangin', auntie?

What became of all those rigorously rationally-reared kiddies? Were they even now being had up for assaulting harmless aunt-types? Dragged before magistrates for exhibitionism? Bulimics and anorexics? What sort of parents heeded the call to be 'intelligent' in the 50s? Ronnie's dad had been in the army - never explain; never apologise. He'd never have countenanced a namby-pamby parents' manual by two mewling females. No mystery about

bringing up a boy - let 'em know who's boss, no nonsense, spare the rod and spoil the child, never did me any harm, harumph. Twirling the walrus moustache.

Evie looked up as an older woman and her grandson came in - a two-year-old, sweet-faced boy with guileless blue eyes under buzz-cut blond hair, who began playing in the toybox while Nanna fossicked among the skirts and blouses. She was sixtyish, burly in leggings and oversized tee-shirt, her haircut not much gentler than laddie's.

'Found yourself a toy there, Nathan?' grunted Gran. 'What have you got? Give us a look. A truck. That's lovely. And a ball. Oh, some dollies? You don't want those, Nathan.'

Nathan's reply was inaudible, but he seemed pretty keen on those dolls.

'Not the dolls, lovey, you don't want those, do you? Dollies are for little girls, and you's a boy, aren'tcha?'

Evie grabbed a pair of Italian bathers hiding under some mammoth beige bras and made her way to the counter. Nanna and Nathan were there already, being fussed over by the sisters.

'Oh, doesn't he look smart?'

Nathan had on a baggy-legged black and gold nylon track suit, mini-homeboy. He gazed up trustingly at the circle of older women.

'Did you choose those dolls?' asked one trim, grey-haired lady with bright eyes and a soft British accent.

Nathan nodded.

'They're lovely, dear,' she assured him.

'Mummy will be pleased.' Nanna dripped sarcasm.

'Oh, it's all right,' said the second neat sister, the one with the thicker beard - rather fetching, Evie considered.

'In the old days,' she went on, 'they always told us boys oughtn't to play with dolls, didn't they? But now they say you shouldn't stop them. It's good for them.'

Nanna capitulated. 'Mummy will just have to get out her machine and make some clothes for your dollies, won't she?'

Nathan nodded happily, as the first sister popped his naked kewpies back inside their cellophane packet and into a plastic shopping bag. Maybe the sisters *were* Florence and Louise. Evie bought the cookbook and the manual, and a pair of pink satin and rabbit-fur 'Carol Ann' mules. Three-fifty. They felt warm in her backpack as Evie hurried to the bus.

In Evie's minute kitchen, niece and nephew jostled for space and attention. Evie tried to steer away from the topic of Zak, in deference to Paula's sensibilities, but Bert wouldn't talk about anything else. Paula appeared happy to sit at the round table and eat chips and listen, so Evie decided to go with the flow.

'Is Zakky still sick?' asked Rose with her mouth full. The adults nodded.

'Mum, Evie, there's a game called Killer, do you know about it?' Bert was itching to get out of his chair again as soon as he sat down. 'A role-play game, you know, like D&D but in real time? One person's game-master, and the game-master decides which player kills which victim, and they keep score until everybody except one is killed. It's phat!'

'How do they get killed?' Rose was unperturbed by the prospect.

'It's only a game, Rose, like a board game, 'cept you play it out in the street. You have to sneak up on people at home or on their way to work or something, tap them on the shoulder, they're dead.'

Evie wanted to know whether actual touch was necessary for a fatal result.

'No, no, all sorts of killing are allowed. You can send your victim an envelope with, say, talcum powder in it, and if they don't suspect, and open it and get powder on themselves, they're poisoned.'

'How does the killer know if the trick's worked?' Evie shook some more chips from their paper wrapping on to Bert's plate.

'It's an honour system. Everyone who plays has to agree to let the games-master know when they get killed. You all have to meet first and read the rules and agree to them. The game-master decides disputes. So, the thing is, Zak's been the master for two rounds now, and he's really getting into it. He hasn't actually left the house yet, but he's hella involved. His mum's really stoked.'

'Why can't he go out of the house?' Rose reached across the table to steal Bert's neglected chips.

'Ah, he was sick for so long he got worried about going outside.'

'In case he got more germs?'

'Yeah. Anyway, all our mates are into the game. They're ringing Zak up to ask questions all the time, and Zak's studying the rules and dreaming up new plots and tactics and he keeps thinking of other friends who might want to play, he's been phoning all these guys we haven't even seen for years ...'

'Your idea, was it, Bert?'

'Wicked, eh, Mum? Some kids at school used to play it, and I remembered how psycho they were about it and I thought it might give Zak an interest. He's rapt. You should see him, Evie. He's almost his old freakazoid self again.' Bert sprang up from his chair and paced the tiny kitchen like a leopard, fish and chips forgotten.

'Then, after we finish with Killer, I thought we could maybe do a course together. Car maintenance, whatever. Zak's not ready to go back to the Waite yet, but if we both did something interesting, where you had to concentrate and remember stuff, and, like, use your hands, didn't have to worry about exams 'n stuff ...'

'Is Zak keen?' Paula pushed Bert's plate nearer. 'Here, eat something, for goodness' sake.'

'He says he'll think about it. I can talk him into it.' Bert grabbed a handful of food without looking and shoved it into his mouth. 'I've checked out WEA courses, and there's one on a Thursday night that starts in a fortnight. That's the one, I reckon.'

Evie widened her eyes at Paula over Bert's shoulder. This was a different boy from the timorous beastie of not so long ago.

'I didn't know you knew the WEA existed. I'm impressed.'

'Yeah, well, I wouldn't mind doing a car maintenance course, anyway,' said Bert, a trifle self-consciously. 'Dad taught me a fair bit about cars, and if I learn some more I could maybe

set up a backyard operation. Spread the word to the lads. Make a bit of moolah, even. Why not?'

'What the taxman doesn't know, eh? Nice plan, buddy. '

Moving into the lounge room, Evie flipped on the ABC. The *7.30 Report* was mid-way through a story on petrol sniffing in the Aboriginal communities around Alice Springs; three deaths from sniffing, one a young mother who'd left two very young children. A white doctor was warning more deaths would emerge as sniffing-related if statistics were better kept. Pneumonia, for instance, from collapsed lungs. In time, she said, all the organs collapse, irreparable brain damage, paranoia, delusions.

Rose bounced around their feet like a puppy as the adults heard that Aboriginal life expectancy was fifty-three, that other countries had improved the lot of their indigenous populations much more significantly. An Aboriginal man whose legs wouldn't behave was helped into the back of a Night Patrol wagon driven by a volunteer, illiterate but speaking five local languages.

'Jesus.' Bert drew a slow breath.

'I know. But how much could you accomplish if you zapped off to Alice Springs tomorrow?' Evie tried for the voice of reason.

Bert threw his head back and stared at the ceiling.

'Rosie, Rosie! Want a piggy-back? Your brother can take you for a ride round the house. He's got ants in his pants tonight.' Evie blurted a call to hounds on an imaginary horn. Bert got up and cantered off with Rosie and Evie sat back and considered her sister.

'That boy was born to be a missionary. Paul, you look good. Love life thriving?'



'Jeez, Evie, I dunno. This one just doesn't seem to have taken. Chris is a dream guy, but I forget about him as soon as he's out the door. There's something wrong with me. How's George?'

'He's pretty worried about his Dad. Harry's down for surgery any minute now. Want this last piece of fish? Too late!'

'And then will George come back?'

'He says so, if Harry gets the all-clear.' Evie tipped her vinyl chair back, balancing it on two legs.

'Do you miss him?'

'Firkin oath. I'm in pain. Not like me, is it?'

'No, that's good. There's really something there, isn't there?'

'Yeah, but I'm packin' it. What if it all goes wrong?'

'C'mon, Evie. We can all see George is different. I'm going to have a fag, do you mind? Only my second today.'

'Sure. Knock yourself out.' Evie sighed. 'He won't stay. He's so young'.

'And that matters?'

'It will when I start to look like his grandmother.'

'If you ever do. Anyway, why assume he's a surface feeder? I think he really likes you, a lot.'

'Mebbe so, Ma.' Evie attempted to defuse the topic with her Walter Brennan voice.

'Remember we did *Richard 111* in Year 11? I was Queen Margaret - the old witch - why did they pick me? And they stuck me in a nun's outfit. Wimples and petticoats and side-mirrors.'

'Nursing sisters looked even weirder when I started out. Left Sister Bertrille for dead.'

'Paul, can you reach the kettle switch from there? Thanks. Yeah, flying on godpower.'

Women needed more elaborate insignia to seem as important as men.'

'What about the Masons, then? Coffee, tea, Bonox?'

'That's all playacting. Tea. In the real world, you just assumed women were never in charge, unless they were wearing a dirty great crown or a complete replica of the Opera House sails on their heads.'

'Here, Irish Breakfast, in honour of those poor cows they sent out from Dublin to teach us. A boatload of clueless sixteen-year-old virgins.'

Evie smiled at her sister. It never seemed occur to Paula that she was now as powerful as any Mother Superior, which was a large part of her appeal. Paula needed to think more of herself, to be ready to grab good things like Chris, rather than assume they couldn't be meant for her.

Paula, smiling back, was having similar thoughts. Evie, in Paula's estimation, never believed people could be as fond of her as appearances suggested, or even as they declared outright. Evie looked a little drawn, Paula thought, although she'd brightened up

when Paula and the kids arrived unannounced on her doorstep. In fact, Evie had looked positively hunted when she opened the door to them. Paula's big sister was never fearful.

'Have you been working too hard, sis?' Paula asked now.

'A bit, I guess. Feeling my age.'

'That all? Everything okay otherwise?' Paula experienced a sudden pang as it occurred to her that perhaps her indestructible sibling was incubating some secret illness, her past catching up with her, her put-upon liver, say, packing up...

'Bert, be a love and get yourself and Rosie some of the special ice cream we brought from the freezer, will you?' she suggested, as Rosie rode a whinnying Bert back into the lounge and pulled him up, pawing and snorting. The offspring disappeared again as if vaporised.

'Sure, of course, you goose. Fit as a flea. Bit tired, that's all,' said Evie, burying her nose in her steaming mug.

Head cocked to one side, Paula peered sceptically.

'You? You can work like a carthorse and never show the strain. You do know you and I are hunky-dory again, don't you?'

'Yeah, I figured that out. But thanks for saying so. Look, really, Paul, I'm right as rain. It would be nice to have George back, but I'm tough. Old boots ain't in it.'

'You know you can ask me if you need anything. Come over and stay the night sometime, if you're lonely.'

'I love my nest,' said Evie, thinking as she said it that it wasn't true any more: she hadn't at all eradicated the taint left after Ronnie's visit.

'What about an early movie on Thursday?'

'Maybe, maybe. I'll check my work roster and let you know. Turn off the box and let's have some music. I think the Wiggles would be about my speed at the moment. Would you like that, Rose? No, no honeycomb icecream for me, kid. Oh, well, alright then, a spoonful. Paul, you know Mills and Boon are doing a new line of romances? Red Dress Ink? More gritty real life and less happy-ever-after? What if we liked our bodices ripped?'

For the next hour, Evie set herself to render condensed plots of recently-read books for Paula's benefit; Bert read Rosie Princess Smarty-Pants, selected from their aunt's extensive secondhand kids'-books collection, and Paula relaxed. Evie was fine.

So she was till she'd ushered them out of her front door. Then Evie sat down with an old vegemite-glass quarter-full of Scotch and took herself to task. What was she doing, giving that rodent one minute of her precious life, her real life, AR for After Ronnie? And why in Christ's name was she persisting in being so tight-lipped about it? One, because Paula would be horrified - and two, because she wanted that gold chain back with a superstitious longing. Pathetic, but true. Also to see for herself that Mish was okay. Check the dates on the photos, that kind of thing. Bugger it, Ronnie was such a sad case. He couldn't go on being her bogeyman for ever- he was too pathetic. It would do her good to face him down, stare him out, call his bluff.

Later she sleep-travelled to a railway siding in a sandy desert, a tarmac strip in the middle of nowhere. Two train tracks ended there - a mound of earth at the end of each track, a wooden barrier on top of each mound. Queues of brown children and young men, maybe African, stood about waiting to be selected for road-gangs. From off to the right, one boy, twentyish, long and lean, came racing towards the intersection, carrying a long stick. When he'd gathered momentum, he jabbed down on to the road, at an angle, lifted his feet and let the stick propel him the last part of the distance, raising a laugh from his mates. Evie asked

a girl with black curls, a white girl, a traveller like her, about the city train, to be told you never got the train you wanted, you had to choose the least inconvenient.

## CHAPTER 11

Morning sun on the parklands; the grey stone of the Anglican Cathedral assumed a warm hue. Standing slantwise at the top of the rise in King William Street, St Peter's kept an eye on the probity of Adelaide's citizens as they streamed past in cars, buses, on bikes or on foot, albeit from a haughty distance. Adelaide's Catholic Cathedral, named after the crowd-pleaser missionary Francis Xavier rather than one of your top-bracket apostles, was down in the thick of the hurly-burly, a step away from the markets, right on the muddy crossroads in Victoria Square. As her bus deposited her alongside St. Peter's, and Evie began to pick her way uphill to the Anglican Creche, she played her usual game, mentally casting herself in the role of Irish skivvy, perennial butt of cartoons in the press of a hundred years and more ago, stereotype of the pig-ignorant, brutish peatboggers, the cartoons to which Ned Kelly made scathing reference. One of the creche dads, a researcher in the social sciences, told her as she handed over his baby yesterday that his folks, assisted 60s migrants from London, though they were willing to grant the virtues of all other races, still hated the Irish with a passion. He offered the observation as a curiosity, probably not even knowing Evie's surname was Haggerty. And here she was, face it, like her forebears, a slavey for the Anglican ascendancy. Tug the forelock, drop a clumsy curtsy, yes ma'am, no ma'am, three bags full, ma'am, begob that's a good one sir. Was she going to live her whole life in service, then? Was it in the blood?

'Arr, begorrah, tis a wonderful mornin' we be havin',' Evie blurted at an unknown, startled, departing mum who held the creche door open for her.

'Sure, and don't we have the devil's own job tellin' the little spalpeens apart?' she asked another mum passing in the corridor, who quickened her step and smiled warily back over her shoulder.

'Me mither had fifteen of us, begob, a martyr to the prolapse, poor woman, indeed and she is,' Evie informed her workmates, as she stepped into the coffee room. 'But does she ever complain? She's a living saint, without a word of a lie.'

'Evie, you're raving. Here, shut up and get some coffee down you,' said Big Joan, who'd joined the ranks of carers about the same time Evie was taken on.

'Ah, you're a darlin', so you are. The Lord bless you and keep you. Have you been to confession lately, sweetheart?'

'My family are Callathumpians from way back,' said Joan. 'You watch it, Pope-lover. We lynch Catholics soon as look at 'em where I come from.'

'Sure, don't mind me, 'tis the poteen talkin'. Shall we find some little angels to flay the hides off, now?'

Potatoes, carrots, pumpkin, corn, peas, onions, celery, capsicum, some leftover cooked brown rice and lots of mousetrap cheese... the creche offered the children a vegetarian menu, and cooking duty rotated from carer to carer. This morning Evie was on, and she stood at the bench in the galley kitchen, sunlight flooding in from the wraparound windows. The creche was a beautifully-designed brand-new building, plans provided free by an architect dad when the old buildings had to be pulled down on Council orders. The kitchen was one of its nicest rooms. The fridge was always full of fresh vegetables and the pantry of wholesome dried foods, and it was up to the day's cook to come up with a balanced, attractive meal. Evie thought a vegie pie might fit the bill, and was looking forward to getting her hands messy in the pastry dough.

Pulling a bright plastic mixing bowl from under the bench, she hoisted the flour tin from a low pantry shelf. She'd taken butter out of the fridge an hour before, to soften, and now scooped chunks of it into the flour. Her hands, fresh-washed, delved into the mix and began

to rub butter into flour of their own accord. Making pastry was pure therapy; not that she got around to it at home very often. It was fun to have to make enough for twenty kids. Among the creche utensils was a monster old-fashioned wooden rolling pan, doubtless someone's grandma's; Evie wielded it like a natural. She rolled out an arm's length of pastry, draped it over a baking tin, and left it aside while she mixed, in another hub-cap-sized bowl, the vegetables she'd been browning. On another flame, a white sauce was bubbling, miraculously lumpless, and into it went a mound of grated cheese. Vegetables and sauce went into the pastry case, handfuls of chopped parsley on top, and another curtain-length of pastry over the lot. Already, Evie knew it was going to be a beauty.

Fruit followed every meal at the creche, and Evie had decided on rockmelon and pineapple chunks. Filling the twenty plastic bowls with pie and then with fruit and watching them disappear was so satisfying that Evie found herself fantasising about training as a chef. Except she'd be unlikely to pick up anything as much fun as this. Maybe she could just volunteer for a second cooking shift per week. Big Joan hated having to cook, regularly serving up plain boiled rice and boiled veg, which set the kids clamouring for grated cheese to make it interesting. Paula's Gary had been a great late-blooming cook, to the point where he'd come close to opening an Indian restaurant with a friend when the family were living in Perth. It used to be a treat to be asked to Paula-and-Gary's for dinner. Not that she'd breathe a word to Paula about missing the good old days.

Sitting in the staff room after kids' lunch, eating her own sandwiches, Evie realised her shoulder-muscles had loosened up while she'd cooked and served the food. Ronnie hadn't crossed her mind. Even though she'd fucking well said she'd go to his fucking caravan after work. Shit. Her shoulders hunched up towards her ears all by themselves. Okay, okay. Take it easy. Breathe, breathe. Come on, you're a big girl. Breathe, breathe.



Paula was whiling away her lunch hour in the Glenelg Library. She'd got hold of David Lodge's latest novel, *Thinks*, remembering an early Lodge from when she'd been struggling with the remnants of Catholic indoctrination - *How Far Can You Go?* - four serious young Brits trying to be good Catholic marrieds; one wife put towels on the marital bottom sheet to signal she'd be receptive to sexual overtures. To get back at Des and her annoying intimacy with novelists Paula had never heard of, she'd grabbed this from the New Acquisitions shelf and was speed-reading in a low armchair by the window.

This was yet another varsity novel, the bluff and rational, craggily attractive male professor of cognitive science pitted against the emotional, deluded-but-lovely female creative writing lecturer, he for Science, she for Art, she quoting Henry James, he mocking James's derivative psychology. Paula thought both characters were way off. - We're animals, we're hard-wired, it makes no odds what belief system we cover up with, you wally, David. There'll always be Crusades and Holy Wars and ethnic cleansing and genocide and soldiers charging around the Congo right this minute on a mission to rape every female between nine and ninety and ... whoa. Lighten up, girlie.

Paula stared out of the library window at Norfolk Island pines. It was nursing that did it; all those years standing alongside beds watching people reduced to poor bare forked animals - blimey, some stray Shakespeare - must use it on Evie. She glanced down at her page, the Prof declaring that even if an advanced breed of chimps discovered orgasms, male chimps wouldn't put any effort into making sure females had them. Boofhead, thought Paula, pointlessly agitated again, don't you watch your nature docos? Chimps are disappointingly like us, but bonobos are nearly the same species, and they never do anything else but snog. Paula lectured the absent novelist on the peace-loving species, at it all day, every possible combination of partners ...till Lodge whispered in her ear that he was a satirist, not a zoologist, and Paula stood up. - Stuff it. Next time she'd go for Stephen Jay Gould.

Back at her desk with a moment to spare, Paula, on impulse, rang Evie at the creche, catching her at the end of lunch-break.

'Hey, kid! How are the ankle-biters treating you?'

'No new puncture-wounds.' Evie sounded quite chirpy. 'How about you, sis? Sustained any walking-stick injuries today?'

'Skull like a rock, you know me. Listen, Evie' - Paula decided to risk it - 'You seemed a bit worried about something last night. Can't fool me, kid. Is there anything you want to get off your chest?'

Paula listened to the silence as Evie paused. 'Oh, look, Paul, it's nothing. A little bit of rubbish floating up from the dim dark past. Pond life never dies. I'm handling it, you don't need to worry. But thanks for caring, sis. '

'I do, Evie, you know I do. The Bert thing's gone and forgotten, you do realise? Call me if you want me, whenever.'

'I will. Tomorrow. After work tomorrow. We'll check out a movie, or grab a pasta somewhere. Okay? '

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*Another cuppa, tidy the pigeonhole, look over the schedule for next week, although you know perfectly well what your workdays are. Fuck it, get going, sooner you go sooner it's over. Out the door, down the hill, maybe he won't be there. Oh shit, there he is, the little sleaze, I'm so much bigger than he is, funny how it never seemed that way.*

'Hello, Ronnie.' - *Ugh - not falling for the peck on the cheek routine. Quick, fish in the handbag for the bus pass. Ha. Neat. Waiting, waiting. Come on, bus.*

'Bit chilly, Evie. The nights are drawing in.'

'You're used to Perth weather.' - *Not so different, two towns on the sea, both on the edge of the desert. Paula and Gary liked Perth, except that everywhere else was so far away...*

'Hey? Oh, family are fine. Except for Mum and Dad having cashed in their chips. Yes, both of them.' - *Here's the bus. Now I have to sit next to him for half an hour.*

'How's your mum and Dad, Ronnie? Still kicking?' - *His mum was all right. Wonder why they never had any other kids...* 'Look, Ronnie. I know you're gutted about Dylan, but I already regret saying I'd come to the caravan. I like us on opposite sides of the Nullarbor.'

'Evie. Be nice. Old times, right?'

- *Here we are. Caravan backed up against a sandhill. Surprised there are any sandhills left. Used to be all sandhills behind the beaches when we were little, parents always on at you not to play in them because nasty men might be hiding there. Now they've all emerged and moved into caravans. Ha ha. Not too poky, ceiling not too low. Not as good as Aunty Beth's fifties bubble, living in Aunty Joy's driveway these days. Collector's item. How did they squeeze into it, all that mob?*

'Well, Ronnie, what do you know. You've got some fresh food in. Don't recall you ever eating anything but takeaways, although, now I think about it, you went for healthy stuff - Lebanese - tabouleh, falafel, kebabs. Looked after yourself. Had to stay in good shape. Sure, pesto. Fine. Why not?' - *Let's play house. Let's pretend you're a nice guy. Sure, you're a champ. I'll park on the bench seat, with the table between us. I'll sit here and you can stay over there, on the bed. I wish I hadn't come. Still miles too close for comfort. A plant on the windowsill. Books on top of the fridge. Anyone'd think you were human. Wait up - notepaper alongside the books, pens in a jar.*

'What's this, Ronnie, writing your memoirs? I'll have tea, if we must.' - *Your taste in clothes hasn't changed. I could have told you what there'd be hanging up in the cupboard - look, spot-on. Tight black jeans, distressed leather bomber-jacket, denim shirts, cowboy boots. It's so claustrophobic in here. What bugs me about this whole thing is you think I'm still the same person, don't you? I'm not, Ronnie, I'm not. All the cells in my body have changed since us.*

'So let's see this photo album, then. There she is, old Mish. Looking good.' - *Looks thinner, not as bad as I'd feared. Not skin and bone. Not wearing the chain, either. So have you two split up, or what? 'She's working, is she? When you say working, do you mean 'working', or working at a decent job?'*

'She had a good job.'

'Had? What's happened? Is she looking after Francesca full-time? Oh, there's Frannie. She's very cute.' - *You'd better not have been leching all over little Frannie.* 'Hey, there's Mamma Cass. Granma Cass, I should say. Is she still going strong?'

'Last I heard. Here, Evie, take your tea.'

'And you're out of the old business, eh? I find that hard to believe, Ronnie. What do you do, then? '

'I've been working on a farm for the last couple of years.'

'I had you pegged as a city boy through and through. No, I stand corrected. That's definitely you on a horse. Gone green, eh?' - *I thought people who cared about animals were nice to people. No, that's dumb. Famous cases of torturers doting on their cats or budgies. No, be fair, he loved Dylan. We never had any pets when we were together. Funny, really, cos*

*there always seemed to be cats in junkie households; there was a cat saucer with a dried smear of yellow skin just alongside Kaz's...shut up, shut up.*

'Look, Ronnie, I don't want to hang around all night. The photos are nice, but I'll need to get a cab back along Tapleys' Hill Road in the dark as it is. Let's eat if we're going to, okay? Tell me some more about Dylan since I saw him last. I'll update my memories. Sounds like he'd come through adolescence with flying colours. Derek and Kaylene were good parents. This pasta's good. Thanks.' - *God, feel like I've been running uphill for hours. Where's the payphone in this place? I have to call a taxi right now or I'll fall asleep in my plate. Bloody hell, Ronnie, what did you put in the pesto - Amazonian sleeping herbs?*

Evie heard Ronnie's voice before she opened her eyes. In the next half-second, she felt a huge surge of alarm connected with the fact that her eyes had been closed at all. At once, further pertinent information rushed in. She was lying on a bed, with her clothes on, still in the caravan. But it was clear from the strength of the sunlight through the windows that she should have been home, slept in her own bed, dressed in different clothes and left for work hours ago. Wrong. Very wrong.

'... it's important to me, babe,' Ronnie was saying.

'Turd,' Evie tried to say, but her mouth and tongue had turned to wet cement. 'You shit. ... where do you get off, moron?'

'You're alright, Evie, you're fine.' Ronnie was standing up, looking down on her. 'I knew you wouldn't wait to hear me out, that's all, so...'

'Roofies. You fuck'n jerk. I can't bel..' but Evie's plaster lips let her down again.

'Nothing to worry about. I'm not kidnapping you or anything. I just want us to talk, Evie.'

'Wha' d'you ca' the - this, then? '

'A day, that's all. One day, hey? We spent a lot of them together once, didn't we? I needed to tell you Mish died, Evie. She died. It blew me away. I'm trying to start again, but you've been on my mind. I wanted to set the record straight, a bit, anyway. And I knew you wouldn't want to listen.'

'Fuckin' oath.' It came out 'oaf'. Evie tried to sit up. 'Look, you creep, I've got a job to go to.'

The words sounded like Urdu. And Ronnie didn't seem to be listening. Evie's body felt like a lump of lead on the bed. Ingot, she thought, unhelpfully. Am I going to die here? The plots of a thousand crime novels in which bad things happened to girls who went off calmly with the creepy bloke merged into one and flooded her brain. Oddly, Evie found she didn't care too much, except for being dumbfounded, in a remote way, at her own stupidity. Like that time she went on the Mad Mouse. She'd begun to scream in terror, until the noise coming out of her mouth turned into hysterical laughter at how insane it was that she was going to die and she'd happily forked over the cash for her own death-ride. Evie had laughed like a maniac all the way to the juddering finish.

Ronnie was still talking.

'It was such a mind-fuck, babe. She died in our bed right next to me. I woke up because I felt cold, and it was Mish. Cold as ice. I never thought it would happen. She'd been really good. She did have a job, she was working in a healthfood shop. Ha! She looked well, she was staying away from the shit. Someone must have persuaded her to have a taste that night. I never even realised. She went to bed early, that's all. Must have had a hit in the bathroom. I never found the fit. Flushed it, I suppose. The cops had it in for me, Evie. They thought I'd supplied her. They couldn't prove it, but they were convinced it was me. It wasn't. We were going to get our act together and have Francesca come to live with us.'

Evie lay listening. And then the room began to swim. Oh God, she was going to throw up. She managed to tumble sideways across the bed; Ronnie read the look on her face, whipping a towel under her mouth just as she heaved up the green contents of her stomach.

'You bastard, you bastard, you bastard.' Evie was speaking clearly now, tears pouring down her cheeks. 'How dare you do this to me, after everything?'

Ronnie wiped her face with a clean towel, took the soiled one away, dropped it into a garbage bag which he shoved outside the caravan door, closing it and locking it behind him.

'I'm sorry, babe,' he said. His own eyes, that so-familiar watery grey, more washed-out than before, more crinkled round the edges, were misty, a rare phenomenon.

'I couldn't think how else to make you listen. I had to talk to you, really talk. Get past the bad news in our history. It was all I could think of.'

Evie lay back weakly on the bed and stared at the asbestos ceiling-tiles above her head. She wasn't scared any more. Just faintly disgusted, sad and oddly accepting.

'Get me some water, you dickhead. All right, talk, if that's what this whole charade is about. And then I'm going home. And you'll be lucky if I don't set the cops on to you. Unless you're planning on keeping me here drugged and powerless for years? Christ, don't blub. Get on with it, then, if you're going to.'

So Ronnie talked. Evie's attention drifted in and out, as she wandered around in her own memories at the same time. Ronnie told her about his father, his father's father and mother, how his father never had a chance, brought up in fear and trembling, never allowed to say boo, dragged around the world from one army post to the other, often chastised, cowering in the corner as Grandpa strutted and snapped. Hmm, Evie thought, the old story. Daddy

made me do it. Well, sure. Up to a point. So why don't little boys swear on Mummy's grave when they grow up that they'll never do the same to their children?

His father, pushed by his dad, joined the army at a tender age. And the army, according to Ronnie, finished off the job Pa began. Made a proper brute of the boy, who in turn took up the rod against his own only son. But it was only lately, said Ronnie, that he'd seen how the pattern went. The one spark of hope lay in the way he, Ronnie, had always felt towards Dylan, never having had a son of his own. Maybe he could have been a good Dad. And he'd wanted so badly to turn the pattern on its head. He'd been going to classes at Cope, for men who wanted to kick the habit of domination.

Gawd, Evie thought, Cope classes, Ronnie. Men sitting around earnestly seeing the error of their ways, congratulated on their every utterance, no doubt, by Mr Team Leader. Most there only because the courts had ordered it. But as Ronnie bumbled on about stories the other guys had told, about their fathers and their fathers' fathers, a home movie of her own began to roll. Sean and her dad, at opposite ends of the cricket pitch on their back lawn, Sean a scrawny six-year-old, desperate to please, Dad's golden-haired boy, first son after five girls. John, one-time State cricketer, still playing for the Glenelg A-side, bowling with all his concentration, willing his boy to meet the ball with a stroke of genius... Poor Sean, he was all thumbs, his eyes popping out of his head with concentration and will to succeed, John not quite managing to hide his disappointment. Maybe that set the seal on Sean's fate, as surely as Ronnie Senior's thuggishness.

Ronnie sat, backwards astride a spindly vinyl chair, brimming with confessional zeal. His hair needed washing, his teeth had seen better days, but his eyes were shining with the convert's conviction. As far as Evie could tell he was sincere. No amount of soul-baring was going to make her decide he was a wonderful human being, her blood was boiling with rage over this blockhead plan of his to render her his captive audience, but one part of Evie's brain was registering the change in her old boyfriend. Ronnie had discovered self-awareness - he was really getting off on it. Big deal, the sisters had been doing it for



themselves for thirty years. Evie felt her lip curl, pressed her mouth tight to even them out. Cut him a little bit of slack. Turning around so many years of dickbrainedness couldn't happen overnight.

Ronnie had perched on the end of the fold-out mattress, legs crossed. His wispy beard was an equal mix of salt and tobacco-drool brown. He twisted his fingers in and out of each other as he spoke. Evie closed her eyes again.

'What really clinched it for me, Evie, was knowing Mish and me had left it too late with Francesca. She's a great kid. I thought we'd do the proper parenting trip, make up for leaving her with her grandma all that time. See her through high school. Watch her grow up and make her way, you know. When I saw Mish lying there that morning, that's what came into my head first. We've blown it. Francesca's going to have a statistic for a mum.'

'Are you her official stepfather? Did you and Mish get married?' Evie kept her eyes closed.

'Yeah, but they won't let a girl her age live by herself with a middle-aged bloke, will they?'

Them, it's always them, never anything to do with you and your history, is it? Evie thought, struggling to stay positive, struggling to ignore the beginnings of a headache she could tell would get worse.

'You never know. If you find another partner, especially. And don't look at me, for Christ's sake.'

A sweet smell was percolating through the plastic-net window screen. The park owners appeared to have taken it into their heads to grow jasmine against the permanent vans. Evie drew in one deep, deep breath, and then another. She debated sitting up, but put it off for the moment. The light outside was deepening into late afternoon. George had probably tried to ring in the morning. What would he have thought? Probably that she'd stayed at

Paula's. Paula. Hadn't she arranged something with Paula for today, Thursday? Too hard. Later. Let Ronnie get it off his chest, get out of here first.

'Did you know Dad had a twin brother who died when they were born?' Ronnie was asking. 'I think his parents sort of took it out on him, you know, unconsciously? I never found out till just a little while back. Dad's been sick, he's a different guy lately. Seems to want to tell me all his stories before he checks out. Mum's a lot happier. They ask me round for dinner a lot since Mish died. Talk like its going out of fashion. I've found out all sorts of things about when they were young. That's partly why I had to come and find you, Evie. What if something happened to me and I hadn't seen you again and tried to...'

What? thought Evie. Make it all better? But she could see from Ronnie's face that he'd been nurturing exactly that fantasy.

'Yeah, well,' she muttered. 'Look, Ronnie, I know you're making an effort, but there's too much shit gone down. Leave it, eh?'

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Old pepper trees dominated the Holmwood back garden. Gnarled and spreading, bowed down yet flourishing, Paula always thought of them as perfect metaphors for residents who'd kept their health and sanity. With age, their centre of gravity moved earthwards, they settled foursquare in their territory, and their reach extended across the lives of all their kinfolk and friends, numbering in the hundreds, often. She was helping several such specimens, dotted here and there in the beds their stronger relatives had prepared, plant seedlings in the afternoon sun. Paula, at a table under a venerable pepper tree, was doling out the plants, in egg-carton trays, yogurt pots, tins that once held beans or crushed tomatoes, recycled containers of all kinds.

Families and friends had turned up trumps when asked for propagated plants from home. From the look of her tableful of pots, Holmwood was set to become the new Eden. Some surprising oldies had volunteered for garden duty, too. Mignon seemed blissful, up to her elbows in dirt, although Paula was keeping a close eye on her. Mrs Gallina was determined to be a gardener as well as a cook, and why not? Several blokes whom they'd all put down as terminally armchair-bound, though they were technically ambulatory, had lurched up as if on wires when the project was announced, asking for gardening gloves and wellies. Paula had yesterday made an unaccustomed trip to some of Evie's favorite charity stores for a collection of old, loose cardigans, comfortably battered gardening trousers and floppy hats. She felt as chuffed as if she were Vita Sackville West and this was Sissinghurst, as her team of gardeners spread out across the beds, stooping and bending, straightening up again.

With the afternoon light ebbing, creaking backs straightening for the last time, Paula dismantled her folding table and propped it against the pepper tree, wandering up and down the new rows of plants, collecting a trowel here, a pot there, marvelling at how much had been done. Maybe there'd be emergency calls to the doctor tomorrow, but she imagined that the gardeners would put up with a few new twinges for the sake of being allowed to come back outside and take up where they'd left off. At the bottom of the last row, she stood for a minute with her eyes closed to let the soft sunlight fall on her face. It'd be nice to keel over in a garden, anyway. What better place to leave the world from?

Matron Tidies Her Immaculate Desk. Paula moved the phone a hand's breadth to the left. Gary is collecting Rosie so Evie and I can go out. Good. What to see? Something girly, something weepy, what about that thing with Duckface from Four Weddings in it? And noodles first, at Mandarin House. Zhiang-Xhi Chicken Noodle Soup, best food in the world, good for whatever ails you from a broken heart to ingrown toenails. Paula wasn't sure she and Evie had ever been there together; it was usually pub meals on an evening out with Evie. Fishing out her Body Shop lipstick, the mulberry one that looked soft and pink, not garish and ageing like so many shades seemed lately, Paula applied it by feel - the

amazing Haggerty blind makeup technique. Comb through hair, add newish characoal long jacket: da *dah!*

Humming to herself, Paula lifted the phone to call Evie. Marta at the creche told her Evie hadn't been in all day, didn't call in sick, just didn't show up. Although there could be a million reasons why her sister didn't show and didn't ring, Paula couldn't think of one. She called Evie at home, and the phone rang out. A chilly feeling began to seep up through her belly from just above her pubic bone. Something was wrong with Evie. Not giving herself time to think, Paula dialled Gary's number.

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'Why won't you listen to me?' There was pique in Ronnie's voice. 'I'm trying to tell you, and you won't listen.'

'I'm listening,' mumbled Evie, feeling feverishly restless, willing herself to stay still.

'You're not. I can tell. You should listen to me, Evie. It's important.'

'It's those crappy chemicals you fed me. I've got ants crawling under my skin. Ronnie, I'm listening; say what you want to say.'

But Ronnie pushed himself up off his chair, shoved the chair away.

'I could have been a success story, if it hadn't been for people always holding me back. You held me back, Evie. You did.'

'How could I have? My life wasn't my own when I was with you. You called all the shots, Ronnie.'

'Oh, yeah. So why haven't I got anything to show for it? You're okay. You looked after Number One. I could have been somebody. There was always someone in the way. My Dad. You women. Always blocking me.'

'Get real, Ronnie.' Evie rolled awkwardly over on to her front. She realised as she moved that her old gold chain had reappeared around her neck. Ronnie must have put it there. It rubbed against her skin in the old familiar way.

'You were all only out for what you could get. Took what I had to offer. Stood in my way, all of you. And when I try to explain, you won't listen.'

'What is there to explain? That you liked to push people around, you liked to have the whip hand, you were a small-time operator who was never going to go anywhere?' Evie tried to prop herself up on one elbow, but her joints and muscles wouldn't behave. 'Unless you totally reinvented yourself while you were with Mish.'

'Mish. She's dead, Evie.'

'I know. You said. I'm really sorry. She was a nice person. Maybe you two were good for each other. I don't know. But I'm not relevant to your life now, Ronnie. You don't need anything from me.'

'I do, but. They told me in the classes I have to make things right. You have to understand. You have to stop holding me back.'

He's lost it, Evie thought. And she began to feel afraid.

The MCG appeared to her mind's eye, vivid as yesterday; a day early in her time in Melbourne, a brilliant summer day, before Ronnie, before drugs, before the Moon. A big match had just ended, a Test that Australia had won. Evie was walking by, just to soak up

sunshine and rub shoulders with a happy crowd. She remembered what she was wearing: an Indian cotton shirt with wide sleeves, bell-bottoms, pink, newly-bought, with embroidered swirls at the hem, those plaited leather thongs you got in all the Indian shops. Her hair was long and bouncy, there was a spring in her step, she had her life ahead of her and she'd broken free of family to make her own way in a new town. One minute she was loosely attached to the people streaming away from the Ground, the next her feet slid out from under her and she was being dragged to one side of the flow. By the time she'd thought to scream, there was a hand over her mouth and she was on the ground, four pairs of jeans-clad legs surrounding her, and nobody else to be seen. She was in an empty patch of unloved land behind the oval, with boys who just wanted to have fun.

Evie's heart started to pound as she lay like a beached jellyfish on Ronnie's tumbled caravan mattress. She remembered her feeling of utter disbelief at the sight of a group of boys her own age, none with caricature markers of bestiality, beetling brows or crossed eyes or twisted harelip snarls, ordinary-looking boys who'd drunk too much at the game, egging one another on. One of them raised a lighted cigarette and the others sniggered. Evie recalled clearly what had been in her mind as she watched, terrified, held motionless by unseen, strong hands. It's because I'm a girl. This is what girls get.

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Gary was home, working on a car. He sounded unsurprised to hear from Paula, although she hardly ever rang for any other reason than to change a handover arrangement. When she explained she was worried sick, although there was probably nothing in it, about Evie, he didn't try to explain away her anxiety.

'Okay, bub, let's find out where she is, shall we?'

Paula danced around impatiently, checking her watch, calling the creche again, calling Evie's house again, hopping from one foot to another, swarms of butterflies, or locusts,

something more malign than butterflies, ricocheting around inside. It was five thirty, and no-one had heard a word all day. Definitely not right. As soon as she saw Gary's white ute pull up through the glass in the front door, she was outside and slamming it shut behind her. Rosie leaned precariously out of the passenger window to give her mother a hug.

'Mum, are we all going to see Evie? Yay!'

Paula squashed into the front bench seat alongside the squirming Rosie, who wanted to sit on her lap.

'No, chook,' Paula said, giving her a squeeze. 'You're safer in the middle, there's a seatbelt for you.'

'I like it in the middle, anyway. Between my mum and my dad,' announced Rosie stagily, beaming at both of them.

Gary looked across her head at Paula. 'Where to?'

'I've been thinking and thinking.' Paula tossed her head in agitation. 'I talked to her yesterday and we arranged to go the movies.... What did she say- *what* did she say? Something about rubbish surfacing from her past, pond scum, it was. I just barrelled on to the next thing, let her reassure me it was nothing important. But, Gary, it must have been. There was something there I didn't pick up. Thinking about it, I can only imagine she meant Ronnie's come back. Why didn't it occur to me at the time...?'

'Okay,' Gary was brisk. 'That sounds possible. And if it's Ronnie, then what?'

Paula looked at their daughter, all ears, and opened her eyes wide over Rosie's head to caution him.

'I think we should go and say hello,' she said. 'Do you remember where they stayed when they came to visit together that last time?'

'I do.' Gary pulled away from the curb, heading for Tapleys Hill Road.

'Are we going to the airport, Dad?' asked Rosie, five minutes later.

'No, to the caravan park down at West Beach. We think Evie might be visiting a friend and we're going to surprise them.'

'Is it a friend I know?' Rosie was squirming in her seat belt, trying to see both parents' faces at once, sensing the tension in the car.

'No, you never met him, Rosie. Bert did, once or twice.'

'Is he nice?'

Gary smiled mechanically and nodded. Put his foot down on the accelerator.

As they turned into West Beach road, the late-afternoon sun was on the point of dropping below the sea, so that the glare of the street-level rays hit the three of them between the eyes.

'Are we nearly there, Dad?'

'Nearly there. I'll ask at the office, shall I, Paul? '

'Yes. There won't be more than one bloke answering Ronnie's description. They'll know if he's here.'



Paula fixed a smile to her face, and turned back to Rosie. 'This is the place, hon. We'll just wait in the car while Dad goes to ask if Evie's friend is here.'

'And then we'll give them a surprise, will we?'

'That's the idea.'

At head-height on the top of the row of built-ins along the caravan wall, an old transistor radio was wittering on at such low volume as to be indecipherable. Impossible to tell even whether the sound was talk or music. Ronnie was standing over Evie now; his head just brushed the ceiling of the van. Catching her glance, he reached behind his shoulder without looking and swept the radio off the cupboard and onto the floor. The extra hum of sound stopped, and Evie felt its absence. Her limbs weren't responding to orders, and she had the sensation of repeatedly sinking underwater and coming back to the surface. She'd lost track of Ronnie's diatribe for a bit, but now it swam back into synch, as if she'd been dial-twiddling on short-wave and caught his frequency again. Evie thought that if she tried to stand in this van, she wouldn't be able to straighten up. If her legs worked.

'If I'd just met someone who could bring out the best in me, I could have done anything.'

Ronnie's voice lifted to a higher pitch and his delivery sped up. His hands flapped about over Evie's head. His face looked damp and his eyes feverish, bluer.

'My family didn't nurture me properly. They always made me think I was getting it wrong. And women like you were leeches, Evie. You hung on like limpets; you drained me, it was all about you. Why didn't you help me make more of myself?'

He's working himself up, thought Evie. I'm going to make a scene at Cope head office if I get out of here. Feed 'em a bit of psychotripe and they'll make excuses for themselves till the last trump.

'I'll never be anything now.' Ronnie's voice was rising. 'I lost all my best years. There were always leech-women around, sucking me dry. Why did you, Evie? Evie?'

He was kneeling on the bed, spitting out her name. Then his mouth closed tight. One hand shot out, fingers attaching themselves to her gold chain, pulling it hard to one side of her neck, across her larynx. Fuck, thought Evie, batting her jellyfish hands against Ronnie's rigid arm, Fuck, fuck, fuck. Been here before. There was no sound in her throat, and, oddly, no fear in her heart. You stupid, stupid fool, Evie thought, equally angry with herself and useless, pathetic Ronnie. And then she stopped thinking to concentrate on the red and yellow flashes across the blackness behind her eyes.

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Gary walked a few steps behind Paula, carrying Rose. The park office had turned out to be quite close to the caravan indicated by the caretaker, who said he'd noticed the bloke come home with a tall woman the night before, but not seen them today.

Paula's legs were like jetty pylons; she instructed herself to place one in front of the other. She remembered to look back at Rosie and smile, as if this really was a fun surprise, hoping her girl wouldn't notice how stretched a grimace she assumed. She had no idea what to say to Rosie if they came upon anything untoward; wouldn't allow herself to imagine what that anything might be. There hadn't been time to sort out an alternative, so they'd brought Rosie along. Maybe she'd bring them luck. Maybe there'd be nothing here that a little girl ought not to see. It took about two years to cross the patch of downtrodden couch grass that led to Ronnie's van. There were two fold-out aluminium steps leading from the

lawn to the door, extending an implicit welcome. The screen door was closed; so was the pink-laminated van door.

But as Paula lifted one leaden foot onto the glinting silver step, both doors were flung wide. Ronnie, whom she would have recognised anywhere, stood silhouetted against the interior darkness, a shaft of gold from the setting sun bathing him in an unlikely aureole. He must have been watching them approach through the window. There were tears running down his face, and he opened his mouth to speak. A rush of adrenaline raced through Paula, galvanising her sluggish circuits, and she leapt up to the top stair, pushing Ronnie back inside. She turned to Gary and Rosie down below, Gary mute and worried, Rosie looking expectant and wriggling to get down.

'Hold on, guys,' Paula told them, with a huge effort maintaining her normal voice. 'I'll just check that Evie's not asleep, or something.'

Or something. Or something. Paula pushed the door to behind her and looked past Ronnie, still standing there, still dripping tears. A motionless Evie lay on the bed, dressed, but with her limbs at twisted angles. Then Paula was on her knees alongside her, grabbing for her wrist, two fingers of one hand against the side of her sister's neck.

'What have you done? Ronnie? Ronnie! For Christ's sake! What?'

'She won't wake up,' he whispered. 'She won't wake up.' He wiped his nose on his sleeve.

'Paula, wake her up.'

'Evie! It's a surprise! We've come to surprise you!' called Rosie from outside the caravan, as Paula massaged her sister's chest, blew air into her mouth, pushed down on her lungs again. She sat up with a jerk as Rosie materialised beside her, jumping up and down, and then Gary was there.

'Sorry, Paul, she got away from me.'

'Ssh, Rosie,' said Paula, amazed at the calm in her own voice. 'Evie's asleep; just wait over there, darling. Sit at the table, eh?'

Rosie went, eyes on stalks. Gary followed her, squeezing her up to the far end of the bench seat alongside the foldout table.

With a chug, Evie's lungs began to drag in air. Paula sat back on her heels and held her sister's hand.

It was ten thirty, by her watch, when Paula thought to consult it for the first time in hours. She was serving a third cup of tea with sugar to Evie, while Rosie lay alongside her auntie on the couch, head on Evie's lap, asleep.

Gary sat in the armchair that used to be his, the brown corduroy Freedom one, that he'd sunk into as soon as Evie was settled.

Evie's hand strayed to her neck again; with an effort, she forced it back down to her teacup and saucer.

'Aren't we going to call the cops?' asked Paula, pulling a kitchen chair up to the sofa armrest, so she could keep a hand on Evie's arm, to reassure herself as much as her sister.

'I couldn't bear the hassle,' said Evie. 'What good would it do?'

'Teach that no-hoper a lesson,' said Gary. 'How many other old girlfriends is he going to charge around the country settling scores with?'

'I don't think there were any other serious ones; he's only lived with me and Mish.'

'He's a psycho!' Gary raised his voice, looked across at Rosie, lowered it again. 'Are you sure he didn't help Mish on her way? Evie, he has to be stopped.'

'Pathetic, sad, frantic to blame someone else for the mess he's made. Looked at that way, half the male population is psycho.' Evie's head dropped back onto the cushion, and she turned her face aside. She could see Ronnie's contorted features, hear the fear and pleading in his voice as he insisted over and over that he didn't know what came over him, he loved her, he'd never want to hurt her, he'd wanted to make everything right. Gary had made an excuse, once he saw Evie was safe, and taken Rosie for a walk over the sandhills to watch the sunset, an immoderately splendid one that splashed pink and gold from one edge of the horizon to the other.

'He nearly killed you, Evie,' said Paula quietly, stroking Evie's forearm. 'Drink the tea, darl, it'll help.'

'I'm alright. I think he must have snapped out of it and stopped...' Evie trailed off.

'Yeah, maybe. Or maybe he just thought he'd finished what he meant to do all along.' Gary's face was set, his mouth hard. 'Evie, he can't just walk away, whether or not he's got other women on his agenda.'

'Leave it, Gary,' said Paula, 'look how pale she is. She's not up to anything now. She should go to bed and sleep.'

'Well, I'll go and report him, then. The cop shop's only five minutes away.'

'He'll be long gone by the time they get to the caravan park.'

'Maybe. Maybe not. I'm going anyway. You rest, Evie. I'll drop in tomorrow.'

'Paul, do you remember the corporal works of mercy?' Half-asleep in Paula's bed, Evie murmured the phrase that came into her mind, blown there by approaching dreams.

'Helping old ladies across the road? No? Visiting the sick. I do that.'

'Yeah. Scholastica used to grill us about which ones we'd performed lately, remember? We never seemed to have any sick relatives, did we?' Evie's eyes were closed, her hands crossed outside the quilt.

'Mum's aunties were all too tough. Didn't get sick that I recall. Didn't hold with it.'

'We used to go to Aunty Imelda's, though, sometimes?'

Paula propped herself up on an elbow and focused on Evie's pale face in the gloom. 'That's right. I was very little.'

'There were always crumpled hankies by her pillow. I thought that was so disgusting. Kids are so heartless. Imelda was a darling.'

'Just look forward to the luxury of getting old, girlie.' Paula patted her sister's hair. 'Go to sleep, Evie.'

Paula lay awake, staring at the ceiling, for a long time after Evie drifted off.

## CHAPTER 12

Zak had his own flat, built by his parents under the rubric of 'studio', as attracting least Council attention, boasting separate shower and rudimentary kitchen along one wall of the sunny bedsit. It had been Zak's castle before he moved out to share with friends, and now it was as if he'd never left. Shirley and Craig had haunted demolition sites and deceased-estate sales to set it up. You entered through an old green schoolroom door, half-timbered, half frosted glass; all the other interior doors likewise salvaged. The French doors which made up most of one wall were from a gracious home in Dulwich, razed to make way for units. They had a key pattern etched around the edges. Here they opened out to the *biergarten*, a brick-floored shadehouse which had, until recently, regularly accommodated trials in the manly art of bending the elbow. Paula thought the beergarten showed signs of neglect: no empty bottles, no brimming ashtrays topped up with rainwater. Just tidily swept bricks and neatly-tailored potplants.

'When's the next pissup scheduled?' she asked Zak, gesturing outside with an elbow from where they sat, ranged around Zak's desk-chair. Bert sat perched by Zak on an orange vinyl and chrome bar stool. Zak was in his swivel desk-chair, in a grey Bonds t-shirt and cargo pants.

'No time for all that stuff,' he said, eyes glittering. 'Too busy having people killed.'

'Listen to Doctor Evil,' scoffed Bert, grinning like a Halloween pumpkin.

On Zak's bed, the bit not covered with plans, Evie leaned against the wall and smiled. She couldn't deny she was weary; she feared her fortnight's break from work might not suffice to recharge her batteries. On the plus side, she appeared to be tapping into an infinite capacity to flow with what came each day. Evie found herself incessantly amazed and pleased that the next minute, and the next, continued to present themselves. Maybe all

revenants had this experience. When Bert and Paula turned up at her door at nine o'clock tonight with the news they were all going to see Zak, she merely collected her bag, brushed her tearaway hair, pulling it into a scrunchy, and stepped out the door and into Paula's yellow Mazda.

Another thing was that she was experiencing temporary second-sight, oversight, insight, double-vision, attuned exclusively to the meanings implied in postures and glances, facial expressions and tones of voice. She saw pride and hope and love in Bert's demeanour towards Zak, the same in Paula's bearing, directed towards her son. From Zak she was receiving a kind of shaky morse code, a little jittery, but excited and positive, plugged-in rather than detached. He was precisely like one of those wide-eyed, excited, driven young lieutenants in British war movies, determined to strike a blow for Blighty, thin as a whip, all nerves and chewed cigarettes. Evie chuckled a bit, shrugged and smiled when the others turned to see what was wrong.

'Carry on, chaps,' she said.

'Are you getting organised to go back to Roseworthy?' enquired Paula of Zak.

'Yes, sure, soon,' said Zak, waving his hand to brush off the query. 'I want to orchestrate a few more games, first. I've got a medical certificate to cover me for the rest of the term.'

He looked like he needed the certificate; Zak was all crackling, feverish energy. Paula's instincts told her it was better for Zak to be engrossed in something - even, or maybe especially, a game - than anxious and unfocused, half-committed. If Zak could keep the complicated threads of Killer in his head, orchestrating dozens of sorties a day, any therapist would roundly approve Bert's strategy for his friend's recovery. Paula smiled across at her boy.



'So Josh goes after Katie,' Zak was saying, turning back to his computer, his lieutenant peering over his shoulder, 'and Emma goes after Maude, and Luke goes after Tom. I want them all to use different tactics this time. And no confronting victims in person at their front doors. Disguise is okay. If you convince the target you're the postman there to deliver a parcel, and they accept it, that's fine. What we need to decide is whether it's okay to ambush people in the workplace.'

As the boys put their heads together, Paula stood up and crossed the room, sitting on Zak's bed and putting out a hand to pat Evie's knee. 'How are you bearing up?'

'Yeah, good. The Zakster looks a lot more chipper than when I saw him last, which was in hospital, about ten years ago, it feels like. Been relying on bulletins from Bert - feeling guilty I haven't got round to visiting. Those two are okay, would you say?'

'Zak's getting there. Bert's as happy as I can remember. I feel old, Evie. I don't want there to be any more crises to get through. I don't mean you,' she corrected herself, as Evie tilted her head back and sighed.

'Wonder what my horoscope was this year, Paul. Was it my Saturn Return or some such rubbish? All your buried crap dredged back up out of the shitheap by the cosmic Bobcat every twenty-eight years, isn't that the deal? But you know what? I feel all right. Like James Brown. Better. I feel lighter. '

'Light-headed, more like. When did you last eat anything? Let's leave these two here and go get something nice from the Beck's Bakehouse back along Magill Road. Bring pies back and have lunch together, us and the boys.'

'Heard that, ma,' said Bert over his shoulder. 'Make mine a Ned Kelly. Up the Oirish, right? Cheers.'

'Same for you, Zak?'

Zak nodded, not looking up. 'Pubs are popular,' he was saying. 'Josh cornered Samuel in the Grace Emily front bar. You know how crowded it is in there. Josh-boy dropped a dash of green food colouring in Sam's beer without him noticing. Nice touch. Poisoned him dead as a dodo.'

Paula hooked an arm through Evie's and pulled her sister upright. 'Come on, gran. Shake a leg.'

'Whoo, watch that bottom step. It's a doozey. Isn't it a lovely world?'

'I've seen this with oldies who have a close call and then a reprieve. They sit back and look blissed-out. If they return to health for a while, it's like a first trip - they're high as kites.'

'What would you know about that, eh? Watch out, dirty great truck pulling out. Okay, go.'

'Years ago, with Gary. Only, with me, everything seemed marvy when I came down. Normal was magic.'

'When was this? God, look at the queue in there. Must be good eats.'

'Perth. Bikie parties. Not real Angels or Commanches, Gary's mates - some of them were hangers-on in proper gangs. We'd all be out the back of this terrace-house in Fremantle. Few miles up the road you were in the desert. Drive a few miles any direction out of Perth it's the same. Anyway, one time it was hash oil in the smoke instead of weed; the lads could lay their hands on killer stuff. I was last in line and I got a huge lungful, coughed my guts up. I was gone. Two days of hell. Never again.'

'A bikie moll and a druggie. I thought I was the bad girl.'

'Wake up - the line's moving. Nah, all very tame. Everybody was doing it.'

'What would Dot have said? You hussy.'

'Gary and I were pretty happy. It was fun playing house, not having Mum or Dad breathing down our necks. I'm still not quite sure where it went wrong.'

Evie and Paula stopped again, just outside the plastic strip curtain, in the comforting miasma of baking smells.

'I always liked Gary, Paul. Straight as an arrow. Nice to the bone. Came up trumps for me the other day.'

'I called him without even thinking. Four Ned Kellys, thanks. And an apricot twist. He didn't ask any questions, just came straight over.'

'I owe him one, that's for sure.'

'...if the shooting takes place in public, the assassin has to wear a mask.' Zak was dictating his amended rules to Bert, who was two-fingering them into the computer.

'Look at it,' said Paula. 'Martin Luther dictating the ninety-five theses. Nearly ready to post them on the church door, are we?'

'Gutenberg, wasn't it?' Zak looked up to take his paper bag from Paula. 'No, I tell a lie. Wittenberg. Kick-started the German Reformation.'

'Quite so, Professor von Zak.'

Evie thought for a second. 'The Diet of Worms!'

'Worms! What sort of a diet is that?' Paula chipped in. 'Luther interrogated by the cardinals at the Diet of Worms. Cracked us up in Religion every time.'

'Henry V111 wrote a defence of the sacraments in response. That's how he got his Defender of the Faith badge. From the Pope. He kept it when he started his own Church - thought it had a nice ring. What I want to know is how Zak's found time to bone up on the German Reformation?'

'Winemaking. Good pie, this. You go into the history of German wines, the Reformation comes up. You check out Spanish winemaking, find out about the Arabs and the Inquisition. You'd be surprised how much I've picked up along the way, with the chemistry and the practical stuff.'

'What's the story with Arab winemaking?' Paula plugged in a chrome vintage kettle on the draining board next to a tiny sink. 'I thought they weren't allowed to drink.'

Zak closed his eyes to think. 'All I remember is the Arabs took over Spain in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and an Arabian goatherd is supposed to have discovered coffee. But don't tell me the Spaniards stopped drinking for three hundred years.'

Zak zapped Bert in the biceps with a rigid middle finger. 'Come on, geekazoid. Chuck us a curly one.'

Bert rubbed his arm. 'All right, suckface. Who started lotteries? Give up? The Germans in 1500. Called them Pots of Luck. I read it in an article on the pokies.'

'What is this, Mastermind? In fourteen hundred and sixty-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue. No! Ninety-two! Ninety-two! Aaugggh! '

'African or Asian swallow? Laden or unladen?' Zak was leaning forward with one thumb hooked in the neck of his t-shirt, Julius Sumner Miller. 'Cop this. Maria the Jew invented the bain-marie, which allowed spirits to be distilled, in 600 AD.'

'Nice one, Maria,' Bert nodded. 'Stick this in your gob. Did you happen to know the first Zeppelin went up in 1900?'

Evie wiped sauce from her bottom lip. 'You think you're so smart. What year did Pope John XX111 die, then? '

'Can I call a friend?'

'1963. I was in primary school. The nuns made a huge song and dance about it. It's tiring being brilliant. Zak, can I have a little lie-down?' Zak was rummaging under the bed, so Evie addressed his back.

'Three weeks ago, it would have been me on the bed,' his muffled voice came back to them. 'Couldn't make myself get up in the morning. Now I'm so busy plotting I'm up at sparrow-fart. Here it is.'

Crawling backwards, Zak pulled out a long, blue box. Trivial Pursuit.

'Come on, you mob. Choose your weapons. Paula, red?'

Bert leaned across Zak's desk to the teetering CD tower wedged in a corner; found Shooglenifty, a Celtic band he and Zak had been hooked on since they came to WOMADELAIDE. Zak's face lit up, as he threw a pair of dice to start the game. 'Bring it on.'

Evie took her turn when it came around, but otherwise let the game wash over and around her, still wrapped in her placental cocoon; in fact she imagined it felt like this to deliver a baby safely; worn out but glowing; anyway, this was the nearest she'd likely come to the real thing. Mish was gone, that was so sad. Poor Francesca. Did growing up with a user Mum prepare you for accidents? Often as not accidents happened when the person was coming good, a misjudgment you mightn't have made when using regularly. For the five-hundredth time in two days, Evie's felt for her chain. Of course, Ronnie had taken the opportunity to split, as they'd screamed out of the caravan park in the ute, Evie bundled up in a blanket pulled off his bed, Rosie tugging one corner - Evie, are you sick? Did you eat a poison thing? - soothed as he drove by Gary.

The burp of a mobile phone caught Evie's attention. Zak, cradling the dice, took the call, nodding, smiling, cocking his head to one side, scanning the list of names and photos pinned up on the wall over his desk.

'Sorry, dude. Nup. Nup. No, doesn't make any difference. You're gone. See ya.'

'Luke,' he told Bert. 'Knock on his front door; he answers himself, the tosser. Tries to get his little sister to but she says no. He's got her as paranoid as he is. Anyway, 'stead of ignoring it, he gets worried it might be a parcel delivery for his mum. Opens the door and -'

'Pow!'

'Yep, face full of acid.'

Zak stood at the desk to score a line through Luke's name and photo. 'Andrea had a water-pistol with blue cordial in it. Luke's cactus. My turn.'

Evie dozed again. The caravan-park owner had Ronnie come into his office to settle his bill right after his visitors left, high-tailing it in a taxi half an hour later. Ronnie. Evie suspected

she'd be good and angry when the endorphins and lingering barbiturates receded. Before Ronnie went bunta, he'd told her that when he was sixteen, his father had shown him the door, waving a rifle at him in case he hadn't got the message. Should all sons be removed from their fathers' orbit at adolescence? All the guff about boys needing fathers... she started awake.

'Um, Roy Rogers. Oh. Audie Murphy. I knew that.'

As the comforting hum rose around her again, Evie saw the face of a young, precariously-recovering Melbourne friend called Mag. Her focus for health, her shining light, was her daughter, Cara, who was four, glowing, never a day's illness, cared for and watched over every moment, Mag's jewel. One day, Cara's father showed up out of the blue, a feral, who'd been wandering in his Kombi since Cara was born, never come back to visit. Mag nonetheless agreed when Sol asked to take his daughter up to Queensland to meet his parents, who hadn't ever visited either. En route, the Kombi veered off the road and Cara was thrown out of the van. None of the adults was hurt, but she was killed outright.

'Montevideo. Caracas. Ah, Yucatan. Right continent, but?'

Evie remembered days spent sitting alone in rented motel rooms while Ronnie did deals along the corridor. It was incomparable boredom, more bearable if you were out of it. She made a friend once of the girlfriend of one of the other guys, walking with her along Tamarama beach, but they never met again. That was how it was. Rarely saw the same people twice. Maybe that was why she read so much now. Daytime TV took her back to those ennui-filled years. Now she was back in the dispensary at the Infectious Diseases Hospital. Methadone ruined your teeth, and killed more people than heroin. Let them have nasty imitation-cake. Why couldn't there have been something for them to do? Not even magazines, not even ancient ones like in dentists' rooms. Because they were scum, presumably. One day Evie just decided she'd had enough. First step away from Ronnie.

'Mum! You swine, you. You've been secretly swotting medieval history.'

'No, the nuns put us on to Fra Angelico. A Dominican, you see.'

'My mother a geek! How can I ever lift my head up in public again? Sketchy cruiser.'

'I love it when you call me names,' said Paula.

There was a knock on Zak's granny-flat door. Through the frosted glass they could see a head apparently haloed with a great deal of hair, the upper half of a slim torso. Bert and Zak froze.

'Who is it?' Zak called.

'Sorry to bother you.' The voice was muffled. 'But my car's broken down just outside. I knocked on the front door of the main house, but there's no one home. My battery's dead. Could I possibly use your phone to call the RAA?'

Bert looked at Zak, who shrugged, then nodded to Evie who was nearest the door, to let the visitor in.

An ordinary-looking redhaired girl in shorts and t-shirt came in, nodded pleasantly to them all and took Zak's mobile outside to make her call. Conversation resumed.

Paula and Gary had come to visit a year after they'd left for Perth. They slept in sleeping bags on the lounge floor of the Prahran house, like little kids at a sleepover, just as excited. Evie took them to her favorite basement flea-market, Paula wearing the look she had when she was four and being taken to the Magic Cave by her big sisters to see Santa. They bought a twenties red dress, a heavy skirt with miles of fabric and glued-on silver beads. Paula looked astonishing in it, like a doll. Gary was head over heels, you could tell. He



bought an Afghan saddle-bag that he tied to his bike-seat: his ship-of-the-desert that carried them through the warm heart of the country to the far side.

'Wake up, der-brain. What's the flavour they use in Benedictine liqueur?'

'Um. Orange?'

The door swung wide, the girl in the shorts came back in, holding out his mobile to Zak. Evie saw his nod of acknowledgement. Next moment, the girl had whirled around to face them, transformed into a banshee, hair flying, teeth bared, in the same instant flinging a handful of white powder scooped from her shorts pocket all over Bert, who collapsed howling on to the ground, arms over his head.

'Radioactive waste, sucker!' yelled the interloper over her shoulder as she fled.

Zak held up a hand.

'Should have hidden in the bathroom, dude.'

'Bastard. You could have given me a hint.' Bert was dusting talcum powder from his shoulders.

'You know better than that,' Zak said, leaning over the desk, pencil poised to strike Bert from the ranks of the living.

'Shit. Who was she, anyway? She was hot.'

'Andrea. Used to go out with Andy, remember? Andy and Andy? And it's no good trying to distract me. You're history.'

They were sparring like their old selves, with the artillery they'd kept lovingly polished with constant use over the years.

'Yah, Bertina. Your throw.'

'And who lands on Entertainment again? Up yours, ugly!'

'Whup, whup, whup, whup!' Zak smeared his hands over his face in Curly mode.

'Oh, a wise-guy, eh?'

'Why, I oughta..!'

'Three Stooges was *our* childhood, if you don't mind. Use your own!' Evie sat up.

'But, Evie, we only had Scooby Doo and the Muppets. We like your stuff.'

'At least leave us Bugs!' She sprang to her feet, clapped an operatic hand to her chest: 'Oh, Bwunhilde, you're so wuv-wy! Yes, I know it, I can't help it!'

'Step into my shop, let me cut your mop, can't you see you're next, YOOOU'RE next! '

Paula draped an arm over Evie's shoulders, leaned her head against her sister's, as they struck up more mangled Wagner: 'Kill the *ra*-bbit, kill the *ra*-bbit, kill the *RA*-bbit!'

Bert and Zak joined the chorus.

She'd dropped Evie home, collected Rosie from Gary's, given her girl the front door key so she could run inside to catch the end of Rug Rats. Now Paula sat in the driveway, still in the drivers' seat, drained, staring sightlessly through the windscreen at the ivy cascading over

her fence. Paula pulled her keys from the ignition and let tears fall into her lap. If thy brother offend thee, thou shalt forgive him seventy times seven times. When she'd seen Evie lying still as an effigy on the bed in the caravan, all the cells in Paula's body mobilised to tell her that this was her kin, in danger. As soon as she knew Evie would survive, her DNA instructed her to seek vengeance; every fibre wanted to tear the aggressor limb from limb. If Gary hadn't stood in her way, pinned her arms to her sides, Rosie or no Rosie, she would have clawed Ronnie's face to shreds.

The fabric of her daily existence had been rent from top to bottom, revealed as gossamer-thin, the winds of the void blowing chill from the other side. Evie was still on a strange high, but Paula was staring down the abyss. Civilised life was a crock. The council rate-notices, hot-water-system breakdowns, malfunctioning cars, begging letters, bank fees, fallen leaves clogging the gutters, the stuff you occupied your mind with from sunup to sundown, they were so many nothings. Underneath was nature, dripping red in tooth and talon. Spite, fear, shame and loathing, territoriality, revenge, they were the real things. Ronnie - the weasel - might quite easily have killed her sister in his pathetic hissy-fit of pique, self-pity, self-regard, whipped-up hysteria - it happened everywhere, every day. On the floor at her feet, where Rosie's backpack had been a minute before, the Messenger, their local rag, showed a photo of an elderly woman hugging the Post Office letterbox outside her home, under threat of removal. Silly cow. You could be killed in your bed tonight, dearie. How many more letters will you be posting then?

Her watch said she'd been sitting like a zombie for fifteen minutes. Luckily care of young was a primordial instinct, too. She should get Rosie her tea. Her daughter lay on the carpet, chin propped on her hands, watching her usual sequence of programs till bedtime, confusing recent events apparently scrubbed from her memory. Paula knew the rest of the sisters would want to offer Evie comfort, only Evie was insisting Paula tell no-one, and the same went for Gary. Evie wasn't so sanguine about her sisters' reactions. She said Trisha would say - should have called the cops as soon as you knew he was stalking you; he's a loser; you should have known. Leen would be full of pity, remorse that she hadn't taken

more care of Evie, rushing to wrap her in layers of big-sister motherliness that Evie didn't want; Sheelagh would feel guilty that she couldn't respond warmly enough - all those years of keeping her distance - she'd stay right away till she judged the crisis to be over. Sean would have wanted to pound Ronnie's useless brains out, but Sean wasn't there. She was happy to have Paula, no-one else.

That phone call from her dad, too early in the morning for it to be anything but bad news, Paula never wanted to take another call like that. Her brother's system had gone into overload; he'd been cold alongside his girlfriend when she woke up; Sean's heart had just given up, John said, dissolving into sobs. So, for the longest time, had Paula's. For Evie to make an untimely, violent departure would be unthinkable. But when the unthinkable thrust itself forward, she'd instinctively turned back to Gary for help. Did she know herself at all? Paula went into the kitchen to make cocoa for herself and Rosie and light the grill for fish fingers for two. Rose could sleep in Mum's bed tonight.

Gary had her clasped in a close embrace. They were standing in the hallway of a marble-floored mansion, soaring ceilings and the glint of sparkling blue in a pristine pool beyond the open windows. Paula felt comforted, although a shade bothered. Both of them knew Gary's girlfriend would be home any minute, and she'd be mad. But that just had to be faced, dealt with. It's all for you, Paul, he whispered in her ear. Sunlight poured into the room, glanced off the floors, bounced back off the shining ceiling, dazzled and dazed them. Her head was spinning, she was smiling, smiling, so happy. She was on the point of erupting into giggles at the rightness of it all. Gary stroked her hair, kissed her again. Paula woke up.

Bloody hell. The sky through the chink in her bedroom curtains was grey and cheerless, the air, when she got carefully out of bed so as not to disturb Rosie, damp and chilly. Paula pulled on her chenille dressing-gown, a gift, naturally, from Evie, who found two in the same charity-shop. It was a washed-out rose colour that usually made Paula feel cossetted. She put the radio on, willed the chirpy tones of the breakfast announcer to infect her with spurious cheer. She made toast, tea, took it into the yard where the sun was trying to break

through from behind clouds as Rose slept on. She sat in a wicker chair under the big gum. That she hadn't even considered calling Chris in a moment of crisis said a lot. Face it, Chris hasn't hooked in, not lodged next to your heart where you hoped he might. So okay, Gary wasn't exactly there, but a Gary-shaped hole was. Paula tried to summon an image of Chris, but it shimmered and dissolved. She jumped, spilling a few drops of tea on the rose gown, as the phone blurted a summons. Of course it was Gary, wanting to know how Evie was, whether Rose was showing any signs of distress. Fine, said Paula, no, she's fine, okay, see you then.

Evie had said she'd come over and keep an eye on Rose today. Or vice versa. Paula had decided Rosie could have the day off school; Evie should continue to have company, and Paula needed to get to work. Cathedral Child Care were being accommodating about Evie's leave, but Paula had missed Friday, and she couldn't spare more. She shook herself, gulped the last of the tea, and went to get dressed. Twenty minutes later, Evie knocked at the door. She looked ordinary, rested, together. Paula made more tea, adding too much milk to her own because she only had a minute to drink it. Evie said she'd slept well, no nightmares, hadn't even checked that her windows were locked, although she thought they were. Her eyes had lost that faraway look. Paula judged her sister was returning to Earth, hoped it wouldn't be a bumpy touchdown, had no time to do more than hug Evie hard, put out cereal for Rosie, kiss them both goodbye.

'Orderly mayhem, boss,' Des reported, as she met Paula in the corridor outside her office, the desk already groaning under a day's extra paperwork. Mrs Tolhurst had fallen out of bed, Mr Fantis had refused to come inside at all on Friday, not for meals, not for anything, until it got dark and he had no choice but to down his gardening tools. There'd been a mixup with medication, a temporary nurse from an agency giving the wrong sedative to one of the very frail residents, and they'd all collectively held their breath to see whether he was going to wake up at all on Saturday. But he had, and seemed fine. Paula was required immediately to okay the transfer, for assessment and probable committal, of Margaret Beasley to a hospital psychiatric ward. The reason they'd needed an agency nurse was that

one of their regular staff had sustained a nasty cut to her scalp when Beasley hurled a glass, thoughtlessly left at her bedside, at the nurse's retreating back. Milton the Monster was hovering in the corridor wanting to chew her ear about some guest speaker who'd done a thesis on Milton's art and who Milt wanted to book for a lecture. The day's work opened up and swallowed her; Paula was needed, she was busy, she was Matron Haggerty.

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The first thing Evie saw when she opened the day's paper, which she'd grabbed at the corner deli on her way to Paula's, was an article about Melbourne's Blue Moon becoming the first brothel (their word) to list itself on the stock exchange. As of now, should you so desire, you could invest in Blue Moon futures. Evie began to snicker, then she threw back her head and hooted like a howler-monkey. 'Oh, God, Rosie, nothing' - Rosie was looking at her over the top of her rice bubbles - 'Just a funny story, a grownup story. Eat up.' Evie stood to put the kettle on, shoulders still shaking, imagining a monitor installed in a corner of the Moon's palatial foyer, relaying the current price of the company's shares on the stock exchange. The girls would be instructed to offer discount rates on shares as they took the punter's credit-card at the end of a session. Yes, love, we're up against Western Mining today.

After breakfast, Evie fished out paints and brushes and a sketch book for Rosie, her Dana story for herself, spreading both on the kitchen table. What was bubbling up from the magma this morning?

*Ah, Aristos, your brother is sweet, but not for me, I think.*

*Dana sat in the cobbled square, overlooking the tiny harbour, happily drinking the retsina pressed upon her by her burly admirer. Aristos had pointed out a pretty boat close in to shore. The bronzed young man furling the sail, if that was what one did to sails, was his only brother, Stav, and*

*Aristos was attempting to paint a glowing picture of how much Dana would like him as an occasional bedfellow. Not, of course, to the exclusion of Aristos himself. But Dana demurred. She could fit a lot on her plate, but it was full at the moment, she judged.*

*As the sun dipped lower, Aristos continued to plead. And to drink more retsina.*

*My sweet, you are becoming tiresome. Dana stood up.*

*But here is my brother now, said Aristos, standing also, his hefty thigh jarring the zinc tabletop. True enough, a slighter clone in dungarees had materialised alongside them. You will like him, truly, Aristos declared, grabbing Dana's arm.*

*Excited, the scrawny brother grabbed the other, nodding furiously.*

*We bring you to our house, we have fun! Aristos declared. His brother, having no English, nodded faster and tightened his grip.*

*Dana decided enough was enough, and calmly but very swiftly jerked her fine-boned, sharp little elbows into two sets of ribs. Aristos 1 and 2 gasped and released their hold on her.*

*Don't play rough, boys, she told them. You wouldn't like what I might have to do to you.*

*And she sauntered off into the gathering dusk, pausing to buy some fresh whitebait from a boat drawn up on the beach.*

Rosie was painting princesses. 'You can do the illustrations for my book, when it's finished,' Evie told her. 'Is it time for a walk?'

They sat on the sea-wall, eating chips from the better of the two fish shops at the beach end of Jetty Road.

'I've decided where to invest the money Grandma Dot left me,' Evie told Rose. 'You think I'm nuts, but wait and see. We'll all be rich one day. I'll buy a big house for you and me and Mum, and we'll be happy ever after.'

The beach was scoured clean, the sand sparkling and new-washed by the receding tide. The surf soughed in and out, gently, the soft susurrations of the earth breathing. Evie and Rose collected pink shells, ones with holes thoughtfully drilled at the apex by some handy natural process, and driftwood twigs. They'd string them together into a mobile later. Rose was happy, her world solid and predictable, the ground firm beneath her feet. Evie, watching covertly but intently for any delayed reaction to the adults-only scenario she'd witnessed, saw only an uncomplicated, confident six-year-old, Tigger-bouncing from one pile of shells to another, saying whatever came into her head, changing tack in mid-sentence, pushing her hair back out of her eyes as she lifted her head to call Evie to come and look.

Walking home from the beach along the warm asphalt of the footpaths, Rosie held Evie's hand, the shells, wrapped in her pink cardigan with the arms tied around them, cradled in her spare arm. 'These will be beautiful, won't they, Evie? Tara's cousin made her a shell mobile, but it was only white shells. Ours are pink, aren't they? They'll be prettier.'

Evie could still feel the glow that had been radiating from somewhere under her sacrum sending its pinkness around her bloodstream, the cocktail of hormones and other chemical



messages that told a creature danger was past, for now; life could go on, could safely be savoured.

When they opened the door to her flat, the phone was ringing. Rosie ran ahead. 'It's George, from Melbourne,' she called. Evie took a breath, still resolved to say nothing to George. Whatever happened between them, she wanted it to be based on their own brief history together, not her past. She knew she was probably being unnecessarily stubborn, clutching her bad times to her breast like some misbegotten child. But that was how she wanted it. Evie didn't want pity, she didn't even particularly want understanding.

'Hello, you Greek god, you, Abducted any maidens lately?'

It was that distancing thing they'd always done, the Haggertys, the way shaky families do. Make it a joke, spit in the face of the hangman. They were in the gang to whom crap happened, because they were who they were. If you learned to lie back and enjoy it, it could even be fun. Bare your bum at God as he was in the act of dropping that sixteen-ton weight. It was open season in the maternity wards when the Haggertys had their babies. Not as ugly as the last one, they'd tell each other. Menzies returns! Give it a cigar! Soon they'd get on to scurrilous talk about exit-wounds to their genitals. You gotta laugh, 'cos it makes you laugh - a nonsense-line of Dot's. Hysterics, more like, John pissed and staggering around the house like a wounded bull-elephant; so scary you had to make a joke of it. The kids would hide together in the wardrobe in their bedroom, giggling with panic, an empty, prickling sensation in their tummies, on an everlasting roller-coaster, where the next corner could always be the one that catapulted you out of the car and over the edge. But your face was full of bracing wind as you sped along, you couldn't deny the rush. Nor the flat feeling at the bottom, as the ride jolted to a stop and misery prevailed.

Evie told George a joke she'd been saving for him, received encouraging reports on Harry's progress, and gave not the slightest hint life was other than routinely staid. She felt guilty, but knew she could live with it.

In the evening, Evie would go back to her own house. For now, she strung pearly pink shells with Rosie, made pots of tea, read more of the thriller she'd put down four days ago during the intervals when Rosie watched kids' TV, made them both toasted sandwiches, revelled in ordinariness. George was coming back in a week; Harry had pulled through and was recovering brilliantly, minus a hefty length of bowel. The doctors were hopeful they'd got the lot. George sounded so happy at the thought of seeing Evie again, it made her feel warm and tingly from the toes up. It was only when Rose asked her what was so funny that she realised she was grinning foolishly all over her face. She grabbed Rosie in a bear-hug. 'You are, you wally!'

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'Jenny! How are you?'

The phone rang several times before Paula shook Rosie off her lap and managed to get to it. Her eyebrows signalled disbelief at Evie, still ensconced in her armchair by the television. Jenny was Gary's girlfriend, and in the normal course of events she and Paula had nothing to do with each other.

'Since yesterday morning? Where was he supposed to be? No, not a word. Not since the day before yesterday. Sure, of course. Yes. I will. Bye.'

Evie sat forward in her chair, but Paula shook her head over Rosie's ponytail.

'Rosie-posy, time for bed! No buts. You can have *The Trouble with Gran*. Just one story. It's late.'

An unavoidable half-hour of pyjamas, toileting, teeth, hair, finding Monkey who'd fallen onto the floor and been kicked under the bed, story and holding Rose's hand for the five minutes it took for sleep to come ensued. Evie contained herself with difficulty.

'What? What?'

Paula came back into the room, folding her arms. She stared at a point on the wall above her sister's head.

'Gary's gone missing,' she said, so quietly Evie thought she might have misheard. 'He didn't come home last night. No message, no nothing. Just didn't turn up.'

Evie started to gabble. 'Gary doesn't do that. Is he in trouble? Would he have gone on a bender? No, he doesn't drink any more. A mate in trouble? Does Bert know anything? He's supposed to be having Rosie on the weekend, surely he'll be back by then? Maybe the Ronnie thing upset him and he...'

'None of the above,' said Paula, still in an almost-whisper. 'Jenny had a call from Ashley.'

'Ashley? Trisha's Ashley?'

Apparently Ashley had found a message for Trish from Gary on their answering-machine, finally rung Jenny in case Trish'd taken their car to Gary for an overhaul or something and forgotten to mention it. That was last night. Neither of them had rung home for twenty-four hours. Jen and Ashley thought they must be together.

Paula shook her head, as if to shake out that thought. 'This is stupid. Insane. Jumping to conclusions. Stupid. There'll be some other explanation. It's a coincidence. Fucking hell, Evie. They're off their trolleys. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.' Paula blew through her lips like a

chaff-bagged horse, shook her head again. Sprang to her feet and raced across to the phone.

'Who should I call? Who would know? Jenny rang Bert, but he hadn't heard anything. And I don't want to spook him. Leeny? Sheelagh?'

'Did Jenny ring them?'

Paula hopped in frustration from one foot to the other, put down the phone; walked back to the sofa and sat down again. Jumped up once more.

'I don't know. She didn't say. Christ. This is unfuckingbelievable. Where would they be? What's going on?'

Evie could only shake her head.

**Chapters numbered incorrectly:**

**Chapter 13 missed**

**CHAPTER 14**

Next morning, Holmwood threw up a crisis to drag Paula's mind back from the radioactive area where it had been trapped all night. Nurse Bridge, the new chum who'd copped a glass in the back of the head, was waiting outside her office as Paula arrived.

'I can't hack it, Matron,' she said without preamble, as soon as Paula gestured to her to sit down. 'I thought I was going to love working with old people, but I can't, it really bothers me.'

'Bothers you how, Sarah?'

'Everything about it. I'm too frightened of hurting them, and then I get too impatient and I *want* to hurt them! That sounds so awful. I'm so scared I'll do something bad.'

Paula stood up and walked around to the front of her desk, sitting on the edge of it and leaning confidentially forward.

'You'll think I'm just saying this, Sarah, but we all feel that some of the time. You should have seen me trying to keep from committing mayhem on my own mother!' Paula smiled, to soften the crack, when she saw Sarah's eyebrows disappear up under her fringe. If only she knew how close to the truth it was.

'You'd be surprised how many of your colleagues have been in here,' Paula went on, 'sitting in that chair, saying just what you're saying. It's normal. But you'll find other areas of care have their own frustrations as well. Just now you're still feeling shocked and distressed after that episode with Mrs Beasley. It's not the best time to decide.'

Paula listened to her own voice advising moderation and reflection, while with the rest of her brain she registered her feet itching to set off in pursuit of the wretched runaways, her

hands to dole out spectacular and lingering punishments. She visualised herself speeding down a country lane after the fleeing pair, bowling them into the air like a couple of skittles. They'd flip back across the bonnet of her car, bounce off the windscreen, lie twitching in twin ditches on opposite sides of the road. It would have been convenient if Ronnie had happened to join forces with Gary and Trish, so she could extinguish the three with one bloody blow. Except Trisha was her sister. Gary was Bert and Rosie's Dad. Ronnie - well, maybe she would be doing the world a favour there.

'Of course it's your decision, Sarah,' continued Paula, seamlessly. 'But I'd really like you to take this booklet home and read it. A sociologist friend of mine did a study here once, and she let me have the transcripts of her interviews with the nurses. You'll be surprised. Your reactions are absolutely in line with theirs. Much more restrained than many, you'll find. The names have been changed, but, believe me, they're your fellow-nurses. Look at the appalling things they fantasize themselves doing to the patients. You work with them. Have you ever seen anyone deliberately harming a resident? Well, don't answer that. You might have seen things you don't want to pass on to me. I know this isn't a perfect world. Of course I don't countenance it when I see it. But my point is it's rare. If wishes were daggers ...'

As the platitudes tumbled out of her mouth, Paula was thinking how satisfying it would be to scratch and maim, bruise and tear, flail and lash until her arms hurt. Unless there was some other explanation, such as ... such as ...

'... even another day, let alone another week. I just know I'm going to do something really bad.'

'No you won't, Nurse,' said Paula firmly, standing up. 'You can take this morning off, but be back for the afternoon shift. Read some of the interviews. We'll talk again in two weeks' time. I trust my instincts. I've been doing this a long time. You're one of the good ones. You'll be right.'

Nurse Bridge stood too and straightened her back. 'Yes, Matron,' she said, like the good nurse she was. She gave one sniff, gulped some air, took the ring-binder of interview transcripts from Paula's desk, turned on her squeaky heel and left. She'd live to fight another day.

Paula stared out of her office window, where two loudmouthed magpies were chasing one another up a gum tree and out again, making enough raucous racket to wake the dead. Die, you bastard. Die, you bitch. Where's Evie and her stock of Irish curses when I need her? But a rush of tears swept up from inside instead, dissolving her anger for the present, substituting sorrow, dismay and loss. She heard Trisha tell her she should make a clean break with Gary. She saw the two of them with their heads together at her own birthday party. Remembered being stupidly pleased that they still got on so well, that her breakup with Gary hadn't meant his being permanently excommunicated by her family. Paula felt the way she did when her best friend left her all alone at a Grade Four birthday party. Only this was double jeopardy. Betrayal bonanza.

And what's it to you, anyway? Paula's brain and her innards gave different answers: Nothing. Everything. The lot.

Idiot. Gary left years ago. Trisha's life is her own. Paula could see Rosie hand-signalling to Tara in the back seat of the car, what was it, a fortnight ago? - seemed like years - on the way back to their place for a sleepover; the girls cackling like hyenas, a wave-motion cracking them up. It meant 'get over it'. Paula feebly mimicked the signal for her own benefit; it didn't work. She was gutted.

Aching for something mindless yet demanding to do, Paula decided to empty all her filing cabinet folders and re-sort the contents, beginning with the bottom drawer, the records of her first few years at Holmwood. For a while she had the desk-top covered with papers, the wastepaper-bin overflowing, and her brain packed with minutiae, but soon enough, due to



her own habitual efficiency, the task came to an end. There was nothing more she could throw away. Paula took her rubbish to the asphalted area at the back of the kitchens, threw it into the paper bin, and was staring into the distance, basket dangling from her hand, when a heavily-accented greeting made her turn her head to her left, where the new garden-plots were.

'Miz Haggerty! Come and see!'

'Okay, Con, I'm coming.' Paula put the wire basket down. She walked over to see what was happening in the veggie patch. Con looked brown and well, seemed to be standing straighter.

'Miz Haggerty,' he said, 'You look sad. You no worry. I don' care if I die working out here. I tell my boys, no problem. Not to make trouble. Look. See these peppers? My girls grow little one at home and bring here. And kolokythakia, zucchini, here. I grow myself. I put peas too. And many lettuce. Radicchio. Endive. Now we have good salads. Radish. Fasolakia. Green beans. And look. I put aginares. Artichokes. They grow like crazy here. Just like Greek. And some other kids bring little eggplants to put. And tomatoes, all along here. All kind tomatoes. I need more room. No room for cucumbers.'

'God, Con, what a veggie patch! We'll have to dig up the whole front lawn at this rate to give you enough space.'

Con's eyes lit up, until he realised she was joking.

'Well, you never know. We could maybe convince the Board. Oh, Lord, heavenly!' Paula bent down to examine green fronds at her feet. 'You've made an instant herb bed!'

'Sure. All our kids grow parsley and rigano, we got thyme and dill. They bring ones they got in pots and we put them in the ground. Go beautiful. Basil, you know, Mrs Gallina get her girls bring so much basil. Pots and pots.'

'Fantastic. I can't believe all this is happening already. It seems like no time since we started the patch.'

'Yeah, we have plenty help from kids. What we need, Miz Haggerty, we need compost heap. No good garden with no compost.'

Paula warmed to the theme. Bundling her other preoccupations into a file marked People to Kill, she gave her full attention to the garden.

'Con, my sister Evie gave me a little book she found in a secondhand shop. It's an old Yates Garden Guide, do you know it? For Australian gardens? I brought it in the other day to give you, but I forgot. I'll get it for you now. I know you know about veggies, but there's lots about flowers. And you know what? There's a section for migrants, with names in other languages for plants, but no Greek. Only Dutch and German and French, and Spanish, Italian and Russian! You can fill in the Greek, eh?'

'Sure. Why they have Russian and no Greek? So many Greek here, not so many Russian, eh? Anyway, flowers good. Some the ladies want more room for flowers. You better dig up that lawn pretty soon. Why you want lawn for?'

'I'm with you, Con. Now, where would we put a compost heap so visitors won't fall into it? What about against the fence? I'd have to ring the Council, I suppose.'

Paula fell into a trance, visualising a rich compost heap of staggering dimensions against their venerable wooden fence, on the other side of which was a school carpark. Perhaps,

seeing there wasn't a household on the other side of the fence, she could get away without ringing the Council. You could bury bodies in a big enough heap...

'Miz Haggerty? We could put chicken house against that fence, too. Have our own eggs.'

'That would mean the Council, and all sorts of regulations... wouldn't it? Tell you what, Con. Ask that boy of yours who keeps chooks what the rules are, will you? If we can get away with it, we'll do it. There's a great Greek chicken pie, isn't there? I used to go to a Greek café in Perth.'

Con grinned all over his face. 'Kotopitta!' he said. 'You bet! My wife used to make. And I can do too. One day when Mrs Gallina in the garden, I cook!'

'And you have to teach me how to make a real Greek salad. Not a dull, boring one like I always do.'

'Herbs, Miz Haggerty. You need good herbs. I show you. You ever use dill in your salad?'

'I'm the dill, Con. I can't cook to save my life.'

'Yes, yes,' Con was laughing, his eyes screwed up into a forest of wrinkles, strong, brown hands patting his chest. 'Easy. Greek cooking very easy. I teach you. You learn quick, you bet.'

Paula found she was smiling, too; the tension had gone out of her shoulders and neck. She squatted down to ground level and put her face in the basil. Oh, Lordy. Aromatherapy. She could have a pot on her windowsill so she could stick her nose in it ten times a day. Chase away ill humours. And later they could make herb pillows with dried herbs. The folks who couldn't get out to the garden could do them. Give them as gifts. Or use them themselves, for better sleep. And they could grow belladonna or henbane or some of those brilliant

medieval herbs and make them into tonics, and some of the tonics could have just a tad too much of the toxic ingredients, and she could send Trisha and Gary free samples of those...

'Con,' she smirked, 'bring it on!'

'Well, sis,' Paula said to Evie as they sat with their feet up, in Evie's living-room this time.

'It's just you and me and Rosie. Until George gets back, I mean.'

'Could be worse. Bert, bring us a beer, good lad. How are you holding up, my son?'

'This all creeps me out big-time; I didn't have a clue. Dad better not have done a permanent runner. And Auntie Trisha. It's rank. Grownups are sick.'

'Yeah. I'm too tired to care,' lied his mother. 'How's your backyard car-care thingy coming along?'

'Wicked. Maybe I can go around and get Dad's tools if he doesn't come back. Except Jenny might not like that.'

'Zak, are you still on the wagon, or would you like a beer?'

'Ginger beer's my poison, Evie. Bert's too, for the moment. It'll be the next big thing, wait and see.'

Zak dragged a large Hall's Ginger Beer from his backpack and wandered off to the kitchen to get glasses. When the boys turned up unannounced, Paula was too preoccupied to register Zak at Bert's elbow when she answered the front door, seeing merely the old duo, a pigeon pair, as ever in the past. Evie, though, whose faculties had returned to normal, took in the significance of Zak's being out and about, and was cheered.

'I'm on pizza detail,' Zak said, pouring fizzy amber fluid into two large glasses, with a tiny one for Rosie, who was doing her homework in the kitchen, not sure that she liked ginger beer. 'Shall I just get a giant Veg from Mamma Carmela's?'

'Giant Veg sounds good. Hey! Zak! Good to see you back in circulation! ' Paula accepted a drink.

Zak grinned, tipping his head to one side. 'Number's on the fridge door, right?'

'Where do we go from here, Mum? I mean, it's the twenty-first century. We don't need to send out search parties. Dad's got a mobile. Can't someone just call him?'

'Trisha's got one as well. Jenny and Ashley have been calling non-stop, what do you expect? Seems like the fugitives have got their phones switched off.'

'When's Dad supposed to have Rosie next? Surely he won't just leave her hanging?'

'Not till Friday. He never has before, but there's always a first time. It's too Days of Our Lives to be true.'

A sharp pang struck in the vicinity of her left breast, a spasm that lingered and spread, squeezing her vitals. How could they do this to her? Next to Evie, Trisha was her favourite sister. She'd always imagined they had a special connection, appreciated one another's forthrightness. If Trisha could shoot her mouth off for Australia, Paula could tell it like it was as well. They'd made one another laugh, noticed the same weird anomalies about people, had the same bull-at-a-gate drive to meet hard things head-on and butt them to bits. Trish and Gary. That hurt. Hurt like her innards were being tugged with hooks, Virgin-Martyr style. She drew in her breath, as it washed back over her once more like a Southern Ocean wave on a Kangaroo Island beach. Summoning a cough to cover the embarrassing animal noise,

Paula recovered enough to ask the company whether anyone knew how Jess, Trisha's seventeen-year-old, was coping.

Bert frowned. 'Jess's been okay boarding at Westminster College since they moved to the Island. But it's her last year of school. Crap timing. I know kids whose olds put off splitting up till they finished Year 12. Tossers.'

'Let's shut up about them, shall we? Pizza'll be here any minute. Come on, let's get Rosie off the kitchen table and have a proper sit-down meal. We can be civilised, if some folks can't.'

Cathedral Child Care embraced Evie like a mother; she sank gratefully back into the routine of babies in the morning, toddlers in the afternoon, a warm bath of normalcy. Maintaining her need-to-know policy, Evie kept up the fiction of having fallen victim to super-flu. What could her fellow care-workers do with the real story, anyway? The Anglican Centre's parents were almost without exception bland and middle-class, single mothers and fathers included. It wasn't one of those bleeding-edge places in the far-flung southern or northern suburbs where bashed wives or girlfriends were two-a-penny. And even if they were, her own story was so tawdry, so stupid, it seemed to Evie, that it wouldn't have warranted telling.

Bugger it, anyway. She didn't want anyone to know. It was all too embarrassing. Gary would no doubt blab to his new sweetheart, her two-timing sister, but that couldn't be helped. Other than that, Paula was sworn to secrecy; she could be trusted. Evie had the strange sensation of being at a ghostly remove from The Abduction, ironically capitalised in her head; it was as if the events of that night and day had happened to a near neighbour. Ronnie was so much a character out of a novel Evie herself would never have read that she could only think of the whole thing in schlock terms, herself as dumb former good-time-girl

sucked in by ex-pimp. A John Waters film, at best. A freak show. Circus Saddo. Ho hum. Change another nappy, wipe another bottom, it's all crap when you get right down to it.

Fruit time. A new little girl called Wilhelmina was insanely cute. She had a way of walking around the room with her hands in teeny jeans pockets, bending forward at the waist, Groucho to the life. She'd look at you out of the corner of her eye, with a sideways grin, so you wondered where she'd left the Havana. She was Evie's new favourite, although you tried not to have them. It wasn't possible not to prefer one kid over another, but Evie prided herself on not showing it. Or not often. She couldn't help cuddling Mina whenever the opportunity presented itself. So this morning, as they sat in a circle on the floor, Evie had Mina on her lap, smelling the Johnsons Baby Shampoo in her curls. She cautioned herself not to get too fond, but what she wanted was to sit with the baby in her arms all day.

Mandarin slices and banana chunks, apple left till last as always, grapes and pear. Evie considered asking Alex, who was cooking, whether they could swap shifts. Being on KP would do her good. She gave Mina a last squeeze and stood her on her little French blue-leather shoes, watching as she toddled off to the sandpit outside with the rest of the gang. She'd never have one of those for her own. Unless she did a Susan Sarandon in the next year or so. Evie didn't expect it to happen, and mostly didn't care - mostly she was pleased with how things had turned out. Today she was being pulled earthwards, urged to tether her guy-ropes. It'd wear off. Reaction, that's all. She'd been through worse. Much. But Evie had to physically restrain herself from being the one who ran across to pick Mina up when she fell over another toddler's feet and jarred her chubby chin.

Lunchtime brought two fractious parents who wanted to complain about their baby's nappy-rash, casting aspersions on creche hygiene. Evie checked the daily notes, meticulously updated as ever, finding no mention of a rash at baby's last visit, the previous Friday. This was Tuesday, so Evie politely rebuffed the charge. She advised cloth nappies and Amolin, which Dot always used, not even sure if it was still manufactured; she asked the right questions about how strong Emma's formula was, whether the proportion of breast-feeds

could increase till the problem disappeared, all on automatic pilot, keeping a serene smile strapped to her face. She and Paula sometimes laughed about Holmwood-speak: 'nourished and hydrated' on nurses' notes, never 'fed and watered'. They had 'toileting' in common, but oldies' incontinence pants weren't allowed to be 'nappies'. Evie chattered on about how lovely a baby Emma was (she was) until ruffled feathers were all smoothed, and family sent home happy.

Evie had the big kids in the afternoon, and read them a favorite, *Noisy Nora*. 'But I'm back again!' said Nora' - they shouted the chorus at the end - 'With a monumental *crash!*' 'The kids made a hash of 'monumental', but all had a stab at it - like a rugby team stumbling through 'Advance, Australia Fair' before a big match. A stray tiny wandering past the seated circle at the climactic moment whimpered at the volume of noise. Evie felt her skin growing back as they chanted. Back again, she thought. Yes, indeedy. And was smiling quite contentedly to herself as she took her bag from the staff room hook and wandered down the corridor to go home, opening the locked door to the outside upon a beaming George, all white teeth and dark eyes, behind a huge bunch of flowering ti-tree.

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Smashing in on the pebble beach, the waves, with the sun behind them, were a translucent green. The pebbles, from tiny up to baby-fist size, were strewn along the shoreline as though by an exacting landscape gardener. Long, thin vertical streamers of white cloud, the late-summer variety, scudded across a blue sky. The house was built out from the bottom of a steep dirt road through scrub, a rear deck straddling water tanks where the land dropped away. Rosie was engrossed in the contents of a rock pool, wearing sturdy shoes with her bathers, in deference to the sharpness of the rock terrace. The wine wasn't top-shelf, but if you had to make do with flagon white, you could do worse than D'Arenberg... not half bad for a provincial, as George fluted in camp wine-toff tones.

'What would you know, peasant?' enquired Evie sweetly.



George couldn't be bothered to do more than stick out his tongue. 'Stonking gorgeous, eh?' He stretched out nuggety legs covered in luxuriant twists of black hair. 'There I was, flicking through the university newspaper at lunchtime, and there was the boss's name, large as life, under the ad for this place in the Classifieds. He did me a great deal. Must like me.'

'Great that he kept the bookshop job open for you, George,' said Paula, without opening her eyes.

'Chris could have come if you'd wanted, you know.'

'Yeah, Evie, I know. I didn't have the energy to ask him.'

'Kangaroo Island. It's been sitting there across the gulf all our lives and we've never been. Why didn't Mum and Dad take us?'

'Can you imagine six of us in the Holden Special, Dot and John playing no-speakies, camping in Flinders Chase or somewhere? We couldn't have afforded much else. It would have been torture. I doubt it ever entered their heads. We weren't big on family holidays, George.' Paula still had her eyes shut. 'Not their fault, really.'

'Come on, Paul. There'd have been more cash if Dad didn't drink it.'

'Oh, give it a rest. There'd have been more if they hadn't faithfully believed God forbade contraception. Who's perfect?'

'Hark at you! You're the one who needs dousing with cold water when the olds come up, most times.'

'Yeah. It just doesn't seem to matter that much any more. That was then. Can't dump our rubbish on them forever. I'm just going to go and sit with Rosie.'

Paula stood up and pulled her sunglasses down in one movement, so Evie couldn't see her eyes. She made her way down the wooden stairs to the tiny patio, and carefully across the rocks to her daughter. She found a perch on a flattish rock shelf near where Rosie was collecting shells, and let the tears come. She could wipe them surreptitiously away from under the large dark moons of her glasses before Rosie saw. Rosie, though, was too busy to even look up.

'We should cook something special for her, eh, Evie?' suggested George.

'There are supposed to be crayfish in the crannies at the bottom of that cliff.'

'Not *that* special! I'll grill eggplant and capsicum and make a pasta sauce... mushrooms and olives in the fridge, right?'

Evie sat back, when George had gone inside, considering the situation. Ashley and Trish's house was further around the north coast from where they sat, but there was no reason to visit Ash. What was there to say? Plus he was a standover-merchant and Trish was well rid of him. If it had been anybody else she'd chosen to run away with. Stupid cow. If she didn't care about Paula, what about Rose? What if they stayed incommunicado for months? So far Evie was sticking to her promise to herself not to mention her own imbroglio to George, though it had been difficult, in the kiss and tell of reunion. George had so much to say about Harry, how well he'd coped, how hopeless a patient he was while at the same time charming the pants off the nurses, how well he was faring back at the Carlton house, how friends were rallying round, how great Melbourne was even though dirty and dangerous in places. Being with his dad, seeing him through a crisis, had been good for George. He seemed recharged, reinvigorated.

When they'd driven out of Adelaide two nights before, there'd still been no word of the runaways, as it was by now clear they were. Paula must be reliving her own dash for freedom on the back of Gary's bike so many years ago. Once a knight of the road... it was puerile, but you had to admit it got them away from all the heat. Trish's kids were stunned. Surely she couldn't leave them behind. Trish a bolter - yet the signs were there. All you ever see is the little girl or boy you grew up with, then they suddenly take to nude wrestling or chopping up cats for a hobby, while the family tries for nonchalance - oh, that's just Sally, we always knew she'd go that way. But Evie was shocked. And so was Paula, you could tell. Gobsmacked.

The shoe was back on the other foot. Were she and Paula going to be rescuing one another, an everlasting surf-lifesaving competition, till one dropped off her perch? Shouldn't things have settled into a comfortable pattern by their time of life, like a house onto its foundations? From where she was sitting, it looked as though anything could change, anytime, for good, no going back. No wonder people traded instead in clichés about how happy so-and-so was now, how nice they'd found the right bloke or lass, found their niche at last, all desperate for the permanently-shifting landscape of human affairs to be still. Yet it seemed people never got too tired for further hanky-panky; Joy had phoned on the night after Trish's and Gary's bolt to say she had a new boyfriend, someone she'd met while she was helping out as temporary receptionist for her son the physio. The bloke had come in for heat treatment on his back, and they'd got chatting. Frank, his name was: younger than Joy at sixty-nine.

'Heat treatment, eh?' Evie couldn't help herself.

'That is a remark in exceedingly poor taste. I'm surprised at you, young lady.' Joy was delighted.

Evie looked fondly back through the deck's open glass doors to where George was busy in the open-plan kitchen, chopping and broiling and grating and mixing. How nice if she could

assume this was it, herself and George. For good. They fitted beautifully, no friction or rough edges. Miraculously. For good? Paula was allowing Chris to slide away, the relationship withering for lack of water and sunlight. She was falling back on her bulwarks, Rosie, Bert, and Evie, pulling the wagons into a circle. For Paula, of course, there was also Holmwood, and all who sailed in her.

-Tarnation, Grandma, she told herself. Land's sakes, there's that poor little mite a-frettin' fit to break her heart down there, you settin' here a-ponderin' an' a-speculatin'. Never did a body no good, nohow.

'Paula! ' she called. 'Get those duds off. We're going skinny-dipping! Rosie! Hide your eyes!'

In two shakes she was alongside her sister, grabbing the hem of her t-shirt with both hands and pulling it up over Paula's head by brute force. Paula screamed as if her fingernails were being extracted, but the shirt was off. Evie whipped off her own man's shirt and shorts, underpants and bra in a couple of deft strokes, and Rosie screamed in delight.

'Hide your shame, you hussy!' yelled Paula, getting into the spirit of the thing. Evie, grinning, danced on the sand from one foot to the other like an organ-grinder's monkey.

Two minutes later the three of them were leaping about unclad in the shallows, gyrating and flinging their arms heavenwards and jumping vertically into the air as if on springs each time a wave came in. Screams as of the tormented in hell echoed around the tiny cove.

'It's alright once your legs go numb!' Evie called to the others.

'How can you tell whether your toes have dropped off when there's no feeling left?'

'Marmee! I don't want my toes to fall off!'

'Who needs toes, my little pobble! Arghh! Christ! The pain!'

'Faaark! Ow!'

'Um, Evie! Evie said a naughty word! Mummy said a naughty word!' Rosie disappeared for a second. 'Mumme! That wave was too big! I'm all wet!'

'Under you go!' Evie delivered a sneaky shove, but Paula managed to grab her sister's arm on the way down, and they were all under, shrieking and yelling like banshees.

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Paula was content, those nights on the Island, to sleep in a single bunk bed, Rosie in the one above. She hadn't told Evie that Chris had turned up the night before they left, wanting to know where they stood, or that she'd told him, regretfully, that she wanted to be on her own. For now. For the long haul, perhaps. If he was still unattached in a year, then... Chris had bade her a chivalrous goodbye, with a catch in his voice, but stopping short of saying he'd wait for her. Paula still wasn't sure why she'd done it, except for a pressing sense that she didn't want any bloke, even a top-of-the-range model. Every inch of her smarting over Gary and Trish, as though she'd been dragged naked through a prickly patch, Paula felt she might be happy to be herself, alone, forever. Evie and George were sweet, but she didn't want to be them. Odd, when you thought about it; Evie had always been the one to maul any bloke who got too close.

And Paula had Rosie, and Evie nearby. And Bert, even Zak, a call away. Leen and Sheelagh. Ouch. A cramp tightened Paula's chest. Better to be a wombat in its hole, solid and solitary, than a - kangaroo? Sea-eagle? Dingo? In the watches of the night, Paula's meanderings grew delirious. Finally the shoosh, shoosh of the waves outside merged with the rinse-cycle of her own blood through her brain, and she slept. She dreamt she was wearing yellow flanellette pyjamas, a cloth tied around her head. She'd pulled up the carpet

in her hallway, and was busy lifting the lino underneath that, so old it was soft and gelatinous. It had a pink and black lozenge pattern, nearly worn away. Then she got down on her hands and knees to examine the floorboards - pinky-brown, soft, dense wood, mostly okay, except at one edge. Here they were rotting near the skirting-board. She could see straight through to the joists supporting the floor, the sandy soil a few feet down. As she tapped at the floor around this area, whole sections of the board against the wall began to crumble away. There was a man sitting reading down the far end of the hall; tall, Romany-looking, tangled black hair, aquiline nose, intensely black eyes. He stood up and came over to the other side of the hole she'd made. He said it would be all right, a good tradesman would replace the rotten boards. He leaned over and took her hand to help her over. A thin arm, brown, weathered, strong, the arm of a man who worked in the open. Her house was full of revellers at a wake, lots of small children. Her new friend's brother, beautiful and disdainful, taller still in flamboyant gypsy gear - flyaway white shirt laced with red ribbon, antique velvet vest, rusty black trousers, earrings, battered leather hat - showed them through a display of household furniture arrayed in the yard. Paula agreed that she needed an elegant mirror stolen from a monsignor, spirited away in a baby's pram. They smiled at each other, there among the wardrobes.

'Are you sure you can walk as far as the big people, Rosie?' asked her aunt.

Rosie frowned her scorn.

'Arrghh! She's learnt her mum's death-glare! I'm me-e-eling! Okay. If we walk out the back door, and through the little forest next door, we can go over the cliffs to Snellings Beach. Right, George?'

George was fastening the laces of serious-looking walking boots. 'Fear not. I, your intrepid commander, shall lead. Paula, do you think those sneakers will hold out?'

Paula recreated Rosie's glare, and George stood up.

'Ready? Forward - march!'

'Lawlors, the White Ant People! 'called Evie, as they strode off. 'Old TV ads, come on.'

'It is indeed a lovely shirt, sir,' cooed Paula, trotting behind.

'If you've got a tickle or a cough, laugh it off - with Throaties!'

George shook his head. 'Call me when we get to the eighties.' He marched ahead, with Rosie alongside.

'Oh Mister Sheen, oh Mister Sheen ...'

'No, they still use that. Doesn't count. What's the gentlest tissue in the bathroom you can issue? We're happy little Vegemeters, bright as bright ...'

'Nah, they brought that back. And the Flick Man. Boys and girls come out to play, happy and well the Laxettes way!'

'Good one. Hippity hop, I wear Cottontails!'

'Are you too fat, too fat, too fat?'

'Evie, do you think there's any point to it all?'

Evie paused, gazing into the liquid eyes of a large cow who sauntered over to the paddock fence at the side of the road. 'No, not really.'

The cow turned away, and Evie walked on. 'But the trick is to believe there is. Not as in Big Picture, that's too hard to imagine. But in your own life. You need to convince yourself that everything somehow had to happen - it couldn't have been any other way.'

'No free will, then?' Paula stopped to wipe mud from a puddle on to new grass on the verge.

'Free will is part of it. You chose freely, but your choices led to something that had to happen. Is that crap?'

'Run that by me again? Wouldn't you choose a certain way because you had to, to your way of thinking?'

'In a way. But not in another way. You always had other options, the choice was real. But afterwards, although you can see how it might have gone if you'd done it differently, you still have to believe that how things turned out was how they had to.'

'You've lost me, Bishop. Sounds like heresy, though.'

'Leave it, Paul. Who cares? This uncleared bit is gorgeous, isn't it? Feel how soft those needles are under your feet. What are the trees? Casuarina?'

'No idea. Evie, I feel as though I'll never be able to trust anyone again.'

Evie leapt ahead up the path like a goat.

'Just makes you realise nobody's a fixed quantity. There's always things about them you don't know. About yourself too, of course. Phew. This bit's steep.'

'So it's all meant to happen?'



'Don't know if you can say that about other peoples' lives. The big thing is to feel it about your own.'

'Deep, Evie. So I shouldn't feel angry, you're saying?'

'No way. I don't mean that - feel angry. It's not like you can see the connections, not till you're dead. Get mad by all means in the meantime; I just tell myself something comes out of the bad stuff. Though imagine saying that to someone being tortured to death. So, forget everything I just said. Shit, this is steep. Shut up for a bit.'

Paula trudged behind, shuffling a swathe of the overlay of brown needles to the side with each step. There was still plenty beneath to cushion her steps. For the moment, they were enclosed in the grove. Rosie and George had disappeared. She bent down and picked up a long, spindly branch to use as a staff. George said there were echidnas. On the way to the beach house, they had seen a pair of eagles lording it over the nearby acres of green. Today they were heading across country, keeping the sea on their right. Kangaroos and wallabies were all around, and mice and rats and spiders, of course. Abundant life on a clean island. And only man is vile. Jesus, shut up, drama queen. Worse things have happened at sea, like Dad used to say. So Gary was a dud, so what? She'd had one happy marriage, to Arthur. Infuriating that she wanted to cry all the time, so undignified. It was the betrayal thing. It had been bearable for him to live with Jenny. Paula stopped to catch her breath. But for him to choose ... Shut up, shut up, shut up. Paula decided to sing to drown the tumult of her overheated brain.

*And did those feet, in ancient times, walk upon England's mountains green, and was the holy lamb of God in England's something something seen...*

The way went on, empty, up and up, Evie vanishing over the crown of the hill. Paula puffed and sang, sang and puffed.

*Bring me my bow of burnished gold, bring me my arrows of desire - dirty bugger - Till we have BUILT Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land!*

Why is Evie fitter than me when she never swims or exercises? Walking everywhere, of course. Thank Christ for this lovely soft stuff underfoot.

*And did those FEET... oh, lovely feet, walk upon Kingscote's clifftops brown?*

*And was the leaping kangaroo a-bounding, boing, boing, up and down?*

Paula was at the top, Evie already a dark spot at the bottom of the hill, where it met the sand, George and Rosie smaller spots bent over a mound, a sandcastle, on the beach.

*Da da da DAH, da da da DAH, bring me my coils of barbed wire*

*And I will BUILD a loo for them - In every yard of this Is-land*

Gaz, Trish, Trish, Gaz. Gag Trish. Squish Gaz.

'Basta-a-a-ards!' Paula ran, yelling, arms spread wide for balance, down the sandy beach path. The others looked up at her, a dark spot rapidly becoming larger, cannoning towards them. Paula had a spell on the sand to catch her breath; they trekked on together across hard-packed darker sand left behind by the tide. At the end of the beach the track was uphill. George assured them their destination was not far, they'd easily manage it, even Rosie. He was right: it was a stiff climb for fifty metres, then the path flattened out. They were heading for George's boss's second block, part cleared and part virgin bush, to find a shady nook to stop and eat. Rosie walked beside her mother, and Evie and George went ahead, hand in hand. The dry cliffside gave way to yellow-green flat pasture, sheep-cropped grass punctuated by wind-stunted bushes, no trees. Paula held up a strand of fence-wire so Rosie could stoop through, then flung herself over, clear of the barbs. They trotted after George and Evie, striking out for the far side of the paddock, where the land dipped down into a multi-hued green valley, thickly wooded, a creek at the bottom. Single-

file, they proceeded along a sheep track towards a dam at the bottom. Flies buzzed around, lazy rather than bothersome, as they pulled up at the water's edge. Rosie looked up and gave a sharp cry, pointing to where two eagles swam in the air ahead.

'Wedgies! You beauty!' said George. 'Look at 'em, they're magic.'

Paula squatted and put an arm round her daughter's waist. 'Wow, Rose. Eagles!'

'My eagles! I saw them first. Look at them swooping. I wish I was an eagle.'

'Sea-eagle or wedgetail?' asked Evie.

'Those ones. Wedgies. I'd like to fly over the land and the green trees. Nothing could hurt me. I'd be stronger than anything else in the sky.'

Paula rubbed Rosie's shoulderblades to check for wings. 'If we keep up all this walking, you'll be stronger than anything on the ground. How about here for the picnic, troops?'

Last night's pasta sauce, cold, was in one tub in George's pack, ricotta in another, while a craggy round of wood-oven bread poked Evie's pack out of shape. They sat in the lee of the dam, at the bottom of the valley, kangaroos bounding between trees on the ridges to either side. Evie leaned back-to-back with George. She felt persuaded that Paula was on the mend. The eggplant and sun-dried tomatoes in the vegetable spread were ambrosial, the bread, broken rather than sliced, a perfect base. There was some rough red in a cordial bottle, made-up cordial in another. The water that trilled over the stones in the creek looked pure and inviting, but Evie had heard stories about hydatids that put her off drinking from sheep country waterways.

Paula sat against a rock, hat over her face. Evie turned her gaze to Rosie, the thriving child of the sunburnt country, contentedly leaning with one elbow on her mother's lap, amidst

plentiful, unprocessed, healthful food. Rosie made a face. Auntiedom was a blessed state, Evie thought; all children needed alternative mothers for when their own were indisposed or out hunting. Momentarily, she wondered where Ronnie had fetched up. In this expansive, earth-aunt mood, she even felt sorry for him, bereaved and adrift, casting about for one or two certainties to clutch. So prisons were full of people like him, striking out in moments of anger and bewilderment, so what? It might have been her who'd struck out at him, years ago. Probably only fear and conditioning to submissiveness that stopped her, not superior morals. Or, on the other hand, he was just a born shit.

'Penny for 'em,' Paula had opened her eyes.

'Bit of There But For The Gray Sir God ... softening of the brain, brought on by overindulgence in Greek food. George, lift your shoulder just a bit.' Evie felt a huge swell of contentment rise up from her feet, transmitted through the brown earth - which, right here, by pure chance, hadn't been wrested by her forebears from aboriginal occupants. She sighed, feeling George's responding contentment through the connecting planes of their backs. He leaned his woolly head back to rest against hers. 'Let's stay here for ever, okay? We'll build shelters from fallen branches and live on wallabies and seagull eggs.'

'Eeyeww. Just vegetables,' said Rose. 'We have to make a vegetable garden.'

'I'll sign on for ten years now, with option to renew,' said Paula. If they could just bottle this atmosphere, infuse bandages with it that you could wrap around your tormented brow in times of need...

That night, Evie pulled the Dana notebook out of her backpack after George had gone to sleep. Dana had made her choice.

*Now that Dana had decided to stay on the island for as long as she could, Maria told her things about her home town that Dana had never suspected. After the episode of the Aristos brothers, Dana was determined not to be caught off guard again.*

*'Not like that,' huffed Arabella Fraser, the cocky's daughter who had given up men and taken over the running of the Wing Chun academy surprisingly situated in a back lane off the town square. 'You must stand with your toes turned a little further outwards, so that your balance is solid. And the hands must be palms together, held so ...'*

*She took Dana's hands between hers and positioned them in a supplicatory pose, in front of her pupil's solar plexus. 'There. That is your form. You should remain in that stance without moving while you focus. Travel inwards and find your strength. From inner poise and respect for the world comes power. Power to deflect harm, not to cause it.'*

*Maria, whose apparently inexhaustible talents included a mastery of this art reputed to be the creation of a Buddhist nun, stood posed alongside her friend and lover. Dana turned to her as the instructor walked on to the next pupil, and winked.*

*At night, they practised their holds on one another.*

*'How do you know I won't run off with the next vulgar boatman to swagger by?' Dana teased, as they lay side by side on the flokati rug in Maria's room.*

*'So you go with some man. I not worry. You will come back'.*

## CHAPTER 15

Paula's insides still roiled from the rough ferry-ride back to the mainland the night before. She walked unsteadily from the Mazda to Holmwood's front door, where Des met her to say Mr Ellis seemed to be on the way out, and not going quietly. Paula tucked her hand under her assistant's elbow as they walked the length of the shining hallway to the old boy's room, a double whose other occupant was sitting bolt upright against his pillows, agog. Mr Ellis, always Mister, but whose name, Paula knew, was Frank, was weak but agitated, also sitting as near upright against pillows as his strength would allow.

'There, you see,' he was saying. 'There! Right by the end of the bed. She was there last night and now she's here again. Make her go away!'

Nurse Sarah, who had weathered her crisis and was cruising contentedly, evolving into a solid carer who inspired confidence, was standing by the bed holding Frank's hand. She looked up as the boss and Des arrived. Paula nodded and smiled; Sarah turned back to Mr Ellis, gaunt and frightened.

'No need to get upset, Mr Ellis,' Sarah said. 'Visitors are a good sign. She doesn't mean any harm.'

Frank's eyes were wild. 'How do you know?' he croaked. 'It's a woman, but I can't tell who. She's trying to talk to me, but I can't make out what she's saying.'

'If she's there, it's because she knows you and wishes you well. Don't get upset, this is a good thing. I've seen it before.'

'What! Visitors from the other side?'

'Well, that's how it appears to people who see them. If they come, they come to help.'

'She frightens me, I don't like it,' whispered Frank. 'I want to rest now, I don't want to see her any more.'

Des nodded as Nurse Bridge looked a question with her eyes. Sarah hurried off to arrange a sedative, and Paula took Frank's hand.

'Sarah's right, Mr Ellis. It's not uncommon for visitors to arrive around this time.'

'Towards the end, you mean?' Frank whispered, sinking back into his pillows, and Des leaned over to make him comfortable.

'That's right,' Des said. 'Whoever it is will help you through, you'll see.'

Sarah was back, with a syringe in a green plastic dish. She pushed the needle into the neck of the catheter that was already taped in place on the back of the man's hand, gently releasing calming chemicals into his bloodstream. As the three of them stood by, Paula patting his free hand, his agitation slowly subsiding, and he closed his eyes.

'Funny, that,' said Paula to Des as they retraced their steps down the hall, leaving Nurse Bridge keeping watch. 'It's in the books. Supposed to be a phenomenon caused by a series of minor strokes that often precede the final decline.'

'Yeah. But why should they always cause visions of people? I'm keeping an open mind. '

'Angel of Death, you think?'

'No, but maybe it's... eh, what would I know. But I know we don't know enough to say it can't be presences of some kind.'

'Dead people, ghosts?'

'Whatever. Maybe the dead are like depleted uranium; they have a half-life that goes on for some unspecified time. Or something. I hope I'm not scared if it happens to me, anyway. A welcoming committee should be a comfort.'

'I don't know. I'd like to think I'd finished dealing with someone when they died. Bit of a bugger to have them come back and stand around gloating, waiting for me to pop my clogs.'

'You just say that because you're pissed off with a lot of people at this moment,' said Des, looking at Paula with the acetylene-blue gaze she normally kept burning at a lower wattage.

'When it comes to it, you'll feel differently.'

'Maybe. But I remember Mum wanting us all out of the way when it was time for her to go. She wanted privacy.'

'She might have had John handing her over the fence from the other side, for all you know. Anyway, Paul, how are you coping with the living?'

'Ah, you know.' Paula sat at her desk and fished a filter-coffee dunk-bag out of her drawer, raising it to Des in wordless enquiry, then setting out two proper china cups and saucers from the bench by the window and plugging in her kettle. 'If I'm honest, it's work that's keeping me sane at the moment. It was nice to go away, and George and Evie were terrific, but I'd rather not have time to think. Talking's fine, so long as it's about anything else but The Great Escape.'



Des took the hint, collecting her steaming coffee and popping open a mini UHT milk. 'You know best, boss. As with the body, so with the mind. Let the scabs form over the cuts; leave them alone.' She sipped and sat back. 'But still, you must be fuming.'

'Sad and angry and then angry and then sad. And then both at once. We don't have a huge repertoire, emotionally speaking, do we? I've got Rosie. And Evie, although we couldn't ever live together. Worse Things Have Happened At Sea. I'm working that in cross-stitch to put over my bed.'

'That's the spirit. Or Keep on Swimming. Now, get that down you and let's start on this pile of invoices. And then Matron Tolhurst wants you to witness her will. How are the mighty fallen, eh? God, I'm starting to sound like my own gran. I'll be saying 'Comes to us all ' any second now. ' Des sat back, stretching athletic legs, running a hand through short black hair. She had the longest eyelashes.

'Des, do you fancy a drink after work? Down the Pines, say? Good. Are you sitting on my pen?'

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Afternoon light through the Pines front bar was soft and underplayed that afternoon, not the golden MGM glory you often got. For this Evie was grateful, as she sat by the window in harmonious silence with George, another day watching over the ankle-biters behind her, another day with the books and the snitchy rich kids down for him. Evie was gazing sightlessly out beyond the Norfolk Island pines, over the seawall and across the soft grey water. She was still living pleasantly in the dream she'd had the night before, which had come back repeatedly during the day, continuing to play in her mind with unusual clarity. Though Ronnie had weaseled back into her dreams with a vengeance, Evie was channelling them in the right direction.

Last night he shared her single bed in a rambling, beautiful house with wraparound verandas. A commotion elsewhere in the house echoed through to their bedroom, and Ronnie got up to see what it was. As he walked out, Louise rose from another bed and came to Evie's, slipping in beside her and falling asleep again. Ronnie returned, a darker bolt of shadow in the midnight gloom, standing speculatively alongside until Evie motioned him over to the unoccupied bed. In the morning, in a giant slate-floored kitchen, men and women were buying and selling huge cinnamon sticks, bunched together in fascia-style bundles. A girl with flinty eyes and wild hair was loading men up with armfuls of glossy brown batons. Evie was playing with a cherubic baby and Ronnie had just disappeared with his load of sticks when she sensed a bulky presence outside the frosted glass kitchen door; next thing the house was full of brown suits. Evie, barefoot and holding the baby, gleefully revealed that Ronnie was still on the premises. A detective thanked her gruffly and ran off. The remaining women made coffee for themselves and breakfast for the babies. It was peaceful, there in the early morning sunlight, and they sat and ate in silence, Louise feeding the baby on Evie's lap.

Yet again, Evie had it in mind to tell her story, *The Unhappy Camper*, laugh it away, so she wouldn't have to keep excusing the abstractions she constantly fell into. But just as she opened her mouth, Paula and her friend Desirée from work, with Rosie between them, stepped through the door; she stood up and waved instead. Paula had made Evie ring *The Pines* to check that Chris wasn't rostered on before she'd agreed to come. They wandered across, Paula looking slight and a little stooped, Des head and shoulders taller, walking tall as well, effortlessly cutting a way through the crush.

Des dragged two heavy wrought-iron chairs and a stool up to Evie's table, returning with Paula to the bar for drinks. Rosie, like the baby in the dream, hopped onto Evie's lap.

'Paula and her sidekick are cute, aren't they? Roy Rogers and Gabby Hayes. Dawn Lake and that guy in drag. They make a nice couple.'

'Liz and Phil the Greek. Yeah, they are cute. Rose, is Mum getting you a drink or do you want a sip of my beer?'

Paula materialised. 'No, you don't. Here, Rosie, raspberry and lemonade. That's what Grandpa used to buy us kids to keep us quiet in the car while he and Grandma went into the pub for ten minutes that was always an hour or two.'

'Why didn't they take you kids in?'

'Not allowed in those days. We got so bored in that car. Amazing we didn't kill each other. Someone always got stroppy and started a fight. Me, often.'

'Too true,' said Evie. 'You little spitfire. Sean could calm you down, though. He'd just do his cherub act and climb on your lap - he knew how cute he was from the start.'

'He died,' Rosie informed George.

'I know. Sounds like a good bloke. He would have liked you. Hey, isn't that someone you know coming up from the beach?'

'Bert! Bert!' In a wink, Rose scrambled off Evie's lap and scaled the railing of the beachside bar, dashing over dry lawn to where Bert and Zak were shaking sand off their feet at the end of the jetty. Both had skate-boards tucked under their arms. Evie saw Bert raise his head to look in their direction as Rosie careered to a stop in front of him, wave and take Rose's hand.

Zak laid his board down on the brick pathway, trundling towards them gracefully; Bert and Rose followed on foot.

Zak, reaching them first, announced he was getting a bottle of wine from the bar. 'I'm celebrating.' He flashed his old grin. 'Got a job in the Barossa. One of the big wineries - a mentorship, with one of the ex-Roseworthy whizz-kids. She's been there a few years, and she actually asked for me. The lecturers say I can defer book-work for twelve months, and sort of do my apprenticeship now.'

Bert had come up behind his friend. 'Ain't it bleedin' belter?'

'Dude, your Geordie's worse than your Cockney.' Zak jabbed him in the ribs for emphasis.

'Shut it, festerhead. Rosie, sit on my lap. Go on, then, where's the wine?'

Nodding at Zak's retreating back, Bert grabbed his mother's beer-glass and tipped some down his throat.

'Real beer tonight. It's like it was planned, Mum. Zakko was getting there, with the Killer stuff. But he was still too much in his own head. It was just he couldn't see himself back in class, doing assignment and that. And now this - it's brilliant. Her name's Karin Lennox. She's the best, Zak reckons. He's ecstatic. He's -'

'Stoked.' Zak was back with a bottle of Kinnockhill pinot grigio, a lesser-known label, he explained, from the same winery he'd be going to. On he went, about the grape, the Italian namesake wine, how close to the original the Kinnockhill was, because they sourced their grapes from the Limestone Coast which was so like the Mediterranean for climate and soil. Zak poured streams of liquid, the colour of grass becoming hay, into their glasses, and a small one for himself.

Paula, standing, raised her glass. 'To Zak, the next Wolf Blass!'

The rest stood as well, scraping back the unwieldy chairs. 'To Zak!'

'Zacky!' piped Rosie. 'Where's my wine?'

Zak leaned across and tipped a thimbleful into her lemonade. 'To Zacky!' - she scoffed her glass.

'Brilliant news.' George pumped Zak's hand. 'Is twelve months long enough to learn the ropes?'

Zak squeezed another inch from the bottle. 'I used to hang around Karin like a bad smell when she was still at Roseworthy. Her family has this big holding in the Riverland, and she used to let me go there on weekends with her to play around with her home brews. We're good together. We made a couple of passable whites, for the family table. She's twenty-six; treats me like a little brother. They're a big mob, eight or nine; sort of adopted me. Karin went off to the Barossa, and we hadn't been in touch for months, then of the blue she rings Mum to ask if she could bear to part with me for a year.'

'What does Shirley say?' asked Evie. 'Here's your hat, what's your hurry?'

'Yeah,' Zak giggled. 'Mum can't wait to see the back of me. She's desperate to have me out there, up at sparrowfart, eating good country food, eyeing off local wenches, all that.'

'Aye, our Zachariah, we be that proud of 'ee! We'll talk of 'ee when 'ee do be gone away.'

Zak punched Bert's arm. 'Wait till I'm all buffed. Them wenches'll be lining up.'

'Save some for me, gringo! Think of me here in the city, flat out under cars all day like a lizard drinking. No hay for me to roll in. I've got three cars to do next week, Mum. Jenny said I can do them in her backyard - use Dad's tools there, use his pit. She said, why not? Someone ought to do something responsible. She was pretty nice, actually.'

'She likes you. Why wouldn't she? Not your fault your father's -' Rosie's ears were flapping. Paula clamped her lips.

'Yeah, but I thought she might be touchy, you know. She seemed pleased I rang.'

'Nice one,' said George. 'Are you going to be keeping it all under the counter?'

'I'll think about going straight when the big bucks start rolling in. Um, Mum? I got a postcard this morning.'

Paula darted a glance at Rose, who had tired of her brother's lap and was climbing onto George's. She cocked an eyebrow for Bert to go on.

'Yeah. They're heading north, they'll be in touch, it said. That's all.'

'Nice drop, Zak.' Paula looked away. 'Is this the new chardonnay?'

'Chardonnay is dead. Long live pinot grigio! Karin's persuading the boss to plant hectares of it. He's got land on KI, which would be perfect.'

'Tell him we'll go across and manage the plantation, eh?' George smiled over Rose's head at Evie. 'Dad knows about grapes. His father had vines back in the village. Harry's talking about selling up and moving to KI, by the way. Did I mention?'

'You know you didn't,' said Evie, eyes bright.

'He's all fired up to build two small mud and straw places there. For us and him. Says he just wants to play in the dirt for the rest of his life.' George smiled over Rose's head at Evie, whose face had flushed with excitement.

'What do you mean by it, eh? Springing it on me like this! But how would Harry live?'

'He'd make a packet on his Carlton place if he put it on the market. He wants to grow stuff on the island. He's thinking roses, would you believe?'

'He'd have to camp in the bushes with a shotgun at night to keep the possums and wallabies away. Otherwise, it could work.'

'What do you say?' George held out his hand. 'Partner?'

'What would I do on the island?' Evie shot back; but her mind was already racing - a housecleaning business, childcare if she was stuck, but she mightn't be. There were all those houses on Island Beach - the place they were already calling Millionaire's Row - the kind of absentee homeowners with cash who'd pay for regular house maintenance. Maybe there wouldn't be much competition. No way was she going to rely on George, but with a bit of luck, she needn't. A sudden stab of intuition told Evie this was a now-or-never, do-or-die moment.

Evie laughed at George's knotted brow, reaching for his hand where it hung in mid-air.

'Don't sweat it,' she said. 'I like the idea. A lot.'

Paula looked up from a discussion with Des about a possible Holmwood Produce Market at the end of summer. 'Sounds brill,' she said to her sister, though her heart felt squeezed by a strong fist and her breathing was briefly difficult. 'George, it'd be the chance of a lifetime.'

'Yeah, well,' said George, pleased. 'Course, it couldn't happen for a little while. I'll be stuck between the book-covers a bit longer. But yeah, it sounds sweet, doesn't it? I could help Harry with the building, commute. Stay at Evie's, if she'll have me. If I get through the Law

degree before the crack of doom, I could maybe look for a berth in a practice that takes clients on the Island.'

In the soft twilight, Evie considered her sister, bent towards George, smiling encouragement. She had easily picked up the smartly-suppressed alarm twanging through Paula's body when George blurted out the plan for going away. Alongside the sturdy Des, Paula looked fragile, but there was a tungsten toughness about that girl, even if Gary's desertion had stretched her resources. Already she was straightening up, metaphorically and physically. A glow of empathy, consanguinity - love, dammit, coursed through Evie from scalp to toenails. If the Island deal came off, they'd just have to make sure there was a mud annexe on the property for Paula and Rose. And Des, perhaps. George had been fantasizing lately about what sort of a baby they might produce between them, Evie being such a fine, sturdy specimen, but she wasn't convinced they needed to procreate.

'Rosy-nose, come for a walk on the jetty?' Rose leapt off George's knee and flung herself at Evie. 'Pick me, pick me!' she cried, her baby demand to be carried that had become part of the family language. Evie bent down and scooped her up, shrugging her around to the back, koala-cub style. She even managed a sort of gallop, once they were on the lawn.

'That girl. When will she learn to be a lady?' Paula turned to Des. 'Lawks-a-mercy, she'll be the death of me.'

'Haven't noticed you getting out the petit-point lately, boss.'

'There's a mountain of it under my bed,' Paula sniffed. 'Now, George, where do you think we'd stand with the legalities if we let the oldies sell their aubergines to the public? Do it like a church fete kind of thing. Stalls and trestle tables on the lawn?'

There was a bustle and a shifting of bodies at the bar behind them. Everyone was craning to get a view of the screen suspended high at one end. In the sudden quiet, Paula heard



the announcer inform them that the meteorite was expected to be visible along the length of the suburban coastline as far as the Fleurieu Peninsula, calculations putting its fall somewhere past Cape Jervis at around nine-thirty.

'What meteorite? '

Des shrugged. 'Dunno. We're in a good spot to be looking for it, apparently. How about we get some fish and chips and come back to the jetty after? You guys up for that?'

They walked out to collect Evie and Rose, meeting horse and rider halfway along the new concrete pier, not a patch on the old wooden one. 'Yeah, we know, mum, you kids were scared of falling between the planks, in the olden days.'

An hour later, they congregated back on the jetty in the gathering dark, bundled in a companionable knot with the other spectators crowding the rails, looking across the water to the horizon, now a colour Rose called pinky-purple.

'The remains of the day, eh? ' said Des.

'Shut up. That's another book, isn't it, you geek?'

Des slapped Paula on the back. 'Well spotted, for a philistine! You don't fool me, boss.'

Paula elbowed Des in the ribs. Bert stood on her other side, considering the still-faint moon.

'Ma, whatever happened to your idea about moving Aggie Whatsername into the sunroom?'

'Talk about bringing work home, eh? I don't think she'd be bored - she's just joined The Greens. She'd be great with Rosie. I'd put it on the back burner, but I've started to wonder again whether it might not be a goer.'

'Aggie's ace. I don't like to think of you all on your own.'

Paula rubbed her nose against his upper arm.

'Gross! Seriously, Mum, now you're not with Chris, I fret.'

'One thing at a time. One of these days Des and I might find a place together.' Paula looked a wee bit shy. 'We've been talking about it. What, Evie? Take that look off your face. Des'll stay with her mum a while yet, and the Aggie plan would come first. She's got a dicky ticker. She powers along, but she might fall over any time. I'm going to ask her this week. Course, she might decide to stay put.'

Leaning perilously out over the dark water, holding on to the jetty railings, Zak stiffened. 'I see it. There it is!'

'Crap, it isn't. Yes, it is! Mum, Evie, Des, George, look!'

A clap of sound like thunder caused the crowd to jump in unison. The streak of white fire momentarily appeared to be coming straight for the watchers, then raced eastwards towards the little towns of the Fleurieu, a bolt of compressed light hurled across the sky, there for two or three seconds, gone. A moment's silence acknowledged the apparition, and then they all began to babble at once.

Did you see it? Did you? Did you hear it? Like a gas explosion! That was it going through the sound barrier! Where do you think it landed? Not on my place, I hope! Something to tell the grandkids, eh? Christ, what a beauty! Wasn't it? A meteorite! Lucky we're all still here! Could have been another big bang - it's on the cards someday!

Paula stood between Evie and Bert, staring at where the streak of flame had been. Her vision, lurid and gratifying, was of a burning disk of white-hot flame landing square on a speeding car, transforming the vehicle and its two familiar occupants to a pile of ash.

'I reckon it landed on KI,' said George, Rose on his shoulders, twitching with excitement. 'It's a sign. God is telling us to go there.'

'We're looking for a stable and a couple of Semitic-looking dudes, correct?' asked Bert.

'They'll already have been sent to detention centres,' said Zak.

'No, the message is that Rosie is the new Messiah. A girl for the new millennium.' Evie was lifting Rosie down from her perch. 'And if she's going to save the world, she needs her sleep. Anyone else getting cold?'

'I'll carry her,' said Des. Rosie began to nod as soon as she was in her arms.

Paula and Evie walked behind the others, who formed a foursome and went ahead.

'You okay, Sis?'

'Yeah. You?'

'Yeah. Maybe that was Mum up there, telling us to get on with it.'

'It'd be her style. Is she on her way to her next incarnation, you reckon?'

'I'm thinking about her much more lately, Evie. Just her, her life, not how she affected me. Do they have to die before you can do that?'

'Probably. They know it all now, if they still know anything. They'll have made all the connections, absolved us and themselves, don't you reckon?'

'Ego te absolvo. Haven't quite got there yet. Evie, I can see you on KI, though.'

'Yeah, so can I. My yellow and white jug in its own niche in a mud wall. I'm not going unless I can take all my best stuff. Don't tell anyone, because it might not happen, but I straightaway had the thought I might open my own shop there. I'd almost have enough to start, and if it made money I could make buying trips to country auctions in the Fleurieu. See, I reckon get a housecleaning business happening, regular jobs with the nobs, get that ticking over, maybe some childcare, and meanwhile scout around for a shop, in Penneshaw, maybe. I've even got a name ... Garden of Eve ...'

Paula was silent for a minute, their route so familiar its landmarks were normally invisible. Tonight she was aware of every fencepost, every fallen frangipani blossom, every sagging lounge chair banished to a front verandah, each louvre slat tilted to the night breeze. She had a sense that it all needed to be captured before it shifted and dissolved, like a frame in a movie. A sudden panic claimed her, and as suddenly subsided.

'Onward and upward! You and me, kiddo, through storm and rain ...'

'Shoulder to shoulder, into the fray. '

'Our daughters' *daughters* will adore us!'

The three men ahead, and Des with Rosie asleep in her arms, stopped and turned to stare.

'Didn't you ever see Mary Poppins?' yelled Evie, as she and Paula bellowed Glynis Johns' breathy Mrs. Banks refrain into the warm Glenelg night.

'And they'll *sing* in grateful *chorus* ...!'

The others walked on.

'You're a loony, know that, Evie?'

'You'd know. Look at the moon, Paul. Is there someone up there, do you reckon'

'No God. Ghosts. Shades. Fading echoes of people. Mum. Dad. Sean. I don't believe it, Evie, but at the same time I do. Watching and waiting. With all the dreck burnt away. The people they were meant to be.'

'Yeah. Hey, babes! Yoo-hoo! Down here! Give us a close-up! Look, we're home, Paul ...coming in?'

*Holmwood*

**Generative and Governing Notions**

**Cath Kenneally**

**English Department**

**April 2005**

## **Table of Contents**

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*Holmwood* introduces itself in the opening pages as an Australian novel set in contemporary Adelaide, the city which is home to two sisters, Evie and Paula Haggerty, on whom the story focuses. My characters, Evie and Paula, aged forty-five and almost forty, are represented as having grown up as two of the six children of Dot and John Haggerty (both recently dead), in an erratic, intense Irish-Australian Catholic milieu whose effects both siblings still feel. The story picks up Paula in professional mode as Matron of a benign nursing-home, the Holmwood of the title. Evie's current life as a casual childcare worker is quiet compared to a misspent junkie/massage-parlour-worker youth in Melbourne; the reader meets her deciding to accept an offer to join a parish project, starting training as a phone-helpline counsellor.

The two sisters keep each other afloat, Evie as professional auntie to Paula's six-year-old, Rosie, Paula as Evie's only female friend in a city she left as a teenager. While both cope in the everyday world, both are privately still tying off emotional loose ends from their respective pasts, Evie's containing more trauma and abuse, Paula's shot through with anger at the shortcomings of her departed schoolteacher-mother. Both still mourn only-brother Sean, dead too young of unspecified, alcohol-related hard living.

The story follows Evie and Paula through a short period in their entwined existence, at a point where both appear to have found romance, although only one relationship blossoms. The surface of their lives is calm, but both are subject to distracting and disturbing flashbacks and daydreams. In fact, sibling rivalry and betrayal are brewing, and Evie's past is about to return in the form of bad-seed ex, Ronnie, from her Melbourne days, with a case of mid-life crisis into which Evie is drawn with near-fatal consequences. Paula's son, nineteen-year-old Bert, is dicing



with drugs and Evie, via her phone-counselling, finds herself offering him guidance while sworn to unwilling secrecy, thereby provoking a rift with Paula. An unexpected twist is the elopement of Paula's ex, Dan, with Trisha, yet another (older) Haggerty sister.

Childcare and aged-care scenarios recur in *Holmwood*, bracketing the sisters, as it were, in mid-life, with Bert and his best friend Zak providing important links to the youth-culture neither Evie nor Paula has definitively left. The emotional heart of the novel is the connection between sisters and, across generations, between both sisters and Paula's children. As they deal with the quotidian demands of their lives and crises thrown up around family and other relationships, the novel sketches for the reader the events that have made Paula and Evie who they are and introduces the major players in their lives to date.

The novel is episodic; this form works best for me both as a writing method and as a style of narrative. I avoid rigidly sequential narrative, since my aim is always to present events filtered through consciousness, buffered and punctuated with reflections and considerations channelled across from other imagined currents of thought and often deriving from earlier incidents or periods in characters' lives. While not strictly 'stream of consciousness', the novel most often offers data 'from the mind', incident as perceived rather than objective or 'real-world' events.

I am preoccupied with details of the everyday and the minutiae of the physical world, a preoccupation which seems to derive from a Catholic education stretching across twenty years, leading me early to Teilhard de Chardin's books and to Thérèse of Lisieux and her *Little Way of Holiness*. These writers I later thoroughly secularised and reprocessed through very different kinds of theory, but they are still there as foundations of my outlook and disposition, providing the focus and habit of introspection behind my poetry, and continuing to colour my approach to fiction writing. An Irish suspicion of airs and graces, filtered down to me through both

parents, leaves me chary of high seriousness in any context, and my fictional characters are on a mission to deflate it where they find it. I hope my writing is often funny. It aims to be moving and 'true' without being ponderous.

My first novel, *Room Temperature*, dealt largely with my own life, dwelling in some detail also on the lives of my parents and their forebears. Evie and Paula, in *Holmwood*, are partly modelled on two of my actual sisters and the novel recreates some events from the lives of the latter. I have used such data sparingly, choosing items selected to distinguish fictional women who, although so close in genetic inheritance and upbringing, constitute themselves very differently as personalities, and have done from earliest childhood. In young womanhood they became more dramatically different, one involved in drug use and prostitution, the other marrying early, having a child and apparently 'settling down'. Now, in their forties, the pull of family background and shared adult lives draws them closer together. At the same time, their distinguishing personality traits remain. At any given moment in the narrative, either the shared family identity or the differentiating accretions of individual experience can seem dominant.

Evie and Paula become known to the reader through the accumulation of snippets of memory, philosophical reflection, internal monologue, flashes of unprocessed trauma or nostalgia or longing, dream. These seem to me to be the texture of the continually-rewoven sense of self, always in danger of fragmentation, a flimsy fabric that is also at every moment subject to violent tearing by outside influences. The story is told as refracted through the consciousness, in rotating order, of one or the other sister. Holmwood, the name of Paula's nursing-home, is meant to suggest home, rest, permanence; it sits part-ironically, part-poignantly against the strivings for stability of the two Haggerty sisters.

In this novel, *Holmwood*, I focus on female subjects, primarily but not exclusively. Associating with many male relatives and friends, from childhood till the

present, mothering two sons, especially intensely during adolescence and early adulthood, maintaining a close bond with a male partner all allow me to have confidence in creating fictional male characters, and indeed two boys and several adult men are central to my narrative. But female subjectivity is of particular interest to me. I primarily want this book to play with and elucidate the tendency of female subjects to damp down or suppress their own subjecthood - the consequence of power relations all over the world - the acculturation of females towards self-denial.

Post-structuralism has chimed for me with an abiding obsession with self-reflexive consciousness, personality and identity, dating back to my theological studies and undergraduate degree in languages and history. Theories disputing the unitary 'self' have accorded with my preoccupation with the daily undertaking of putting together an apparently seamless personality. I am someone who has always taken mental notes even in the midst of compelling personal dramas. From an early age I was aware of at least a duality in individual consciousness, and have latterly become more and more attracted to theories of masquerade to explain behaviour more commonly understood as determined by biological and sociological notions such as gender. My reading for many years has focused on feminist theorists of various hues, among them theorists of gender, literary theorists, sociologists, historians and anthropologists.

The influence of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on my thinking and writing has been seminal. As a feminist, a postcolonial scholar, a Marxist of sorts and a Freudian of sorts, but above all a supremely critical intelligence, she has been a beacon of best writing and reading practice. Profoundly wary of universalizing isms, Spivak mistrusts history as a narrative of great acts, and also personal histories as records of things people (supposedly sovereign subjects we as researchers can know) do or did. Among her precepts, chiming with the recommendations of de Chardin and Thérèse, is attention to the neglected details of the everyday.

Of what is history made as it happens? ... it is the bits and pieces found unspectacular ... that are most rich in educative promise ... I am speaking of a history that can attend to the details of the putting together of a continuous-seeming self for everyday life.<sup>1</sup>

Where Spivak reads the history of imperialism as 'the story of a series of interruptions, a repeated tearing of time that cannot be sutured' (208), I apply her metaphor to individual history: the infant consciousness progressing through initial separation from the at first coterminous-with-self object of desire into some sort of autonomous individual. In attempting to represent any individual's experience of the present moment, I am always aware that the mind renders any moment multi-dimensional, that the adult is always still the child, and that time echoes endlessly backwards and forwards.

Jane Flax has also been important in shaping my ideas on the multifaceted moment and the multifaceted self. Her *Thinking Fragments* (subtitled *Psychoanalysis, Feminism & Postmodernism in the Contemporary West*<sup>2</sup>) quotes Freud's hypothesis in *Civilisation and Its Discontents* regarding the origin of religious feelings in infantile helplessness and desire for fatherly protection, moving on to the dictum of D W Winnicott that we all have in reserve a certain fear of woman, a fear responsible in the public sphere for women remaining excluded from political power. Winnicott and Freud agree on this effect of dependence on woman in infancy - the critical pre-oedipal experience (see Flax 109-113).

In constructing my protagonists in *Holmwood*, I have been working from the notion that one of the two sisters, Paula, is less 'realised', less individuated and less satisfactorily separated from the mother than her older sister, Evie. In this regard I deploy what I know of object relations theory, associated with Winnicott and his

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<sup>1</sup> *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason, Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Massachusetts & London: Harvard University Press, 1999. 238

<sup>2</sup> University of California Press, 1990

school, broadly assuming that 'good-enough' parenting in early childhood produces adequate, functional adults in psychological terms, but that the preoedipal experience of mother's moods and responses has lasting psychic effects. If this experience is uncertain, it is hard for 'the infant to achieve the sense of "continuity of being" that makes further growth towards a true self possible' (Flax 113). In *Holmwood*, Paula continues a dialogue with her dead mother in a half-serious, half-ironic attempt to make good what she herself, being medically trained, recognises as a weak spot, a lack, in her selfhood.

Western psychoanalytic theory can only take us so far, particularly across cultural barriers, and any theory is only tangentially applicable to actual individual histories or invented, fictional ones. Joan Cocks encapsulates the problem in a chapter called 'Theory's Contemplative Relation to the World':

Both the historian and the historical example are made and confined by accidental facts and actual occurrences, which in every real situation compose, paradoxically, at once a more chaotic and a more threadbare collection than the array of logical potentialities that the situation holds in store. ... It is theory's special task to reveal the inner logic of a situation.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, to the (appreciable) extent that my fiction is operating on realist principles, psychological verisimilitude must matter. I want *Holmwood* to show adult women characters operating in the world under certain restrictions, both internal and external. As to the internal checks, damage from the mother-daughter relationship is more deeply internalised by Paula, damage which continues to thwart her individuation and self-realisation well into adulthood. My sense of this lack should be apparent both through Paula's actions and what is revealed of an internal dialogue with her mother, as Paula continues to be afflicted by strong anxieties arising from the mother's relative unavailability in Paula's infancy. Object relations theory has it

that mother needs to 'be emotionally available to the child in a consistent, reasonably conflict-free way... without developing a narcissistic overinvestment in the child' (Flax 114). Paula's overcompensatory tendencies, instanced in several places in the novel, suggest less than ideal maternal 'input'. Consequently, Paula's 'core identity' is shakier than it might be (above and beyond, that is to say, the fact it is a fictional one). I represent unresolved difficulties with her mother as plaguing Paula through adolescence and adulthood, implying, particularly through my descriptions of her dreams, that these problems connect with her deepest insecurities.

But her eyes felt sandpapered now as she sat opposite the blessed woman in her office. She'd spent the night squeezing through milling crowds of students in a suffocating, maroon-carpeted stairwell, attempting to get to her boss's office to defend her filing system. Bloody sardine dreams. Came from being number five of six kids. (*Holmwood* 17)

On the other hand, I mean Paula to appear as a good-enough mother in her own right. Paula's insecurities are not appreciably transferred into her mothering of her own children, and she deploys a range of strategies to counter her mother's lingering influence. Paula achieves notable success in dealing with her mother-problems. For a start, she correctly identifies them. On top of that, she engages in humorous mental role-play and other methods of defusing the power of her departed parent. The lapse of time is shown as having healing effects as well.

'... Maybe that was Mum up there, telling us to get on with it, what do you think?'

'It'd be her style. Is she on her way to her next incarnation, you reckon?'

'I'm thinking about her much more lately, Evie. Just her, her life, not how she affected me. Do they have to die before you can do that?'

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<sup>3</sup> *The Oppositional Imagination*. London & New York: Routledge, 1989. 109

'Probably. They know it all now, if they still know anything. They'll have made all the connections, absolved us and themselves...'

'Ego te absolvo. Haven't quite got there yet...' (*Holmwood* 252)

Paula is depicted as having trained professionally in precisely the intellectual fields that allow her to decipher her own situation. She reads Melanie Klein, whose classic 1927 neo-Freudian text *Love, Guilt and Reparation* provides her with amusement but also food for thought. Object relations theory is thin on the matter of gender analysis. While good-enough mothering seems a comforting concept, and appears to take some of the heat off mothers who are still, more than ever perhaps, liable to be blamed for all psychological ills manifested by their children, feminist theory is a necessary bolster to Winnicott *et al.* As Sarah Blaffer Hrdy notes in her book *Mother Nature*: 'The assumption that ambivalent parents (especially mothers) must be abnormal ... may ... be the reason maternal ambivalence has for so long remained a preserve of psychoanalysts (who study the odd) rather than of evolutionists (who study the natural)'<sup>4</sup>.

Other things beside the mother-child dyad operate to mould identity and subjectivity, especially class and gender relations in the culture into which children are born. Culture in the broadest terms provides conflict and structures that influence the individual's development; male-dominant cultures model and perpetuate contempt for women. As Flax writes, societal forces operating to repress the self are manifold: '(T)he forces of repression here are not only within the individual, metaphysics, metanarrative or discursive formations, but in social relations as well.' (220)

It is axiomatic that repressed social groups struggle to contest their subjection in the language of the oppressor, which operates to define their status as 'natural' or preordained. Jill Astbury elegantly summarises this state of affairs in her book, *Crazy*

*for You: The Making of Women's Madness*, in which she offers an overview of the formation of nineteenth-century discourses and intellectual disciplines, demonstrating the interreliance of the male authors of these new 'sciences' in regard to untested and often fantastic notions about women. She mentions, for instance, Freud's attachment to Darwinian notions of recapitulation of the history of species in the development of each individual. Freud privileges developmental stages of the human male as normative, then 'discovers' that women's biology prevents them from developing fully as humans.<sup>5</sup> I situate Paula in a milieu where it is appropriate for her to ponder developmental conundrums. She revisits Melanie Klein, as mentioned, and also encounters a David Lodge novel which sets her teeth on edge. Paula responds with the theory of human development that currently makes most sense to her:

This was yet another varsity novel, with the bluff and rational, craggily attractive male professor of cognitive science pitted against the emotional, deluded-but-lovely female creative writing lecturer, he for Science, she for Art, she quoting Henry James, he mocking James's derivative psychology. Paula thought both characters were way off. - We're animals, we're hard-wired, it makes no difference what belief-system we cover up with, you wally, David. There'll always be Crusades and Holy Wars and ethnic cleansing and genocide and soldiers charging around the Congo right this minute on a mission to rape every female between nine and ninety and ... whoa. Lighten up, girlie. (*Holmwood* 190)

My fiction and poetry worry at the nature of the experience of the self from within - the question of whether individuals have a deep internality wherein they know themselves, or whether certain matters remain forever hidden or disguised from the self. 'Poem for Linda', which appears in my 2003 collection, *All Day, All Night*,

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<sup>4</sup> Vintage, 2000. 533



touches on internality, maternity and whether escape from biological imperatives is possible:

Lately, you sent me

a poem of your own

about Dracula's mother

suckling her monster

...

in future I foresee you

being less strong

your poem says you realise

how much mothering

of intractable creatures

you've done to date

and might just stop <sup>6</sup>

My operating assumption, in fact and in fabricating my fictional characters, is that human 'subjects' are only imperfectly realised, that true individuation and separateness are hardly ever achieved, that we operate out of an imperfect sense of self, that we all disavow and 'split off' parts of the self. I believe further that functional

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<sup>5</sup> '... the theory of anabolic and katabolic cells ... saw the female ovum as the exemplar of the passive, placid anabolic cell. ...Freud's theory...sought to yoke female biological difference to arrested human development, which in turn legitimated her social subjection.' (Astbury 78)

<sup>6</sup> Cambridge: Salt Independent Publishing, 2003. 3-4

subjectivity is harder for women to achieve, in the context of a patriarchally-defined 'reality.' Jill Astbury notes Freud's counsel to his male students (in his final essay, 'Femininity'): "interrogate your own experience or turn to the poets, or else wait until science can give you more profound and more coherent information" ', glossing thus:

Significantly, muted groups are rendered most inarticulate and most frustrated when it comes to expressing matters of special concern to them ... any attempts to modify the dominant model using its own terms are bound to fail. ... self-censorship is a reaction to the unavoidable frustration of being unable to modify dominant structures using (men's) own rules. (26-9)

The novel I was interested in writing would show a focal pair of women operating within the world despite these handicaps, those shared with men compounded by cultural imperatives instructing passivity, pacificity, sacrifice, domestic sequestration. Inside the psyches of the characters - where almost all the unfolding story would be located - their agency-in-the-world would be refracted into multiple meanings, reflections, distortions. It is my aspiration to show my characters acting out agendas hidden to their conscious selves, although I am aware of being a novice in this art.

Of her critical project, in *Sexing the Self*, which I have read and re-read, Elspeth Probyn writes: 'Critical practices of the self work through my feeling and expression of being in the world as they work to render visible the social terrain out of which and in which I speak.'<sup>7</sup> Each of my fictional characters is necessarily and unavoidably, and, indeed, avowedly an attempted reconstruction of my own imagined self. It is only from within that self, eternally problematised, analysed, 'an activity of theory and of being' (Probyn 169), that the imaginary construction of other selves can proceed. Strangely, the work of imagining other selves, 'that pull of imagination which throws me into imaging other articulations of how we might be caught up in each other' (ibid.), pushes one's own sense of self to extremes. Probyn again: 'As my self

does all the complex and mundane manoeuvres required of it, the sound of other sexed selves beckons and empassions ... these selves carry with them the movement of bone, of body, of breath, of imagination, of muscle, and the conviction of sheer stubbornness that there are other possibilities ... (L)odged in the terrain of the social they rearticulate a geography of the possible' (172). Probyn's formulations of a feminist problematic of the self summarise for me many of the difficulties and possibilities inherent in creating fictional female selves: '(T)he critical task at hand is to figure ways in which we can use our selves critically in order to trouble the material conditions that literally gave rise to 'us' ' (168). In particular:

As certain 'hard-line' theories ... pass out of favour, the possibility emerges for unruly and critical questioning about the relation of individuals to the social formation, as well as about the very differing ways that we construct selves for ourselves in relation to other selves. ... Outside and alongside of the guiding paradigms of the last decades and centuries, current questions about the self, subjectivity and inhabited and actual selves and subjectivities ... insist upon the necessity for theories of the particularity of historical subjectivity. (110)

*Holmwood* is a political project, as all fictions are political, a project which will, however, only succeed insofar as the novel succeeds in literary terms, and vice versa. In being a portrait of two contemporary women, I wished the novel to show these characters as a product of societal pressures and expectations. In the case of Paula, I envisaged these as conveyed most strongly via the family. In the case of Evie, I considered peer pressure a more potent force. Over and above these common influences, which I imagine as something akin to gravity, bolting us to the earth and weighing us down, resisting our (Western, post-Enlightenment) efforts to rise above our origins and circumstances, I chose to represent Evie as a sometime prostitute. It is for the reader to interpret the fact that she is shown as having had a

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<sup>7</sup> London & New York: Routledge, 1993. 168

series of relationships with men, after the breakdown of a longer-term abusive relationship at the stage of her life where she was involved in earning a living at a Melbourne massage-parlour.

I am concerned to show the 'parlour' period of Evie's life as the result of circumstance, by no means an all-but-involuntary choice dictated by a putative set of childhood influences, parental neglect or abuse. As Dennis Altman argues in *Global Sex*,<sup>8</sup> commercialization of sex is not simply an increasing fact of the modern world but as old as the world itself. And in the modern world, it is 'difficult to distinguish between actual increase in commercial sex and increasing openness in acknowledging it.' (107) The United Nations is moving, though cautiously, towards regarding sex work as an industry to be regulated, not a plague to be eradicated. Sex work, as Altman says, is a survival-strategy, not 'the refuge of the most marginalized and self-hating' (113). Naturally, for most, it's no picnic. But I want Evie to represent Altman's pragmatic proposition; more, to appear as a self-contained and charming individual, possibly stronger for the experience of working in the sex industry, certainly armed with a great deal of useful knowledge. If some of that experience comes back to haunt her, her fears are those of any woman in a vulnerable situation exposed to male violence, less than those of women who live in such situations with a long-term violent partner. Evie is shown as having had some (male) protection, though inadequate, in her massage-parlour work. She has also encountered random violence in unrelated situations. Her relationship with Ronnie, connected as it is to both drug use and sex work, is represented as involving greater 'learned helplessness', its damaging and lingering psychic consequences blending with earlier lessons.

One minute she was loosely attached to the people streaming away from the Ground, the next her feet slid out from under her and she was being dragged

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<sup>8</sup> Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

to one side of the flow. By the time she'd thought to try and scream, there was a hand over her mouth and she was on the ground, four pairs of jeans-clad legs surrounding her, and nobody else to be seen. She was in an empty patch of unloved land behind the oval, with boys who just wanted to have fun ... a group of boys her own age, none with caricature markers of bestiality, beetling brows or crossed eyes or twisted harelip snarls, ordinary looking boys who'd drunk too much at the game, egging one another on. One of them raised a lighted cigarette and the others sniggered. Evie recalled clearly what had been in her mind as she watched, terrified, held motionless by unseen, strong hands. It's because I'm a girl. This is what girls get. (*Holmwood* 200)

In broader philosophical terms, I am interested in the fear, in most cultures, of women as dangerous, volatile, polluting creatures, liable to break bodily boundaries in distressing, frightening ways. I position my novel in this territory by situating the two main women characters in the aura of birth, death, illness and decay, working among the very young and the very old. As a former sex-worker, Evie has also transgressed official legal and conventional bounds set to women's sexuality in male-dominated societies, although remaining within a subculture no less prescribed and patrolled by men.

In Evie's case, I attempt to imply, through the day-to-day tissue of her life and thoughts, that she has not been diminished by her experience, although the narrative demonstrates how her young-adult traumas remain potent. My authorial attitude is that sex has been demystified for Evie, her life appreciably the better for it. She has no inhibitions about the transactional nature of sexual relations, and none about initiating sexual transactions herself. Evie, in the present of the novel, is able to section off unpleasant and demeaning aspects of her past life as a working girl, retaining a utilitarian but not pessimistic outlook on the business of sexual relations. She has gained access to greater agency in her own affairs, along with an

impatience with courtship behaviour which in large part explains her numerous short-term relationships. Evie, in fact, has an attitude to sex - as a pleasant aside - more traditionally attributed to, and culturally more possible for men.

She'd seen it before. Travellers often had an instinct for a woman with a past, disregarding younger options in favour of battle-scarred veterans. Leading him home in the early hours, Evie congratulated herself she'd got to the point in her life where she could trust her own gut, only slipping up when she'd had too much to drink. She'd come a long way since wet-behind-the-ears days with Ronnie. But Ronnie, the bastard, slipped back into her decommissioned mind at an unpropitious juncture later, as he still had a nasty habit of doing, just when a girl had a right to expect a little uncomplicated oblivion.

*(Holmwood 34)*

I have no interest in suggesting the notion of 'perversion' in relation to Evie's past. Flipping again through Louise J. Kaplan's book, *Female Perversions*,<sup>9</sup> I am reconfirmed in my conviction that traditional psychoanalytical reasoning, even when followed by women-friendly theorists, deposits undue blame at the feet of the mother, subscribing to over-restrictive notions of normal behaviour for both sexes. I am hoping, on the contrary, that my character, Evie, will be one of a new brigade of fictional women whose history includes a period of sex-work, without its dragging in its imagined train enormous guilt or dysfunctionality. As to Evie's history of addiction. I wished to imply, as with her (consequent) choice of sex-work, that her becoming a heroin addict was one of the pitfalls of being a young woman at a certain place in a certain time, rather than a consequence of childhood abuse or low self-esteem. I am more interested in the personality that evolves under the prolonged influence of alcohol or drug addiction than in positing a causal chain from childhood insecurities to drug abuse. Paula's (somewhat flippant) warning to Bert that the Haggerty family

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<sup>9</sup> Pandora Press, 1991

has a proclivity to alcohol abuse stands as sufficient explication of Evie's succumbing to heroin. For me, the important thing is that Evie has come through, and the interesting questions to tease out in this novel are what remnants or traces are still to be discerned in her psyche.

Although my own belief system rests on feminist principles, this may not mean that mine is a 'feminist' novel. As Sneja Gunew warns (in her chapter 'Feminisms, Reading, Postmodernisms', in *Feminism and the Politics of Difference*<sup>10</sup>), an 'uneasy battery of questions hovers around feminism's investment in the author function ... Is a feminist text determined by the sex of the writer, and further, by that writer's stated commitment to feminism? Is it determined by the object of investigation? Is the style or genre... a factor to be considered?' (31) Answer: No, or not necessarily, mainly because the author has definitively lost her place as the arbiter of meaning in respect of her own writing. 'Reading', as Gunew styles what is now a commonplace of critical theory - 'is an act of transformation, not a simple retrieval or diagnostics' (32).

Sneja Gunew's call to arms occurs within the context of discussions of ethnography, positing the woman author's complicity in networks of power which a proper practice of reading works tirelessly to unravel. Gunew invokes Gayatri Spivak and her 'challenging phrase "negotiating enabling violations"': that is, the hard work of turning to our advantage what would otherwise oppress us' (32). I want to apply the politics of reading difference in a perhaps unorthodox way in reading my own novel. In re-reading and explicating my own work I regularly find myself awarding Other status to my characters. I find myself constantly retreating from too-imperious/imperialist dissection of their motives, psychological makeup, machinations. I find myself treading softly in their presence as a proper ethnographer will in the presence of Other subjects, attempting to heed Spivak's warning to avoid 'the clear-headed

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<sup>10</sup> Allen & Unwin, 1993

arrogance of this assumption of a subject-position that claims the other as grounds for difference' (345). Spivak's ideal of anti-hegemonic criticism and writing is wonderfully noble, indeed she admits it to be unattainable: one must simply, always, exercise '(a) caution, a vigilance, a persistent taking of distance always out of step with total involvement' (367). I do not go so far as to assert the 'real' existence of my characters, as Jasper Fforde amusingly did in his two recent novels (*The Eyre Affair* and *Lost in a Good Book*<sup>11</sup>) with regard to famous fictional creatures such as Jane Eyre, Mr Rochester and Miss Havisham. Yet my wariness does proceed from a sense that I am not the normative reader, perhaps not even a qualified reader, of my own text. If my characters 'work', their operations will be more apparent to a reader who is not their architect.

But this is by no means to deny the presence of the author in her own text. Elspeth Probyn writes, of the ever-present reporting self in ethnography: 'If we keep in mind the doubled sense of representation we may begin to think through ways of repositioning the relations between being a 'proxy' and producing a portrait...the image of the other a palimpsest through which we see ourselves.' (81)

I invoke the principle of partialness as truest to partially-realised human subjectivity, and also as truest to the condition of women in the world. Trinh T. Minh-ha expresses this in a piece on film called 'All-Owning Spectatorship':

In a society where they remain constantly at odds on occupied territory, women can only situate their social spaces precariously in the interstices of diverse systems of ownership. Their elsewhere is never a pure elsewhere, but only a no-escape-elsewhere, an elsewhere-within-here that enters in at the same time as it breaks with the circle of omnispectatorship, in which women always incur the risk of remaining endlessly spectators, whether of an object,

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<sup>11</sup> London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2000, 2002



an event, an attribute, a duty, an adherence, a classification or a social process. (Gunew 174)

Or, to quote a poem of my own, 'View from the Pier':

we tell shreds of tales

only ask for shreds

.....

I sit in this chair

up to my knees in

threads come loose

the view an endless ocean

of woolly tales un-

ravelling, skeins

of our lives (ADAN 68-80)

*Holmwood* makes several implicit and many explicit statements about gender politics. Over the last several years particular studies have shaped my perspective. *Taking Care of Men*, by Anthony McMahon<sup>12</sup>, is a landmark book. Susan Maushart's recent book, *Wifework*<sup>13</sup>, has been useful, as has her *The Mask of Motherhood*<sup>14</sup>. More in the nature of a bible has been Sara Blaffer Hrdy's *Mother Nature*, proposing, with reference to the animal world and many human ethnic groups, that the practice of mothering is far from being a 'motherhood' issue. Mothers will not always sacrifice themselves for their young. Among certain extant human groups, mothers are permitted to decide whether or not to keep babies to which they have given birth.

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<sup>12</sup> Cambridge University Press, 1999

<sup>13</sup> Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2001

Infanticide is a common practice worldwide. The name of the game being survival, human mothers are particularly badly placed when it comes to support during the vulnerable child-rearing years, unduly long relative to other mammals.

Of particular note with regard to *Holmwood* is Blaffer Hrdy's positing of the necessity of allomothers, alternative mothers or 'aunties', for successful rearing of human young. Fathers are unreliable and can turn nasty (stepfathers notoriously so), yet mothers burdened with infants need extra help getting access to resources. Other females often provide this service in animal groups, as they do in human societies. I have this in mind in giving Evie her central auntie status - a role not only important but sufficient, in psychological terms, for self-fulfilment. Evie has numerous relationships at one remove with other women's children, a mutually satisfactory as well as necessary state of affairs on both sides, especially rewarding and important to all parties in the cases of niece Rose and nephew Bert.

Evie turned her gaze to Rosie, the thriving child of the sunburnt country, contentedly leaning with one elbow on her mother's lap, eating plentiful, unprocessed, healthful food. Rosie made a face. Auntiedom was a blessed state, Evie thought; all children needed alternative mothers for when their own were indisposed or out hunting. (*Holmwood* 240)

A more thoroughgoing conclusion, that women are happiest together, men likewise, and that our social arrangements would do best to reflect this, is drawn by Germaine Greer in *The Whole Woman*<sup>15</sup>. In some societies, the ones Westerners are accustomed to consider backward, they do. Greer envisages the West coming around to the idea of communal apartments solely for women. Part of my focus on Evie and Paula's relationship is to show how a de facto Greerite praxis operates unremarked in the West already, as when sisters, say, spend the greater part of their

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<sup>14</sup> Vintage, 1997

<sup>15</sup> Viking, 2000, e.g. p. 328 'The dignified alternative is for women to segregate themselves as men do ... to make a conscious decision not to want men's company more than men want women's.'

spare time together, in the absence of partners. I wanted to explore in *Holmwood* how far the sister relationship can go towards meeting adult emotional needs. I was unsure in my own mind about this, being inclined to believe that our childhood impressions of our siblings tend to prevail into adulthood, preventing us from appreciating the full three-dimensionality of our siblings as adults.

Against this is the tendency we have as adults to turn to the individuals we feel know us best, our siblings, when other arrangements break down. I question the optimism on some counts of Brigid McConville's book of interviews, *Sisters*: 'Not one interviewee said that she had ever been in a struggle with a sister over a man,<sup>16</sup> but agree that '...the reality of the sisters' relationship when men are involved is infinitely more positive and complex than the stereotype.'<sup>17</sup> McConville's book is enlightening in many areas, especially on the difficulties all women have identifying with one another in a male-dominated society, and on the sister bond as 'not only durable, but ... hardly requir(ing) any formal attention in the great gaps of time and space that often separate (sisters) in adult life ... Nor does the childhood relationship have to be all sweetness and light for this to be the case.'<sup>18</sup>

When I began writing my novel, I was sure only that there were two sisters, and that they were the closest siblings, intimacy-wise, of six, one brother having died in early adulthood. Here I was leaning heavily on what I knew or thought I knew of the two of my own four sisters who seemed to me to most apparently different, or different in the most interesting ways, among my siblings. One, the younger, had been dutiful and 'good', up to a point, and the other a black sheep, in youth. Now in their forties, they had reached a time in their lives where youthful follies were past, apparently, and their lives had settled into a more or less conventional pattern.

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<sup>16</sup> Melbourne: Pan Books, 1985. 123

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> McConville 187

*Holmwood* shows Evie and Paula jolted by events into new insights about themselves and each other.

Paul Carter, in *Living in a New Country*,<sup>19</sup> writes that '(t)he drama of the space people improvise between themselves resides ... in ... the dynamic back and forth of gestures, sounds, counter-gestures and counter-sounds ... temporal as much as spatial ... a continual harking back to earlier unfinished gestures and sounds ... to find a system of communication where the greatest differences can be expressed simultaneously, and, instead of cancelling each other out, be instantaneously transferred from one side to the other.<sup>20</sup> Carter's passage is oddly reminiscent of the mystics' attempts to describe union with the divine, when we shall allegedly know even as we are known. On a much more pedestrian level, the one in which we live, communication between siblings approximates this knowing/being known. The ongoing exchange between sisters in my novel, in accustomed and new spaces, jolted along by intermittent dramas, is meant to appear this way - unfinished, ever-developing, moving towards implicit understanding.

For real-life episodes incorporated into *Holmwood*, I used my (unreliable) memory of stories my sisters had related to me in the past, topped up by occasional nostalgia-sessions with my siblings. These talks - in a mood of emotion recollected in hilarity - were not undertaken in the context of finding material for my book: I had determined to use invented detail around any 'facts' in my reconstructions. I found reminiscing with my sisters always sparked a certain liveliness and three-dimensionality in my imagination. Paula and Evie rapidly took on 'lives' of their own, unrelated to my sisters' situations past or present.

Inescapably immersed in my birth-family drama, I frequently seek out occasions to discuss others. Friends and acquaintances, especially those with large

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<sup>19</sup> London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1992

<sup>20</sup> Carter 180

numbers of siblings, have provided accounts of their relationships with brothers and sisters and parents. Again, these tale-sharing sessions have been emotive and energising. There's always more to be understood about position in the sibling sequence, a father's behaviour towards a mother, religion and politics in the family, the interaction with near kin such as cousins, the effect of different proportions of boys to girls among siblings. These informal collaborations have often galvanised the writing of what seem to me authentic passages in the novel.

One woman friend in particular is of special interest in relation to *Holmwood* and the matter of sibling-bonds. As one of five sisters, with one brother, Helen has a particularly domineering, professional father. In her, a palpably anxious persona seems to be the result. Helen speaks rapidly and constantly, filling all silences in conversation, continually attempting to reinforce a guest's well-being with repeated reassurances (gratitude for small favours, compliments, deferential remarks). This barrage of placatory behaviour seems to me to be deployed in an unconscious attempt to ward off ill-will or even active harm. One has the impression Helen constantly tries to forestall the anger of some unseen figure, for whom her actual interlocutor stands in. From Helen I take away a powerful impression of a 'squashed' sister: strapped for growing-room amidst a team of sisters (three older, one younger), imperfectly protected by her mother and bullied by her father and brother.

Helen is one of the sources of my Paula character, Paula being a youngest sister, prey to dreams about insufficient resources, missing out, being last in line and too late. In waking life, Paula has a lingering sense of being a supernumerary - she has trouble locking in to her life, suspects she may be intermittently invisible to other people. Her rejection of Chris, her suitor, stems partly from this. Other factors are Paula's abiding loyalty to her first partner, whom she relates unconsciously to her father, with whom her bond is very strong. A consequence of her early bonding with her father, an unpredictable but charismatic man, is that Paula registers conflict,

ongoing drama and high tension, as natural and indeed as testament to the authenticity of relationships. Chris, comfortably bonded with his mother and used to an equable mutuality as normative of relationships, does not manage to 'imprint' himself sufficiently on Paula's psyche. She experiences him as 'too nice', although she protests (too much) otherwise.

Paula resolved to make an effort. She'd slipped back into her old routine, letting days go by, keeping Chris as a sort of optional extra. He was being entirely accommodating, allowing her to set the pace. In the past two weeks, he'd rung her a few times, she'd called him once. She hardly thought about him when he wasn't there. Poor guy, he was so nice. (*Holmwood* 149)

While no superwomen, Evie and Paula have found sufficient strength and resilience to dilute, if not neutralise the toxicity of a dysfunctional birth-family. This poison, it seems clear, does not leave the adult organism, but remains present, sometimes dormant and sometimes active, rendered less potent as years pass but retaining the power to unexpectedly lay low its host. ('When we've compared/ notes it transpires that/ what's down there is depths/ of diffidence, unease/ attacks of panic, low/ low days of *désespoir*'<sup>21</sup>). Still mysterious is the period of old age - is the apparent amelioration of childhood and adolescent damage only apparent? - are the old hurts and rages and terrors still packed away in the brain and the gut, waiting for the breakdown of painstakingly-erected barriers along with the deterioration of the body and voluntary controls? Although I do not follow Evie and Paula so far along the way, I use the *Holmwood* locale to play with some of the possibilities.

For all my inclination towards theories that seem to suggest predetermination, in this life rather than the next, by familial and societal influences, I want to believe, to stick with theological terminology, in 'free will'. I want this fiction, *Holmwood*, in any event, to show adult women in control of their lives, women with important

responsibilities which they bear admirably. Evie and Paula should provide testimony for the hopeful proposition that adult women are not prisoners of our backgrounds or genes, but able to retrieve lost ground, recognise and compensate for deficiencies in our upbringing, identify psychic strengths as well as deficiencies corresponding to painful lack or excess in childhood. Work goes on, in other words: adult experience continues to shape the psyche, the psyche works to repair itself:

That vision couldn't have been me  
but I *remember* it somehow  
as though secret salvage work were possible

on museum items in the brain, so that you  
dredge up as fact  
something intensely believed in

...

reflecting back to me my arrival

in the rightness I was born for

('The House of Merivale'. Kenneally AH 82-3)

I attempt in my fiction to mount action on an internal stage. The secret life which is self-reflexive consciousness is only possible, so far as we know, for humans, perhaps for higher-order primates. I have always been fascinated by how complete, and how other, is the interior life, intrigued by 'spills' of interiority into the external world. What happens to Evie and Paula in the course of my narrative is filtered through their internal reactions and responses, guesswork and fantasies; what happens to other characters or what other characters do is discovered through their eyes. In addition, I use Paula's and Evie's working situations to stage some examples of 'spillage': old people losing control of habitual mental restraints, children

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<sup>21</sup> Kenneally, Cath. 'Ruthie'. *Around Here*. Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 1999. 76-7

overstepping boundaries they don't yet recognise. Paula and Evie are both attuned, by training and experience, to these incidents, and learn from them.

'Funny, that,' said Paula to Des as they retraced their steps down the hall, leaving Nurse Bridge keeping watch. 'It's in the books. Supposed to be a phenomenon caused by a series of minor strokes that often precede the final decline.'

'Yeah. But why should they always cause visions of people? I'm keeping an open mind. '

'Angel of Death, you think?'

'No, but maybe it's... eh, what would I know. But I know we don't know enough to say it can't be presences of some kind.'

'Dead people, ghosts?'

'Whatever. Maybe the dead are like depleted uranium; they have a half-life that goes on for some unspecified time. Or something. I hope I'm not scared if it happens to me, anyway. A welcoming committee should be a comfort.'

'I don't know. I'd like to think I'd finished dealing with someone when they died. Bit of a bugger to have them come back and stand around gloating, waiting for me to pop my clogs.' (*Holmwood 243*)



Looking again at my initial proposition - a novel which concerns itself with the damping-down of selfhood common to females the world over - I realise it makes for a less than exciting reading prospect. If the main characters in my text are to be less than fully realised, and, further, unconsciously repressing much of such identities as have crystallised in adulthood, the going might be expected to be heavy and the action dull. It is true that what is of interest to me is the internal world of both characters, but enough highly-coloured action should be going on there to satisfy readers. There should also be conflict between the mind-world of both sisters and the 'real', making for tension and suspense.

In Evie's case, to give one example, her customary preoccupation prevents her from attaching the significance she should to the footprint she notices under her bedroom window, which advertises the reappearance of Ronnie in her life. Paula, caught up in the dynamics of family exchange at her own birthday party, doesn't pick up nuances of behaviour that might easily betray the secret intimacy between her ex-partner and her sister Trisha. I have constructed the novel such that both sisters are revealed to live fantasy lives that occupy much of their attention, keeping them to a considerable extent insulated from 'real' life. Paula has less opportunity to escape into fantasy, with her busy work life, but her dreams compete strongly with her waking moments for attention. Evie's haunting of opportunity shops is a kind of dreaming also; she sees them, as she reflects at one point, as museums of womens' dress and customs. Engaging with womens' relics takes her into imagined histories of other women as well as providing her with tangible links, such as the yellow jug introduced on the first page, between her present, their past, her own past.

*Holmwood's* first paragraph establishes the relationship between Evie and Paula, with Rosie (daughter/niece) introduced as an important part of their bond. Paula's precision, even pernicketyness, appear at once, along with Evie's casual style. The novel moves immediately into Paula's professional territory, the nursing

home which gives the book its name, presented as an important buttress of her identity and self-esteem. Evie is seen as happier to go with the flow, more settled in her sense of self, although her first action in the narrative, the purchase of an op-shop jug, precipitates an unwelcome flashback and demonstrates Evie's vulnerability to her undead past. Evie is seen contentedly mingling caregiving and daydreaming, joining in Rosie's play, at intervals composing a written fantasy, an ongoing fun project deliberately overwritten in bodice-ripper fashion. This should suggest self-sufficiency and resourcefulness in Evie, as well as a habit of taking the mickey, rather than any attempt at compensation for shortcomings in her life. (In structural terms, the segments of Evie's 'novelette' are situated so as to provide a counterpoint to evolving scenarios in the 'real life' of the encompassing novel, a device I also used in my first novel.) Evie has the survivor's content in merely being alive. From this point on, the novel shifts constantly from Evie's to Paula's perspective and back, through a period of not much more than a month.

It will be apparent that I have deliberately given my female characters dominion on the home front. There are no resident men in their lives, though Evie may be in the process of acquiring one and Paula still painfully erasing the after-image of her first love from her psyche. In the real world it is statistically probable that women of Evie's and Paula's age will be single (long-term relationships having broken down). Men find new partners more quickly; women in their forties often don't. More importantly, I wanted to make plain the areas of control both women have established in their lives, the domestic being the most obvious but often overlooked domain.

Anthony McMahon's *Taking Care of Men* is bracingly clear on the home front as battle-front, unequalled in dispelling obfuscatory rhetoric that abounds on the issue. In a chapter called 'Misrecognising Resistance', he examines discussions in both the scholarly and the popular press of household labour and who should do it.

Remarkably often, commentators blame women for not producing change: either they're too bossy to give up control of housework, or they want to keep control of child-management, or they fear confrontation. Also, '(f)or men, the belief that women's standards are excessive provides a very common self-justification.'<sup>22</sup> Male tolerance of lower standards is constructed as more rational, and also more macho. Bluntly put, men employ 'avoidance, denial, intimidation and violence to avoid domestic work,' and they avoid sharing emotional labour by similar means - women's requests for improved communications meet 'incomprehension, violent anger ... or cool logic on immediate issues.'<sup>23</sup> Men want the privileged situation which allows them to expect to be looked after by women to continue, and will fight to maintain it.

The fact that unemployed men do as little around the house as employed men (sometimes less) has come to be explained (away) with reference to the paradigm of full-time/male work, a paradigm early tagged by feminist theorists as disadvantageous to women with children. 'However, slowly the model has come to be thought of as also, or even mainly, a constraint on men. Men are said to be frustrated by the limited roles available to them, compared with women's 'multiple options'.<sup>24</sup> Men dominate in the labour market, exploiting women's domestic work, reinforcing it by keeping women economically dependent: '(a)n aspect of that dominance is men's higher incomes, which can then be constructed as an obstacle to change.'<sup>25</sup> Phenomena such as longer working hours come to be viewed as part of 'society'. 'But as soon as a phenomenon is considered external, it moves beyond critical attention. Much of the talk about obstacles to change in men's domestic lives does just that.'<sup>26</sup>

My experience of the homefront as battleground has been unambiguous, as my first, strongly autobiographical novel, indicated. In *Holmwood*, Evie and Paula

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<sup>22</sup> McMahan 158

<sup>23</sup> McMahan 30

<sup>24</sup> McMahan 168

<sup>25</sup> McMahan 173

<sup>26</sup> McMahan 175

have only themselves to please: to have allotted them male partners would have required staging some of the battle of the home, whereas I wanted home for both characters to be sovereign territory, even if assailable by intruders of various kinds. Evie is a collector, making her home a museum of symbolically-charged items. Paula is extremely 'houseproud' (not neurotic), using the nursing-home's industrial washing-machines for her household linen, thereby achieving very clean sheets and strong satisfaction. A live-in male might have contested her system. Evie likes to be surrounded by what a carping husband might well view as undesirable clutter.

A deeper, intended conundrum in the novel, regarding the extent of hegemony my characters might wield over their own lives, is the placing of both women in jobs whose nature is service. To what extent are they re-enacting the 'feminine' in their lives, to what extent redefining or resisting it? To what extent have they (especially Evie, with her early employment history) internalised the abjection of Woman? Have they contented themselves with lesser, servile, jobs when others with higher (male-awarded) status might have been possible? Here is Julia Kristeva, uncharacteristically impassioned, speaking from within the depths of the female dilemma as she perceives it:

If a solution exists to what we call today the feminine problematic ... (I)t involves throwing women into all of society's contradictions with no hypocrisy or fake protection. The second condition is sexual and no social statute can ever guarantee it ... it involves coming to grips with one's language and body as others, as heterogeneous elements ... an infinite, repeated, multipliable dissolution, until you recover possibilities of symbolic restoration ...<sup>27</sup>

My characters may not be familiar with Kristeva, but in the above passage she is no great distance away from their concerns. I show Evie in continuing, conscious

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<sup>27</sup> *Desire in Language*. Ed. Leon S Roudiez. Trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, Leon S Roudiez. New York: Columbia. 1980. 165

struggle against abjection: lashing out against her sleazy private employer, using humour to lance the still-extant paradigm of Irish servility and stupidity in her workplace, but still not free of internalised passivity and silence. There may be deliberate, ongoing *mise-en-abîme* in Evie's choice of occupation (to the extent it is a choice, not forced on her by lack of qualifications and age). Her work is in the least-valued sphere, poorly paid, tied to the messiness and unruliness of children.

While Paula deals with equally unspeakable second-childhood messes, she has status, is less hands-on than Evie, wielding authority permitted her by the patriarchy, within strict limits; yet, in that Paula's is a domain where all authority (except religious, the province of a figure of fun, Father Keogh) is in the hands of women, it counts. What I want to get at is my characters' self-estimation, conscious or pre-conscious, its ingredients, digested and undigested. Women, sisters, Catholic-schooled, born in the 1950s or 1960s in urban Australia, coming of age in the seventies or eighties, their parts are to a degree pre-scripted; where do they diverge from the script, why and how? I visited this territory in *Room Temperature*, representing mother Phil, at the end of her life, clinging to religion to explain and validate her pain and a lifetime's anger, while daughter Catherine, turned unbeliever in her twenties, can only mime sympathy. Still in the air we breathe is the formula for being a 'good woman'. Spivak, as usual, has her eye on the global picture that Evie and Paula only glimpse:

We must keep trying to deconstruct the breach between home and work in the ideology of our global struggle to reach this female grounding layer that holds up contemporary capital. We have to face this difficult truth, that internalised gendering by women, perceived as ethical choice within 'cultural' inscription, accepts exploitation as it accepts sexism in the name of a willing conviction that this is how one is good as a woman, even ethical as a woman.

(391)

Sociologist and feminist Ann Oakley is succinct on the modern elision of Woman into Home. Her *Man and Wife*,<sup>28</sup> a biographical account of her mother's and father's first years together, sets out to show how Kay Titmuss's life, active and public up to the time of marriage, recedes to a shadowy, subsidiary, sequestered existence, even though Oakley's father, Richard Titmuss, had a 'passionate belief that human beings could only fulfil their potential in a society which offered equality of opportunity for all.'<sup>29</sup> Richard Titmuss, one of the key formulators of social policy in post-war Britain's welfare state, 'signally failed to notice the deep fissure in the vision of an equal society created by men's and women's different social experiences. It was as though for him the social divisions between men and women were different from all other social divisions.'<sup>30</sup>

Oakley, also a noted novelist, like McMahon interrogating the social order rather than Kristeva's Oedipal maelstrom for explanations, sees women's otherness as part of 'taken-for-granted aspects of our lives which (lie) beyond the realm of political discourse.'<sup>31</sup> Womanhood still connotes the private world. Because the state assumes the continuation of the pattern whereby women do people-work in the home and men profit by this labour, are made free by it to operate in the public world, the state's actions 'are essentially exploitative and patriarchal - that is, more often in men's interests than women's.'<sup>32</sup> Oakley reiterates that there is no public sphere remote from the private one. The pattern of 'democratic' selection of political representatives of the people continues to be systematically discriminatory. Similarly, 'in the home, differences in power straddle, infuse and ignite people's bonds with one another.'<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> London: Flamingo, 1997

<sup>29</sup> Oakley 4

<sup>30</sup> Oakley 4

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Oakley 5

<sup>33</sup> Oakley 6

The reason so many visionary ideals of post-war social policy have fizzled out is 'the lack of any basic shift in the social fissure gender imposes; nothing much has happened because nothing much has happened to women.'<sup>34</sup> As Oakley says, women continue to take on themselves the preservation of the old paradigm of 'the' family. The continuing '*danse macabre* of the public-private split, and the associated repetitive *pas de deux* of men and women, leaves us all gasping for air, bereft of the possibility of social transformation.'<sup>35</sup> For me this is a self-evident truth - the politics of the home and 'the' family are profoundly subversive of women's attempts to achieve parity with men.

My reading of women's behaviour in 'the' family situation is that hitherto independent women, used to disposing of their own time and resources at their own discretion, retreat, in nuclear-family scenarios, to a position where they become gradually used to deferring their own wants. The index of this process is mobility. In very few nuclear families, even egalitarian ones, does the woman feel as free as the male partner does to walk out of the front door, get into the car and drive away on her own business. Where children are involved it is still mothers who at the commencement of a day or an outing, consider how children are to be transported, fed, rested, and otherwise taken care of, a pattern reinforced by other social institutions, such as schools, which assume mother is primary caregiver.

This largely unremarked but intensely real mental burden is carried by women as if by divine or some other unquestionable dispensation. It reduces not only women's day-to-day mobility and agency but their sense of these things as due to them. Even if they continue to believe themselves theoretically entitled, they routinely, regretfully, decide their old freedoms are unattainable in practice. Most women still, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, learn to grin and bear it and attempt to fit in 'public' lives around the obligations of the home. A shocking upset of

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<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

the conventional pattern, the recent killing by an Australian mother of her four children, prompted the culprit's sister to tell ABC TV's 'Australian Story' (March 22, 2004) that 'Kathy always liked to go out on a Friday night, that was her thing.' Ineluctably deprived, by motherhood, of that freedom, and refusing to submit to the supposed logic of her situation, Kathy (her sister seems to believe) turned on her tiny jailers. Their father seemed not to enter the equation.

As Oakley suggests, 'the *idea* of masculinity sets up an opposition to daily life, through which identity is achieved, as some kind of supra-domestic transcendence.'<sup>36</sup> Women's bodies themselves arbitrate a different time and rhythm to men's, 'not determined by the clock or by the social relations of publicly organized and approved labour.'<sup>37</sup> Of her parents' marriage, Oakley notes that other models besides the one they lived, where the wife did not pursue a separate professional life, were to be seen in friends' marriages. But among their closest acquaintances, and between Richard and Kay Titmuss, the wife's work was subsidiary to the husband's, served his work, and went towards providing him with a haven, an escape, 'a *refuge*.'<sup>38</sup> A good deal of what Richard and Kay hoped for appeared to come to pass after 1945, but 'a welfare-state based on the two-roles model of women was to be a disappointing chameleon.'<sup>39</sup> Oakley's summary of the state of affairs that still prevails is cogent: 'Equal for women means being like men. Equal for men doesn't mean being like women. So long as men and women inhabit different spheres and there is no *collective* lifting of the boundaries between the home and 'work', the public world will be the important one and the private world of the home will only shadow it as the poor relation.'<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Oakley 15

<sup>37</sup> Oakley 16

<sup>38</sup> Oakley 291

<sup>39</sup> Oakley 294

<sup>40</sup> Oakley 295



We shudder to think the days when women teachers had to retire on getting married in Australia are so recently gone. But the women who were freed in 1967 to continue their profession after marriage weren't freed from the expectation that they would go on holding home and family together. As women like my own mother, with eight children, did, at great cost to themselves and their families, territory I explored in my first novel, *Room Temperature*, and return to in *Holmwood*. It is still indisputably true that women who want to succeed in the public sphere must *seem* as untrammelled, at least in the public eye, as men. Male public figures who are perceived to have pressing family responsibilities of the hands-on variety are either objects of awed admiration or mockery. The moment is still far off when that situation might be perceived as equally as normal, as 'proper', as it is deemed to be for women.

So perhaps I've cheated with *Holmwood*. I don't situate my two women characters in 'normal' family scenarios, precisely because I want to show them operating in both spheres without the responsibility of sustaining a resident male partner who drains them of energy and a sense of entitlement to a public life. Their children and relations have a similar draining effect, but that is a separate political issue. Evie and Paula are aware of the commitment and burden that children/nieces/nephews represent, embracing them all the same, even though they can in no sense control or stay on top of the stresses that accumulate from this source. Paula, at the novel's end, is also considering inviting a Holmwood resident to share her home. To the extent that my novel strives to be quietly celebratory of its central characters' lives, it celebrates the way women continue, so much more often than not, to freely accept and take on these crucial responsibilities, and to build them, lovingly and painfully, into the structure of family communities of all varieties.

In the above analysis I focus on the psychological alteration - towards deferral of their individual needs and ambitions - that so many women experience in

marriage. I don't mean to imply that economic factors do not work towards the same result. My novel sets up its two focal women characters as economically independent, although Evie works in sectors where pay and conditions are precarious. In the literature of twentieth-century feminism, socialist feminism has laid most stress on economic independence as the basis of women's liberation. In fact, women have been aware of this for much longer than the last hundred years. A colleague and friend, Linda Barwick, is a descendant of Suzanne Voilquin, nineteenth-century midwife and member of radical saint-simonian communities in Egypt and America, director of one of their communal houses. Voilquin's *Memories of a Daughter of the People*<sup>41</sup> details Suzanne's upbringing, her politics, her marriage and its consequences. Barwick and I hope to work on dialogues around Suzanne Voilquin in Paris in 2005, to live for some time near her old haunts in St-Merry, to study archival material held in Paris libraries. As Barwick puts it, we hope to confront 'early saint-simonian feminism with our experiences as feminists at the end of late-industrial capitalism in the era of globalisation.'<sup>42</sup>

Voilquin had grand visions of 'the influence of woman' joining 'with the social harmonization and progressive pacification of the globe.'<sup>43</sup> But on a material level, Voilquin saw that fair wages were the lynchpin of emancipation. She organised the Paris midwives, in 1848, to agitate for government salaries. This campaign was unsuccessful. Needlework trades fared badly also, with female wages for garmentmakers after 1840 never rising to a level 'that could support a woman on her own.'<sup>44</sup> Said Voilquin: 'For the time being, the relationship between the sexes must be a postponed question ... before being morally free (women must be) materially self-sufficient.'<sup>45</sup> The saint-simonian founding fathers had not considered economic

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<sup>41</sup> Voilquin, Suzanne. *Souvenirs d'une fille du peuple ou La saint-simonienne en Egypte*. Paris: François Maspero, 1978

<sup>42</sup> letter, October 2003

<sup>43</sup> Moses, Claire Goldberg. *Feminism, Socialism and French Romanticism*. Indiana UP, 1993. 330

<sup>44</sup> Moses 82

<sup>45</sup> Moses 83

independence for women, but the women saw clearly that '(W)omen must owe their subsistence, their social position, only to their own ability and work ... To accomplish this, women must work, must fulfill a function,' wrote Voilquin's fellow-feminist Claire Démar.<sup>46</sup> Liberty and equality, they said, meant 'to be able to own possessions; for as long as we cannot, we shall always be the slaves of men.'<sup>47</sup> Reine Guindorf saw that 'as soon as it is noticed that we can do a job, the wages there are lowered because we must not earn as much as men. It's true, it is essential that our earnings be very modest to assure our dependence on men.'<sup>48</sup> These pioneering radical women looked forward to all jobs being open to women when equal educational opportunities made them eligible. They would have been shocked to see that the battle is still being fought at the beginning of the third Christian millennium.

Estelle B. Freedman, author of *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*,<sup>49</sup> believes that utopian socialists like the saint-simonians were more radical than the later Marxists, in attempting to socialize not only production in the workplace but housework. 'This socialization of housework could restore the proximity of men's and women's tasks ... Socialized housework and childcare also meant that all adults took responsibility for all children.'<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately, writes Freedman, the saint-simonians became tainted in the public mind by reason of their espousal of free love and interracial relationships. It was to be Marxist socialism that would capture the imagination of workers and intellectuals, with a prescription for bringing women into the workforce and thus away from economic dependence on husbands. Marxism, though, failed to recognise the value of work in the home, seen as producing no surplus value. A few remarkable socialist feminists did enact reforms that addressed the dual-labour problem, like Commissar Kollontai after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, ordering free maternity care and equal work duties for women.

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<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Reine Guindorf, Moses 83

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> London: Profile, 2002

Almost all Kollontai's work was undone by Stalin, as Soviet women, like women elsewhere, went on working a double day. The revolutionary strategies of the Great Leap Forward to detach Chinese women from patriarchal restraints and free them for the workforce also saw communal child-care facilities close in hard times while '... state propaganda claimed that 'Women Should Do More Family Duties'.<sup>51</sup>

Reine Guindorf's assessment still holds true. Women still dominate in jobs that are either unattractive to men or in sectors seen by men as on the wane; I place Evie and Paula in just those sectors. Work seen as women's work still has least status and lowest pay, incontrovertibly indicating that women themselves have not achieved the rise in status those early French feminists envisaged. I choose to stake Evie's and Paula's self-esteem, so far as it depends on status and social position, on the very fact that they have jobs which provide both with an identity and public value. Clearly, though, Paula has a higher-status job than Evie. Some of Evie's self-doubt is connected to her insecurity on this count. On the other hand, Evie is cognisant of the greater freedom she has to 'smell the roses', limited, again, by meagre resources. Paula leans heavily on her work identity for her self-esteem, and actually values the demands it makes on her time, when she can be sure of being too busy to spare attention to other anxieties.

In *Holmwood*, what I want to explore is the conflict that persists in women's hearts and minds, accentuated rather than lessened by their greater presence in the workforce, over service to family and community versus salaried work. While neither of my characters is active in a political organisation, Paula is a good employer, with an instinct for that commonality of females idealised by Voilquin. Evie is part of all-female work communities, performing surrogate mothering for pay. Neither Evie nor Paula, innoculated by membership of a large family against clubbiness, is a 'joiner', both maintaining the habit of secretiveness large families enjoy. All these matters

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<sup>50</sup> Freedman 58

minge, any one of them in the ascendant at any given time. No Big Picture correlates neatly to the interior world where we live. Part of what I want to do in my writing is always to show the constant waxing and waning of moods, of confidence, of urges and desires. Nothing is fixed, moods are unpredictable; there are material, often physiological reasons for our ever-changing self-perception. Suzanne Voilquin's memoirs, interestingly, show that she believed in a direct relationship between psychological and physical wellbeing - she constantly explains illness in terms of shocks to psychological equilibrium. I use illness and dreams, in *Holmwood*, to show this two-way connection. Paula's fever, for instance, at one point, clarifies her unresolved attachment to her ex-partner.<sup>52</sup>

I am attempting, in this novel as in earlier work, to demonstrate, claim, stage the profound value of association with and attention to children (see 'Mother Bear', 'Eleven Up', 'Magic Circle Club' and other poems in *Around Here*; 'Little Palindrome', 'Being Away' and 'Big Kids' in *All Day, All Night*, and more or less the whole of *Room Temperature*.) I include Bert, on the cusp of adulthood, along with Rosie and Zak in the group of children who appear in *Holmwood*. Other children make guest appearances at regular intervals, bearing truths of various kinds. Collecting Rosie from after-school care, Paula finds the children making angels and other Christmas decorations, idealising that unsullied, iconic, divine/human domestic scene, as their culture instructs. Yet Rosie is also bursting with a story from earlier in the day, about building a cubby-house with her girlfriends, whose point is that the girls had to capitulate to male invasion. I mean this to be funny, but nonetheless illustrative, in little, of Paula's reality and real-world politics.

Paula regularly leaves Rosie in after-school care as well as in the care of a relative, in order to meet the demands of her working life. As noted above, anthropologist Blaffer Hrdy is clear on the situation of dual-career mothers, 'whether

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<sup>51</sup> Freedman 62

they forage or go to work.<sup>53</sup> Whatever may be the prevailing romantic (read, patriarchal) notions regarding mothers and work, work/foraging, is the first imperative, maternal duties second. 'Just as European infants were once left in foundling homes or sent to wet nurses at near epidemic levels, today we witness poor mothers from the Philippines, Central and South America, South Africa and Asia leaving children behind to be bottle-fed and somehow cared for by kin while they themselves go far away to work as housekeepers and caretakers for other people's children. Solutions differ, but the tradeoffs mothers make, the underlying emotions and mental calculations, remain the same.'<sup>54</sup>

A nurse herself, and still working in the healthcare industry, and moreover subject to 'peeled' moments of awareness of the mammalian imperatives we all follow, Paula knows she is lucky to have matrilineal kin nearby (although, and this is a central paradox of my novel, care by kin is risky). Hrdy refers to a study of Italian foundlings during the years 1879-81, when 69,000 babies were left at foundling homes in Sicily, but only fifteen in Sardinia, where mother-centred family organisation prevailed.<sup>55</sup>

Similarly, Evie collides with several home truths via the children in her care at her three workplaces. I try to avoid being cute in the use of children as pivotal at certain points of the book: I intend the child-adult axis to be important and telling, not least because I want to suggest that Evie and Paula continue to contain, and to a significant extent to perform their own child selves. In moments of elation or relief, they regress to scraps of musical detritus from their shared childhood, nonsense that points up that empathy available only to siblings.

'Lawlors, the White Ant People!' called Evie, as they strode off. 'Old TV ads, come on.'

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<sup>52</sup> *Holmwood*. 102-3

<sup>53</sup> Hrdy 370

'It is indeed a lovely shirt, sir,' cooed Paula, trotting behind.

'If you've got a tickle or a cough, laugh it off - with Throaties!' ...

'Good one. Hippity hop, I wear Cottontails!'

'Are you too fat, too fat, too fat?'

'Evie, do you think there's any point to it all?' <sup>56</sup>

And in the interactions of both Evie and Paula with the adolescent boys, Bert and Zak, shards of their own adolescence break the surface, still sharp.

'Shit, George, what do we do?' asked Evie, her bowels turning to water, once again standing helplessly in that gloomy Prahran kitchen. She tried, gathering her strength with a huge effort, to forestall the shaking she could feel setting in, unable to prevent herself clutching George's hand. ...

'No, no. I want to stay. 'George took Evie's hand again. 'Our first date.'

Evie felt herself relax, warmth spreading out from the middle of her stomach, up and down her arms and legs, into the tips of her fingers.

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<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Hrdy 372

'Ha ha,' she said.' Welcome to the family.' (237)

Evie is an allomother - an alternative mother - in both a professional and voluntary capacity, for which she deserves but does not receive recognition and status. The difficulty of combining work and childcare for mothers has become extreme in Australian society. The evolutionary picture is as follows:

Scarcity of local alloparents often forces working parents to look beyond their own neighborhoods. But grouping infants together - like bats in a communal nursery - for a certain number of hours every day under the supervision of paid alloparents who are not kin, but who are expected to act as if they are, is an evolutionary novelty, completely experimental. Already there are greater numbers of children in daycare than ever before in human history.<sup>57</sup>

Research appears to show that childcare will succeed as well as mothering 'if daycare resembles families with a stable cast of characters and an atmosphere that provides infants with a sense of belonging.'<sup>58</sup> Without sentimentalising her job, which she leaves behind when the Creche door closes behind her, Evie is a gifted builder and provider of such a space.

Several of the episodes and dilemmas which found their way into both the Holmwood and the Creche sections of the novel were suggested by interview material made available to me by a friend and colleague, sociologist Dr Suzanne Franzway. In 1998 she conducted a series of interviews with nursing home and child care workers in a study of conditions in the sectors. One interview showed the Director of a large Church-affiliated nursing home in Adelaide entirely 'wedded' to her work:

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<sup>56</sup> *Holmwood* 237

<sup>57</sup> Hrdy 507

<sup>58</sup> Hrdy 510



'Chasing calls, being here for the staff. I have this open door management policy that (staff) just generally arrive, the same as the residents. There's often a stream of residents that want to come in and share incidents ... They often come to see me about family matters or tell me that they've bought a new dress... My days off are taken up with attending meetings ... From roughly about 5.30 through until 7 p.m. is the most productive time as far as paperwork is concerned because there's fewer interruptions. I'm also here over that time so I'm available for the afternoon staff ... and I'm also available for the residents in the evening, if there's anything at the end of the day they want to share with me ... Before my appointment there was a Director of Nursing and a Director of Care ... I've started to run the place as one ...'<sup>59</sup>

Choosing a nursing-home scenario for a good part of this novel was an attempt to draw the teeth of the subject of ageing and decline towards death, whose capacity to terrify us is evident in our hiding the aged in 'homes' that aren't our own. On the material plane, aged care is making a lot of entrepreneurs hugely wealthy. Holmwood is comfortable and in good hands, though a Board of Management holds threatened belt-tightening measures over Paula's head. Paula enjoys her status as matron and enjoys Holmwood's residents, her job providing sanctuary rather than overwhelming responsibility. Paula's work space is a play space for her as well, a context for regenerative fantasies, healing daydreams about perfidious Gary and Trish ('And they could grow belladonna or henbane or some of those brilliant medieval herbs and make them into tonics, and some of the tonics could have just a tad too much of the toxic ingredients, and she could send Trisha and Gary free samples of those ... ' 228) or the Arthur-Paula scenario ('She badly missed the fantasy of their shared farmlet ... it was almost as though she'd had a real house in the country repossessed.' 123) My

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<sup>59</sup> Anne Henderson, Director of Alexander Lodge, interviewed by Suzanne Franzway 14/10/98

fantasy of how Holmwood blossoms as a result of resident-inspired projects like the 'guest chef' idea and the garden was a vastly entertaining part of the writing process.

The workers in the care facilities studied by Franzway made up an interesting spectrum. About twenty percent of those surveyed were male, the men mostly clustering in the aged-care sector. Childcare workers were predominantly female, several currently engaged in upgrading qualifications. Workers surveyed by Franzway tend to be aware of the low status of their profession, and to be angry or distressed about it. They also express the ambition to move on from childcare before too long, finding it exhausting and a dead-end career-wise. Lisa, Director of Goodwood Community Child Care Centre, interviewed by Franzway for her study, explains the frustrations:

'Keeping that animated, you know, positive sort of feeling. It's very hard ... because staff are very stressed, they're very overworked, they're very extended hours so you've got to keep that morale going and that's very difficult when ... I'm on my own and that's why I feel for them. I've been a child care worker so I'm not going to be a Director that just says, you know, "you can cope, you can cope", because it's burnout ... I'm not a qualified social worker but we are everything ... to parents who are separated. Everything ... But it has changed. It's a business ... I mean every bum on that seat is important ... It would be really good if childcare could just have a better image.'<sup>60</sup>

For Evie, I want childcare work to be fulfilling but not too fulfilling. Its part-time nature is one of its attractions. I required Evie to have time to herself, for wandering about her city, reflecting, shopping for second-hand items which spark a response, observing. But it is true that Evie's Auntie status is fundamental to her sense of herself, and surrogate motherhood plays a liberating function in her life. She feels

little pull towards actual maternity, yet has real and important roles in respect of her nieces and nephews, and to a lesser extent, her Creche charges.

Children, the value placed on them and their care, indicate essential truths about a culture. Sadly, in this culture, her status as a carer for children seems a badge of failure to Evie, who at forty-five feels the lack of a career that would be recognised by her peers, many (products of the progressive, paradigm-altering seventies education curriculum) now successful professionals. Yet Evie's life is her own in that non-negotiable sense which becomes lost to mothers in particular. She has not had to contend with the loss of identity and autonomy, that mothers face. The challenges to Evie's autonomy are from within, guilt and shame (particularly 'survivor guilt') and external, in the person of a vengeful male ex-partner. My focus is Evie's psychic resilience following youthful trauma, sexual danger and abuse; it would have been blurred had I added motherhood, which 'changes everything, both within and around a woman.'<sup>61</sup>

Over Evie, named for our first mother, I jocularly hang the notion of *felix culpa*. As the cover-blurb to Pamela Norris's *The Story of Eve* has it: '...three thousand years after the loss of Eden was first recorded everyone still knows that it was all Eve's fault.' And yet, as Norris documents, in ecclesiastical scholarship over the centuries there evolved the idea that the first Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit was, though sinful, a happy event, since without it God would never have had cause to send his Son to earth, clothed in human flesh, through the agency of Mary his mother. This notion found ready acceptance in the mariolatrous medieval mind, surviving there at odds with the Fathers' fear and loathing of Eve and her quest for knowledge (increasingly understood as sexual, 'carnal' knowledge). A beautiful fifteenth-century lyric (resuscitated for Benjamin Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*) puts it precisely:

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<sup>60</sup> Lisa, Director of Goodwood Community Child Care Centre, interviewed by Franzway 28/10/98

Ne hadde the apple take ben,

The apple taken ben,

Ne hadde never our Lady

A ben Hevene Quen.<sup>62</sup>

There is intent behind the joke of Evie's name. Her transgression in youth is indeed the original sin, the age-old provision of unsanctioned sexual access, while proper daughters of Eve-Mary agree to become helpmeets and to restrict sexual activity within the confines of marriage. She remains childless, another mark against her. She is a model of the profligate woman, who in the dominant narrative is punished. As Eve the mother of the human race became identified by male exegetes with her serpent tempter, so woman the tempter of men is down the ages identified with temptation itself and blamed for loss of control, submission to the feminine principle, the primordial, hateful reversal. For the woman who occupies the public role of seductress, the associated dangers are always real - unsafe ground, as my Evie, a more than usually clueless adolescent girl, finds out. And yet she is meant to signify that female renaming is powerful: to refuse to be defined by the master-narrative is to be victorious, in some sense. Evie's survival, physical and psychic, is her claim to power. Evie is not spelt out by her history, she lives on to recreate, in her allomother role, that first Eve, the Mother of all Living.

Sadly, grand symbolism, heartening as it may be, is only that. The political reality of the society in which Evie and Paula, contemporary Australian women, live, does not have their interests at heart. I began by declaring my interest in the muting of women's voices and aspirations: there are limits to the power and self-realisation of my characters. I want my novel to be clear about this. Women and girls still take in with the air they breathe 'arguments designed to warn women of the truly adverse

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<sup>61</sup> Jane Price. Maushart MM 150

consequences that await them if they overstep the mark of men's tolerance and acceptance.' (Astbury 63) The debate is not a neutral one. The threat is plain: 'If women persist in pursuing social change, men will become enraged and exact vengeance' (ibid.). Dr Ben Greenstein, a respected London endocrinologist, writes in *The Fragile Male* that mass murderers such as Marc Lepine (who shot fourteen women at Montreal University), were responding to a powerful male need to kill - 'both believed their roles had been usurped by women, and both did something about it.' (Astbury 64)

The stakes are high, and women implicitly know it. Evie is particularly sensitised to this fact, and finds demonstrations of it not only in actual physical assault but in incidents such as her confrontation with males such as 'Ponytail'.

'I have to go. Do you want it or don't you?'

'Really can't tell. I need to think about it.'

The old girl whose yard-sale it was looked on in evident discomfort, dismayed by the man's tactics but too intimidated by his burly cockiness to intervene. Just then, he decided to play his master-stroke. He leaned across the table to the householder and handed her the book with an ingratiating smile.

'Could you keep this for me till later? No cash on me. I'll come back for it after I close my shop.' ...

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<sup>62</sup> 'Adam lay Ibounden'. *Medieval English Lyrics*. Ed. RT Davies. London: Faber and Faber, 1963. 160

Great fucking ape. You could bet he had a doll-sized girlfriend at home he bounced off the walls like a ping-pong ball to remind himself how tough he was. One of these days ... yeah, Evie, what? You'll set up a vigilante group?  
(*Holmwood* 42-3)

The predictable and most common response of women to the perceived threat of male retaliation for their independence is to take steps to ensure their safety. I believe this impulse is even stronger if the perception of danger from 'enraged males' is subliminal. Women who name and externalise the fear of reprisal are better situated to face it down. Neither Evie nor Paula is suffragette material, though they know the chorus of a fictional suffragette song from Disney's *Mary Poppins* (253). Evie finds a certain sympathy for Ronnie, her past and present tormentor, believing strength lies in keeping silent about her 'abduction', which she characteristically attempts to put at one remove with the help of irony. Perhaps she is right; the reader must decide. Evie, given the history with which the novel provides her, might be entitled to be sceptical of involving authority on her behalf. She can be expected to have observed prosecutions of prostitutes but not of their clients. Whether or not the deliberations of the California legislature on rape within marriage are within Evie's ken ( - one senator objecting: ' But if you can't rape your wife, who can you rape?'<sup>63</sup>) - assumptions about prior sexual history or marital exemption are still encountered in courtrooms everywhere. The 'Ponytail' incident referred to above also describes the phenomenon of complicity of cowed women in male bullying, with the 'old girl' selling the contested Pears Cyclopaedia too intimidated to protest over Ponytail's behaviour.

The close bonds most women have with at least some significant males conspire to counsel tolerance and understanding rather than rebellion. The focal women characters in *Holmwood* are no exception. Paula, reminded by a newspaper

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<sup>63</sup> Stanko, Elizabeth A. *Intimate Intrusions*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985. 164

story of the murder by a father of his three daughters, is consumed with vengeful fury until her son, Bert, rings her doorbell.

... standing on her front lawn, shading his eyes from the sun, looking unusually fragile for her bouncing boy, was Bert. Mother-love burning up man-hatred in a white flash, Paula's smile widened so far it wiggled her ears; she wrapped her arms around Bert and he hugged her back, standing head and shoulders above her as he'd done since he was seventeen. (49)

And where women are prepared to sympathise, male analysts leap into the breach. Note has been made of the appeal of an object-relations model for many men wishing to posit regrettable but ineluctable developmental roots of the status quo. Anthony McMahon mentions the reliance of authors of titles such as *Fear and Intimacy* and *The Inexpressive Male* on object-relations theorist Chodorow to 'explain men's resistance to feminist demands for equity in personal relationships'(184), remarking on just how far such analyses can be taken. 'David Lisak surveyed rapists and concluded that they fear "re-engulfment' by women" (185). Such authors, McMahon recounts, empathise tenderly with angry males: ' "I think of the man who feels powerless who beats his wife in an uncontrollable rage" ' (ibid). One study saw rapists as having 'an impoverished emotional life (except for anger) and "deep-seated doubts about adequacy and competence as a person." ' (ibid.) Yet another proposed male pain over rejecting mothers and identifying with distant fathers as the basis for the nuclear arms race.

'(T)he greater the autonomy a woman enjoyed in her life before motherhood, the more acutely she will experience its loss once the great divide has been crossed,' writes Susan Maushart.<sup>64</sup> For Paula, motherhood came early, before the development of a strong ego and sense of entitlement, impeded in her case anyway by maternal disapproval and obstructiveness. Young parenthood negotiated, along a

gradual path to autonomy, Paula's dilemmas at forty are different. By then she has a professional identity, is reaping the late rewards of motherhood from her relationship with Bert, and has the confidence and resources to enjoy her second child. Yet Paula has not managed to suppress jealousy of her sister's glamorous past and unfettered present. It is over their closest bond, Paula's children, that discord erupts. Evie accepts a confidence from Paula's son and withholds information from Paula, the consequences provoking home-truth-telling and a serious rift.

'What's the matter? Bert's okay, isn't he?' asked Paula, wondering as she spoke the words what possessed her to say that, and why Evie should know.

...

'Great. So you're saying they look at you and think it's okay to mess around with drugs a bit, here's Bert's cool auntie, a little bit of shooting up when she was our age didn't do her any harm, let's go for it!' (116-7)

I represent Evie as maintaining a dialogue, in the same way Paula has an ongoing, unwilling conversation with her mother, with dead brother Sean. Having seen more than her share of untimely deaths, and shocked by her experiences with Bert and his friend Zak in the present, Evie is inclined to sorrow rather than rage. 'Evie cried helplessly for everyone she'd known who hadn't made it, and wondered for the thousandth time why she was still here. Was any of it down to her strong character, as she sometimes liked to flatter herself, or was it all just a matter of dumb luck?' (120) The internalised voice of Sean is Evie's survivor instinct counselling reason, in typically ironic Haggerty fashion: 'You haven't got second sight, so don't sweat it, right?'(ibid.)

Paula relies more on consoling fantasies than Evie, as should be apparent by this stage in the narrative. Angry with her sister, Paula represses and simultaneously



maintains her rage, until a whole-family event, her fortieth birthday, trips the catch. 'Paula, resentment swamped in a rush of gratitude for family ties, smiled back.' (131) Temporarily tantalised by a vision of safety, Paula proposes a return to Eden: 'Why don't we all move in, build cabins in the back yard... Why do we all have to strive so hard to prove we can make our own way in the world...?' (138) George, token representative of non-Anglo arrangements, concurs: '... (Y)ou mad anglo buggers, frantically proving how independent you are till the day you die all alone in a nursing home.' (139) But the proposal lapses, the siblings return to their separate lives, Paula and Evie rebuild their bridges. Paula still has one more nasty, unsuspected shock coming to her through the agency of a sister, Trisha.

House and home, private and public worlds, haven and bear-pit, for both Evie and Paula the home as sanctuary is challenged and corrupted by the irruption of malign external forces. Their work lives, in fact, provide them with safe haven: I refer in several instances to the workplace closing around one or the other as a womb, an oxygen-tent, and so on. This is an attempt to disrupt the Angel in the House paradigm that's so hard to shift. Both Evie and Paula would like their homes to be womb-like, but home is where the danger is as well as the comfort. In the relative anonymity of professional identity, which still provides for a satisfying exercise of competence and responsibility, interaction with others that, while comfortingly mutual and even significant, does not carry the import or consequences attached to dealings with their relatives and children, Paula and Evie find relief and refreshment.

Place is as central to identity and expectations as accidents of birth order, education and reproductive history. In *Holmwood* I concentrate on a few Adelaide beach suburbs and city locales. Simple proximity is central to the ease with which Evie and her sister intertwine their lives, and both live in the same area in which they grew up, infused with childhood memories.

- Hey, Dad! Look at me - Evie yelled silently at the sky, her heart filling up suddenly with a rush of love for the movie-star handsome father of her childhood, clowning around in the water with them in those endless summers when they lived a short walk away from this same beach. She charged into the water, arms flailing, running full tilt the way she always did as a little girl, stumbling and staggering up again, charging on until she fell full length under a wave. (61)

Elspyth Probyn sees in 'the struggle to rearticulate locale' part of 'how we struggle to become subjects and how we resist provided subjectivities' (182). The subaltern, Probyn goes on, using Spivak's favored term, has her position ' "naturalized" and reinscribed over and over again through the practices of locale and location. In order for her to ask questions, the ground constructed by these practices must be rearranged.' I am not sure whether thinking can make it so. I am more inclined to believe that childhood locale, especially, is imprinted and somehow fused with core identity, a theme I investigated in *Room Temperature*, implanting in the text several episodes where location becomes part of evolving identity for Carmel/Catherine, at Glenelg Beach, Sturt Creek, 75 The Broadway and other places.

The imaginary of home in *Holmwood* is especially powerful, particularly in Paula's case. Both she and her sister have left the parental home and recast another locale as home in youth (Perth for Paula and Melbourne for Evie). In both cases, the self-chosen new home city has in its turn been abandoned in order to re-adopt, in adulthood, the city/home of childhood. I believe this initial adoption of a new locale can be a crucial move for young women, often leading to proper individuation and separation from mothers, in particular. In Paula's case this is a critical step on the road to identity. Yet Paula's choice of partner, Gary, is made at a time when separation and formation of core identity are not complete. Although the relationship has broken down, it still carries unconscious associations of security - Gary is blurred

with Paula's ideal father, and she continues, without realising it, to regret the loss of protection/safety she believes Gary represented. In fact, this unhealed bereavement, unconsciously linked to the loss of her father, hinders Paula's forming a new attachment to a man, as evinced in the novel by Chris's failure to 'take'.

That she hadn't even considered calling Chris in a moment of crisis said a lot. Face it, Chris hasn't hooked in, not lodged next to your heart where you hoped he might. So okay, Gary wasn't exactly there, but a Gary-shaped hole was. Paula tried to summon an image of Chris, but it shimmered and dissolved. She jumped, spilling a few drops of tea on the rose gown, as the phone blurted a summons. Of course it was Gary, wanting to know how Evie was, whether Rose was showing any signs of distress. Fine, said Paula, no, she's fine, okay, see you then. (217)

Paula is shown as turning instead to female companionship, and potentially to the choice of Des as sexual partner.

Evie, who has playfully experimented with homosexuality in her teens, is shown as retreating from serial heterosexual promiscuity into a cautious experiment with monogamy, her first since the disastrous connection with Ronnie. Ronnie's return and the threat he poses is, for Evie, the return of the repressed, and her surviving of the new danger he brings, albeit via a *deus ex machina* rescue, is meant to open new options for her in the future. Ronnie's toxicity has been diluted. This sounds overly simple, and the novel suggests that the process will be extended and possibly incomplete. But Evie's determination to cope with the Ronnie situation without the help of her new male partner is meant to be positive. Evie's own tools of objectifying and distancing through humour, temporary shutdown, rest and realignment of her goals (towards a new life on Kangaroo Island) should suffice, at which time (beyond the scope of the novel) Evie can allow George in on her secret history, should she choose.

Yet again, Evie had it in mind to tell her story, The Unhappy Camper, laugh it away, so she wouldn't have to keep excusing the abstractions she constantly fell into. But just as she opened her mouth, Paula and her friend Desirée from work, with Rosie between them, stepped through the door; she stood up and waved instead. (225)

Kangaroo Island is the New Found Land of the novel. For both sisters, escape from their birthplace, either temporary/episodic (Paula) or permanent (Evie) is presented as necessary. My feeling is that such escape may be necessary for women especially as the locale of 'home' becomes burdened with overdetermined baggage. Escape may be symbolic or real, but for the purposes of *Holmwood* I have chosen to apportion paradisiacal characteristics to 'The Island'. This is where a mock baptism takes place, with Evie, Paula and Rose naked in the healing cold of Bass Strait water. The forest on the island, in best Shakespearean tradition, provides the setting for unburdening and for psychic reconnection with the elements and the animal world. Half-genuine, half-ironic speculation about staying in paradise forever evolves into a real plan to make The Island a new home. I am implying that in women's lives particularly, escape from the expectations that go with being the Angel in the Home becomes periodically necessary for psychic health/growth. For Paula, who at the end of the novel is on the point of refashioning her own home space by adding an older woman (Aggie) and, perhaps, a younger woman (Des) as partner, this is less important. For Evie, whose home space has been defiled and who in any case has a transportable set of items which represent home, her op-shop artefacts, connecting her to past lives according to an intuition of kinship with disappeared householders who survive in their leavings, a new beginning is possible and important. For Evie there may be a new Eden.

I strive in my writing to linger over the importance of the quotidian, the unsuspected meanings underneath the veneer of the everyday, women being the

performers par excellence of everyday, accustomed tasks, repetitive and ordinary to the point of being invisible to observers. As Martin Amis puts it, in *The Information*, in one of the many segments where his angst-ridden novelist character, Richard Tull, examines his modus operandi:

He (i.e. Richard) was an artist when he saw society: it never crossed his mind that society had to be like this, had any right, had any business being like this.

A car is in the street. Why? Why cars? This is what an artist has to be:

harassed to the point of insanity or stupefaction by first principles. (11)

Amis's passage about his alter-ego character has stuck with me: ... an artist when he saw society: it never crossed his mind that society had to be like this... I want this 'what th'..?' process of perpetual amazement and fascination with everyday arrangements and customs operating my pages. *Holmwood* is attempting the difficult feat of interrogating social arrangements that seem so 'natural' as to be invisible. Women as carers of the young and the old ... mothers always there for their children ... nuclear families or the remnants thereof living in separate, demarcated spaces rather than wider family groupings or any other arrangement. For both Evie and Paula, links with children anchor them firmly in the present, and to a great extent to the unremarkable, unnoticed provision of care, the bread-and-butter kind, so tedious and yet so real, so certain. Amis again:

By mid morning on Tuesday Richard knew why women never did anything and never amounted to anything and never contributed anything to anything. To anything *permanent*, that is to say. It wasn't *having* children that did it, necessarily. It was hanging out with children that did it. Whatever you thought of this, it had something to be said in its favour: it demanded no further inquiry. And it wouldn't be getting any - not from him. Why waste valuable time when you could be untangling a shoelace or picking up crumbs or tripping over a squeaky toy or slapping some slice of trex on to a frying pan or

going down on your hands and knees to search for a weapon component under the sofa or the bunk bed or the oven? (444)

It should be evident that for Paula the connection with her children, particularly with almost-adult Bert, is intensely strong, instinctive and powerful. Of the two sisters, Paula is the more umbilically connected to siblings and parents, Evie protecting herself with conscious cynicism and distancing mechanisms. I want to show Paula as more at the mercy of these primal forces than she realises, and for the contrast between her capable work self and her vulnerable psyche to appear to readers much more stark than it does to Paula herself. Paula's dreams are important. The sardine-dreams, the competition-for-resources dreams, the furious-with-mother dreams, these are indicative of a roiling inner sea of emotionality kept at bay in waking hours. Paula, rather than Evie, would be the sister to seek the services of a psychic to connect her with her dead father. To a quite significant extent, Paula is still an unhappy, resentful child seeking to make good the shortfall of approval, succour, nourishment she feels her parents should have provided. She idealises her father, blames her mother; the reader should see that both parents failed this daughter. Although Paula makes great strides towards resolution of some of these difficulties, the novel should demonstrate that total psychic health is a chimaeric norm approximated, never realised.

Evie has brought to 'front brain' position more of her own fears and delusions. She externalises fantasies of wealth and dalliance in her novelette about alter ego Dana. Life crises have forced her to face and rationalise certain brute facts such as violence and its close association with sex. She permits herself to override 'reality' in her own fiction, where her heroine is never at a loss, never hurt, able to outwit or overpower dangerous males, indulging all her desires, however transgressive. The novelette is a conscious fantasy, a joke, but a liberating one. Evie 'does' empathy

better than Paula, as *Holmwood's* Lifelink-counselling episodes reveal, though Paula makes a fruitful foray into real-world role-play, with 'husband' Arthur.

I show Paula as particularly close to her younger brother, Sean, dead of alcohol-related causes in early adulthood. Recollections of her brother are apt to pop into Paula's head at any time, prompting reflections on her own mortality and plugging in to a well of sadness. At one such moment, Paula succumbs to an episode of memory while waiting in a supermarket queue. 'She imagined Sean on his unsuspected last day, popping into the deli to buy himself tobacco and rollie papers. God, let her be blissfully unaware of time running out, just like him.' (20) When Paula buys her daughter a swing for her birthday, she recalls an incident involving a faulty swing when she protected her brother from harm. She privately christens the swing in memory of Sean. There is a private world of loss, lack and sadness common to Paula and Evie, female characters composite of accumulated tragedies, large and small, such as accrue by mid-life and which women, I imagine, may process closer to the surface, more actively and continuously than (many) men. Chapter by chapter, as dreams and daydreams accumulate in the minds of my fictional sisters, the reader sees that preoccupation with the past, endlessly rerunning stored mental footage as both sisters do is a shared habit. Joy, their vivacious eighty-year-old aunt, is by contrast blessedly free of regrets and second-thoughts. When Evie remarks to her aunt that 'there's a certain amount of drive you come programmed with' (48), the reader should note that a large amount of the sisters' 'drive' is diverted into action-replays and wishful thinking. Partly, also, this is a habit taught by necessity. Evie tells Joy: 'I didn't have the sort of girlfriends you could gossip about sex with, and there was no one to talk to at home. Trish and Leenie left me out, and the others were babes. '

Paula, in some respects more at the mercy of eruptions from the inner depths than Evie, is also fortunate in being subject to occasional cleansing rages. We see

one early in the narrative, when Paula surprises an intruder, and surprises herself with her fury. Another access of rage is prompted by a newspaper article about a Tasmanian, Peter Shoobridge, who kills his four daughters. This time, a visit from her son 'burns up' her anger like dew in the sun. Paula's gut-connection to her children is a saving feature, pulling her away from repetitive dead-end contemplation of intransigent features of the past and present into purposeful activity accompanied by self-directed irony (as on the occasion of a later visit by Bert to his mother, when he and Paula consume several beers and launch into painting Rosie's bedroom purple).

The way I deploy children in key roles in the novel draws on sentiments encoded in my poems, where they are awarded emblematic significance. By the same token, my poems in general actively avoid 'talking up big', shying away from numinous pronouncements about children or any agents of redemption:

You say, children's fanaticism about life amuses, and appals

(true)

... we merely get better at pretending not to care, or

only about big things

.....

... You may cry less, but ...

Now you have your children's hurts

To cry for, too<sup>65</sup>

Rosie's comments and experiences are occasionally - not too frequently - used as images of grownup situations. The child as seer/ truth-teller is a device that can only be used sparingly, but it makes sense to me. When Rosie tells the story of the failed girls' attempt to keep boys out of their cubby-space, ending in compromise to save

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<sup>65</sup> 'All Day All Night'. ADAN 61



the 'home', Paula sees the irony, but turns it aside with a one-liner only she is there to appreciate. The savour of that tiny incident is meant to be wry, and the trick is to change the scene immediately. I'm tempted by such moments, but aware of the danger of overkill.

A recent TLS review<sup>66</sup> of a novel by Sheena Joughin<sup>67</sup> considers that it 'affects aimlessness when it comes to novelistic structure'. Ali Smith is pleased by Joughin's 'patchwork ...expertly focused...with interlinking motifs of drunkenness, responsibility (to mundane but needy things, like cats and babies) and the unexpected presence of poetry'. I haven't read Joughin (though now I want to), but a focusing of the everyday, with its superficial aimlessness, is what I was aiming for in *Holmwood*. Fragments from my characters' reading are used to provide focus, the way Joughin apparently uses scraps of Burns on cigarette packets; likewise television documentaries which happen to be playing in various interiors at pertinent moments, such as Paula's fortieth birthday, at which her siblings and their children assemble at the eldest sister's house. At that juncture, a feature program about Macquarie Island chimes with Paula's wistful ruminations about whether her siblings could ever again coalesce into one community.

Songs and hymns, as in *Room Temperature*, illustrate or provide a refracted 'angle' on incidents. Paula, blessed/cursed with a facility for creating new from old lyrics, goes so far as to recast the verses of Blake's 'Jerusalem' as she strides over the New Eden which is Kangaroo Island. 'Joughin' (says her reviewer) 'is firmly on the side of bathos, the unromantic, when it comes to our expectations of and our desires for the ideal state of things.' Similarly, I could not imagine providing a character with the actual lines of 'Jerusalem' to mark a high point of any novel I might write, but the fact that Paula is moved to sing a stirring and uplifting melody, indeed, a hymn, is significant, even though she is in the same moment compelled to debunk

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<sup>66</sup> Smith, Ali. 'Patchwork Passions'. *Times Literary Supplement*. July 4 2003

the original's visionary ideal. At any point where hope is reborn, or struggling to be, my characters register surges of something that must be called 'spirit', incidents they feel a need to mark with some readily-available snippet of exalted language, even though it must immediately be undercut with irony.

Evie, delivered from the hands of her nemesis Ronnie by the timely intervention of her sister and ex brother-in-law, moves into a kind of trance-state, a buffer provided by her psyche to ease the post-trauma transition back into her daily round. And, where Paula has the Holmwood residents to 'plug into' to recharge, Evie has kids:

Evie had the big kids in the afternoon, and read them her own favourite, *Noisy Nora*, of which she never tired - neither, fortunately, did they. ' "But I'm back again!" said Nora," came the shouted chorus at the end – "With a monumental *crash!*" ' The kids made a hash of 'monumental', but they all had a stab at it - like a rugby team stumbling through 'Advance, Australia Fair' at the beginning of a big match... A stray little wandering past the seated circle at the climactic moment started to whimper at the amount of noise.

Evie felt her skin growing back as they chanted. Back again, she thought.

(321)

Caring for children, though, leads for Evie equally frequently to intimations of mortality, interspersed as it is in Evie's case with interactions with reckless young adults, which is in turn connected to the early death of Sean, their younger brother.

As the littlies pushed themselves to their feet and toddled over to their individual cupboards under the long bench by the door, to put their shoes on for outside, Evie had to fight down a distraught premonition that one, or some, of these children, would not see out their twenties, would instead be ushered

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<sup>67</sup> *Things to Do Indoors*. Doubleday, 2003

untimely from the world in a box. Breathing hard, Evie forced herself to attend to the moment, the mystery of vanished socks, the intricacies of shoelaces, the dilemma of which foot was right. What was the point of doomsaying, when you only ever had the time at hand, not the next bit or the bit after? If Sean's life meant anything, it surely meant that. (212)

I hope that a certain reversal of expectations is staged in moments like the foregoing in *Holmwood*. For Paula, close contact with people nearer to death, consigned, indeed, to a 'twilight home' to await the end, is invigorating and restorative as much as it is depressing and anxious-making. Evie, amidst the bustle and clamour of hopeful new lives, is sometimes struck with fear, envisioning truncated rather than realised potential, a phenomenon she has seen first-hand more often than most.

A fictional narrative is not, of course, a thesis or a psychoanalytical text. It is an authored artefact, created according to selected genre specifications or in conscious rejection of them. My writing process eschews plan or agenda in favour of 'what comes' in a day's writing, with internalised norms, sometimes conscious, sometimes not, dictating limits and maintaining 'flow', propelling the whole towards my approximation of the standard proprieties and unities: exposition, crisis, dénouement, resolution; mimesis, verisimilitude, pathos, irony.

A feature of the way I write is a lingering fondness for poetic compression, for insinuation rather than explication. I want to preserve suggestiveness, nuance, ambiguity. Many of my customary conceits or devices are poetic in nature: I like to proceed by vignettes rather than discursive exposition, nuggets embedded in the text with the minimum of connective tissue, irradiating it like radioactive chips.

My first novel included actual poems within the text. While *Holmwood* confines itself to prose, it, too, to a degree, is a poet's novel. For instance, I felt the pull of the sea as an overarching metaphor in this novel. In my poems, the ocean frequently appears for its own sake, as well as to indicate 'time and tide' - as in my

poem 'Harmers Haven' ('where time has drained/like dishwater'<sup>68</sup>), also as baptismal, cleansing. Glenelg Beach is a potent locale in this novel, offering regeneration and allowing new beginnings.

I have mentioned Martin Amis's 'what th'...?' principle, and the difficulty of applying it to situations we are programmed to see as natural. Yet there are a limitless number of alternative ways open to humans for dealing with the imperatives of shelter, food and reproducing the species. One reason I allot as much space as I do to my characters' in-head reflections, the equivalent of cartoon thought-bubbles, is to allow room for that constant mild surprise of the 'artist when (s)he saw society' to register.

In the process of constructing a prose narrative, my operating principles are a series of negatives: don't spell everything out; leave inferences to the reader; assume intelligence; assume concentration. Don't leave the nuts and bolts of the structure showing. I am also wary of *recherché* language. I have a horror of trying too hard, being unflaggingly inventive - so much of my prose is internal monologue, which is, as we know from familiarity with our own mental processes, disappointingly repetitive.

Dialogue is central. For me, dialogue has to be naturalistic, and is the test of a narrative, unless the whole narrative is flagged as non-naturalistic, which is not the case in *Holmwood*. Characters should never speak like writers; fictional speech should sound as ragged, as half-baked, as tentative as actual conversation. Attention should always be paid to how much the spoken word is a token of exchange, a means of establishing good-will and commonality, rather than a vehicle for argument or exposition. Nine times out of ten, conversation serves these social ends rather

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<sup>68</sup> Adelaide: Little Esther, 1996. 12; see also poems in Lizz Murphy, Ed. *Eat the Ocean*. Literary Mouse Press, 1996. 45-55

than, or as much as a vehicle for information. What I search for all the time, in re-reads, is overwriting and underwriting.

The texture of books is everything. This is the hard work, what the writer is conscious of as the work of writing: the density of detail, precision and vividness, the job of finding the best rather than serviceable phrasing. Re-reads should show up empty or threadbare bits, later drafts fill in holes, like embroidery. Equally, writing that comes easily is probably suspect. Where dialogue has just rolled out like carpet, I revise for what might be slick or glib. Distinguishing quirks of speech ought to be apparent and sustained in all characters.

I return often to Martin Amis's self-conscious novels for his wry take on the business of writing. In *London Fields*, as in *The Information*, the central character is a writer - and, once again, a rivalrous one - Samson Young is living in his successful rival's London house, whose two previous works are 'Memoirs of a Listener' and 'On the Grapevine'. He writes: 'I'm not one of those excitable types who get caught making things up. Who get caught improving on reality.' (39) Samson, writing a novel at last, is happy because 'reality is behaving unimprovably, and no one will know.'  
(ib.)

One's own writerly lineage and kinship is difficult to pin down. As a chain-reader of novels, a regular reviewer of unsolicited books, a judge of non-fiction and fiction awards and presenter of a weekly books-and-writing radio broadcast, my reading habits are unstructured. I admire any number of writers, but there are none I strive to imitate. *Sydney Morning Herald* reviewer Debra Adelaide assumed my first novel's debt to Barbara Hanrahan, and *The Sunday Age's* Mike Shillitoe suspected I'd read Margaret Drabble,<sup>69</sup> but in the first case I think the comparison was simply

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<sup>69</sup> Cath Kenneally's novel is an impressive, risk-taking debut. This book shares certain similarities with Margaret Drabble's *The Peppered Moth*: the freewheeling movement back and forward in time, anxieties about the inheritance from past generations; the struggle to break free through education... *Room Temperature* is an engaging experience, blending fiction and memoir via some sharp-edged images. The early chapters revel in the details of a

conveniently to hand, Hanrahan and I both writing about Adelaide childhoods, and in the second, Drabble had recently written about her mother in a manner the reviewer found similar to my treatment of that theme.

Among Australian writers I admire, high on the list is Janet Shaw, who to my knowledge has only published one book of stories, *In This House*, in 1990.<sup>70</sup> I consider Shaw an unsurpassed master of the internal monologue, and have frequently reread her stories for this feature. Each opening sentence snaps you into the head of the narrator, and that instant breathless immediacy is faultlessly sustained. In 'Blood and Milk', for instance, Shaw grasps with both hands the strictures of the short story, giving away very little about the woman protagonist, so that the reader holds on to every carefully-chosen snippet of information to make sense of the piece. And within the restricted word-count Shaw allots herself, she chooses to devote quite a bit of her prose to intensely vivid sense-impressions.

And she slid her breast back into her clothes and put the baby down on the couch. She went into the kitchen and he cried as she shut the door, cried as she turned on the radio as loud as it would go. She pressed her forehead hard against the little speaker but she could still hear him, so she clicked the radio off again and lifted her head. She touched the skin of her forehead and felt the neat pattern of criss-crosses imprinted from the radio. She rubbed hard and they began to fade.<sup>71</sup>

Shaw delivers condensed hits of sensory information, her disturbed character dwelling on these minutiae rather than on her big-picture situation, which, as becomes gradually clear, is alarmingly critical. In other stories, a similar technique

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1960s Catholic childhood in Adelaide. The adult life is preoccupied by the patterns thrown down by a working-class family, Church and patriarchy. The narrative is a mosaic of events, memories, dreams and poems, leaving some questions unanswered, but finally the un-heroic tone and Kenneally's stylistic rigor is admirable.' (October 7, 2001)

<sup>70</sup> William Heinemann Australia 1990

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.* 67

works brilliantly to reveal startling, funny or poignant situations piecemeal through a narrator's erratic reflections, each narrative advanced by minimal, admirably unobtrusive authorial intervention.

I revel in Shaw's gem-like short stories, in the virtues of her writing: psychological acuity, wicked insinuation, intuition; timing, detail, titillation and suspense, the spice of added titbits of a grisly or hilarious nature. It is also true that I write episode by episode, short-story-wise, adding connective tissue later. In the act of writing, though, I am never consciously aware of aiming for a 'style' of any kind. My internal censor screens for infelicities, in a rearguard action.

A writer whose work also left an impression, also no longer writing, this time because she has departed the ranks of the living, is Marian Eldridge, one-time member of the Canberra women writers group Seven Writers (who also included Sara Dowse and Marion Halligan). Eldridge's novel, *Springfield*,<sup>72</sup> I reviewed on its arrival:

The good sense and compassion, the close observation and the rawness of this novel are stunning. Eldridge offers a latter-day *Monkey Grip* with the big difference that the female lead, for all her rough edges, is self-sufficient and a survivor ... ' Worms, grubs, ants, roots of growing things, all busy in their invisible underground world, and up here, walking across it, I am part of that world, I am alive, I am I. She grew even stiller. She felt herself flow out to this world and the morning stopped and the shadows at her feet stood still.' ...

There are comparisons to be drawn also with Tim Winton's *In the Winter Dark*. That was a compassionate novel, too, with a pregnant girl stranded out the back of beyond. Winton was much more tight-lipped, but the echoes of

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<sup>72</sup> UQP, 1992

that novel (in memory) are similar. Eldridge deserves as much attention, if not more.<sup>73</sup>

Recording the moment and following lines of association which open up in the process is the kick-start of most of my writing, prose or verse. I find myself drawn to writers who seem to be likely to use the same method, and who seem best at weaving their carefully-documented moments into an appealing structure. Stephen Orr is a South Australian writer whose recent *Hill of Grace* is such a novel. The particulars lovingly packed into his Barossa Valley narrative derive from a poetic sensibility, but are welded neatly into a big picture whose themes are clear and ambitious, the whole pricked like a rising cake with needle-stabs of irony and humour, again, qualities I noted in a recent review for *The Weekend Australian*.<sup>74</sup>

In the last decade or so, the list of writers with whom I have felt profoundly strong kinship would include New Zealand poets Jenny Bornholdt, Dinah Hawken and Janet Charman; the amazing M.J. Hyland (whose *How the Light Gets In*, a new *Catcher in the Rye*, is to my mind a flawless novel), Rosie Scott's *Queen of Love* (stories), and New Zealander Catherine Chidgey's *In a Fishbone Church*. I admire Damien Wilkins, another Wellingtonian, enormously, especially for his latest novel, *Chemistry*. Actually, all of the above except Hyland are New Zealanders, and Hyland is Irish.

I have consciously imitated none of these writers. I merely recognise writing that calls me out and register, as far as I can, what the virtues of each kindred writer are. If I had to attempt to 'place' *Holmwood*, the features of my prose that would locate it on the spectrum would include the limited extent of authorial intervention, narrative being moved forward mostly by way of the recording consciousness of the central characters. Narrative progression through lived moments-in-time rather than

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<sup>73</sup> *The Adelaide Review*. October 1992

<sup>74</sup> 'Valley of the Messiah'. December 24-26



omniscient precis of lapsed chunks of time puts my prose in the *tranche-de-vie* camp. Focus on female characters would situate the novel as primarily a women's book, its dramatic tensions placing it in psychological rather than 'action' territory (along with thousands of books in English by women since Jane Austen). Among recent Australian practitioners, I believe the Helen Hodgman of *Blue Skies* is a near relative. Close attention to place puts my book in the company of Australians such as Marion Halligan, Helen Hodgman once more, the Peter Carey of *The Tax Inspector*, Gary Disher and certainly the Elizabeth Jolley of *Mr Scobie's Riddle* and *The Well*. (*Mr Scobie's Riddle* has only just offered itself to me as a possible antecedent of *Holmwood*; it must be lodged in my subconscious - a favourite book, but one I haven't revisited for years.)

I think my overriding aim in *Holmwood* has been to create characters who are the product of their place and time. In this I happily acknowledge the company of Barbara Hanrahan, and invoke again my New Zealand heroes Chidgey, Wilkins, the early Rosie Scott and the early Elizabeth Knox of *Pomare*<sup>75</sup>. The writer whose practice I have most loved, studied and undoubtedly internalised as chronicler *par excellence* of *The Woman In Time*, poet Janet Charman, more than anyone inspires me to write the mind-moment, its kaleidoscope of history and sensation. At any one moment of writing, the engine for me is always partly fired by the inebriation of the feel of words, wordplay and the delirium of particulars, a fever I recognise also in Charman. This is the meeting-point of prose and verse. It will be apparent from the following review of Janet Charman's book, *end of the dry*<sup>76</sup>, that I have indeed internalised some of Charman's tricks, unless they match pre-existing language-games of mine, which might be why I like her so much:

I like everything about Charman's work in this collection: themes, voices, fluent inarticulateness, the inhabiting of other selves in such a way as to

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<sup>75</sup> Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1994

suggest commonality between observer and observed, instead of that too-common aloof anthropologist's tone (see especially 'found language' and 'core sample'). Her rhythms and stock of phrases appeal greatly to me, especially the snippets of nursery-rhymes, Shakespeare songs, old poems, not all of which, but most, I can identify ... But it's only minimally a question of the reader's reading matching the poet's. In a poem like 'our father', with its simple quatrains and skipping-rhyme metre ('when she saw you/ nothing was said/ she closed her eyes/ and broke the bread') the effects depend on the universal accessibility of the schoolyard-church-fairytale referents. Ditto with pseudo-biblical or neo-Yeatsian jokes like 'i will arise and go now to a land of ansaphone', where the incongruity is obvious even if the source doesn't spring instantly to mind. Charman doesn't overdo these touches, but they provide an element of the particular flavour of these poems. Sometimes they act as leaven in an otherwise dense and difficult piece:

the mew of baby in sinking disposable and the  
 feel of the world through a skin  
 up on the ridges the shelling begins  
 designs of the lions let groaning out of  
 a rough shake and the shooing through sheets to  
 the wood basket for granny no no don't eat me

... as gripping and telling as Plath in its neurotic, canny associativeness

... Plangent, funny, intense, intelligent, full of understanding, sharp, passionate, densely-crafted, intelligent again: women's poems not in the sense that they require special indulgence for their sooky subjects or

language ... that don't yield the whole message up on one reading ...

Venturesome, confident, deep, ironic, tangled, vivid, invigorating.<sup>77</sup>

What I intuit in Charman, what I hope finds an echo in my writing, is the edginess of women's lives, the biologically-dictated tightrope existence of Mariana-trench-depth hormonal connections, the gauntlet of sex, pregnancy, birth and childrearing, the ever-damped-down yet subliminally ever-present awareness of that intense danger that comes from nothing more nor less than the accident of being female. I meant my first novel, *Room Temperature* to convey that edginess, as well as the interconnectedness of all moments of time in the multiple personae of its subject, in its episodic construction, in the multiple personae of its subject, her mind repeatedly snagging on moments of peril. I hope that edginess is there in *Holmwood* too, in the Haggerty sisters' cheek, gallows humour, nose-thumbing and fate-tempting.

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<sup>77</sup> Landfall, 195

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